UN sanctions hamper humanitarian work

Aid leaders have warned that unintended consequences of UN sanctions are a growing problem for humanitarian actors and have called for more proactive action. John Zarocostas reports from Geneva.

Under the UN Charter, sanctions are considered a key tool of diplomatic statecraft to ensure international peace and security. However, Jan Egeland, the secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, told a news conference on Feb 9, 2022, that multilateral sanctions are “the biggest obstacle to principled humanitarian work”.

On Feb 7, a public debate by the UN Security Council examined sanctions and preventing unintended humanitarian consequences. Martin Griffiths, the UN’s top humanitarian official, told the session that, “However smart, however targeted they are, compliance with sanctions is a daily element in the work of humanitarian agencies. They impact our logistics, our finances, our ability to deliver.”

Sanctions can “make it harder” for humanitarian agencies, he said, to transact with listed individuals or entities who hold substantial control over the lives of entire populations, and lauded an exemption to sanctions given to impartial entities conducting humanitarian activities in Afghanistan unanimously adopted by the Security Council on Dec 22, 2021.

Field reports by humanitarian workers from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, and Yemen reveal the heavy toll that sanctions often inflict on the delivery of aid, including in health care. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres appealed to world leaders to waive sanctions imposed on countries to en-sure access to food, essential health supplies, and COVID-19 medical support.

A study by UN University concluded that overbroad implementation of sanctions “can impede the ability of humanitarians to access vulnerable populations or deploy much-needed resources. In turn, sanctions designers worry that humanitarian aid can sometimes be diverted or manipulated to subvert the intended goals of sanctions regimes”. Other research has found that the most unintended consequences of targeted UN sanctions are increased corruption and criminality and negative humanitarian consequences.

Jason Straziuso, a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross, told The Lancet that banks take “an extremely risk-averse approach” to sanctions—known as bank de-risking—even when licences are available and, as a result, continue to block and delay transfers of money, having major operational effects. Van den Driessche noted that in 2021, “we spent half a year, in terms of staff hours, trying to sort out these issues. Currently, a transfer of US$50 involves as much screening as a $1 million payment. This delays our ability to provide emergency aid to people in need”.

WHO has suggested that impediments to the importation of life-saving medicines and equipment to Iran, as a result of sanctions, has affected health outcomes. WHO says that transferring money for importing equipment and medicine is a lengthy process and goes through the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which increases costs. According to WHO officials, some global vendors are not familiar with OFAC protocols and are often unable or discouraged to proceed with complex procurements.

Scott Paul, senior manager for humanitarian policy at Oxfam America, noted that although exceptions for humanitarian activities will not solve all the challenges, they help remove a lot of the ambiguity for humanitarian organ-isations and their donors, which would get aid moving in a crisis. However, even though the humanitarian community, including Griffiths, would like such exceptions to apply across the board for all UN sanctions, they are likely to be made only on a case-by-case basis.

John Zarocostas