



refining the debate

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Millions of South Africans yearn to replace the apartheid state with a just, unified, non-racial and democratic government. Friends in 'the outside world' promote a range of strategies to bring this transformation about. The strategy of economic sanctions has been fiercely defended and as fiercely denounced. Beyond the heat which has enveloped the sanctions debate, can we at last detect some light? Here we look at two recent attempts to clarify the issues and refine the debate.

Some of us are overwhelmed by questions about sanctions and how they actually work. Others have strong opinions - too strong to budge, perhaps. Whichever the case, most will be curious and/or grateful to find out what leading analysts can tell us on the basis of hard thinking and careful research.

Sanctions and South Africa: The Dynamics of Economic Isolation is an Economist Intelligence Unit Special Report, prepared by Merle Lipton, which appeared in January 1988. *Sanctions*, a recent *Leadership* publication, gives space to plain-speaking pro- and anti-sanctioneers along with contributors who hold their cards much closer to their chests.

The Lipton book is strong on the history of sanctions as a policy instrument. Its tone is dispassionate. It sets this country in the context of international trade and finance and looks at, e.g. 'The Changing Costs and Benefits of Doing Business with South Africa'. It examines the impact of sanctions to date and asks, 'What Next?' It carries the reader forward through a wealth of useful detail, until the final page is reached where the author spells out the view that sanctions are producing almost wholly negative results.

Lipton argues thus: 'There seems to be a threshold beyond which the initially often helpful effects of external pressures become counter-productive.' While sanctions are unlikely to unseat the government, they are likely to impede reform (deracialisation) and strengthen government authoritarianism.

Among the counter-productive effects of sanctions is the fact that they have encouraged the internal opposition to overestimate its strength, while reinforcing verkrampte demands for a clampdown on the press (whose reporting on political repression and resistance is seen to stimulate international pressure). Sanctions, she thinks, have contributed to curbs on political activity, resulting in the destruction of limited but valuable political space. They have encouraged the government to retreat further into a siege mode while, increasingly, anti-apartheid activists have been driven underground. Meanwhile the ranks of the disaffected are being swelled by the growing numbers of the unemployed.

Thus, far from ensuring rapid and peaceful transition, sanctions can be seen to escalate revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence. In short, sanctions reduce the chances

of evolutionary change towards a post-apartheid South Africa.

The *Leadership* publication is differently organised in the sense that topics may be plainly featured or they may be buried in the texts; they may recur, that is, be dealt with by different authors from different viewpoints, or be sketchily addressed. But the result is powerful and readable, and an appealing human element is introduced by means of interviews and photographs. The editor acknowledges that stringent security measures prevent a 'full and open discussion' around the sanctions debate since 'those who call for sanctions risk heavy penalties'. Readers will decide for themselves to what extent this accounts for the fact that, here too, sanctions emerge in sum as an unsatisfactory instrument.

Having said that much, let us treat these publications as a resource for answers to important questions in the sanctions debate:

What are the attitudes of blacks in whose name sanctions are advocated?

Leadership's contributions include: 'Head Counts' in which Patrick Laurence analyses six major opinion surveys carried out since 1984; 'A Lesser Evil': Kenneth Kaunda, president of Zambia and chairman of the frontline states, strongly supports sanctions; 'Queuing for Bread': Mangosuthu Buthelezi, chief minister of KwaZulu, firmly opposes them; 'Blowing Hot, Catching Cold': Riaan de Villiers explores the policy stance of largely black labour unions. Stephen Gelb's 'Out of Tune', which looks at changing attitudes and strategies, demonstrates the fact that readers must browse widely to glean what is relevant.

Lipton's brief treatment of this question is titled 'Black Politics and Sanctions'. Here, as elsewhere, she draws attention to the unintentional ('perverse') effects which force sanctions advocates to re-evaluate this strategy from time to time. In this context, Lipton refers to the policies



of the black businessmen of Nafcoc (National African Federated Chambers of Commerce), trade unions and political groups, especially the ANC. Much-quoted has been her assertion that 'frequently the public utterances of participants in this debate differ from their private, off-the-record assessments, because many people feel constrained from saying publicly what they think'.

How are sanctions meant to impact on politics? How have they affected the South African economy until now, and can we calculate their future impact?

These questions permeate the Lipton book. In Chapter 6 ('Politics, Propaganda and the Aims of Isolation') she examines the claims of pro-sanctions authors, for example, that sanctions will 'reinforce black bargaining power': like other claims by special pleaders on both sides, this one is 'neither absurd nor self-evident'. Discussion is complicated, she points out, not only by the extravagance of propagandists but also by the conflicting assessments of sober analysts. In two more chapters she looks at the economic and then the political impact, ending with the verdict already mentioned (see above).

Readers should consult a number of the articles in Leadership but the big gun is Ronald Bethlehem's 'High Stakes'. His theme is that 'hope' for 'South Africa's Third World population', which is largely black, lies in 'continued economic growth' and this 'depends on capital accumulation', i.e. precisely what is threatened by the sanctioneers. A host of other questions may bewilder readers who still need to be convinced that substantial investment will empower blacks, encourage redistributive trends, and so forth. Read also here: 'The Art of Empowerment' by John Kane-Berman; 'Hackles Rising' by Robert Schrire; Raymond Parsons' 'A Rising Tide' - articles which also help in answering the next question.

Could 'business' do more to influence government policy, promote reform, and stem the sanctions tide?

Lipton briefly explores 'The Attitudes and Power of Business', concluding that 'capitalists have less influence than is assumed'. Referring to the disinvestment side of sanctions, she alludes to the fact that loss of confidence has prompted sizable investment outflows [NB: Erwin, p.24]. In an interesting aside she cites a business leader's view that the tendency of nervous investors to avoid the risks which 'entrepreneurship and job creating activities' generally involve means that 'Internal disinvestment poses a greater danger at present [1986] than external disinvestment'.

In Leadership, the Parsons, Schrire and Kane-Berman articles apply. See also 'Seizing the Moment', an interview with Gavin Relly, chairman of the Anglo American Corporation - although what enlightened business needs and wants comes out more clearly than any advice as to what this sector can and ought to do. In 'Pack up your Troubles' Duncan Innes provides an interesting evaluation of the way in which the disinvestors have actually behaved. 'Although the local white business sector has undoubtedly been the major beneficiary of disinvestment so far, it could turn out to be something of a pyrrhic victory over the longer term', he says. 'Drifting down to Zero' by Sheryl Raine details the winding down of corporate social responsibility programmes since sanctions and disinvestment began to bite.

Is there a gap between the theory and practice of sanctions in effecting change? Whatever the answer to this and other pertinent questions may be, have sanctions a momentum of their own?

Some answers may be found in Lipton and Leadership. Lipton names additional sources for readers with the stomach for more. □

The Sanctions Debate and the Black Sash

Ordinary South Africans cannot travel overseas without being questioned about their views on sanctions and disinvestment. For Sheena Duncan, who is a Vice-president of the South African Council of Churches and widely identified as a former National President of the Black Sash, it has been imperative to present a reasoned and consistent response. Abbreviated (and sometimes inaccurate) accounts of her views have caused some debate at home and so we publish them here. She makes the following points:

1. The South African Council of Churches has called for comprehensive sanctions.
2. The Black Sash has not made any statement on sanctions because we have no common mind on the issue which is an indication of how difficult the subject is.
3. I personally would support the call for comprehensive mandatory sanctions if I thought they were politically possible in the foreseeable future. If South Africa were to be totally isolated by every country in the world simultaneously, apartheid would probably not last a fortnight but I do not think that this is possible. I am not thinking of the West here. We have all kinds of trading partners outside the Commonwealth, the European Community, and the United States.