Book Review Symposium VI of Economic Sanctions from Havana to Baghdad - Targeted and Economic Sanctions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Political Economy and Humanitarian Consequences

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Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) occupies a central place in debates about conflict, resource governance, and international intervention. Despite its abundant natural resources, the country continues to face protracted insecurity, particularly in its eastern regions, and persistent political and economic fragility at the national level (Autesserre 2010; Stearns 2011). The international community has relied heavily on sanctions to influence political behavior and mitigate conflict dynamics in response to the country's ongoing challenges.

Since the early 2000s, sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, alongside measures by the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom, have increasingly taken the form of "targeted" sanctions. These include asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes directed at specific individuals and entities. While intended to pressure political elites and minimize civilian harm, the effectiveness of these measures remains contested, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts like in the DRC (Biersteker, Eckert & Tourinho 2016; Peksen 2019).

Sanctions Regimes in the DRC

The use of economic and political pressure in the DRC predates the contemporary sanctions regime. During the final years of the Mobutu regime, international actors, primarily the European Union, sought to influence governance through conditionality measures, including suspending official development assistance from 1992 to 2002 (Englebert 2003; Hoebeke et al. 2007; Gegout 2005) and imposing an arms embargo in 1993 (European Commission 2025), reflecting broader concerns regarding corruption, authoritarian governance, and economic mismanagement. While these measures were not formal sanctions, they signaled early attempts to use economic leverage to influence domestic political dynamics.

The establishment of a formal sanctions regime in 2003 marked a significant shift. In the aftermath of the Second Congo War, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1493 imposing an arms embargo on armed groups in eastern DRC (United Nations 2003; Stearns 2011). It then imposed targeted restrictive measures through Resolution 1596 in 2005 (United Nations 2005), which it extended through Resolution 1649 (United Nations 2005) to political and military leaders of foreign armed groups operating in the DRC. The 2006 adoption of Resolution 1698 extended restrictive measures to political and military leaders recruiting or using children in armed conflict and to individuals committing serious violations of international law involving the targeting of children in armed conflict, including killing and maiming, sexual violence, abduction, and forced displacement (United Nations 2006).

Over time, the sanctions regime evolved to include measures against individuals and entities involved in armed violence, illicit resource exploitation, and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. These measures were supported by institutional mechanisms, such as UN Groups of Experts, which monitored compliance and documented violations. Parallel sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States expanded the scope of restrictions, particularly regarding financial transactions and international mobility (Biersteker, Tourinho & Eckert 2016).

Despite their formal design as targeted measures, sanctions still have unintended consequences on civilians. Specifically, weak state presence in eastern DRC and ongoing conflict limit enforcement capacity allow sanctioned actors to evade restrictions through cross-border networks and informal economic channels and to continue their activities and human rights violations. Furthermore, where state institutions and financial systems are more developed, like in the capital, sanctions exert influence primarily through formal economic mechanisms, including banking and trade, often disrupting local populations' access to basic means of subsistence.

The Effects of Targeted Sanctions in the DRC

Sanctions in the DRC are shaped by the interplay between external pressure mechanisms and domestic governance structures. While they are intended to alter political elites' behavior, sanctioned non-state actors, and designated entities, their effectiveness is constrained by fragmented authority, weak institutions, and the adaptability of targeted actors (Parker & Vadheim 2017).

In eastern DRC, sanctions have had limited success in altering the behavior. Groups such as the M23 continue to operate by adapting their economic strategies, relying on local resource extraction, cross-border trade, and informal taxation. Following the resurgence of armed conflict in 2025, the international community sanctioned some leaders of the group as well as its affiliated network, including former President Joseph Kabila, "the Alliance du Fleuve Congo" (AFC) and its leaders, one of whom, Corneille Nangaa, was already sanctioned when he was the head of the National Electoral Commission and a close ally of Joseph Kabila (US Department of the Treasury 2026). Control of strategic economic hubs, such as Bunagana and Rubaya, enabled these groups to generate substantial revenues despite sanctions and to continue their operations (Behalal 2025; Paravicini and Lewis 2025). In particular, the seizure of mining areas producing key minerals, such as coltan, has enabled them to maintain financial autonomy.

More broadly, sanctions contribute to the reconfiguration of these economies rather than their dismantling. As formal trade channels become restricted, economic activity is redirected toward informal and illicit networks, reinforcing governance patterns based on coercion and resource control while limiting the effectiveness of sanctions as tools of behavioral change. At the same time, sanctions intersect with formal economic structures, producing broader systemic effects. A key mechanism is the disruption of financial systems resulting from compliance with international regulations, particularly those administered by the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Banks operating in the DRC face significant risks when engaging with entities linked to sanctioned individuals, leading to increased scrutiny and, in some cases, reduced participation in international financial markets.

This dynamic closely reflects the argument advanced by Saldivar and Chilufya, who show how sanctions contribute to financial exclusion in African contexts through processes of ‘de-risking’ (Saldivar and Chilufya 2025). In the context of the DRC, rather than directly targeting financial inclusion, sanctions reshape banking behavior, leading institutions to withdraw from or limit engagement with high-risk clients and markets. BGFIBank DRC is a notable example. Reports indicate that the BGFIBank maintained accounts linked to sanctioned entities, raising concerns about compliance with international regulations. While this did not result in a complete withdrawal of services, it significantly constrained the bank’s international operations and highlighted the broader challenges faced by financial institutions in high-risk environments (The Sentry 2017). As in Saldivar and Chilufya’s analysis, the result was not simply compliance with sanctions but a broader contraction of financial access, affecting companies and individuals beyond the designated targets.

Crucially, sanctions often extend their impact to entire sectors of the economy. As the case of Congo Futur and related companies shows, sanctions can disrupt key supply chains in sectors such as food distribution and trade. Because these companies are deeply embedded in national economic systems, imposed restrictions can have far-reaching consequences, affecting access to essential goods and services. In their analysis of blacklisting in Cuba, Rodriguez, Lopez, and Bartuste show how sanctions targeting specific individuals or entities can have broader sectoral consequences due to the interconnected nature of economic networks (Rodriguez, Lopz, and Bartuste Dominguez 2025). Such systemic effects, extending beyond their intended targets, are also palpable in Congo Futur, which occupies a central position in Congo's supply chains.

The impacts of sanctions in the DRC are complex, indirect, and deeply embedded in local political economies. Although they are intended to minimize civilian harm, their effects often extend beyond the intended targets (Peksen 2019). Humanitarian consequences, for example, are closely tied to the dynamics of conflict economies. The mining sector, which provides livelihoods for large segments of the population, is particularly vulnerable to disruptions. Restrictions on mineral trade undermine formal supply chains, reduce income opportunities for artisanal miners, and push economic activity into informal or illicit networks, exposing workers to exploitative conditions (Seay 2012).

Furthermore, sanctions have limited deterrent effects on armed groups. In some cases, economic pressure may incentivize armed actors to intensify resource extraction or predation. These dynamics contribute to ongoing insecurity and are closely linked to patterns of internal displacement, as communities are forced to flee violence or economic disruption (Autesserre 2010). This is consistent with Peksen's argument that sanctions may increase rather than reduce coercion (Peksen 2025), in which economic pressure does not constrain armed actors so much as redirect their strategies toward intensified resource extraction, taxation, and violence against civilian populations.

More recent developments involving the M23 illustrate these dynamics. After taking control of North and South Kivu, M23 and AFC established de facto control over strategic infrastructure, including airports and key trade routes. They also established parallel governance systems, appointed local officials, and imposed taxes on economic activity (Ngutjinazo 2025). Concurrently, the closure/absence of banking services severely constrained the circulation of money, disrupting local markets and limiting access to essential goods (Reuters 2025). Civilians were subjected to coercive practices and forced recruitment, while those who resisted faced violence and, in some cases, execution (The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation 2025). Food insecurity also worsened, as supply chains were disrupted. Crucially, the spatial constraints imposed by sanctions—such as travel bans and financial restrictions—limit armed groups' ability to operate beyond areas under their control, reinforcing their reliance on localized resource extraction and predation.

Moreover, food security is a key area where sanctions' effects are evident. Urban populations rely heavily on market-based food access, whose prices increase under sanctions. This illustrates how sanctions can interact with structural weaknesses to produce broader socioeconomic challenges. The case of Congo Futur shows how sanctions can disrupt entire supply chains. As one of the largest food importers and distributors in Kinshasa, Congo Futur played a critical role in providing essential goods. However, its association with the Tajideen family led Congolese banks to sever or limit financial ties, restricting the company's ability to transact business in U.S. dollars and operate within formal banking systems. This financial isolation constrained trade activities, ultimately affecting the availability of food and other basic goods in the capital. This parallels Batmanghelidj's analysis of sanctions and food security in Iran, where restrictions on financial transactions and imports contribute to price volatility and reduced access to essential goods (Batmanghelidj 2025). While the DRC differs in its weaker institutional capacity and greater reliance on informal markets, the underlying mechanism is similar: constraints on financial and trade systems translate into disruptions in food supply and affordability.

Similar dynamics can also be observed in the cases of Pain Victoire and Minocongo, two companies central to the DRC's food system. Pain Victoire, a major bread producer supplying millions of loaves daily, and Minocongo, a key flour mill and poultry supplier, were both sanctioned due to their links to Saleh Assi, who purportedly has ties to Hizballah. Disruptions in Minocongo's ability to import inputs and operate efficiently reduced production capacity, which in turn affected the bakery sector and contributed to rising bread prices in Kinshasa. These sectoral disruptions led to broader socioeconomic impacts. Prices of staple goods—including bread, sugar, beans, corn, and chicken—rose sharply, with some increases exceeding 50 percent. As in the Iranian case, these effects are not always the direct result of explicit food restrictions, but rather emerge indirectly through financial constraints, supply chain disruptions, and market uncertainty. For a population that relies on informal employment and lives on low daily incomes, such price increases severely undermined food security and household welfare. Overall, these cases demonstrate that sanctions in the DRC function not only as political tools but also as structural economic shocks, with significant unintended consequences for food systems and civilian livelihoods.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that sanctions in the DRC produce complex and uneven political, economic, and humanitarian outcomes. Although designed to promote behavioral change without harming civilians, they remain ineffective in fragile, conflict-affected contexts. They fail to alter armed groups' behavior, contribute to the reconfiguration of conflict economies, reinforce reliance on local resource extraction and predation, and disrupt banking systems, trade, and access to essential goods. Additionally, they often extend beyond their intended scope, producing broader socioeconomic consequences. By affecting key sectors such as mining and food distribution, they disrupt livelihoods, increase prices, and exacerbate food insecurity. These effects are especially pronounced in contexts marked by weak institutions, informal economies, and high poverty levels. Therefore, sanctions often act as indirect economic shocks that reshape local political economies and reinforce the very dynamics they seek to address.