Since the inauguration of the Inclusive Government (IG) in February 2009, the issue of sanctions has been presented as one of the major obstacles to the full implementation of the power-sharing arrangement signed between Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the two formations of the Movement for Democratic Change led by Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara (MDC-T and MDC-M, respectively). Article 4 of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) stipulates, among other things, that “the parties hereby agree (...) that all forms of measures and sanctions against Zimbabwe be lifted in order to facilitate a sustainable solution to the challenges that are currently facing Zimbabwe”. It also notes a commitment to work together “in re-engaging the international community with a view to bringing to an end the country's international isolation”.

It was evident from the onset that sanctions would be one of the most contentious issues in Zimbabwe's “mariage à trois”. ZANU-PF has, on occasion, blamed the MDC-T for not doing enough to lobby for the removal of sanctions. The MDC-T, on the other hand, insists that the responsibility for these sanctions rests squarely upon ZANU-PF, whose continued refusal to act in a democratic and accountable manner is to blame for the persistence of the sanctions regime. Governments, such as those of the USA and UK, have made it clear that they would consider lifting the restrictive measures only once there is visible evidence of reform on the ground. The UK government was quick to dissociate itself from Foreign Secretary David Milliband's recent statement that its position on sanctions would be largely driven by the MDC's directive, stating that they would consult with a number of stakeholders, including the MDC, on the economic and social conditions in Zimbabwe. Since then, the positions on both sides appear to be hardening once more, with ZANU-PF adamant that it would make no concessions in the recent talks to solve the political impasse unless the issue of sanctions was resolved and all targeted measures lifted.

But before dismissing calls for the lifting of sanctions as biased or premature, or simply refusing to consider lifting any restrictive measures, one should first ask whether these measures have achieved the goal they initially set out to attain, and second, whether the targeted sanctions in place are still relevant given the changed political environment.

This Situation Report attempts to elucidate the contested matter of sanctions in Zimbabwe by outlining all the “sanctions and measures” mentioned in the GPA currently in place. Who do they target, how rigorously are they implemented, and...
are all restrictive measures still in effect? Also, is there perhaps a middle ground to be found between the two extremes of unconditionally lifting all restrictive measures as called for by some and the other extreme of maintaining all targeted sanctions until every outstanding issue surrounding the GPA is resolved?

Targeted sanctions, often termed “smart sanctions”, are usually targeted at a small circle within the ruling elite of a given country, and were developed as an alternative to comprehensive sanctions that had proven to have a more devastating impact on the broader population than on those whose behaviour the sanctions had intended to influence. Targeted sanctions can include diplomatic sanctions, bans on trading commodities such as diamonds or timber, arms embargoes, travel restrictions and financial sanctions. The rationale behind the targeted measures is to pressure key decision-makers considered to bear direct or indirect responsibility for a political or economic crisis in a particular regime with the objective of persuading or compelling them to change their behaviour.1

In Zimbabwe, a selected number of Western governments and international bodies have imposed restrictive measures as a result of the deteriorating political and economic situation since the 1990s. The UK and the USA were the first two countries to make a strong case for smart sanctions against the Mugabe regime in the early 2000s. In addition, the EU, the governments of Canada, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand have also imposed certain restrictive measures on the Mugabe regime over the past decade.

To examine the effect of the targeted sanctions and restrictive measures currently imposed upon the former Mugabe regime and affiliated businesses, it is useful to identify those measures currently in place, and the means by which they are implemented. Below is a comprehensive summary of all restrictive measures:

Restrictions on arms and military-related trade were the first in a series of steps taken by the UK, the USA and the European Union (EU) following international dissatisfaction with developments in Zimbabwe. One of the objectives of the arms embargo was to weaken the capacity of what was seen as an increasingly repressive regime to oppress its own population.

As early as 1997, the UK began isolating its former colony by refusing to deliver vehicles to the Zimbabwean police following the publication of an alleged “hitlist” released by the Mugabe regime identifying 1,500 farmers of British descent to be dispossessed of their land. In addition, Mugabe had called on the UK to pay compensation as stipulated in the Lancaster House agreement signed at the country’s independence in 1979. In 1998, British premier Tony Blair responded that such payments were conditional on the guarantee of the rule of law, transparency, sustainability and fairness of the redistribution process; conditions that were not fulfilled.2 The relationship soured further and a few years later in 2000, Blair’s administration imposed a full arms embargo on the government of Zimbabwe, in addition to other measures elaborated further below.

Similarly, the USA imposed restrictive measures, including a ban on the transfer of defence items and services in 2002 and 2003.

In the run-up to the 2002 presidential elections, the EU responded to the Zimbabwe government’s refusal to allow the head of the EU observer mission entry into the country by also imposing a comprehensive embargo on military goods to the country.

Australia, New Zealand and Switzerland have all had an arms embargo in place since 2002.

In addition to an arms embargo, selected members of the Zimbabwean political elite were issued with travel bans to the UK, and the country also froze the assets of a number of members of the then ruling ZANU-PF.

In terms of the “Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act” of 2001, the USA established the basis for similar measures and in 2002, targeted sanctions
were imposed on more that 200 Zimbabwean individuals and businesses. These comprised an asset freeze as well as a travel ban to the USA for listed individuals and businesses. However, these measures were implemented only in 2003. This had the undesired effect that those targeted were given enough time to move their assets to other accounts (and countries) unaffected by the sanctions. In March 2009, US President Obama extended these targeted sanctions for one year, citing a lack of progress in resolving Zimbabwe's political crisis.

In addition to the comprehensive embargo on military goods imposed after the violence in the run-up to the 2002 elections, the EU imposed targeted sanctions on 20 individuals (mostly government representatives and members of the military), a number subsequently increased to 129 persons. Their assets were frozen and they were issued with travel bans to the EU.

In 2002, New Zealand banned 20 key government officials, including President Mugabe, from travelling to the country. The list was updated four years later in 2006 and now comprises a total of 249 people associated with the Mugabe leadership, including spouses of senior ZANU-PF members, officials involved in Operation Murambatsvina and business people who have profited from the Mugabe regime.

Australia and Switzerland have done much the same by freezing the assets of as well as placing visa restrictions on members and supporters of the former Mugabe regime, including senior management officials of state-owned companies (parastatals). These restrictions have been in place since 2002.

As in the case of the EU, the overall negative assessment of the 2002 presidential elections compelled the Commonwealth to consider taking measures against the regime. As with the EU, the UK was a key motivator for these measures. It was agreed that Zimbabwe's membership to the body be suspended for one year. When the reinstatement of its membership was tabled a year later in 2003, Mugabe “retaliated” by revoking his country's membership.

In 2000, the UK reduced its bilateral aid by as much as one-third of its previous sum. The areas of agriculture and land resettlement were worst affected.

In 2002, in addition to the arms embargo, travel ban and assets freeze, the EU restricted development assistance to Zimbabwe to emergency humanitarian aid and social projects.

New Zealand and Australia, in addition to restricting members and allies of ZANU-PF from entering the country, restricted the adult children of those individuals subject to the travel ban from studying in their respective countries.

It is worthwhile to note at this stage that none of the countries and regional bodies mentioned above imposed restrictions on overseas development assistance. New Zealand, for example, worked closely with in-country NGOs and multilateral agencies focussing on basic education, rural livelihoods as well as HIV/AIDS.

Only a few countries and international bodies have imposed restrictive measures on Zimbabwe or members of the former Mugabe regime. Moreover, the imposition of targeted sanctions did not lead to a subsequent overall cessation of bilateral ties with regard to development assistance and financial aid.

As for other international bodies and regional organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in the case where restrictions were placed on the former Mugabe regime or diplomatic or financial ties severed, these were resumed in the wake of the inauguration of the IG. Moreover, these measures are not to be confused with sanctions, as they were imposed as a result of the actions of the Mugabe regime. The IMF, for instance, had severed ties with Zimbabwe for over a decade because of its failure to pay its debt arrears, which currently stand at US$ 144 million.

Similarly, the World Bank (WB), which had provided a total of US$1.6 billion in assistance between 1980 and 2000, suspended its lending to Zimbabwe in 2000
when the country went into arrears. However, this does not mean that the Bank disengaged from Zimbabwe entirely. It currently provides technical assistance and analysis in the areas of macroeconomic policy, food security/agrarian sector, social sector expenditures and delivery, infrastructure assessment, as well as providing support for the HIV/AIDS programme. The Bank's Harare office also administers a Multi-Donor Trust Fund that was initiated in 2007, through which several donor governments have begun channelling aid for areas such as health, sanitation education.

Despite intensive lobbying by the UK government, the United Nations Security Council has not considered imposing any targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe. In 2007, for example, the issue of Zimbabwe was not taken up in the UNSC. That South Africa was holding the presidency that year played a crucial role in the UNSC not focussing more critically on the Zimbabwe crisis. Moreover, Zimbabwe enjoyed the support of the vetoes of China and Russia. There is no unity on Zimbabwe in the UNSC – several members remained cautious about taking a heavy-handed approach to Mugabe partly because it might aggravate the already tense situation in Zimbabwe.

The AU and SADC have remained neutral on the issue of sanctions, and Zimbabwe has continued to receive bilateral credits from member states, such as Angola. SADC has called for the lifting of all forms of sanctions on a number of occasions, most recently recorded in the Communiqué of Summit of the Troika of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation held in Maputo, Mozambique in early November 2009. In Article 11, Section (vi), the Summit urged the international community “to lift all forms of sanctions on Zimbabwe”.

Targeted sanctions may have a number of objectives, the most important of which are:

a) To target a select group of political elite without jeopardising the national economy or exerting a negative impact on the humanitarian situation of the greater population;

b) To compel sanctioned politicians to change their behaviour by no longer supporting the violation of human rights or the freedom of expression and assembly and instead to facilitate democratisation processes; and

c) To provide support to the opposition and civil society. For instance, when Blair's administration imposed targeted sanctions in 2000, one of the key objectives was to provide support to the opposition MDC in the run-up to the parliamentary elections.

In the case of Zimbabwe, it appears that the effectiveness of smart sanctions has been limited by inconsistencies in their implementation as well as by their selective nature. Although a travel ban may have had an initial impact in the sense that it limited the free movement of a targeted individual, it appears that the impact was not severe enough to compel such persons to change their behaviour. Underscoring this dilemma is the fact that the travel restrictions apply only to certain countries and allow travel exemptions for participation in meetings coordinated by international organisations, for example. Targeted individuals can therefore easily find ways to circumvent the ban – either by travelling to (and shopping in) countries that have not imposed such restrictions, or by attending international conferences or humanitarian events while at the same time pursuing their private interests in whichever countries they visit.

There is also a lack of clarity on the exact limitations of the EU travel ban, which in the past has also been ignored. Moreover, the loopholes in the policy that have enabled individuals to circumvent the ban have had a very negative impact on its effectiveness. In May 2002, for example, Mugabe was received at the UN offices in New York on a Libyan airlines flight via Paris. That same year, the President attended the World Food Summit in Rome. In August 2002, only weeks after Police Chief Augustine Chihuri was placed on the EU's travel ban list, he travelled...
to Lyon to attend an Interpol meeting. Hence, targeted individuals have not always been restricted in their movements, and thus there was less pressure on them to change their behaviour in order to have such restrictions lifted.

Mugabe’s manipulative use of terminology by describing smart sanctions as illegal has meant that instead of pressuring Mugabe and his allies, these measures have been taken hostage and are often used as a scapegoat, with the Mugabe government publicly blaming them for the country’s economic decline. He has not spared any opportunity to denounce the targeted sanctions as serving the cause of the imperialists and colonialists, portraying himself as a hero of the masses. In doing so, he has transformed the external pressure into political capital in support of his alleged anti-imperialist cause, discrediting anyone in favour of smart sanctions as puppets of the West. In the past, repressive legislation was justified by recalling the threat of neo-colonialism. In this sense these measures have, in fact, been counterproductive, serving to stabilise the Mugabe regime by providing it with an alibi.

Conversations with ordinary Zimbabweans reveal that many are still under the impression that Zimbabwe has suffered under comprehensive economic sanctions, attesting to the effectiveness of the state-owned media apparatus. Persistent references to so-called “illegal economic sanctions” in state-owned media further underscores this perception. 

Yet the imposition of smart sanctions on a small circle of political elite and affiliated businesses can hardly have had the detrimental effect on the economy that the leader and some members of ZANU-PF claim. Even after it had imposed targeted sanctions, the EU, for example, remained second in importance only to neighbouring South Africa as a trade partner to Zimbabwe.

Another challenge is the continued support received by Mugabe from regional bodies and other states, such as SADC and the AU, in calling for a removal of any form of sanctions on Zimbabwe. The EU-Africa Summit is a good example of this show of support. The Summit was scheduled to take place in Lisbon in 2003, but had to be postponed after several African Heads of State boycotted the event because Mugabe was not invited to attend. Thus in 2007, Portugal pushed for an exemption from the travel ban on Mugabe in order to allow him to attend the Lisbon Summit that year.

China has also enjoyed good relations with the Mugabe regime, and this also buffered the potential impact of restrictive measures imposed by others. Only recently last year, Zimbabwe received Chinese fighter jets and other military aircraft, easily circumventing the EU and UK arms embargo. China has also continued to provide low-interest credit lines. Moreover, as one of the five veto powers in the UN Security Council, China has and continues to be a powerful ally.

Given the number of loopholes available to targeted individuals, the potential damage that may have resulted from the imposition of financial sanctions were thus hardly felt at a national level, and the exemptions provision on the travel ban meant this was no more than a symbolic gesture. In all cases where travel restrictions have been imposed, there are provisions for exemptions to allow targeted individuals to attend meetings of international organisations of which Zimbabwe is a member as well as events that are related to issues of human rights, rule of law and the humanitarian situation. Those targeted appear to have been inconvenienced somewhat, no longer able to enjoy certain privileges.

Moreover, despite the spiralling economic deterioration prior to the signing of the GPA, the Mugabe regime has remained able to reward its supporters, thus securing their continued loyalty. The patronage system allowed the regime to award political posts to cronies, and access to power and resources was easy given the corruption that was so entrenched in the system.

It is also difficult to gauge the positive impact of targeted sanctions on the plight of the opposition party and civil society movements. On the one hand, those
opposed to the Mugabe regime continued to pursue their political goals while the regime continued to enact a number of restrictive laws despite the imposition of smart sanctions. On the other hand, the restrictive measures also had symbolic significance. It gave international recognition to the cause of the opposition.

In summary, the fact that targeted individuals were able to circumvent travel restrictions placed on them by a select few, that the Mugabe regime for a long time enjoyed the support of SADC on the sanctions issue, or that the regime was able to find alternative means to acquire arms from countries that did not have an arms embargo in place, reveals that the effectiveness of any restrictive measures depends very much on the number of states that support their implementation—not to mention their relative significance to the victims.

Prior to the signing of the GPA and the subsequent inauguration of an Interim Government, it was unlikely that the West would consider lifting any of the restrictive measures it had imposed. Understandably so, given that there appeared to be little improvement on any of the conditions identified as crucial for the lifting thereof. However, now that the opposition-MDC has joined government, sanctions cannot necessarily be considered as a measure to show support for the opposition, for example. It is therefore prudent to consider whether this remains a valid objective. The recent renewal of targeted measures by the EU, which included the removal of selected individuals and companies, is a positive step in this direction. Given the fact that other conditions for the lifting of sanctions have not been met – halting the fast-track land reform process or providing parliamentary oversight of the security apparatus, for example – calls for the lifting of all sanctions can surely not be met without proper consideration of the possible consequences of such a move.

Recapping on developments in Zimbabwe thus far: the past 20 months have certainly witnessed visible improvements on the ground. Shortly after signing the GPA in September 2008, spiralling inflation was halted, goods can now be found on store shelves, schools and hospitals have reopened, and the cholera epidemic was brought under control. While there continue to be reports of unjustified arrests and harassment of MDC supporters and human rights activists, there has been a marked decrease in the total number of cases reported compared to 2008. Given the improvements on the economic front, a Multi-Donor Trust Fund was set up to disburse donor funds with several countries, including those that have restricted measure in place, pledging to direct aid through the fund.17

Are these improvements linked to the pressure of smart sanctions? Or was it Mbeki’s quiet diplomacy bearing fruit? The above elaborations have demonstrated that Robert Mugabe and his affiliates could have continued about their business without necessarily having the restrictive measures that were placed on them removed. What has in actual fact led to ZANU-PF agreeing to enter into a power-sharing arrangement with the opposition MDC? It appears that there may have been more a pragmatic reason for this development, namely the continuing downward spiral of the economy18, that is, the fact that the economic situation had deteriorated to such an extent that the political elite could no longer sustain the status quo. The threat of sanctions and Mbeki’s quiet diplomacy were factors operating in an environment that was favourable to change.

In other words, if the imposition of targeted sanctions alone has been less effective in fostering democracy or compelling the ruling elite to change their tactics or behaviour, then there is little empirical reason to maintain them. Given that these sanctions have now been instrumentalised by ZANU-PF hardliners, one might even say that they are doing the MDC more harm than good by providing its opponents with a justification for stalling the ongoing negotiations around the full implementation of the GPA. For it appears that even before the signing of the GPA, targeted sanctions had missed the mark as several high-ranking and influential individuals from the former Mugabe hijacked the issue, using it as a scapegoat to explain the devastation of the country’s economy.
Thus, while a lifting of all restrictive measures may be construed as a political victory for ZANU-PF, it could also be portrayed as a reward for achievements made following the MDC’s joining of the government. Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai has on occasion called for the easing of travel and financial restrictions as a reward for progress achieved thus far. Thus a conditional lifting could just as well be interpreted as an achievement of the MDC.

The key recommendation of this Report would be to reconsider the position on targeted sanctions and seriously question whether they have achieved the goal intended, or whether they are likely to have the desired effect in the future. Will the targeted individuals be moved to change their behaviour, or will they continue to use this issue to divert attention from their responsibility for the economic downfall in the country?

The international community faces a dilemma: on the one hand, not all conditions have been met to justify the lifting of all restrictive measures, yet on the other hand, the issue has become a key public justification for ZANU-PF to stall the GPA process.

Perhaps it would be prudent to consider showing a sign of good faith by removing certain restrictions to acknowledge that there have been improvements in the economy and a decrease in incidents of violent crackdown on opposition supporters. Moderates can be found on all parts of the political spectrum – not only within the MDC, but also within ZANU-PF itself. Certain elites have indeed changed their behaviour and this could be an opportunity for the international community to send a positive signal (see Eriksson 2007:50). This would also have the added effect of deflating the argument by several targeted individuals that sanctions are harming the country as a whole, and would provide a channel for communication to the wider public (through the media) that sanctions are specific, and not comprehensive.

For it is time that the sender of the message makes it clear: restrictive measures are targeted at selected individuals, bilateral assistance – while perhaps reduced – continues at various levels, and the international community has not at any stage of the crisis disengaged completely.

What has sustained the crisis is perhaps the lack of a strong, unified position on the issue of sanctions from all stakeholders and interested parties. As long as Mugabe has allies on certain issues, he will be hard-pressed to make any serious political concessions. Hence efforts should be undertaken to consolidate the message from international bodies. At the moment, SADC and its representatives are calling for a lifting of sanctions, yet the USA and other “Western” states are adamant that these be upheld until the full implementation of the GPA. These actors should perhaps realign their positions on this issue in order to increase pressure either way. There should be serious and visible consultations between Western states and SADC on the issue of sanctions – because whether we like it or not, their lifting may be as much part of the problem as it may be part of the solution.

While experience has taught us that the political game in Zimbabwe is never clear cut, and tensions persist as destructive elements continue to sabotage progress made on the implementation of the GPA while promised concessions are not made, experience also teaches that those eager for change do hold some measure of leverage. The potential for pressure was most apparent when, in October 2009, Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai threatened to withdraw from the unity government, a move triggered by the renewed detention of MDC Treasurer-General, Roy Bennett. Soon after, a High Court order was issued for Bennett’s release. Tsvangirai had flexed some political muscle. Surely, there must be room for more of this kind of leverage.
In May 2005, the government initiated Operation Murambatsvina (also known as Operation Restore Order), ostensibly to rid urban areas of illegal structures, illegal business enterprises, and criminal activities. The operation, which resulted in at least 700,000 people losing their homes and belongings, was widely condemned by local and international human rights groups, churches, the United Nations (UN) and western governments such as Britain and the US. (see ISS Zimbabwe country page)

However, the impact of this decision was minimal given the fact that at the time the UK reduced its official development assistance (ODA), Japan had become Zimbabwe's largest bilateral donor. For example, ODA from Japan increased from US$ 27 million in 1998 to US$ 78 million in 1999. In the years 2000 and 2001, ODA stood at US$ 62 million and US$ 29 million, respectively. In comparison, the UK spent US$ 37 million in ODA to Zimbabwe in 1998, US$ 26 million in 1999, and US$ 20 million and US$ 18 million in the following years.

In July 2008, these arrears stood at an estimated US$600 million.


The Multi-donor Trust Fund is run by the Ministry of Finance. The US pledged US$73 million towards health, sanitation, water, Germany pledged 20 million Euros through NGOs and UN system and the Australian government also pledged a substantial amount of aid to help restore health, water and sanitation services, to name but a few.

This was as a result of the fast-track land redistribution, corruption and exploitation of state resources, money printing, and so on.

See e.g. Blessing Zulu, Zimbabwe PM Tsvangirai Calls On West To Ease Sanctions on Mugabe, ZANU-PF, Voice of America, 29 January 2010, and ‘Zanu pressure sees Tsvangirai calling for sanctions to be lifted’, Eyewitness News, 15 February 2010.