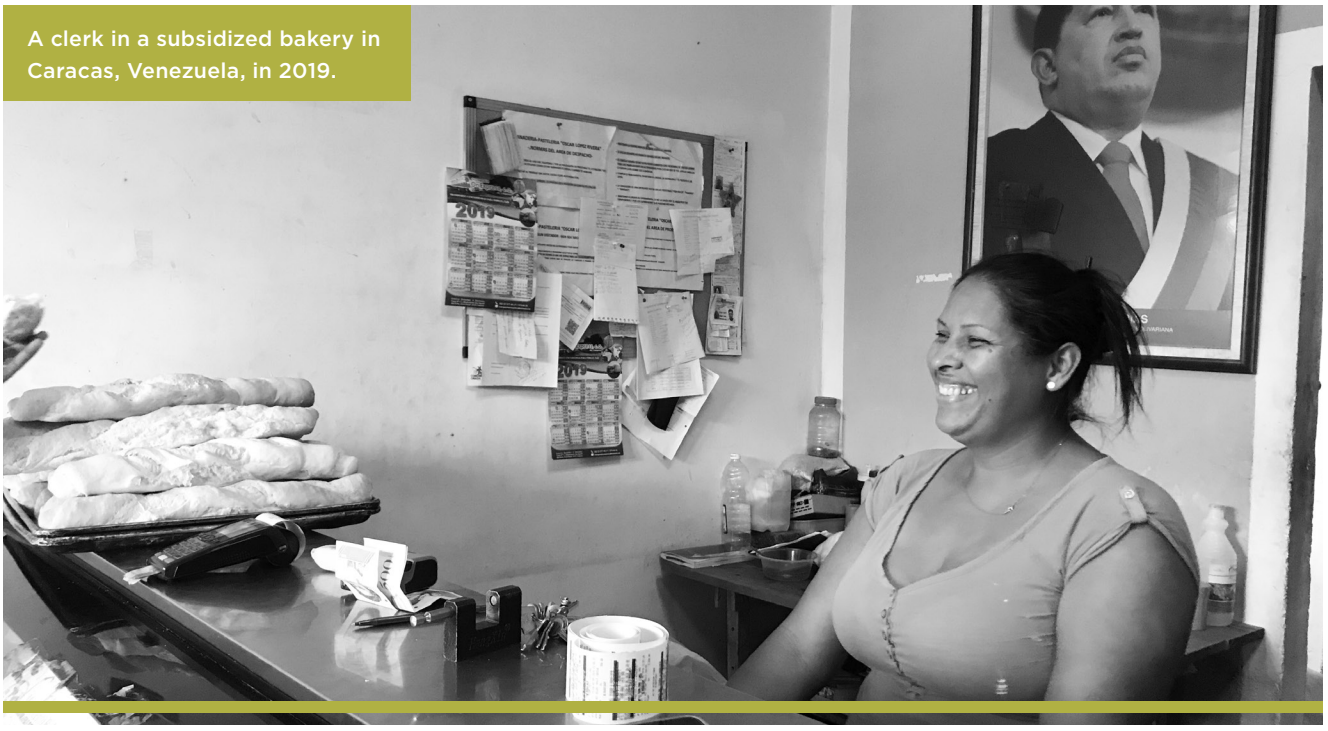
By Jim Hodgson



A clerk in a subsidized bakery in Caracas, Venezuela, in 2019.

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SANCTIONED IGNORANCE

International sanctions in countries like North Korea and Venezuela hurt more than help

WHEN I BECAME INVOLVED in movements for social justice in the 1980s, economic and political sanctions were viewed as tools of liberation. They were a potential means to end colonial rule and, in the South African context, apartheid.

Today, sanctions are mostly used by rich and powerful countries to pressure smaller states. Food and medicine are supposed to be exempt from sanctions, but banks block payments and transport companies won't carry the goods out of fear of contravening the rules. Thus, Venezuela can't buy wheat from Canada, fertilizers from Colombia, or insulin from Germany. North Korea can't buy X-ray machines or finish building a hospital because it is prohibited from buying metals abroad.

Since 2018, The United Church of Canada and a handful of other organizations have pressed the Government of Canada and the United Nations to ease up on use of sanctions because of the unintended humanitarian consequences for ordinary people in sanctioned countries. For the United Church, these calls are rooted in its practice of partnership, and often in its mission history—in the case of North Korea—or in wider ecumenical action—as with Venezuela.

In 1998, two years before I joined the United Church staff as Latin America-Caribbean partnership coordinator, Venezuelans chose Hugo Chávez to be their new president. Chávez began turning the country's oil revenue to serve his country's impoverished majority by focusing on housing, health care, and education. In 2000, the people of the United States chose George Bush to be their new president, who in 2002 would refer to North Korea, together with Iraq and Iran, as part of the "Axis of Evil." The stage was set for confrontations that reverberate today.

SANCTIONS HARM THE VULNERABLE IN NORTH KOREA

For Patti Talbot, the United Church's north–east Asia partnership coordinator, the connection between The United Church of Canada and its partners in Korea—North and South—is deeply felt. It dates back to 1898 when Canadian Presbyterians established a mission in the northern port city of Wonsan, in what is now the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea.

Water, soap, electricity, fuel, and food are all in short supply in sanctioned countries—a situation made more acute because of the global pandemic.

"The Canadian mission action combined a concern with the well-being of the person and the soul, the physical and the spiritual," says Talbot. "Attention focused on people who were left out of traditional structures: education for women and girls, for example." Church planting, she adds, went on in ways that developed Korean leadership and capacity building. Missionaries demonstrated respect for the Korean language and culture, particularly during the Japanese colonial period when the Korean people were brutally suppressed.

But "liberation" from the Japanese, with the end of World War Two in 1945, saw the division of the Korean peninsula between Soviet-led forces in the north and U.S.-led forces in the south. The subsequent Korean War in the early 1950s was one of many proxy wars carried out between the Soviet Union and the United States and their allies as well as a civil war that pitted Koreans against each other. Many Christians fled to the south. Today, Koreans on both sides of the border yearn for reconciliation, but hope ebbs and flows depending on forces not at all within their control.

The late 1980s and the 1990s saw gradual opening as Cold War tensions eased. The Korean Christian Federation, a body representing North Korean Protestant Christians, was able to connect with the World Council of Churches, the United Church, and others. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB) implemented a food aid program during and after a serious famine. Canada established diplomatic relations in 2001.

When more conservative governments came to power in Washington and Seoul in the early 2000s, official collaboration and dialogue with the DPRK dwindled. In 2006, North Korea tested a nuclear weapon. While this may have been a sort of bargaining chip to renew talks about demilitarization of the whole Korean peninsula, the United Nations Security Council responded by imposing sanctions. These were strengthened several times later over further nuclear tests and ballistic missile activities. Canada imposed its own set of sanctions in 2011.

Severe environmental and climate change–related challenges have led, in recent years, to prolonged dry, hot spells in some areas and major flooding in others. With international sanctions blocking access to agricultural inputs and tools, and the near complete lockdown response to the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has steadily increased throughout the DPRK. In early 2020, UN agencies feared widespread undernutrition would threaten an entire generation of children in North Korea, with the growth of one in five children stunted due to chronic undernutrition.

Today, the United Church supports a modest maternal-child nutrition effort led by First Steps Canada, a Vancouver-based organization committed to preventing child malnutrition in the DPRK. Every day, First Steps provides more than 100,000 children with soymilk and 20,000 mothers and their babies with sachets of micronutrients in powder form that are added to food. First Steps does the arduous work of seeking exemptions from the sanctions so as to provide the aid.

And the United Church hopes to work again with CFGB and with Finland's Lutheran relief organization, Finn Church Aid, to provide food assistance, but the effort is delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The United Church is part of a global effort to press for easing of sanctions against the DPRK, as it becomes increasingly clear sanctions are not achieving the intended goal of denuclearizing North Korea. "What we bring to this sanctions conversation with other civil society organizations is this history of relationship as well as a moral and ethical objection to the use of sanctions," says Talbot. "Sanctions do the most harm to those who are already vulnerable. We know that women and children suffer."

SANCTIONS ARE "WARFARE" IN VENEZUELA

If some good came of all the threats made against Venezuela in recent years—including an attempted coup in April 2019, and a failed invasion by mercenaries in May 2020—it is found in new impetus for dialogue and for humanitarian aid.

Until the 2008 global financial crisis, Venezuela was providing more international assistance in Latin America than the United States. Oil was provided at reduced prices or with long-term, low-interest loans to Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and other countries.

Oil prices collapsed in 2009, rose again between 2012 and 2014, and collapsed in 2015 with no recovery in sight. While it is tempting to blame the arrival of Donald Trump in power at the beginning of 2017 for current problems, relations with the United States worsened in 2015 when the Obama administration declared that Venezuela represented a "security threat" to the United States, and began implementing a series of political and economic measures against Venezuela. Faced with economic hardship derived both from the collapse of the oil industry and the impact of sanctions, several million Venezuelans left for Colombia and other countries.

Inside Venezuela, the government expanded its food distribution program to reach about 60 percent of the population. Gradually, United Nations agencies and the Pan American Health Organization became more involved, along with non-governmental organizations and a network supported by the global ACT Alliance of faith-based relief organizations.

"Sanctions are warfare tied to U.S. policy to provoke regime change," said Teri Mattson of the U.S. women's solidarity

Food distribution from a truck in central Caracas, Venezuela.

Jim Hodgson

network Codepink during a visit to Ottawa in November 2019. The strategy doesn't work, she said, and only seems to result in pushing countries like Russia, China, Venezuela, Iran, Cuba, North Korea, and Syria closer together.

Mattson was part of a panel on the unintended humanitarian consequences of sanctions at a forum organized by the Canadian Council for International Cooperation. A response to calls for sanctions should always consider who is making the call and who will be most affected by their implementation, she insisted.

On the same panel, the person responsible for emergency operations of the Canadian Red Cross, Chiran Livera, said there may be good reasons for sanctions, but they should always exempt humanitarian activities. Even when disasters occur, such as the earthquake in Iran in November 2017, transfers of funds for emergency assistance are blocked.

Another speaker, Kee Park, lecturer on global health and social medicine at Harvard Medical School, works frequently with doctors in North Korea. "Surgeons are using old scalpels because new ones cannot be obtained," he said. "I am outraged as a humanitarian aid worker."

Park noted the issues of international power—that the U.S. government "has unchecked power, coercive power, and there is no accountability." Policies can be divergent, he added, and Canada's relationship with Cuba is an example of what can happen when a country chooses a different tack.

CALLS FOR NEW APPROACHES

For more than 60 years, Canada has defied U.S. sanctions against Cuba. Canada calls its approach to Cuba "constructive engagement," a model that could be applied with other countries. Norway, Mexico, and Uruguay are among countries that have persevered in promoting dialogue as a means to resolve conflict in Venezuela. Canada should similarly re-engage with North Korea, argued the United Church's former Moderator the Very Rev. Lois Wilson in an opinion piece published in the *Ottawa Citizen*. "If we want peace, we need to help make it happen," she wrote. "Of course, Canada should maintain its commitments to human rights and to an international system based on rules, but at the same time Canada should re-establish direct communications and rebuild official relationships with North Korea."

Calls for new approaches sharpened as the COVID-19 pandemic spread. "Sanctions that were imposed in the name of delivering human rights are in fact killing people and depriving them of fundamental rights, including the rights to health, to food, and to life itself," said an August statement by five United Nations experts. Water, soap, electricity, fuel, and food are all in short supply in sanctioned countries—a situation made more acute because of the global pandemic.

In May, the United Church joined with the Mennonite Central Committee Canada and the Nobel Women's Initiative in urging Canada's foreign affairs minister, François-Philippe Champagne, to ensure that aid is not blocked by sanctions during the crisis. "We join with others who share a vocation to be peacemakers and a commitment to work for the health and wholeness of the human and created world," their letter said. Their words echoed calls to suspend sanctions from UN Secretary-General António Guterres and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, as well as statements from the ACT Alliance and the U.S. National Council of Churches, among others.

However we conceive of our motivation for justice—social gospel, right relations, preferential option for the poor—we should be suspicious of cures that are worse than the supposed diseases. We can argue over politics in Korea or Venezuela or Iran, and work for change, but sanctions these days hurt more than they help.

Jim Hodgson, a former United Church Latin America-Caribbean partnership coordinator, is a journalist based in Toronto.