

Human Rights and Economic Rights

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One aspect of human rights is the principle of economic rights—that all persons are entitled to food, shelter, health care, education, and other basic needs. These principles are contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. In general, we associate the violation of these rights with the poverty in the developing world, or the low-income classes in the First World countries. But the suffering that comes with poverty can also happen in the context of war and other conflicts. Siege warfare is the clearest example of using impoverishment as a weapon. In modern international governance, economic sanctions are used to punish governments that have violated international law, but the sanctions themselves can do indiscriminate harm to the innocent.

That is what happened in the case of Iraq. In 1990, the United Nations Security Council imposed very strict sanctions on Iraq, because Iraq had invaded Kuwait. This aggression violated the UN Charter, and the Security Council was mandated to respond to aggression using diplomatic, economic, or military measures. But the sanctions imposed were so extreme that they compromised Iraq's ability to import food, or to grow more food themselves. They could not import the equipment to generate electricity or to treat water and sewage. In February 1991, in the Persian Gulf War, the allied forces used bombing strikes to destroy Iraq's infrastructure, such as electrical generators, roads, bridges, and water treatment plants. The result was that Iraq was reduced to a "near apocalyptic" state, a "pre-industrial condition," according to the missions sent by the UN Secretary General. For the next twelve years, the sanctions continued to be so stringent, Iraq could never come close to restoring its economy, even when there were humanitarian programs, particularly the Oil for Food Program. Iraq had been an industrialized nation, heavily dependent on electricity and oil for its energy, and on advanced equipment from the West. But the sanctions crippled all of the fundamental systems that were necessary to sustain life: agricultural production, transportation, telecommunications, health care, education, and industry. There were epidemics of cholera and typhoid, and child mortality increased by two and half times. In 1999, UNICEF estimated that 500,000 children under the age of five had died in Iraq, who would not have, if it were not for the sanctions.

So, rather perversely, the measures that were intended to punish Iraq for its aggression, in fact had the result of violating the rights of the Iraqi population as a whole. For them, being reduced to such extreme poverty resulted in enormous suffering. This is why economic rights are so important.