

To cite: Seyfi, S., Hall, C. M., Saarinen, J., & Vo-Thanh, T. (2022). Do international sanctions help or inhibit justice and sustainability in tourism?. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2069785>.

Do international sanctions help or inhibit justice and sustainability in tourism?

Siamak Seyfi^{a}, C. Michael Hall^{abcd}, Jarkko Saarinen^a, Tan Vo-Thanh^f*

^a Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Finland

^b Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

^c School of Business and Economics, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

^d School of Tourism & Hospitality, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

^f Department of Marketing, Excelia Business School, CEREGE (EA 1722)

*** Corresponding Author:**

Siamak Seyfi
siamak.seyfi@oulu.fi

Abstract

Despite the expanded use of sanctions as a soft foreign policy tool in the post-Cold War era, there is yet little knowledge on the implications of this coercive tool in relation to justice, ethics and sustainability in destinations to which sanctions are applied. Using Iran as a case study and grounded in international relations and political science literature, this study used semi-structured interviews with tourism actors to assess the direct and indirect effects of sanctions on tourism with respect to justice, rights and sustainability. The informants suggested that sanctions have worsened mobility rights, rights to communication, and the economic and financial rights of tourism actors, thereby limited their capacity to contribute to inclusive and sustainable development. Distributive pressures within Iran arising from the sanction-driven economic disruption have clearly undermined the empowerment capacity of tourism to contribute to improve gender justice, thereby standing in opposition to the principles of justice and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, notions of justice and rights are uneven in space and time, with their application inherently dependent on its definition in particular contexts. By portraying new insights from the restrictions emanating from sanctions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of a very popular instrument of foreign policy and its humanitarian and justice implications in destinations affected by sanctions.

Keywords: Sanctions; justice; mobility rights; Sustainable Development Goals; crisis; gender empowerment

Sanctions can create severe and undue suffering for individuals who have neither perpetrated crimes nor otherwise borne responsibility for improper conduct. (Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

1. Introduction

Economic sanctions are increasingly used in international relations and they have become integral to the repertoire of coercive geopolitical tools of statecraft (Cortright & Lopez, 2018) and championed as ‘the humane alternative to war’ (Boomen, 2014). In the post-Cold War era, sanctions have become a ‘go-to’ policy and are imposed at the multilateral level (e.g., at the UN), regional (e.g., the EU in particular), and unilaterally by a single state (Hufbauer et al., 2008). They range from broad economic and trade sanctions to more targeted measures (so-called smart sanctions) such as asset freezes, travel bans, financial or commodity restrictions, and arms embargo (United Nations Security Council, 2020). Sanctions are frequently used in conjunction with other foreign policy measures to affect a state's or group's policies or actions when such policies or actions are deemed as a threat to world peace and security (Cortright & Lopez, 2018).

Sanctions have been used for decades and have been widely discussed in international relations, political economy and political science (Gowlland-Debbas, 2021; McDowell, 2021). Nonetheless, recent reviews of tourism and geopolitics (e.g., Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016; Hall, 2017) overlooked sanctions as a significant topic, potentially because for the most part sanctions have not been applied to major tourist generating regions or destinations until relatively recently (Seyfi & Hall, 2020a, 2020b), and there has therefore been a substantial lag in the literature. Additionally, despite the burgeoning interest in studies of crises in tourism, existing research is predominantly centred on issues of terrorism and political security and has not framed sanctions as a crisis event for affected destinations (Hall, 2010; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Wut et al., 2021). As a result, until recently, sanctions had become an ignored element in studies of the politics of tourism and crisis. However, while any crisis may exacerbate existing inequalities, the crises precipitated by sanctions often compound and complicate existing issues of economic, social and environmental injustice for individuals, communities and specific populations (Drury & Peksen, 2014; Özdamar & Shahin, 2021). Research also indicates that, because of the social and political instability caused by sanctions, individuals' political and social rights may be violated more frequently (Fathollah-Nejad, 2014), thereby limiting their empowerment and capacity to contribute to inclusive and sustainable development (Tahmasebi, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2020a).

While scholars have stressed that planning for sustainable tourism must be driven by the rights, interests, and social needs of vulnerable groups in local communities (Boluk et al., 2019; Rastegar et al., 2021), little is known about how tourism continues to operate in sanctioned countries and how tourism actors respond to the sustainability and justice challenges sanctions pose. This is particularly important in sanctions-ridden destinations, which are often low-income countries with significant justice and rights issues and pre-existing heterogeneity in employment generation, income distribution and poor working conditions for women and marginalised groups (Gutmann et al., 2020). It is also unknown

whether justice related sustainability issues are only a concern of academic commentators and interest groups, for example, or whether they are actively considered by tourism actors such as policy makers, business interests and members of the wider community. Hence, these issues point to the gaps that this study attempts to fill.

In the light of these research gaps and applying a justice lens and located in an international relations and political science disciplinary base, the research objective central to this study include investigating the hitherto unheard voices of key informants in Iranian tourism and hospitality sector regarding the politico-economic crises emanating from international sanctions. This study also attempts to cultivate an improved understanding of the impacts of sanctions on Iranian tourism and to explore how sanctions affect notions of justice and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Taken collectively, this paper responds to the recent calls by scholars to transcend disciplinary boundaries for increased research related to justice and tourism (e.g., Jamal, 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Rastegar et al., 2021; Jamal & Higham, 2021) and extends understandings of sanctions-led crisis in economically and social fragile destinations.

Iran, which has been subjected to a steady stream of tough sanctions (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011), presents an intriguing case study for such an investigation. This study is also timely in the light of the United States' reimposition of sanctions against Iran following a brief period of relaxation of sanctions (2015–2018 resulting from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal) and contemporary debates over their continuation, as well as the possible consequences for the country's tourism industry.

In this study sanctions, justice and sustainability are framed within the context of tourism geopolitics, as they reflect the way in which the sanctions-tourism nexus has become a focus, or casualty, of foreign policy decision-making. As a result this research combines both traditional geopolitical theory which focuses on the nation-state as a geopolitical actor as well as more recent expansions of the notion of critical geopolitics which explores ways in which political space is experienced and practiced (Power & Campbell, 2010). As Seyfi and Hall (2020c) observed, research on sanctions provides a new direction in critical geopolitical and foreign policy studies in a tourism context because of the effects of the denial or constraint of mobility as well as the way in which some forms of tourism act as a means of resistance to sanctions, while also connecting to critical geopolitical research on sustainability and notions of justice (Power & Campbell, 2010). As a result, the study contributes to a greater understanding of a frequently used instrument of foreign policy on destinations and the experience of tourism actors through a justice, ethics and sustainability lens. Therefore, in responding to the need for more multidisciplinary empirical work related to justice and tourism, this study emphasizes sanctions as an important crisis event for tourism destinations and ethical challenge in relation to SDGs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Crisis precipitated by sanctions in relation to tourism and SDGs

The term ‘sanctions’ in international law refers to “coercive measures, taken by one State or in concert by several States (the sanctioner), which are intended to convince or compel another State (the sanctionee) to desist from engaging in acts violating international law” (Ilieva et al., 2018, p.201). Sanctions can be used to achieve a range of political goals, including restricting trade and economic development in targeted countries and having a negative influence on their GDP, bilateral trade, and financial services (Özdamar & Shahin, 2021). Indeed, it is the deliberate goal of sanctions to cause economic damage and create economic stress and pain so as to encourage policy change in the target country (Rarick, 2007). For instance, Neuenkirch and Neumeier (2015) illustrate that multilateral (e.g., UN sanctions) and unilateral sanctions (e.g., some US sanctions) can cut the targeted country's GDP by up to 25% and 13%, respectively. While economic sanctions are often used as indirect tools to achieve a political change, they primarily place severe constraints on the economic development of sanctioned countries, and, therefore, can significantly challenge their ability to achieve the SDGs (Afshari, 2019). Adopted by the United Nations in 2015, the SDGs are a set of 17 interlinked global goals with specific targets aimed at ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity (UN, 2015). In their comprehensive analysis of unilateral sanctions imposed by US since 2000, Rosenberg et al. (2016) reported that sanctions reduced the human development index of targeted countries. This note is highly significant because finance and economic development, multilateral trade, and foreign investment are all required to achieve the SDGs, especially in the low and middle-income countries, which contradicts SDG17's emphasis on poor and developing countries' integration into the global economy and the strengthening of the multilateral trading system’ (UN, 2015). Although the conceptualization of SDGs has been criticized for reinforcing contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Hall, 2019), sanctions are unmistakably hurdles to state-industry collaboration and the achievement of the SDGs in their current form.

Sanctions can also limit the international community's ability to cooperate, coordinate, and share obligations, as outlined in Goal 17 of the SDGs. This might result in a lack of access to knowledge and international scientific and educational expertise and, even, publishers (Mozafari, 2016). However, while the sanctions challenged business development and conduct, some studies suggest that a shortage of imported goods caused by sanctions might occasionally stimulate domestic production in countries affected by sanctions. For instance, the study of Farzin (2017) showed that local businesses in Iran have learned to withstand the impact of sanctions and established their own initiatives to spur innovation.

Sanctions also impose financial constraints on a variety of industries in target nations (for example, foreign investment ban and technology transfers). Seyfi et al. (2019) argue that sanctions imposed on Iran have largely constrained technological support for cultural conservation in Iran, which is arguably a vital component of the country’s sustainable development for international visitation (Rastegar et al., 2021). Such restrictions are in sharp contrast with target 11.4 of the SDG11, which calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural heritage. This also reflects Jamal et al.’s (2010) observation on

the significance of cultural justice for local people and fairness for the sustainable use and conservation of a destination's cultural heritage.

The legitimacy and effectiveness of sanctions is often criticized because of their devastating impacts on human rights and the well-being of civilian populations. Especially women and their rights are often seriously affected by sanctions. In their cross-national study spanning 146 nations from 1971 to 2005, Drury and Peksen (2014) reported that sanctions have a substantial detrimental effect on women's rights, their position and agency in society and labour force participation. A similar observation was noted in a more recent tourism-focused study by Seyfi et al. (2020a) which reported on the gendered impacts of sanctions and argue that sanctions have negatively affected and deteriorated economic, psychological, social and political aspects of Iranian women empowerment. They further note that sanctions contradict women's equality and empowerment as enshrined in the SDG5. Overall, as Rustler (2019) notes, sanctions have the potential to lock nations into unsustainable practices such as unintended consequences for the environment and the climate in the short, medium, and especially the long-term that undermine several of the SDGs and have long-term negative consequences for socio-economic and environmental quality of life, including health.

2.2. Theorizing the ethics of sanctions through a justice lens

Sanctions are incompatible with the principles of social justice proposed by Rawls (1971) and which draw upon ethical perspectives of the liberal enlightenment (Wood, 1999; Brown, 2006), the Kantian 'categorical imperative', which calls for people to act in a such a way that, if everyone did likewise, the world would be a better place (Ramet, 2019). Significantly, Kant's and Rawls' views are in stark opposition to those of Hobbes (Flikschuh, 2012), which saw the relationship between sovereignty and the individual as "nothing more than the fear of violent death" (Ramet, 2019, p.197) or Rousseau's notion of a general will (Steinberger, 2008). Instead, and significantly for notions of social justice, Kant also spelled out a 'practical imperative', itself drawn from the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant, 1948, p.91). Interestingly, from the perspective of both sustainability and justice, Kant argued that the responsibility of sovereign government was "to constrain the wealthy to provide the means of sustenance to those who are unable to provide for even their most necessary natural needs. The wealthy have acquired an obligation to the commonwealth, since they owe their existence to... its protection and care" (Kant, 1948, p.136). Kantian logic may be somewhat removed from the realpolitik imperatives of contemporary neoliberal capitalism or even the demands of authoritarian states. However, in policy terms such perspectives on justice may provide an ideological underpinning for some foreign policy positions on sanctions (e.g. smart sanctions) as well as a 'reasoned voice' to the applications of sanctions to entire regimes, e.g. following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (King, 1999; Scott, 2018).

According to Rawls's (1971) theory of justice, a situation of fairness exists when "all social primary goods - liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect - are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the

advantage of the least favoured' (Rawls, 1971, p.303). Existing evidence suggests that the imposition of sanctions is clearly opposite to such principles of justice with most countries' economic sanctions disproportionately impacting the least advantaged groups of society (Drury & Peksen, 2014; Hatipoglu & Peksen, 2018). Thus, economic sanctions do not meet the purpose of allowing the greatest benefits to the least advantaged of society. Instead, sanctions are often approached under notions of rule-based international law, rather than specific concerns with particular notions of justice (Scott, 2018).

Rawls's (1971) notion of justice has been the subject of many debates and several scholars argue that they do not consider differences in communities and their values (Daniels, 1989; Jamal, 2019) as well as the context in which they are applied. In their brief examinations of Rawls' theory of justice, Fennell (2006) and Duffy and Smith (2004) highlight the complexities of applying an ethics of justice to tourism. Rawls's theory has also been criticised for the extent to which it fails to acknowledge complexity, human irrationality, and notions of justice that are different from those of the Western philosophical tradition (Chan, 2005), as well as offering only a 'weak sustainability' perspective with respect to intergenerational rights (Mathis, 2009).

Fennell (2006) states that tourism is an inherent issue of justice. For Duffy and Smith (2004) social justice refers to the fair distribution of power, goods and other resources within and across societies. This echoes the view of Higgins-Desbiolles (2008) that the concept of justice in tourism encompasses more than a fair cost-benefit distribution. Jamal and Hales (2016) and Rastegar et al. (2021) also suggest a shift from distributive justice (e.g., Rawls's theory) to performative justice. They argue that where vulnerable populations are affected by a crisis, justice is done performatively through recognizing local rights, needs, and social spaces. Such a situation highlights the essentially contested nature of concepts of justice and sustainability (Gallie, 1956), particularly in light of the SDGs. While providing a universal (Kantian/Rawlsian) perspective on sustainability and justice, the implementation of the SDGs is performative given that it utilises the notion of common but differentiated governance to give local effect to the SDGs (Meuleman & Niestroy, 2015). However, the tension between these perspectives is perhaps irreconcilable given that it also reflects the relationship between universal and local rights, and competing concerns of justice that are inherently difficult for policy-makers to manage. While acknowledging the significance of performative and local rights, this paper primarily frames sustainability and justice issues in tourism within universal notions of justice and rights, however imperfect, because of concerns of the way local interpretations of rights may be misused to justify constraints on the empowerment of women and specific groups in society in particular (Bidegain Ponte & Enríquez, 2016; Sen, 2019).

Universal notions of rights and justice are also sometimes used to justify the application of sanctions (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 2014; Teitel, 2015). However, while proponents of the use of sanctions contend that coercive tools such as economic sanctions are a cost-effective means for changing the behavior of targeted governments by avoiding the high costs of military intervention (Marinov, 2005), the most comprehensive study of the effectiveness of economic sanctions assessed that the measure works only about 35% of the time (Hufbauer

et al., 2008), while having undesirable effects on the wider population. As such, there is considerable scholarship on the ethics of sanctions. The majority of this research stream employ 'just war' theory as a framework for evaluating their moral permissibility, focusing on sanctions aimed at changing undesirable political policies or conduct (Winkler, 1999; Ellis, 2021). For example, Damrosch (1994) argues that sanctions can be a morally acceptable tool of foreign policy if they are administered consistently to comparable situations, uphold international standards, and are not used only for political purposes. However, Ellis (2021) criticized the straightforward application of just war principles to sanctions and explained the distinction between war and economic sanctions:

...war is constituted by bombing, shooting or stabbing but economic sanctions are constituted by refusing to trade. While there is a strong *pro tanto* duty to not bomb, shoot or stab individuals, there is no comparable *pro tanto* duty to trade. That does not mean sanctions are always morally permissible, only that the moral issues involved are very different. We have no reason to believe that moral principles developed to govern war are also appropriate for governing sanctions. This approach to the ethics of economic sanctions ought to be abandoned (Ellis, 2021, pp.410-411).

From a tourism perspective, such ethical debates have been applied to sanctions on tourism to a destination (Seyfi & Hall, 2020a). For example, in the longstanding debate over sanctions on Myanmar tourism, some proponents of sanctions have suggested boycotting Myanmar travel and tourism to effect 'regime change'. The argument is that it is unethical for individuals to support the military dictatorship, which controls most of the country's productive capacity including tourism that attracts considerable foreign exchange. In contrast, those who argue against sanctions suggest that visiting such destinations might help to reduce the isolation of the wider population as well as generating needed employment and visitors can advocate for justice. From a justice perspective Rarick (2006) asks the fundamental question of: is it appropriate to destroy a country in order to save it? However, although contested, the most appropriate ethical course from a justice and sustainability perspective is ultimately decided upon at the national or the global scale. It is to these ethical concerns that the remainder of the paper will turn in the specific case of sanctions on Iran.

3. Method

3.1. The study context: Iran under four decades of crippling sanctions

Following the establishment of a theocratic Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has been the target of one of the longest and toughest international economic sanctions' regimes in response to the country's nuclear activities, human rights record, and intervention in regional affairs (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011; Dizaji, 2019). In the aftermath of the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, the United States, as one of the key actors in the imposition of unilateral sanctions has tried to curb Iran's geopolitical ambitions through a variety of foreign policy instruments, including economic sanctions (Takeyh & Maloney 2011). Since then, these instruments have grown in their stringency. The question of whether or not these long-running sanctions have succeeded in changing Iran's behavior is extremely debatable (Madani, 2021). However, what is clear is that Iran's economy has struggled as a result of four decades of

sanctions, which led to major economic problems, high inflation, and limited access to foreign markets (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018). Due to the tense political relations with Western countries, and particularly the United States (which were major tourism markets for Iran before the revolution), the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) and steady imposition of sanctions, the country's tourism market experienced major changes and shifted to neighboring countries. According to the WTTC (2020), Iraq, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Pakistan and Kuwait account for over 70% of the inbound arrivals to Iran in 2019.

While Iran was the most popular tourist destination in the Middle East from 1967 to 1977 (Morakabati, 2011), following the revolution international travel to Iran was severely restricted by sanctions. After the 2015 nuclear agreement (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), international sanctions were partially lifted, transformed Iran's political and economic atmosphere and created significant chances for the struggling tourist sector (Khodadadi, 2016; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). Importantly, the lifting of sanctions and Iran's integration into the international community transformed the country's image from that of a 'pariah state' to that of a 'booming destination' (Khodadadi, 2016) leading to substantial growth of incoming tourists, visitor spending, employment and tourism-related investment. For instance, in 2017 almost five million international tourists visited the country, nearly three times as many as in 2009 (UNWTO, 2019).

With an over 85 million population, Iran is the second-largest country in the Middle East followed by Saudi Arabia. Historically, Iran has been heavily dependent on oil revenues. However, the tourism industry plays an increasingly important role in the economic growth of the country. Iran's strategic position at the crossroads of major civilizations and trade routes (e.g., the Silk Road), along with its climate and landscapes provide significant opportunities for tourism development (Seyfi & Hall, 2018). As of February 2022, 26 sites are listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, while 61 sites are tentatively listed (UNESCO, 2022). Based on the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report, the total contribution of travel and tourism to Iran's GDP was 6.5 % of the total GDP and 5.4 % of total employment (1.344 million jobs) in 2019 (WTTC, 2020). Although women's participation in tourism-related activities increased with the relaxation of economic sanctions in 2015 (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018), there is no reliable data on female labour force participation rate in Iran's tourist and hospitality industry. While, nearly half of Iran's population is female, and women account for a rising proportion of university graduates, they are a minority of the employed population (UN, 2020).

The US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reestablishment of sanctions in May 2018 halted Iran's booming tourist industry. Following the return of American sanctions, several major European airlines suspended their flights to Iran with negative consequences for Iranian tourism while substantial international investment in the Iranian accommodation sector was also dramatically halted (Khodadadi, 2018). The return of sanctions not only reduced international visitation but also reinforced a negative image of Iran in some Western markets, which the Iranian tourism industry had been working to overcome (Seyfi & Hall, 2018).

The ramifications of such reimposition of sanctions also prompted renewed discussion on the ethics and justice of economic sanctions and these issues will be examined in the next sections from the perspectives of Iranian tourism actors.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place in Iran by the first author during two different periods: first in 2016- 2017 at the time of the lifting of sanctions and then in 2018-2019 just after the re-imposition of the sanctions. The first author made use of his knowledge of the country to access participants. Some of the participants were personally known to the first author while additional participants were enlisted by snowball sampling, which involved asking participants to recommend further eligible individuals who would be willing to be interviewed (Handcock & Gile, 2011). This was deemed appropriate in obtaining a purposive sample suited for this study (Flick, 2018). Using ethnographic and participatory approaches that are both interpretative and interactive have been suggested when there is a need to gain more comprehensive information about the phenomenon under investigation (Wise, 2018). Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with key informants in the Iranian tourism and hospitality industry. Participants in this study were carefully chosen to represent different sectors of the industry to allow for enriched views. A total of 35 individual interviews were conducted (20 interviews in the first period of data collection followed by 15 interviews in the second period with same interviewees). Sixteen of the interviewees were female. Table 1 shows the profile of interviewees. The interviews continued until data saturation was reached when respondents were repeating the same information provided by prior interviewees, and no additional issues were being identified (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additional data was gathered for data triangulation by ethnographic observations (Wise, 2018) as well as analysing policy documents and other literature such as newspaper articles and online forums (Decrop, 1999).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide and the questions covered themes related to the impacts of the sanctions on the Iranian tourism and hospitality industry and more particularly, its fairness, justice and ethics, as well as personal impacts in an effort to capture different perspectives. The questions were drawn up in light of the justice literature in tourism (e.g. Jamal, 2019; Rastegar et al., 2021) and adapted to the wider literature on sanctions and crisis (e.g. Seyfi & Hall, 2020). They were left open-ended in order to elicit more spontaneous opinions and allow the participants to contribute their stories and own understandings of justice and ethics without being limited by the structure of data collection (Rowley, 2012).

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 75 minutes. The majority of the interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed after receiving consent. In order to foster an environment to express their opinions freely, the interviews were conducted in Persian, the native language of the interviewees with transcripts and supporting data then back translated in English. For those respondents who did not want their voices recorded, notes were taken during the

interview. Because Iranians, particularly officials, are generally hesitant to speak freely about political issues, interviews were conducted anonymously (Farasatkah et al., 2008), and all participants were reassured that their identity would remain anonymous. The participants were thus given codes to maintain confidentiality (Given, 2008).

To gather in-depth accounts of respondents' experiences, a semi-structured in-depth interview approach involving a series of open-ended questions was utilized which encourages more spontaneous opinions and minimizes potential bias from confining responses to predetermined categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transcripts were examined along with the field notes and cross-checked by the first and second author. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative methods, a series of procedures recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were adopted. First, during data collection, information was provided with interviewees to ensure accuracy, and data was collected from different sources to allow triangulation. Second, the initial codes and transcripts were also reviewed by two tourism researchers to ensure that codes are applied consistently throughout the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data was manually coded as this form of coding is consistent with the interpretive research paradigm and provides more control and ownership over data analysis and keeps the data within the context (Saldaña, 2021). Nevertheless, such approach to coding is prone to potential personal bias although the authors sought to overcome this by the adoption of a systematic approach to analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis was adopted for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.6). Thematic analysis is a useful method for researchers working within an interpretivist paradigm and is employed to gain a fuller and more nuanced understanding of empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The five steps of analysis (familiarization of the researcher with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes) outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to guide data analysis. The interviews were initially reviewed, transcribed, and then read and re-read multiple times to narrow down the number of codes, further reviewed and then categorized into identifiable themes. Three main themes were formed that are reflected in the next section.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section examines the restrictions imposed on Iranian tourism as a result of the sanctions from the views of key informants. Three main themes emerged from the thematic analysis (Figure 1) that will be discussed below.

[INSERT FIGURE & HERE]

4.1. Restricted mobility rights

Conversations with participants revealed that long standing sanctions on Iran have had a negative influence on the country's economic growth, with the tourism sector being particularly hard hit throughout the sanctions period. Sanctions have a variety of notable consequences, including 'restrictions on mobility', which many respondents noted as one of

the most significant and harmful consequences of sanctions. ‘Travel advisories’ were noted as one tool of US sanctions against Iran. One of the respondents mentioned that:

The tensions between Iran and the USA which has been the main reasons for US sanctions has negatively hit the Iranian tourism industry... Over the years, the US government has issued a range of travel advisories prohibiting its nationals from visiting Iran, this has very negatively impacted on tourist visitation from the western countries (Interview #19).

The safety-related contents of state travel warnings play a significant role in shaping the perception of risk by international travellers (Toubes & Araújo-Vila, 2021) which have the potential to damage the image of a destination and affect tourists' destination choices (e.g. Deep & Johnston, 2017; Chaulagain et al., 2019). While, mobility is often associated with flow and freedom (Bærenholdt, 2013), it is also about power and governance (Hall, 2005). Travel warnings are sometimes highly politicized and as Bianchi (2006) notes, they can be perceived as an extension of a state's geopolitical concerns. The latter highlights that tourism is more intimately tied to global geopolitics and security issues via state travel warnings. This reflects Azcárate et al. (2021) framing of this as ‘mobility geopolitics’, and they argue that tourism is increasingly used by states as a “ geopolitical and political economic weapon of choice that often fuels discriminatory social imaginaries of domestic and international destinations” (p.18).

Others respondents noted that the country's negative image has made it a high-risk destination for international visitors. They all believe that the nuclear agreement of 2015 and the following relaxation of sanctions greatly helped to altering Iran's image, resulting in a significant rise in the number of visitors, particularly European tourists, and an increase in foreign investment in tourism. A tour operator mentioned that:

.... Because of the lifting of sanctions and positive media coverage of nuclear deal, Iran's image in the world's media was changed and the country became a popular tourism destination for European tourists (Interview #23).

This reflects the previous studies’ findings on the role of media in shaping or altering a destination image (Avraham, 2015; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Media coverage of political upheaval has the potential to shape individuals’ image of destinations (Khodadadi & O'Donnell, 2017).

The US government also imposed sanctions on individuals visiting Iran. Under US law travelers who visit Iran are subject to enhanced scrutiny when later attempting to enter the United States. This has as led to a collapse in international visitation which was noted by the interviewees:

Following this new type of sanctions, numerous tours were cancelled. We had many cancellation by European tourists because they feared that visiting Iran may prohibit them from entering the United States in the future (Interview #11).

This sanction has had a significant impact on Westerners' willingness to visit Iran. The general perception among Western visitors is that visiting Iran will make their future trips to the United States extremely difficult... I don't think they'll go to Iran any longer (Interview #25).

Apart from restricting the mobility of visitors to Iran, sanctions have also had an impact on Iranians' outbound travel. Respondents also mentioned the difficulty of obtaining a visa for Iranians which undermines the 'right to travel' of Iranian outbound tourists. This was noted by several tour operators :

Because of sanctions, we've had a lot of issues with visa applications in recent years for our Europe travel packages. Payment delays, as well as unilateral and arbitrary cancellations, have been experienced by visa applicants (interview #3).

After the return of sanctions, several of our package tours to Europe were cancelled since only a few persons on the tour were able to obtain a visa.... imagine that when you plan a tour, you pay for the tickets, hotels etc, but few days before the trip, your customers get a visa rejection (interview #13).

Additionally, the restrictions caused by sanctions are not only limited to the mobilities of individuals but carriers have been suffered as well. Many major European airlines, for example, do not provide direct flights to Iran because firms doing business with Iran risk being blacklisted from the US market. This has had a significant impact on airline capacity to and from Iran which was repeatedly noted by the interviewees:

...We only have a few options when we plan to travel overseas now that European airlines have ceased direct flights to Iran, and regional airlines that have direct flights from Iran raise their ticket prices, leaving us with no other alternative... (interview #7).

Furthermore, Iran's civil aviation has long been subject to sanctions imposed by the United States, the United Nations, and Europe. Sanctions have mainly targeted Iran's purchase of aircraft and supply of spare parts and technical services. One of the respondents commented:

... sanctions ban the supply of fuel to Iranian airplanes at major European airports causing significant operational difficulties for the aviation sector (interview #29).

As illustrated, sanctions have largely restricted international mobilities to and from Iran. This contrasts with SDG16, which highlights the significance of ensuring just and inclusive societies for everyone, and Target 16.10, which emphasizes the importance of 'protecting fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements'.

This has meant respondent concerns over how their rights to mobility have been affected by sanctions. While, for international tourism bodies such as the UNWTO and the WTTC, the right to international travel should be regarded as a fundamental freedom (Breakey & Breakey, 2013), for others, notions of social justice in international travel and notions of mobility remain elusive (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018) or contested (Torabian et al., 2021). The respondents perceive that these rights exist even if commentators or governments do not. Notions of justice with respect to international mobility remain contrary and contested (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018, Bianchi et al., 2020), especially given the limited nature of rights to travel across national borders in international law (Torabian et al., 2021).

While Hall (2005, p.134) argues that “mobility is at the heart of our understanding of tourism”, Bianchi and Stephenson (2019, p.13) suggest that when the international mobilities of many individuals is “deemed problematic or illegitimate,” the right to tourism cannot be fully realized. In the same vein, Torabian and Miller (2017) observe, restricting international movement perpetuates inequalities across the globe, although the right to travel “is frequently perceived as a market issue and is less frequently situated in a socio-political context” (Torabian et al., 2021, p.3).

In a globalized world the effect of sanctions has both distributive justice (e.g., Rawls’s theory) and performative justice dimensions. Distributive issues clearly arise with respect to the flow on economic impacts of mobility restrictions which have repeatedly noted by the interviewees of this study. However, performative justice concerns arguably arise because of the more localised social impacts that occur through restrictions on VFR as well as, in the Iranian case, on pilgrimage.

4.2. Restriction of digital and financial rights

One of the issues discussed by participants was that the sanctions resulted in a lack of resources to develop a ‘well-equipped transportation’ and ‘hotel sector’, making Iran even ‘less appealing to tourists’. In addition, online travel booking platforms have been prohibited of listing Iran on their platforms with respondents feeling that their ‘digital rights’ or ‘communication rights’ have been affected. As a result, there is no reservation system or platform for travellers planning to visit Iran. One of the interviewees commented:

....an online booking system is an important aspect of any country's tourism sector since it instills trust and confidence particularly in foreign visitors....travelers who decide to plan a trip do not have to do so through travel agency; they can do so on their own time... Because of sanctions, we are prohibited to list our hotels on online booking platforms (interview #17).

In addition to the sectoral sanctions, financial restrictions were also noted by informants. The prohibition and restrictions on international payments networks and the banking industry and the effect on their financial ‘rights’ were repeatedly mentioned by interviewees as one of the noteworthy financial repercussions of sanctions. An interviewee commented:

Sanctions make it hard to send money to Iran or send money from Iran to other nations using formal banking systems... For all overseas transactions with our tourism business partners abroad (like booking hotel, flights), we must go via exchange offices... For whatever transaction, they constantly demand a large commission (interview #4).

This issues clearly shows that sanctions have created many challenges for different sectors in the Iranian tourism and hospitality industry. Attaining the SDGs necessitates financial and economic development, multilateral commerce, and international investment, all of which can be harmed by sanctions (Madani, 2021). While Goal 17 emphasizes the integration of developing countries into the global economy and the expansion of the multilateral trading system in order to achieve the SDGs, as the findings of this study indicated, economic sanctions hamper such capacities by prohibiting financial transactions and foreign investment in target countries. In the case of Iran this situation effectively financially isolates it from much of the rest of the world (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018) and creates significant issues of distributive justice with respect to economic well-being.

4.3. Gender justice

Economic sanctions against Iran have resulted in a significant increase in inflation, unemployment, and economic uncertainty in general. Sanctions supposedly gender neutral, have disproportionately affected vulnerable groups in society, and in the case of Iran, women have suffered more socio-economic hardships as a result of the sanctions due to the country's male-dominated and patriarchal society. Respondents believe that the effects of sanctions on Iranian women have been substantial.

Women are the first to lose their employment as a result of the of sanctions, and they have poorer job security than males in the Iranian tourism sector... Sanctions put women's livelihoods at jeopardy and take away their employment security... (interview #12).

Sanctions create economic harm in a variety of ways, including lower-paying jobs in the hotel industry, reduced job security, and no government backing with no protections... All of this has a negative impact on Iranian women's economic situation (interview #30).

Conversations with female participants revealed that despite Iran's highly gendered economy and religio-patriarchal society and masculinized political culture (Shahidian, 2002), tourism has been a sector that has advanced gender empowerment and increased levels of economic independence for Iranian women who are disproportionately affected by sanctions.

I go to several places in Iran as a tour guide, something a single female like me may not be able to do... However, as a certified tour guide, I have no problems with traveling alone... My career has altered my vision of what it means to be a woman in Iran and has made me feel strong.... (interview #10).

I really love my job of being a tour guide.. when I am with the tours coming from Europe, I feel very happy as I earn very good money and get to meet with people from different cultures.. working in tourism helped me to build my self-confidence that I am a productive members of society... Now that the number of tourists has decreased, I've lost my employment and my network relationships (interview #14).

These narratives show that economic sanctions have had a direct impact on women employment and entrepreneurship as a result of lower tourist numbers, and that they have also contributed to financial discrimination against them by reinforcing pre-existing structural gender discrimination in Iran. As highlighted by the interviewees, sanctions are not gender blind and that the empowerment of women through tourism has been made more fragile with the return of sanctions (Seyfi et al., 2020b). This is consistent with other studies that show that economic sanctions led to increased economic maldistribution between both rich and poor and between genders, with such situations often being reinforced by government policies that reinforce the economic position of men in an already highly patriarchal economy (Drury & Peksen, 2014; Gutmann et al., 2020). While this situation enables a distributive justice critique of such a situation there is also the need for a more fundamental performative justice assessment of empowerment and gender-justice at national and local scales (Houston & Pulido, 2002; Jamal & Hales, 2016). The latter is extremely significant in the Iranian context given that the notion of what constitutes performative justice at the local level may be highly contested. Different from other countries subjected to sanctions, in Iran, tourism and hospitality employment and entrepreneurial activities serve as an 'acceptable' work environment in the conservative and highly patriarchal Iranian society, making tourism and hospitality employment and entrepreneurial activities arguably more significant than other sectors for women's rights (Shahidian, 2002; Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2021b).

For women continuing to travel, albeit domestically and engaging in volunteering or undertaking other tourism-related work activities in the light of sanctions act as a way to be seen and are a performative vehicle by which claims for recognition can be made legitimate (Brownlow, 2011). Such seemingly everyday practices can provide a form of 'performative citizenship' for the gendered and politically marginalised (Gilbert & Phillips, 2003). Such performances, as Houston and Pulido (2002, p.403) suggest, when "enacted in specific historical and geographical contexts... expose the dynamics of power and exploitation," by operating "simultaneously as a space of possibility and becoming, and as a mechanism for working through existing social contradictions [and injustice] by making them visible" (Houston & Pulido, 2002, p.406). However, women's performance stands in opposition to the ongoing impositions of sanctions and the subsequent normalisation of gender discrimination and particular local gendered, religious and political interpretations of justice that it reinforces (Biyouki & Marinova, 2020). As a result, the economic sanctions imposed on Iran clearly run directly counter to the SDG goals with respect to women rights and empowerment.

Aligning with previous studies, the findings of the present study show some support for the notion that performative tourism-based empowerment is a response to distributive sanctions-

based disempowerment. This is especially important in Iran for women's economic empowerment, which is critical to attaining women's rights and gender equality, as well as achieving the SDGs (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2020a; UN Women, 2020). Given its acceptable nature with Iran's highly gendered economy, tourism is a sector potentially capable of advancing gender equality and women's empowerment (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Boluk et al., 2019), particularly because it provides a performative space for such social and economic justice actions. However, it can be concluded that distributive constraints resulting from the sanctions-driven economic disruption in Iran are obviously restricting tourism's ability to contribute to better gender justice.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study has aimed to gain a better understanding of the implications of a widely used foreign policy tool for justice and sustainability in destinations to which sanctions are applied. Guided by a justice lens and grounded in international relations and political science disciplinary base and building on in-depth, empirical data from key tourism informants in Iran, the findings of this study emphasized sanctions as a significant though overlooked crisis event for tourism destinations and actors. Although the broader ethics of sanctions has been examined in the political science and international relations literature, there is a scarcity of studies exploring this in the context of tourism. Additionally, this study addressed the call of previous researchers (e.g., Jamal, 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Rastegar et al., 2021; Jamal & Higham, 2021) for more 'multi-/inter-/trans-disciplinary' empirical work related to justice and tourism. This study provides new insights into the crisis-justice nexus and argues that both distributive and performative justice dimensions can simultaneously be read into the effects of sanctions and other crises and their perceived effects on rights. However, although such effects are noted at the individual level, their recognition at the macro policy level appears more problematic. Nevertheless, this study brings to the fore that Rawlsian distributive justice provides a clear benchmark by which to assess material justice issues, particularly at the national level. Performative justice provides a means of reading some of the responses to economic change, particularly for women, and the way in which the economic and employment effects of sanctions intersects with the gender, religious and political structures of contemporary Iran. However, while recognising the limitations of Rawlsian and Kantian approaches to justice issues in tourism and crisis, we suggest that, to a great extent, notions of universal justice measures continue to frame performative justice actions and grassroots justice measures, including with respect to responding to crises, as they provide an 'ideal' over what could be. Such in-depth insights add significant value to the existing body of literature.

Here the SDGs, which are substantially rights-based, act as a critical benchmark by which to assess the difference between what is desired and what exists, and for tourism researchers to assess how might that gap be closed. In other words, although a primarily distributive justice document, it provides a vital framing role for performative justice issue raising at the local scale by highlighting the gap between ideal and reality and therefore provides directions for future research, especially the potential significance of the relationality between distributive and performative justice and its application over different scales. This means that that the

tension between those approaches, especially in a crisis context, may depend on recognition as justice as an essentially contested concept, the application of which inherently depends on its definition in particular contexts. Arguably, this means that future tourism crisis research needs to better engage in broader debates over the relationship between different notions of rights to mobility, communication, employment and economic well-being and social, economic and environmental justice, at a time of major environmental change, and place them at the forefront of sustainability thinking.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the special issue editors and four anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of the paper and their thoughtful comments and constructive suggestions, which helped us to improve the quality of this paper.

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Table 1: Profile of interviewees.

Organisation	Sector	Number of participants
Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO)*	Public	2
Regional offices of ICHHTO	Public	3
The association of hoteliers	Private	2
Hotel owners/manager	Private	5
Traditional guesthouse owner/manager	Private	4
Tour operator/travel agency manager	Private	6
Tour guide	Private	4
Airline manager/staff	Private	3
Car rental employee	Private	2
Tourism lecturer/professor/consultant	Academia	4

* In 2019, ICHHTO converted into the ministry.

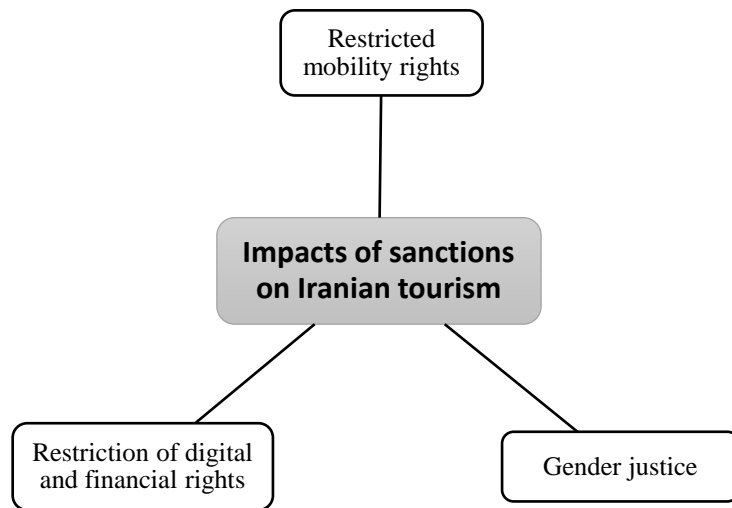


Figure 1: Themes emerged from interviews