

Research Article

The Role of the WTO in Global Trade and Its Implications for Developing Economies

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Abstract: Global trade has long been promoted as a driver of economic growth and international cooperation. The World Trade Organization (WTO), established to ensure fairness and stability in global trade, plays a central role in shaping trade relations among nations. However, concerns persist regarding its impact on developing countries. This study aims to examine how WTO policies influence economic inequality and structural dependency in developing economies. Using a qualitative research approach, this article integrates legal and economic perspectives to analyze relevant literature and assess the WTO's institutional mechanisms. The findings reveal that, although the WTO seeks to promote equitable trade, its policies tend to favor developed countries through liberalization and intellectual property regimes that restrict policy flexibility in developing nations. These mechanisms reinforce technological dependency, reduce competitiveness, and perpetuate unequal participation in global markets. The study concludes that without institutional reform, the WTO framework will continue to sustain global trade imbalances. This article proposes alternative solutions, including enhancing regional and South–South trade cooperation, promoting fair technology transfer, and reforming the WTO's decision-making structures. These measures could foster a more inclusive and balanced trading system that supports sustainable development in the Global South.

Keywords: Developing Countries; Economic Growth; Economic Inequality; Global Trade; World Trade Organization.

1. Introduction

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International trade has become a key driver of global economic growth in the modern era, with multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) playing a central role in formulating and enforcing multilateral trade frameworks. Since its establishment in 1995 as the successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the WTO has sought to reduce trade barriers through negotiations between members, realize the principles of collective wealth, such as Most Favoured Nation (MFN) and National Treatment, and create stability and predictability in the international trading system (Chaisse and Rodríguez-Chiffelle, 2023). The organization's goals are to facilitate open trade, improve market access, and ultimately raise living standards by increasing real income and creating jobs. Empirical studies show that membership in the WTO, along with structured trade agreements, significantly increases bilateral trade flows, especially after the Uruguay Round, and lowers the volatility of export and import prices, thereby contributing to global trade stability (Cao and Flach, 2015).

Membership in the WTO can benefit access to international markets, but these benefits are uneven between developed and developing countries (Felbermayr and Kohler, 2010). Developing countries often face structural obstacles, including low industrial competitiveness, technological limitations, and a high dependence on primary commodity exports. The term 'developing country' in WTO terminology does not have a standard definition; it is based on a self-declared status that can be reviewed through a negotiation process between members (WTO, 2022). Meanwhile, according to the World Bank's

classification, developing countries are lower-middle-income countries, which generally still have low competitiveness, dependence on primary commodity exports, and limited technological mastery. According to the UNCTAD report (2023), more than 60% of developing countries are commodity-dependent, making them highly susceptible to global price fluctuations.

The WTO was originally designed to create fairer global trade, but the policies it has implemented in practice often benefit developed countries more than developing countries. For example, agricultural subsidy practices in developed countries make their products more competitive in international markets, so farmers in developing countries are unable to compete on equal terms (Anderson and Martin; Martin, 2017). In addition, protections for strategic industries in developed countries exacerbate trade imbalances (trade imbalance) because it is difficult for developing countries to enter the market with high-value-added products (Tang and Wei, 2009). This has led to WTO membership for many developing countries as a provider of raw materials and primary commodities, while economic added value remains concentrated in developed countries (Engelbrecht and Christopher Pearce, 2007). This condition further strengthens the global dominance of developed countries and exacerbates welfare inequality between countries (Giljum, Bruckner, and Martinez, 2014).

Although many previous studies have reviewed the role of the WTO in trade liberalization and its implications for both developed and developing countries (Tanveer et al. 2024; K. Anderson and Martin 2006; Kinanti 2015), these studies generally place more emphasis on the trade creation and trade liberalization. There is still a gap in understanding how WTO membership affects the economic dependency structure of developing countries, especially those classified as commodity-dependent economies (UNCTAD, 2023). Moreover, most previous research has focused more on aggregate global trade, without unraveling the distributional inequality between developed and developing countries (Rena, 2012; Weinhardt & Barros Leal Farias, 2025). Thus, research is needed that specifically analyzes the implications of the WTO on the position of developing countries in the global trade chain, as well as the extent to which multilateral trade policies contribute to welfare disparities between countries.

2. Literature Review

International Trade

Global trade has become a major driver of a country's economic growth by promoting efficiency and scale of production. Global trade is the exchange of goods and services across international borders (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018). In developing countries, empirical findings show that trade volumes (exports & imports) are positively correlated with GDP growth, whereas tariff liberalization, as reflected in lower trade barriers, does not always have a positive impact on the economy (trade-off effects) (Nam and Ryu, 2024). This shows that the dynamics of global trade need to be examined more deeply, especially how these various components affect developing countries.

As a major multilateral organization, the WTO plays a central role in shaping global trade policy. One open-access study in Transnational Corporations Review found that about two-thirds of WTO members are developing countries and that their membership actively seeks to harness trade as a means of development (Rena, 2012). WTO policies have had both a positive impact and new challenges for developing countries. Trade liberalization tends to reduce poverty rates in general; the CGE (Computable General Equilibrium) model indicates that its effect on income inequality is not always positive and can even increase disparities in developing countries (Anderson, 2020). This shows that the correlation between global trade and economic justice is complex; the benefits of trade are not always evenly distributed.

In addition to economic factors, global trade also affects resource inequality, such as energy and water. Resource-based studies of Gini coefficients show that international trade tends to reduce energy-use inequality but instead exacerbates inequality in water use—with developing countries "exporting" energy and water to developed countries (Li et al., 2022). Despite facing criticism for its pro-developed-country practices, the WTO remains an important instrument for regulating global trade. Policy simulations show that multilateral cooperation schemes (including the WTO) can increase global GDP by 3.2% relative to no-cooperation scenarios, with LDCs (Least Developed Countries) projected to benefit more (~4.8%) through technology (Métivier et al., 2023).

World Trade Organization

The World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1995 as the successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), with the main goal of creating a transparent, non-discriminatory, and stable multilateral trade framework (Rena, 2012). The WTO aims to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers and strengthen global economic integration. More than two-thirds of WTO members are developing countries, which see WTO membership as a strategic opportunity to expand market access, despite structural challenges (Rena, 2012). The WTO is also transforming the role of non-market economies through the pro-market economic reforms required upon accession, reflecting the WTO's role in driving global marketization (R. M. S. Putri, 2024).

One of the important pillars of the WTO is the Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM), which is often referred to as the "crown" of the global rule system. This mechanism ensures that member states comply with the agreement through a structured, legal dispute-resolution process (Odilovna, 2024). The DSM provides formal legal access for developing countries to enforce their trade rights, enhancing the credibility and predictability of the international trading system (Odilovna, 2024). The WTO runs a Trade Policy Review (TPR) mechanism that now covers environmental aspects, including the adoption of green technologies. Longitudinal studies from 2009 to 2019 show that countries with climate-related TPR significantly encourage companies to adopt environmentally friendly technologies (Tanveer et al., 2024). These TPRs help reduce perceptions of managerial political risk, encourage green investment, and contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Tanveer et al., 2024). The WTO is also trying to bridge the gap through Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) provisions, which provide greater flexibility for developing countries in implementing trade rules. Research by Squirrelly (2015) challenges the claim that the real benefits of the WTO for developing countries remain suboptimal, especially given that global trade practices are more favorable to developed countries. This often puts developing countries in the role of suppliers of raw materials, without reaping balanced added value (Kinanti, 2015).

Global Economic Inequality

Global economic inequality has become a central issue in the era of globalization, with income disparities now originating more within countries than between them. A study by Lang and Tavares (2024) found that the role of global trade and integration is no longer to widen the gap between countries, but rather to contribute to internal disparities when the influence of globalization reaches a saturation point. The mechanisms of globalization, especially through trade intensity, financial integration, and economic liberalization, have diverse impacts on inequality, depending on the country's context. Research by Baek and Shi (2016) indicates that increasing trade intensity in developed countries tends to widen inequality, whereas in developing countries trade intensity actually reduces inequality, even though financial openness has a negative influence. This shows that the effects of globalization are not homogeneous; active involvement in trade can have a positive impact on developing countries, but without wise management of financial integration, it can actually increase inequality.

Research by Ibrahim (2022) using the GMM approach for developing countries found that "overall globalization reduces income inequality" mainly through the economic and social dimensions. This further makes it clear that inclusive globalization, in the scope of trade and social relations, provides positive benefits for the equitable distribution of economic resources in developing countries. The study's results show the importance of policies that encourage the inclusive participation of developing countries in the global economy. The findings are in line with research by Dreher and Gaston (2008), which states that economic globalization can increase employment opportunities and incomes, although the impact varies depending on the capacity of domestic institutions. Open trade and global economic integration will reduce inequality only if developing countries strengthen institutions, improve the quality of human resources, and ensure equitable access to the benefits of globalization.

3. Research Methods

This research uses a Qualitative method, which focuses on an in-depth understanding of the subject's perspective (Sugiyono, 2020). This approach was chosen because the focus of this research is to understand in depth the role of the WTO in global trade and its implications for developing economies. Qualitative research emphasizes interpretation and analysis of

meaning over numerical measurement, making it suitable for examining the phenomenon of international trade inequality.

The data collected in this study are secondary data obtained from literature reviews, including scientific journal articles, books on international trade economics, and official reports from global institutions such as the WTO, UNCTAD, and the World Bank (Ardiansyah et al., 2023) as well as previous research that discusses the impact of WTO membership on developing countries, especially on countries that depend on primary commodity exports.

Data analysis in this study was carried out qualitatively, namely by interpreting the collected literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis process includes data reduction to select relevant information, the presentation of data by grouping findings into key themes such as the role of the WTO, obstacles faced by developing countries, and global economic inequality, and the drawing of conclusions that connect theory and empirical data.

4. Results and Discussion

The Role of the WTO in Global Trade

The WTO plays an important role in enforcing international trade rules through various multilateral agreements, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which help reduce tariffs and other trade barriers. In addition, the WTO serves as a forum for negotiations that allows member states to resolve trade-related differences through a structured dispute-resolution system (Drabek, 2024).

The WTO has the main mandate to regulate international trade, resolve trade disputes between countries, and provide a forum for member countries to negotiate to lower tariff and non-tariff barriers. With 164 member countries to date, the organization is a key pillar that connects the economic interests of developed and developing countries in the global trade arena (Kinanti, 2015). The WTO has several roles, including:

The first is to resolve trade disputes between countries. In global trade, disputes often arise between countries over trade policies. Therefore, the WTO provides a dispute-resolution mechanism to address conflicts objectively and to avoid unilateral actions that can harm other countries. The dispute resolution process uses a system mutually agreed upon by member states and focuses on the application of international law acceptable to all parties (Odilovna, 2024).

The second is the WTO as a facilitation of negotiations and trade liberalization. The WTO serves as a forum for member countries to negotiate lower trade barriers. One notable example is the Doha Development Agenda, launched in 2001, which specifically emphasizes the importance of developing countries' involvement in the global trading system. These negotiations aim to reduce import tariffs, lower export subsidies, and encourage open market access for developing countries. Third, through its facilitative role, the WTO helps create freer and more efficient trade, although in practice, there is often a tug-of-war between developed and developing countries.

Fourth, the WTO plays an important role in promoting trade liberalization by reducing various barriers, such as tariffs, quotas, and non-tariff barriers. The organization encourages countries to open up markets and ease restrictions. In this case, the WTO plays a role in overcoming protectionism that can hinder global economic growth and harm countries with a comparative advantage in certain areas (Hendarto et al., 2024). In addition, non-tariff barriers are increasingly dominant and include technical regulations (Technical Barriers to Trade/TBT), Food Health and Safety Standards (Sanitary and Phytosanitary/SPS measures), import quotas, and domestic subsidies. These barriers are often used as covert protectionist tools that can hinder the free flow of trade between countries.

To address these problems, the WTO offers various mechanisms and policy instruments. In the area of tariffs, the WTO encourages multilateral negotiations and tariff binding to prevent member countries from raising tariffs beyond the agreed limits. Through the Trade Policy Review Mechanism (TPRM), the WTO also increases transparency into each country's trade policies, helping to control protectionist practices. Meanwhile, for non-tariff barriers such as TBT and SPS, the WTO has a special agreement that stipulates these regulations should not be used as a form of discrimination but should be based on scientific and health considerations. The SPS and TBT committees also serve as consultation forums to resolve differences in standards between countries without resorting to the dispute settlement route (Pauwelyn, 2023).

The Fifth, the WTO also serves as the supervisor of international trade policy and monitors the trade policies of its member countries to ensure they remain in accordance with the rules agreed upon. Each member state is expected to pursue policies that are transparent and consistent with applicable trade principles. The WTO supervises and assesses trade policies implemented by member countries and provides recommendations if policies are found that have the potential to harm other countries. This is important to maintain stability and confidence in international trade (Brotto, 2024).

Overall, the WTO plays an important role in global trade through rulemaking, negotiation facilitation, dispute resolution, and providing support to developing countries. The organization has succeeded in creating a relatively stable and regulated international trade framework. However, the role of the WTO is also inseparable from controversy, especially regarding issues of injustice, unequal interests, and the slow pace of reform in addressing new global challenges such as trade digitalization, climate change, and pandemics.

Inequality and Criticism of Developing Economies Against the WTO

The WTO, or World Trade Organization, plays an important role in regulating international trade, but its impact on economic inequality in developing countries is often debated. Although the WTO's main goal is to create freer and more open trade, developing countries frequently feel left behind in this global trading system. One of the main problems that developing countries face is the difficulty in accessing international markets due to higher tariffs and non-tariff barriers. Developed countries often have advantages in technology, infrastructure, and production capacity, enabling them to derive greater benefits from international trade than developing countries.

Economic inequality between developed and developing countries is a problem that cannot be ignored in the context of international trade. Developing countries that rely heavily on natural resources often struggle to compete with developed countries that have more advanced manufacturing industries and technologies. As a result, developing countries tend to be trapped in dependence on the export of raw materials whose prices are easily affected by fluctuations in international markets (Lang & Tavares, 2024).

In this case, economic inequality does not occur only between developed and developing countries, but also within developing countries themselves. Many developing countries experience income inequality due to limited access to international markets and their inability to compete in a global market dominated by developed countries. In addition, developing countries often struggle to negotiate in WTO forums. In contrast, developed countries have greater economic and diplomatic power and more resources to influence the outcome of trade negotiations. As a result, the deals reached are often more favorable to developed countries, while developing countries struggle to secure their interests. This inequality worsens global economic inequality (Odilovna, 2024). In contrast to the limitations imposed by WTO's intellectual property and liberalization frameworks, sector-specific innovations—such as digital ecosystems supporting global halal trade—demonstrate how developing economies can utilize technology to strengthen competitiveness and independence (Rasyidah et al., 2025). These digital mechanisms promote transparency, reduce reliance on traditional intermediaries, and enable compliance with international standards, potentially offsetting the inequities embedded in the multilateral trade system.

The WTO has received various criticisms related to its impact on developing countries and the global trading system in general, including concerns about inequality in trade relations between countries. This has led developing countries to often be in weaker positions, making it difficult for them to defend their interests, especially in key sectors such as agriculture and local industries. The WTO has also been criticized for encouraging trade liberalization that could hurt key sectors in developing countries, such as agriculture, which finds it difficult to compete with cheaper imported products from developed countries (Rabbani, 2021). WTO policies are often seen as exacerbating social and economic inequalities, both within the developing world and between developing and developed countries. Although the WTO seeks to promote freer trade, the policies it pursues tend to favor countries with strong infrastructure and market capacity, while developing countries that depend more on natural resources or the agricultural sector often lag.

The WTO's dispute-resolution mechanism is also considered biased, favoring large countries. The lengthy and expensive process for resolving trade disputes makes it difficult for developing countries to access justice and often requires them to accept adverse decisions, despite the dominance of developed countries in setting global policies that affect the world of work and the environment. Although the WTO aims to promote fair trade, the resulting

policies often benefit large countries and exacerbate global economic inequality (Aida Munawaroh et al., 2024).

WTO Alternatives and Solutions in Global Trade

Alternatives to the WTO's role in global trade have become a frequently discussed topic in recent years, as criticism of the inequities posed by current international trade policies has increased. There are several alternatives issued by the WTO in this matter, including:

The first is the establishment of regional trade agreements that can create a more open and fair trade space for the countries involved. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a trade agreement among 15 Asia-Pacific countries, including China, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN members. The RCEP aims to reduce trade tariffs, facilitate trade in services, and establish clear rules on e-commerce and intellectual property rights, with the hope that this agreement will strengthen regional economic integration and provide developing countries in the region with greater opportunities to grow more rapidly. RCEP delivers an alternative for countries in the Asian region that feel disadvantaged by WTO trade policies that favor developed countries (Solikhin, 2023).

The second MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia) is a group of countries often touted as an alternative platform for enhancing global trade cooperation. MIKTA is a consultative forum where middle-income countries can discuss and negotiate global trade and economic issues. The group has the potential to design more flexible trade agreements and to pay greater attention to the interests of developing countries, given that MIKTA member countries face the same challenges posed by international trade inequality driven by developed countries (Karim, 2018).

While these alternatives offer the potential to create a more inclusive trading system, the WTO remains an important organization in international trade. Therefore, the solution to criticism of the WTO focuses more on internal reforms to make it more equitable and responsive to global developments. One of the steps taken is to emphasize the importance of improving dispute-resolution mechanisms to make them fairer for developing countries, as well as to provide more space for countries with small and medium economies to have a say in multilateral negotiations (Romli et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) role in global trade reveals a paradox between its founding ideals and its practical outcomes. Established to promote fairness, stability, and open markets, the WTO has indeed succeeded in creating a rules-based international trading framework that fosters predictability and transparency. However, beneath these achievements lies a persistent asymmetry in how the benefits of globalization are distributed. Despite being the majority of WTO members, developing countries continue to experience unequal participation and limited gains. Their economies remain constrained by structural weaknesses—technological dependency, low competitiveness, and a heavy reliance on primary commodity exports. These conditions perpetuate global trade imbalances, reinforcing a hierarchical system where developed nations retain economic dominance while developing economies remain dependent.

The findings of this research indicate that WTO policies, particularly those related to trade liberalization and intellectual property rights, often favor advanced economies. Agricultural subsidies, industrial protections, and complex dispute-resolution processes have widened the gap between nations rather than closing it. While the WTO promotes “free trade,” in practice, its institutional mechanisms tend to privilege those already equipped with the infrastructure, technology, and capital to exploit market openness. Consequently, developing countries find themselves in a cycle of dependency—exporting raw materials, importing finished goods, and struggling to upgrade to higher value-added production. This imbalance not only affects economic growth but also deepens inequality within and across nations.

Despite these challenges, the WTO remains an indispensable institution in managing global trade relations. Its existence provides a common legal framework and a platform for negotiation, helping prevent trade wars and unilateral protectionism. Yet, for the organization to remain legitimate and effective, it must undergo structural and procedural reforms that reflect the realities of today's global economy. Reforming the Dispute Settlement Mechanism to ensure equitable access for developing countries is critical. Enhancing the flexibility of Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) provisions would allow these countries to tailor trade policies that support industrialization and sustainable development.

Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of complementing multilateralism with regional and South–South cooperation. Initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the MIKTA platform demonstrate that alternative models of collaboration can yield more inclusive outcomes. Regional trade frameworks can empower developing countries to strengthen their bargaining positions, diversify markets, and reduce overreliance on traditional export structures. Technology transfer and knowledge-sharing among the Global South can also help bridge innovation gaps and foster industrial upgrading.

Achieving a more equitable global trading system requires a dual approach: reforming the WTO to make it more responsive to developmental needs, and promoting regional cooperation as a complementary pathway to international integration. The pursuit of trade justice must extend beyond market access to encompass fairness, capacity building, and sustainable development. Only through such transformative measures can global trade evolve from a mechanism of dependency into a genuine instrument of shared prosperity. The future of the WTO, and indeed of globalization itself, depends on its ability to balance efficiency with equity—ensuring that developing nations are not merely participants in trade, but active beneficiaries of it.

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