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Assistant professor of Law

Mrs.S.Kalpana, presently Assistant professor of Law, VelTech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R & D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi. Formerly Assistant professor of Law, Vels University in the year 2019 to 2020, Worked as Guest Faculty, Chennai Dr.Ambedkar Law College, Pudupakkam. Published one book. Published 8 Articles in various reputed Law Journals. Conducted 1 Moot court competition and participated in nearly 80 National and International seminars and webinars conducted on various subjects of Law. Did ML in Criminal Law and Criminal Justice Administration. 10 paper presentations in various National and International seminars. Attended more than 10 FDP programs. Ph.D. in Law pursuing.



Avinash Kumar



Avinash Kumar has completed his Ph.D. in International Investment Law from the Dept. of Law & Governance, Central University of South Bihar. His research work is on "International Investment Agreement and State's right to regulate Foreign Investment." He qualified UGC-NET and has been selected for the prestigious ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship. He is an alumnus of the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Formerly he has been elected as Students Union President of Law Centre-1, University of Delhi. Moreover, he completed his LL.M. from the University of Delhi (2014-16), dissertation on "Cross-border Merger & Acquisition"; LL.B. from the University of Delhi (2011-14), and B.A. (Hons.) from Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. He has also obtained P.G. Diploma in IPR from the Indian Society of International Law, New Delhi. He has qualified UGC - NET examination and has been awarded ICSSR - Doctoral Fellowship. He has published six-plus articles and presented 9 plus papers in national and international seminars/conferences. He participated in several workshops on research methodology and teaching and learning.

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FREE TRADE AND FOOD SECURITY: A MODEST BALANCE IN THE WTO FRAMEWORK

AUTHORED BY - DEVANG BHATI

Abstract

In the international arena, achieving free trade and ensuring food security appear like opposing objectives. This paper explores the complex relationship between the WTO agreements and how they affect the promotion of free trade and the achievement of food security. In addition to examining the ways in which WTO regulations have promoted trade in agricultural goods, it delves into the worries expressed by developing nations about possible risks to food security as a result of increased competition and restricted policy flexibility. The paper explores current discussions on striking a balance between these objectives, focusing on the significance of Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) rules for developing nations as well as the difficulties presented by problems such as trade distortions and biosecurity measures. Lastly, it looks at possible approaches to improve the coherence of trade and food security policy under the WTO framework.

Introduction

Achieving global food security, which involves ensuring everyone has constant physical, social, and economic access to adequate food, remains a serious problem. International commerce provides a two-pronged strategy to potentially alleviate this issue: firstly, by improving access to a greater range of food sources, and secondly, by stimulating economic growth. However, questions persist regarding potential detrimental outcomes. This paper dives into the delicate link between trade liberalization at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its influence on food security, particularly in developing nations. The WTO framework itself indicates a commitment to utilise free trade as a strategy for increasing food security. The Agreement on Agriculture emphasises the necessity for continuous talks and the establishment of agreements that especially reflect food security challenges. This acknowledgment shows the potential of trade liberalization to help to food security. However, it also underlines the significance of adopting policies that accommodate the special requirements of developing nations in their quest of a secure and

sustainable food system. This may comprise measures like loosening rigorous WTO rules on food security measures undertaken by poor nations, allowing them greater freedom. Negotiating a lasting solution that legitimizes public stockholding programs for food security objectives would give assurance and stability. Additionally, additional policy freedom for developing nations to explore domestic measures that assist sustainable agriculture, rural development, and price stabilization would allow them to solve their particular difficulties. Furthermore, developing greater engagement with organizations like the FAO, WFP, and IFAD would allow the WTO to harness their experience in capacity building, knowledge transfer, and infrastructure development. By transitioning from a purely trade-focused entity to a facilitator of global food security through policy reform, increased flexibility for developing countries, and collaborative efforts, the WTO can ensure that trade truly contributes to nourishing populations and achieving sustainable food security for all¹. The World Trade Organization (WTO) supports the potential of trade to uncover a diversified solution to food security concerns. They perceive commerce as a mechanism that opens doors to greater food supply in places suffering with shortage. By encouraging a more stable trading system and producing employment possibilities, the WTO thinks trade may empower individuals with the economic means to get the food they need. This enhanced economic access would not only improve dietary choices but also contribute to a more strong and resilient global food system². The global food environment is a mix of plenty and shortage. While some nations boast vast resources and agricultural prowess, leading to structural surpluses, others battle with restrictions in land, water, or climate, producing structural deficits. Here, well-crafted trade policies emerge as a great equalizer. By eliminating obstacles, they may choreograph the free flow of food from surplus nations to deficit ones, comparable to a global supermarket where countries operate as both suppliers and clients. Trade policies become the efficient logistical network, ensuring food goes easily across borders, bridging the gap between what a nation produces and what it needs to sustain its population. This worldwide food exchange offers a plethora of benefits. For deficit nations, access to a larger variety of food sources becomes a reality. Imagine a landlocked country, unable to develop a varied range of crops owing to its climate. Trade helps them to acquire fruits, vegetables, and other critical food products from surplus nations, broadening their dietary options and increasing overall health. Additionally, commerce encourages price stability. A weak harvest or natural calamity in one location needn't translate to starvation if trade regulations allow for imports from surplus places. This functions

¹World trade Organisation, Food security, Available at https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/agric_e/food_security_e.htm

² Ibid

as a buffer, minimising the impact of localized food shortages and price surges. However, the effectiveness of trade in boosting global food security rests on fairness and well-designed rules. Unrestricted commerce, without sufficient controls, can pose issues for developing nations. Cheap, heavily subsidized food imports from surplus nations could undercut local farmers, leading to a fall in domestic food output. This can render deficit nations unduly reliant on imports, leaving them exposed to price swings and potential supply chain disruptions in exporting countries. To guarantee trade actually increases food security, a balanced approach is required. Trade policy should foster fair competition, avoiding overly subsidized items from flooding markets and undercutting local manufacturing. Additionally, help for emerging nations' agricultural sectors is vital. Investments in infrastructure, research, and sustainable agricultural techniques can boost their production and competitiveness in the global market. This allows people to not just fulfil their own requirements but perhaps contribute to the global food supply chain. Ultimately, trade, when paired with smart policies that emphasise food security, may be a tremendous weapon for a more equal and well-nourished world. By allowing the free movement of food from surplus to deficit nations, supporting price stability, and promoting fair competition, trade policies may pave the way for a future where everyone has access to the healthy food they need to flourish³. In the ongoing struggle for global food security, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has emerged as a vital actor, gaining recent successes on two critical fronts. Firstly, they've achieved agreements on long-term solutions for public stockholding initiatives. These initiatives allow governments to systematically acquire and store food reserves during times of surplus. This buffer reserve works as a safety net, maintaining access to crucial food supplies during periods of shortage or price rises, particularly for disadvantaged people. By guaranteeing long-term solutions for public stockholding, the WTO permits countries to proactively manage food security and limit the consequences of unanticipated disruptions. Secondly, the WTO has given rules that remove food from export limitations when it's acquired for humanitarian purposes. Imagine a natural calamity wiping off crops in an area, putting people on the edge of hunger. These verdicts ensure that life-saving food aid from international organizations like the World Food Programme may move freely across borders without impediment from export restrictions. This quick and unfettered circulation of food during crises is important to saving lives and reducing hunger pangs. These recent victories by the WTO constitute substantial progress towards a more secure and stable global food system. By supporting the responsible use of public stockholding programs and guaranteeing the unhindered distribution of food aid during

³ J.Clapp, Food security and international trade, Unpacking disputed narratives, Food And agriculture organisation of the United Nations [2015-16], Available at <https://www.fao.org/3/i5160e/i5160e.pdf>

humanitarian crises, the WTO is helping to establish a world where everyone has access to the healthy food they need to thrive⁴. The World Trade Organization (WTO) isn't a lone wolf in the fight for global food security. It actively participates in the Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy, and Finance, a joint initiative sponsored by the United Nations Secretary-General. This group acts like a war room, bringing together numerous groups with specific skills to handle complex concerns impacting food security. Imagine the WTO as the trade strategist, working with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) - the agricultural knowledge base - and the World Food Programme (WFP) - the logistical expert providing food aid. Through this coordination, the WTO can ensure that trade policies not only don't harm food security initiatives but actively contribute to them. For instance, the WTO may lobby for temporary tariff reductions on crucial food imports during crises, allowing speedier and more inexpensive access for vulnerable nations. Additionally, the WTO, along with the FAO, may cooperate with developing countries to enhance their agricultural infrastructure and trade capacity, allowing them to participate more effectively in the global food market. This collaborative approach understands that food security is a complicated issue needing a united front. By cooperating with other institutions, the WTO can harness its experience in trade to establish a more efficient and responsive global food system, ensuring commerce becomes a potent weapon for feeding people and attaining sustainable food security for everyone⁵. The globe Trade Organisation (WTO) plays a crucial role in weaving a global tapestry of food security, with its fundamental functions influencing not just the supply of food but also the stability and peace of the globe. Imagine a future where trade relations worsen, leading to countries hoarding resources or participating in trade wars. This volatility would disrupt food supply lines, making it impossible for nations to get the food they need. The WTO operates as a mediator, supporting peaceful trade relations through established norms and dispute settlement methods. This calm climate allows for the easy movement of food across borders, guaranteeing even deficit nations may receive crucial food supplies from excess regions. Furthermore, the WTO fosters efficient manufacturing by pushing nations to specialize in what they do best. This specialization stimulates innovation and economies of scale, leading to increasing food production at cheaper prices. Imagine a landlocked country failing to cultivate wheat but excelling in growing fruits. Through WTO-facilitated commerce, they may sell their surplus fruits and import wheat at a competitive price, maximizing resource use and total food supply. Finally, the WTO tries to preserve stable trade linkages, a critical aspect for reliable food supply. Stable trade agreements and laws establish a solid

⁴ Supra 1.

⁵ Supra 1.

foundation for international food trading. This predictability helps countries to plan their agricultural production and food imports with certainty, lowering the danger of shortages or price surges. In essence, the WTO operates as the unseen architect, ensuring the global food system functions smoothly and effectively. By fostering peaceful relations, stimulating efficient production, and preserving stable trade linkages, the WTO plays a vital role in establishing a world where everyone has access to the safe and nutritious food they need for a secure and peaceful future⁶. The World Trade Organization (WTO) recognizes a fundamental truth: poverty is the core cause of hunger and malnutrition. Therefore, a fundamental tactic for the WTO in managing food security entails enabling the poor to enhance their purchasing power. Imagine a family trying to afford even basic needs, let alone nutritious meals. This is the grim reality for millions throughout the world. The WTO acknowledges that merely increasing food supply isn't enough. People also need the economic wherewithal to get such food. The WTO handles this problem from two aspects. Firstly, by fostering efficient production and trade liberalization, the WTO aspires to establish a global economic environment where overall wealth grows. This rising tide can lift all boats, resulting to better wages for everyone around the globe, even those in underdeveloped nations. With higher wealth, individuals and families acquire the capacity to purchase a larger variety and bigger amount of healthy food, enhancing their dietary choices and overall health. Secondly, the WTO acknowledges the necessity of fair trading practices. Unequal trade agreements that harm developing nations can hinder their economic progress and keep people mired in poverty. The WTO pushes for fair trade rules that establish a level playing field, allowing developing nations to engage more effectively in the global economy. By encouraging fair trade practices and stimulating economic growth via efficient production and trade liberalization, the WTO helps individuals to break free from the cycle of poverty and hunger. This economic empowerment becomes a springboard for greater food security, allowing people and families to take control of their meals and nourish themselves for a healthier and more meaningful future⁷.

Effectiveness of WTO framework

The battle for food security in developing nations needs a sophisticated approach to free trade

⁶ DG Supachai Panitchpakdi, **Why Trade Matters For Improving Food Security**, Organización Mundial Del Comercio [2005], Available at https://www.wto.org/spanish/news_s/spsp_s/spsp37_s.htm

⁷ ibid

within the WTO framework. While the WTO acknowledges trade's potential to expand food supply in countries experiencing shortage and improve economic access to food through job development and a more stable trading environment, concerns continue about possible disadvantages and uneven gains. Proponents of free trade believe that it helps developing nations to specialize in what they do best, enabling them to acquire food at reduced rates from surplus places. This not only enhances total food diversity but also potentially cuts prices for customers. Additionally, trade liberalization may drive economic growth by providing new markets and export opportunities, translating into better wages for individuals, permitting them to afford a larger variety and bigger amount of healthy food. However, detractors raise worries about potential drawbacks. Unrestricted competition from heavily subsidized agricultural producers in affluent countries can put local farmers in developing nations at a disadvantage, resulting to a drop in domestic food production and a reliance on imports, rendering them subject to price changes in the global market. Furthermore, others worry that trade agreements can favour corporate interests above local food security aims. To handle these complications, a diverse strategy is needed. While free trade can play a role, it should be supported with measures that boost domestic food production in underdeveloped nations. Investments in agricultural infrastructure, research, and development can boost efficiency and production. Additionally, establishing fair trade practices and minimising the harmful consequences of agricultural subsidies in industrialised nations are crucial initiatives. Ultimately, the WTO's vision of trade as a weapon for food security may be fulfilled through a mix of carefully planned free trade, targeted support for domestic food production in poor countries, and a commitment to fair trade practices. By supporting a more fair and inclusive global trade system, the WTO may contribute to a future where everyone has access to the nutritious food they need for a healthy and satisfying life⁸. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has come under fire for its glacial progress on a vital problem for developing nations: public stockholding for food security. This approach allows governments to deliberately acquire and preserve food reserves during times of surplus. These stockpiles operate as a safety net, providing access to crucial food supplies during periods of shortage or price rises, particularly for disadvantaged people. However, WTO regulations concerning public stockholding have been complicated and restrictive, hampering developing nations' capacity to execute these vital programs successfully. Critics contend that the WTO has been reluctant to address these problems and set clear norms that take into consideration the special demands of developing nations. This lack of growth can have grave repercussions. Imagine a developing

⁸ ibid

nation undergoing a natural calamity that devastates its agriculture. Without substantial public stocks, the government could struggle to acquire food imports owing to WTO constraints, leaving its population exposed to starvation. Recognizing this need, developing nations have sought for a lasting solution that legitimizes public stockholding programs for food security objectives. Recent improvements, such as agreements on long-term solutions, give a glimpse of optimism. However, continuing efforts are needed to ensure the WTO embraces a more flexible and inclusive approach to public stockholding. By emphasising the requirements of poor nations and supporting the proper use of these critical food security programs, the WTO can play a more substantial role in achieving a world where everyone has access to the healthy food they need to thrive⁹. The World Trade Organization (WTO) accepts that free trade, while a strong weapon, cannot single-handedly tackle the complex dilemma of global food security. They acknowledge the necessity for a comprehensive and well-coordinated policy framework that integrates trade with other key factors. Imagine a food security solution as a multi-layered cake. Trade liberalization may be the first layer, encouraging higher food availability and economic access through job creation and a more stable trade environment. However, the WTO admits that more layers are necessary for a truly safe food system. Firstly, investments in infrastructure, research, and development are necessary to boost agricultural output and efficiency in emerging nations. This allows people to not just fulfil their own requirements but perhaps contribute to the global food supply chain. Secondly, establishing fair trading practices is crucial. The WTO understands that unrestrained competition from substantially subsidized agricultural producers in wealthy countries can put local farmers in developing nations at a disadvantage. Therefore, establishing fair trade regulations that ensure a level playing field is crucial. Thirdly, social safety nets and tailored food aid programs are important to guarantee disadvantaged populations have access to healthy food even during moments of shortage or economic hardship. Finally, supporting sustainable agriculture techniques that preserve the environment and save resources is vital for long-term food security. By acknowledging the limitations of trade alone and advocating for a holistic approach that integrates trade with investments in developing nations' agricultural sectors, fair trade practices, social safety nets, and sustainable agriculture, the WTO can contribute to building a more robust and equitable global food system where everyone has access to the nutritious food they need for a healthy and fulfilling life¹⁰. The WTO Agreement on

⁹ Jeongyeol Kim ET AL., More free trade will not solve the food crisis, [JUNE 2022], Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/6/7/more-free-trade-will-not-solve-the-food-crisis>

¹⁰ **Clem Boonekamp, Food Security and the World Trade Organization**, DEC 2014, Research, Available at https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/10.1596/978-1-4648-0305-5_ch6

Agriculture explicitly acknowledges the necessity of considering food security in both commitments and ongoing negotiations. Trade has the potential to enhance food availability in regions where it is limited and can also enhance economic access to food by generating employment opportunities and establishing a more reliable trading system. Nevertheless, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) recognises that food security is a valid policy goal. However, certain stockholding plans are seen to create trade distortions when they incorporate government-fixed pricing, commonly referred to as "administered" prices, for purchases from farmers. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has reached a consensus that, for the time being, public stockholding initiatives in developing nations would not face legal challenges, even if a country surpasses the agreed limitations for managed pricing. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) is involved in the Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy, and Finance, which was created by the United Nations Secretary-General. The purpose of this group is to guarantee that trade plays a role in enhancing food security¹¹. In overall, although free trade under the WTO framework can help address issues regarding food security in poor countries, it is not a perfect solution and should be considered within a comprehensive policy framework that considers the valid policy aim of food security.

Need of Policy Reforms

The World Trade Organization (WTO) plays a crucial role in balancing the aims of free trade with development-oriented agriculture policies that assure food security in developing nations. Nevertheless, legislative reforms are necessary to more effectively tackle the issues of food security in emerging countries. One of the significant difficulties is the employment of state stockholding programs for food security objectives, which are believed to distort commerce when they entail purchases from farmers at prices determined by the government. At the 2013 Bali Ministerial Conference, ministers decided that, on an interim basis, public stockholding schemes in developing countries would not be challenged legally even if a country's stated limitations for managed prices are exceeded. However, a lasting solution to this issue is yet to be agreed¹².

Another area of concern is the use of trade measures for food security purposes, which was a prominent flashpoint during the WTO ministerial conference in Bali and throughout 2014. India and other developing nations lobbied for clarification in the provisions of the Agreement on

¹¹ Supra 1.

¹² ibid

Agriculture (AoA) that would protect developing countries' capacity to implement domestic policies for food security without fear of being in infringement of international trade norms¹³.

Moreover, the WTO Agreement on Agriculture gives extensive freedom for nations to pursue a range of economically viable policies focused at food security objectives. However, it limits the use of some policy tools, such as price supports and input subsidies, that can be costly and inefficient, and also has severe environmental repercussions.¹⁴

Therefore, policy reforms in the WTO agreements and policies could include relaxing WTO disciplines on some policy measures used in the name of food security, negotiating a permanent solution to public stockholding programs for food security purposes, and providing greater flexibility to developing countries in pursuing domestic policies for food security without fear of being in contravention of international trade rules. Additionally, the WTO may cooperate more closely with other organizations to guarantee that trade helps to increasing food security, particularly in poor nations.

Alternative Strategies

While free trade offers potential benefits for developing nations, a comprehensive approach is necessary to ensure equitable and sustainable food security. This comprehensive method fights food waste through enhanced infrastructure and consumer awareness initiatives. Investments in storage facilities, refrigerated transportation, and education allow individuals to make educated decisions that minimize waste across the supply chain. Shifting towards sustainable agriculture approaches like agroecology and permaculture is equally vital. These approaches promote healthy soil ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural pest management, leading to greater food production while safeguarding the environment for future generations. Furthermore, enabling small-scale farmers, who constitute the backbone of many developing nations' food systems, is crucial. Investments in rural infrastructure, training programs on effective agricultural practices, and the

¹³ Supra 3.

¹⁴ David Blandford, *The World Trade Organization Agreement on Agriculture and World Food Security*, *Journal of Law and international affairs*, (2015), Available at <https://elibrary.law.psu.edu/jlia/vol3/iss2/10/>

development of local cooperatives may considerably boost their production, income, and negotiating strength. Finally, achieving food sovereignty through public stockholding programs enhances resilience against external shocks. These schemes include governments holding food reserves during times of surplus that may be released in seasons of shortage or price surges, stabilizing food prices and safeguarding vulnerable populations. In conclusion, by adopting these complementary policies alongside free trade, developing nations may construct robust food systems that minimize waste, encourage sustainable practices, empower local farmers, and assure resilience against external problems. This multimodal strategy sets the path for a future when developing nations can sustain their populations and attain long-term food security.¹⁵

Conclusion

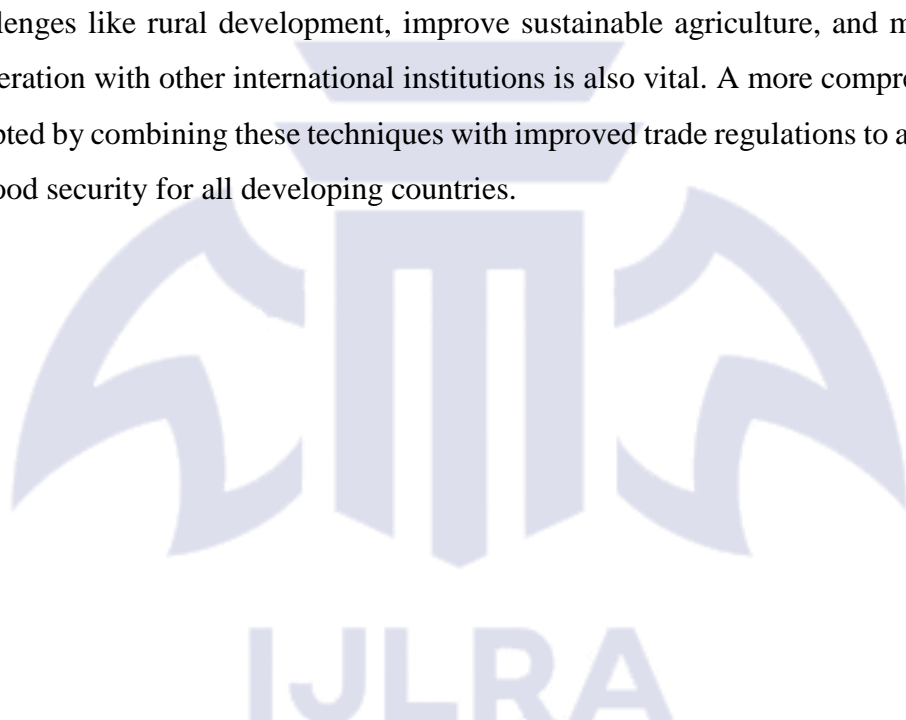
For developing nations functioning under the World Commercial Organisation (WTO) framework, achieving a balance between free commerce and food security is a crucial concern. Trade in agricultural commodities is supported by WTO treaties, which favour free trade as a method of promoting global wealth. Developing nations do, however, routinely raise concerns. Free trade agreements, they say, may expose domestic food producers to cheaper imports, threatening their livelihoods and potentially putting staple food production's self-sufficiency in peril. Furthermore, pricing is still a huge concern despite the fact that food is now more easily available thanks to worldwide trade. Some disadvantaged populations that depend on affordable food alternatives may suffer if trade liberalisation does not result in decreased food prices for everyone. Developing nations may find it harder to compete with subsidised imports.

Existing approaches give limited solutions, despite the WTO admitting these problems and the potential benefits of free trade for food security, including greater availability and economic access to food. For the objective of maintaining food security, public stockholding schemes, for instance, enable developing nations to preserve supplies of key food staples. Furthermore, food aid is free from export limits during humanitarian emergencies pursuant to WTO standards. There is disagreement about these measures, nonetheless. Developing nations commonly complain that because wealthier countries have more established agriculture sectors and significantly supported

¹⁵ Bozsik N ET AL., Food security management in developing countries: Influence of economic factors on their food availability and access at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9312371/>

exports, the policies currently in place advantage them. Because of the unequal playing field this provides, developing nations' attempts to reach food security through domestic production and economic growth are impeded.

Beyond trade agreements, this research emphasises the vital relevance of treating the root causes of hunger—poverty and economic injustice. These limits hinder particular groups' access to food in emerging nations, even in the scenario where trade increases the availability of food. Hence, a diversified strategy is advised by this research. It is necessary to reform the WTO structure in order to reduce trade inefficiencies originating from wealthier nations' subsidies, while simultaneously providing poor countries' food security initiatives greater leeway. In order to handle challenges like rural development, improve sustainable agriculture, and minimise food waste, cooperation with other international institutions is also vital. A more comprehensive plan may be adopted by combining these techniques with improved trade regulations to assure fair and long-term food security for all developing countries.



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