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Nigeria's Relation with the World Trade Organization 1995- 2025

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Abstract: Since it acceded to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, Nigeria has sought to integrate more deeply into the multilateral trading system as part of its broader foreign economic policy. The WTO, which succeeded the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), provides a framework for trade liberalization, dispute settlement, and cooperation among member states. Nigeria's participation reflects both the opportunities of global market access and the persistent challenges of structural economic dependence. This study examines Nigeria's WTO membership since 1995, with particular focus on its engagement in multilateral negotiations, trade in oil and non-oil products, and the broader economic implications of membership. Drawing on secondary sources, policy documents, and existing literature, the paper highlights the limited gains achieved and notes that weak institutional capacity, inconsistent trade policy, and overreliance on primary commodities have constrained Nigeria's performance. It argues that without significant reforms in negotiation capacity and domestic economic policy, WTO membership will continue to yield modest results. The study concludes by recommending diversification, policy coherence, and strategic engagement as essential steps for Nigeria to maximize its position within the global trading system.

Keywords: Nigeria, WTO, Multilateral Trade, Globalization, Trade Liberalization.

Introduction

Global trade has undergone profound transformations since the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. Emerging from the earlier framework of the General Agreement on

Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the WTO was designed to provide a stronger institutional mechanism for enforcing trade rules and promoting global liberalisation (WTO, 1995; Jhingan, 1998). For developing countries, it represented both an opportunity to gain greater access to international markets and a challenge, given the structural imbalances that shape North–South economic relations. Nigeria became a founding member of the WTO in 1995, joining at a moment when its economy was struggling with the legacies of structural adjustment programmes, inflation, and overwhelming dependence on crude oil exports (Onimode, 2000). The expectation was that WTO membership would accelerate diversification, enhance competitiveness, and attract foreign investment. Participation in the multilateral trading system was seen as a potential catalyst for industrial development and economic reform.

However, almost three decades later, the results have been mixed. While WTO membership opened Nigeria's economy to international markets, it also exposed local industries to overwhelming external competition. Sectors such as textiles, food processing, and light manufacturing, which once provided significant employment, declined under the pressure of cheaper imports, often dumped by more technologically advanced economies (Nnabuihe, Odunze & Okebugwu, 2014). The collapse of the textile industry, in particular, illustrates the costs of premature liberalisation, as local producers struggled to compete with subsidised imports and faced infrastructural bottlenecks (Adeleye, 2002).

Agriculture, which had served as Nigeria's economic backbone prior to the oil boom, has also faced setbacks under WTO rules. Domestic farmers found themselves competing with heavily subsidised producers from Europe and North America, undermining local productivity and food security (Aina, 1996). Critics argue that the liberalisation framework has therefore reinforced dependency rather than stimulating structural transformation (Omotola & Enejo, 2009). Institutional weaknesses have compounded these challenges. Nigeria's negotiating presence at WTO ministerial conferences has often been minimal, with small delegations unable to match the technical expertise and lobbying power of industrialised countries such as the United States and China (Aaron, 2001). The organised private sector, including the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) and the Nigerian Association of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (NACCIMA), has repeatedly voiced concerns about the uneven nature of trade engagements, warning that national development objectives frequently clash with WTO obligations.

Despite these constraints, WTO

membership has not been without value for Nigeria. The organisation provides a legal framework for dispute resolution and a platform to participate in shaping global trade norms (Gilpin, 1987). Nigeria has achieved modest gains in non-oil exports such as sesame seeds, cocoa, and solid minerals, sectors that have found niche markets under the liberalised regime (Uy Uyo Ita et al., 2023). In addition, membership has created opportunities for technical assistance, capacity-building, and incremental integration into global trade governance. However, these gains remain overshadowed by structural dependence on crude oil and persistent trade imbalances. Imports have risen disproportionately compared to exports, leaving the country vulnerable to external shocks and currency fluctuations (Obuje & Akhanolu, 2022). This paradox of access without transformation, participation without competitiveness, defines Nigeria's WTO experience. On the one hand, membership has expanded economic linkages and offered new opportunities. On the other hand, it has reinforced vulnerabilities, exposed weak industries, and limited the space for protective policies critical to development. In light of these dynamics, and in the context of globalisation, regional integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and Nigeria's urgent need for economic diversification, a critical reassessment of WTO membership becomes necessary. This paper, therefore, examines Nigeria's participation in the WTO since 1995, focusing on the historical evolution of its engagement, the structural challenges it faces, and the broader economic impacts. It seeks to identify the factors that have limited Nigeria's gains and to explore the reforms needed to reposition the country within the multilateral trading system.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Global trade and multilateralism have become defining features of the contemporary international system. At its core, global trade refers to the exchange of goods, services, and capital across borders, underpinned by the idea that nations can benefit by specialising in areas of relative efficiency, a principle articulated in Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage (Ricardo, 1817; Maneschi, 1998). Multilateralism extends this logic by embedding trade within institutional frameworks where rules and commitments apply equally to all states. It seeks to reduce uncertainty, prevent discriminatory practices, and manage the complexities of economic interdependence (Ruggie, 1993). The post-war creation of the Bretton Woods institutions and, later, the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 marked milestones in the institutionalisation of this order (Irwin & O'Rourke, 2011).

The WTO represents the most ambitious expression of multilateral trade governance. Emerging from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) of 1947, the WTO expanded coverage beyond tariff reduction to services, intellectual property, and dispute settlement (Hoekman & Kostecki, 2009). Its member-driven decision-making and legally binding dispute-settlement mechanism distinguish it from earlier trade arrangements (Van den Bossche & Zdouc, 2017). In principle, the organisation empowers weaker states by providing rules-based avenues for negotiation and conflict resolution. In practice, however, participation is shaped by power and capacity asymmetries. Nigeria's experience reflects this duality. As a founding member, it gained access to a global platform for trade negotiations, but its limited representation at ministerial conferences and its weak institutional infrastructure have constrained its ability to fully leverage the system (Aaron, 2001; WTO, 2022).

Theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into this paradox. Liberalism views the WTO as an institution that promotes cooperation, transparency, and mutual gains by mitigating collective-action problems and reducing transaction costs (Keohane, 1984; Baldwin, 2008). From this perspective, Nigeria's membership provided opportunities for integration into global markets, foreign investment, and technical assistance. However, liberalism also assumes a level playing field, an assumption that is difficult to sustain given Nigeria's infrastructural weaknesses, policy inconsistency, and industrial underdevelopment (Rodrik, 2011; Onemekehian, 2021). In contrast, Dependency Theory highlights how multilateral trade reproduces structural inequalities between industrialised and resource-exporting states (Frank, 1967; Amin, 1976). Nigeria's continued reliance on crude oil exports and dependence on imported manufactured goods illustrate this pattern. WTO rules on agriculture and intellectual property have further reinforced these inequalities: developed countries maintain subsidies that undermine African farmers, while TRIPS protections restrict Nigeria's capacity to develop local pharmaceutical industries (Aksoy & Beghin, 2005; Sell, 2003). From this angle, Nigeria's WTO membership reflects less a pathway to diversification than an extension of peripheral dependence.

Globalization has deepened the reach of multilateral trade institutions, particularly through the WTO. Defined as the intensification of interconnectedness in trade, finance, and technology (Giddens, 1999), globalization has been institutionalised through rules that liberalise markets and promote transparency (Hoekman & Kostecki, 2009). For developing countries, WTO membership carried the promise of greater market access and industrial upgrading. However, the outcomes have been uneven. Countries such as Vietnam and Bangladesh have leveraged membership for export-led growth, while many African economies, including Nigeria, have struggled to translate liberalisation into structural transformation (Rodrik, 2011). Critics point to asymmetries in WTO rules as a significant source of disadvantage. The Agreement on Agriculture allows the United States and European Union to sustain large subsidies, depressing world prices and undermining African competitiveness (Aksoy & Beghin, 2005). Similarly, the TRIPS regime has been criticised for privileging multinational corporations over public health in the Global South, restricting access to affordable medicines (Sell, 2003; Matthews, 2002). Even the Dispute Settlement Mechanism, often praised for its legal rigour, remains out of reach for smaller economies with limited technical expertise and financial capacity (Shaffer, 2003). For Nigeria, these dynamics have reinforced a pattern of import dependence, weak industrial linkages, and vulnerability to external shocks. Nonetheless, Nigeria's engagement with the WTO cannot be understood solely in terms of constraint. Recent reforms, such as customs modernisation and the 2017 ratification of the Trade Facilitation Agreement, have modestly improved border efficiency and revenue mobilisation (World Bank, 2023; WTO, 2024). Nigeria's 2021–2025 National Development Plan also emphasises industrialisation, export diversification, and strategic use of trade agreements to boost competitiveness (National Planning Commission, 2021). In this sense, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) complements Nigeria's WTO participation by providing a regional platform for the country to negotiate from a stronger collective position (UNECA, 2022).

Conceptually, Nigeria's position in global trade cannot be explained solely by classical notions of comparative advantage. While the country retains a resource-based advantage in crude oil and agricultural products, the benefits of WTO membership increasingly depend on institutional capacity, negotiation strategies, and the ability to integrate into evolving value chains shaped by digital trade, environmental standards, and green industrial policies (Baldwin, 2022; OECD, 2022). Nigeria's challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling the formal opportunities of multilateral engagement with the structural realities of underdevelopment. Its experience illustrates the continuing tension between global rules that promise inclusivity and domestic conditions that perpetuate marginality. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate the dual nature of Nigeria's WTO membership. Liberalism underscores the opportunities of institutional participation; Dependency Theory exposes the inequalities that constrain benefits; and globalization highlights the evolving pressures of interdependence. Nigeria's trajectory within the WTO framework reflects both the promise of integration and the persistent weight of structural limitations, a paradox that will frame the empirical analysis in the following sections.

Nigeria's WTO Membership Since 1995

Nigeria's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 represented a critical moment in the country's economic history, embedding it within a global regime of trade governance that had expanded beyond the tariff-focused framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). While Nigeria had been a contracting party to GATT since its independence in 1960, its role during this period was largely passive and reactive. Trade policies were shaped more by import-substitution strategies and oil-driven revenues than by sustained engagement with multilateral trade rules (Oyejide, 2000; Ajayi, 2003). The oil boom of the 1970s entrenched a mono-product economy and reduced incentives to diversify or deepen integration into the global trading system.

The economic crises of the 1980s, however, altered this trajectory. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), adopted in 1986 under pressure from the IMF and World Bank, reoriented Nigeria toward trade liberalisation, naira devaluation, and deregulation of key sectors (Olukoshi, 1993). These reforms aligned with the neoliberal consensus that shaped global economic discourse in the post–Cold War period. By the early 1990s, therefore, Nigeria was already on a reform path that made WTO accession both logical and necessary (Ladan, 2010). Accession itself occurred under the military regime of General Sani Abacha, a period not known for transparency or democratic inclusion. Unlike South Africa, where post-apartheid trade policy was subject to extensive public debate, Nigeria's accession was essentially an elite-driven process. Ministries of Commerce, Finance, and Foreign Affairs, together with donor advisors and technocrats, negotiated commitments with minimal parliamentary oversight or civil society participation (Asobie, 2001). Ratification of the Marrakesh Agreement signified Nigeria's acceptance of core WTO obligations, including those on goods, services, and intellectual property (TRIPS). The country also submitted schedules of tariff bindings and liberalisation measures, committing to align customs valuation, sanitary measures, and technical standards with WTO norms (WTO, 1998).

Nigeria's membership reflected both domestic and international imperatives. Internally, it offered a means to attract investment, signal reformist intent, and rebuild credibility after years of economic crisis. Externally, it aligned Nigeria with the broader African shift toward liberalisation in the 1990s, shaped by structural reforms and the diffusion of globalisation as a development strategy (Okonjo-Iweala, 2003). However, almost three decades later, the dividends of accession remain contested. Nigeria has benefited from technical assistance and inclusion in multilateral forums, but persistent dependence on oil exports, weak manufacturing capacity, and infrastructural deficits continue to limit its competitiveness (Adewuyi, 2012).

Since becoming a member of the World Trade Organization in 1995, Nigeria has formally signed onto the organization's major agreements, including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), and the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). However, the depth of Nigeria's participation in negotiations and implementation has remained limited, reflecting both domestic institutional weaknesses and the broader asymmetries of global trade politics.

Much of Nigeria's engagement has occurred through coalition-based diplomacy. As part of the African Group, the Group of 90 (G90), the Group of 20 (G20), and the Group of 33 (G33), Nigeria has sought to amplify its bargaining power by working alongside other developing countries. Within these blocs, Nigeria has supported demands for special safeguards in agriculture to protect small farmers from import surges and has consistently raised concerns about subsidies maintained by advanced economies (Aksoy & Beghin, 2005).

Despite this group presence, however, Nigeria's individual role has often been described as reactive rather than agenda-setting, constrained by inadequate funding for research, limited representation in Geneva, and the absence of a robust domestic constituency driving trade policy (Ayinla, 2011). In specific sectors, Nigeria's commitments have produced uneven outcomes. Liberalisation under the GATS agreement opened financial services and telecommunications markets, creating space for foreign investment and growth. However, the lack of regulatory safeguards left domestic firms vulnerable to external competition, with limited spillovers into broader industrial development. Similarly, obligations under TRIPS have proven difficult to reconcile with Nigeria's developmental needs, particularly in public health. During the HIV/AIDS crisis and later the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria faced the dilemma of balancing intellectual property protection with the urgent need for affordable medicines (Matthews, 2002; Sell, 2003).

Regional trade dynamics have further complicated Nigeria's participation in the WTO. Commitments undertaken through ECOWAS, including the Common External Tariff (CET) and Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the European Union, have often intersected with, and in some cases exceeded, Nigeria's WTO obligations (Ezeani, 2018). These overlaps highlight a persistent tension between global trade commitments and national development priorities. While ECOWAS integration offers Nigeria a larger regional market, it has also constrained domestic policy flexibility, limiting the government's ability to shield sensitive sectors. Recent institutional reforms suggest a recognition of these challenges. The establishment of the Nigerian Office for

Trade Negotiations (NOTN) in 2017 marked a step toward professionalising trade diplomacy. Through initiatives such as the Nigerian Trade Policy (2022), NOTN has sought to align Nigeria's WTO participation with its broader economic diversification goals under the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP). Nigeria has also participated in newer negotiations on electronic commerce and investment facilitation, though with caution, mindful of the risks of deepening digital divides (WTO, 2023).

Nonetheless, Nigeria's experience reflects a structural imbalance. The informal governance practices of the WTO, where critical decisions are often made in exclusive "Green Room" consultations, have left many African states on the margins (Wade, 2003). For Nigeria, the result has been formal membership without substantive influence, participation without clear strategic gains. Moving forward, the challenge lies in transforming this presence into purposeful engagement through stronger institutional capacity, research-driven policy, and more assertive diplomatic coalitions.

Nigeria's accession to the WTO in 1995 compelled significant changes in its trade policy orientation. Historically, trade policy in the post-independence era was anchored on protectionism and import substitution, reflecting the nationalist drive for economic self-reliance. By the 1970s, indigenisation decrees reinforced state control and sought to limit foreign dominance in key sectors. However, the economic crises of the early 1980s and the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986 marked a decisive shift. Under SAP, policies of devaluation, deregulation, and privatization initiated a gradual embrace of liberalization, paving the way for the more comprehensive reforms associated with WTO membership (Olukoshi, 1993; Alkali et al., 2011). The transition to WTO norms required Nigeria to dismantle or reform many of its protectionist structures. One of the earliest obligations was the simplification of a complex tariff regime and the removal of outright import bans found to be inconsistent with WTO rules (WTO, 2011). While Nigeria reduced the number of tariff lines and moved toward harmonising customs procedures, full compliance proved elusive. Domestic political economy pressures, rent-seeking practices, and entrenched interests slowed the pace of reform, creating a gap between formal commitments and practical enforcement.

The launch of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) in 2004 represented an explicit attempt to integrate WTO-oriented liberalisation into a broader development framework. NEEDS promoted deregulation, market competition, and diversification of the export base in line with global trade norms (Matanmi, 2012). Complementary strategies at the state levels, popularly known as SEEDS, sought to replicate this agenda. However, critics note that these reforms were often donor-driven and lacked consistent execution, limiting their transformative potential (Adewumi, 2012). Institutional reforms also accompanied Nigeria's WTO commitments. Agencies such as the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission (NIPC) were strengthened to encourage foreign direct investment, while customs procedures were modernised with the adoption of e-governance systems.

The adoption of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in 2015 further aligned Nigeria with WTO-compatible regional standards, offering opportunities for deeper regional integration. However, Nigeria's repeated resort to border closures and import restrictions, most recently between 2019 and 2020, revealed a persistent tension between liberalisation obligations and domestic political imperatives (Ezeani, 2018).

However, the broader question remains whether these reforms have translated into developmental gains. Sectors such as telecommunications and financial services expanded under liberalisation, benefiting from foreign investment and regulatory changes. Manufacturing, however, has struggled to survive under competitive pressures, infrastructural deficits, and inconsistent policy incentives. In agriculture, liberalisation exposed Nigerian farmers to heavily subsidised imports from Europe and North America, undermining local production despite WTO safeguards for developing countries. Thus, while Nigeria formally adjusted its trade policies to conform to WTO rules, the outcomes have often reinforced structural vulnerabilities rather than catalysed industrial transformation. From a development economics perspective, Nigeria's experience illustrates the limits of externally driven reform.

WTO-aligned liberalisation, in the absence of robust domestic industrial policy, risks deepening dependency rather than fostering diversification (Chang, 2002; Rodrik, 2011). For Nigeria, the challenge lies not merely in complying with WTO obligations, but in embedding trade reforms within a coherent national strategy that supports infant industries, promotes value addition, and ensures inclusive growth. Without this strategic anchoring, WTO-inspired trade policy adjustments risk serving international credibility rather than national development.

The Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM) of the WTO is widely regarded as the institution's "crown jewel," providing a legal framework for resolving trade conflicts and ensuring predictability in the global system (Davey, 2014). For developing countries, the DSM offers an institutionalised pathway to challenge discriminatory practices by stronger states, something unavailable under the earlier GATT framework. In principle, this makes the DSM an important equaliser. However, Nigeria’s record in this system since its 1995 accession has been mainly passive. As of 2024, the country has never initiated a dispute before the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) and has only participated minimally as a third party (WTO, 2024). Several factors explain this limited engagement. First is the issue of technical capacity. WTO litigation is highly specialised, demanding expert legal knowledge, sustained diplomatic presence in Geneva, and significant financial resources.

Nigeria’s Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Investment lacks a dedicated dispute litigation unit, while chronic underfunding has prevented the recruitment of experienced trade lawyers and economists (Adebajo, 2017). In practice, this capacity gap forces Nigeria to rely on external consultants or donor support, undermining its ability to act independently.

Second is strategic calculation. Many developing countries hesitate to confront major powers through the DSM, fearing political or economic retaliation despite the system's formal neutrality. Nigeria’s reliance on imports and investment from the EU, US, and China has likely reinforced a cautious approach, discouraging confrontational legal strategies in sensitive sectors such as agriculture or pharmaceuticals (Shaffer, 2003). As a result, Nigeria has often chosen informal diplomacy or regional negotiation rather than direct recourse to WTO adjudication.

The implications of this passivity are significant. Other developing states, such as Brazil, in the landmark U.S. cotton subsidies case (DS267), have demonstrated that the strategic use of the DSM can yield concessions even from powerful states, with indirect benefits for African economies. Nigeria, though part of the Cotton-4 coalition, refrained from formal participation, missing an opportunity to advance its agricultural interests (ICTSD, 2005). Similarly, restrictive measures affecting Nigerian exports, particularly in agriculture and manufactured goods, have rarely been challenged at the multilateral level. Despite this underutilisation, Nigeria has engaged with the DSM indirectly through capacity-building programmes and third-party submissions. International initiatives such as the Advisory Centre on WTO Law (ACWL) offer subsidised legal assistance for developing countries. However, uptake by Nigeria has been limited due to weak institutional coordination and political inertia (Gathii, 2011). Calls for reform of the DSM, particularly following the Appellate Body's paralysis since 2019, further complicate the prospects for Nigeria’s deeper engagement. For weaker states, the erosion of the appellate function threatens to undermine the credibility of the system they rely on most (Hoekman, 2021).

Nigeria's disengagement from WTO dispute settlement reflects broader structural patterns: postcolonial dependence on external markets, weak bureaucratic capacity, and an elite-driven trade policy environment. Reforming this trajectory requires both domestic and external action. Domestically, Nigeria must invest in building a cadre of trade lawyers and negotiators, strengthen the Nigerian Office for Trade Negotiations (NOTN), and cultivate coalitions with like-minded developing states.

Externally, reforms to enhance inclusivity, affordability, and transparency within the DSM are necessary if countries like Nigeria are to participate meaningfully. In sum, while the DSM represents one of the most advanced features of the WTO, Nigeria has yet to harness its potential. Without a deliberate strategy to overcome institutional and political constraints, the country risks remaining a passive participant in a system designed to protect the rights of all members.

Economic Impact of WTO Membership on Nigeria

Nigeria's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 heralded a new phase in its agricultural development narrative, situating the country firmly within the framework of global trade liberalization. However, the WTO's influence on Nigeria's agriculture and food sovereignty has been highly contested. While framed under the auspices of modernization and efficiency, the multilateral trading system, particularly the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), has done little to address the historical and structural specificities of Nigeria's agrarian sector.

Agriculture historically formed the cornerstone of Nigeria's economy. Before the oil boom of the 1970s, export crops such as cocoa, groundnuts, palm oil, and cotton accounted for the bulk of foreign exchange earnings, while the sector employed more than 70 percent of the labor force. However, the oil economy shifted state priorities, leading to the neglect of agriculture, declining productivity, and food insecurity (Akinyoade & Uche, 2018). By the 1980s, the situation was worsened by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which, under the guidance of the IMF and World Bank, dismantled subsidies, deregulated markets, and liberalized trade, stripping the state of much of its capacity to support smallholder farmers (Olukoshi, 1993).

The introduction of the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture in 1995 institutionalized these reforms by requiring Nigeria to reduce tariffs, remove quantitative restrictions, and limit domestic subsidies (WTO, 1998). However, the agreement was far from equitable. Developed countries retained significant agricultural support through the so-called "green" and "blue" box subsidies, while developing countries, such as Nigeria, had few instruments to shield their agricultural sectors (Murphy, 2002). This imbalance had far-reaching consequences. Liberalization, in the absence of infrastructure, credit access, research support, or extension services, merely exposed Nigerian farmers to subsidized foreign competition. Imports of poultry, rice, and dairy products surged, undermining local production and pushing entire farming communities out of business (Adewuyi, 2012).

Beyond its immediate economic effects, the WTO framework has also undermined the principle of food sovereignty, the right of states to define their own agricultural and food systems without undue external interference. Nigeria's inability to impose variable tariffs, subsidize local production, or shield vulnerable sectors from global price shocks has increasingly tied its food security to volatile international markets. The outcome has been paradoxical: despite abundant arable land and favorable agro-ecological conditions, Nigeria has emerged as one of the world's largest importers of staples such as rice, wheat, sugar, and fish (UNCTAD, 2015).

This dependency has deepened the structural vulnerabilities of the agricultural sector. WTO rules have tended to favor large-scale, export-oriented farming models, privileging commodification over subsistence and rural sustainability (Murphy & Hansen-Kuhn, 2019). In Nigeria, where agriculture remains closely intertwined with community life, cultural identity, and smallholder farming systems, such rules have disrupted traditional livelihoods. The influx of heavily subsidized imports, especially cereals and poultry products, constitutes dumping, in which products are sold below their production costs due to hidden subsidies in exporting countries. While the WTO formally prohibits export subsidies, it permits alternative support mechanisms, such as direct payments and infrastructural assistance that achieve similar effects.

For Nigerian farmers, the practical result has been the consistent erosion of competitiveness and the displacement of local producers from domestic markets (De Schutter, 2011). WTO disciplines and the broader liberalization agenda have often constrained Nigeria's attempts to reclaim control over its food system. Periodic interventions such as border closures, temporary import bans, and targeted subsidy programs have been criticized by trade partners and multilateral institutions as violations of Nigeria's WTO commitments. However, these measures are frequently adopted as pragmatic stopgaps in the absence of fair trading conditions or adequate protective mechanisms. The contradiction is stark: while developed economies continue to deploy extensive policy instruments to safeguard their agricultural sectors, developing countries such as Nigeria face reprimand for similar actions (McMichael, 2005).

This tension has given rise to the growth of food sovereignty movements in

Nigeria, often in alliance with global coalitions such as La Via Campesina. These groups argue that the multilateral trade system, as currently designed, entrenches dependency and undermines developing states' ability to feed themselves sustainably. They have called for a revision of the Agreement on Agriculture through the adoption of a “Development Box”, a reform agenda that would grant developing countries the flexibility to support smallholder farmers, regulate imports, and prioritize domestic food security without facing WTO sanctions (ActionAid, 2020).

Despite sustained advocacy, however, these proposals have gained little traction in WTO negotiations dominated by export-oriented economies and agribusiness interests. Nigeria's experience under the WTO framework illustrates the broader dilemma of postcolonial states navigating a global trade regime tilted toward robust economies. The expectation that WTO membership would stimulate agricultural modernization and strengthen food security has, instead, translated into rising vulnerability, increased reliance on imports, and the erosion of smallholder resilience.

Today, Nigeria ranks among the most prominent global importers of staple foods such as rice and wheat, even though its agro-ecological endowments should make it largely self-sufficient (UNCTAD, 2015). The paradox is evident: a country with abundant land and labor resources continues to grapple with chronic food insecurity, with over 20 million Nigerians experiencing hunger in 2023 (FAO, 2023). The cumulative effect of liberalization without capacity-building has been the weakening of rural livelihoods, the collapse of value chains, and the hollowing out of food sovereignty. WTO disciplines, particularly under the Agreement on Agriculture, have restricted Nigeria’s policy space, preventing targeted subsidies, tariff adjustments, and support programs that historically enabled developed countries to industrialize their agricultural sectors. Instead, Nigeria has been relegated to a passive importer, vulnerable to global price shocks and dependent on the policy choices of external powers.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the impact of the WTO on Nigeria’s agriculture has been marked less by structural transformation than by deepening fragility. To safeguard its food future, Nigeria must reassert national control over agricultural policy, invest in infrastructure and research for sustainable rural economies, and build coalitions within the WTO and beyond to advocate for fairer rules. Only by aligning trade policy with food sovereignty and developmental imperatives can Nigeria hope to reverse the current trajectory and harness its agricultural potential for inclusive growth.

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