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The disconnects between trade policy and the rhetoric of inclusive trade

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ABSTRACT

International trade has long been promoted as a pathway to development, yet its inclusiveness remains contested. Despite growing recognition of the desirability of linking trade with broader development goals—such as poverty reduction, gender equality, human rights, and disability inclusion—growing incomes through trade has often remained as the dominant objective, at the expense of these other dimensions. Recent global trade turbulence and emerging issues including environmental and labour standards further challenge trade's role to promote inclusion. This paper reviews the disconnects between the intended development impacts of trade policies and the improvement of the lives of marginalized and vulnerable groups, who are often the most exposed to trade shocks and/or least able to take advantage of trading opportunities due to poverty, a lack of human rights, gender inequities, disability, and structural constraints. In the context of limited policy space, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, the study highlights how exclusionary dynamics risk undermining trade policies' potential for inclusive development.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, growing criticism has emerged over the perceived dominance of trade policy agendas—particularly those prioritizing market liberalization and efficiency—at the expense of social equity, environmental sustainability, and broader development priorities (UNCTAD, 2018a; Hoekman and Nelson, 2020). This critique has been especially pronounced in debates surrounding the social dimensions of globalization, the uneven distribution of trade benefits, and the marginalization of low-income and vulnerable groups (Evenett and Fritz, 2023). In response, concerns about sustainability, inclusion and justice have become more central to trade policy discourse, including over regional trade agreements, WTO reform debates and national trade strategies (OECD, 2019; ITC, 2020). As these shifts unfold, they highlight a broader recognition that trade policy cannot be separated from social and developmental outcomes.

There is no doubt that international trade creates benefits from increased competition, more variety, higher productivity, lower input prices, reduction in poverty, and increases in real GDP (Bergh and Nilsson, 2014; IMF, 2017; Kreuger, 2019; among many others). At the same time, the distributional consequences of trade, producing both winners and losers, are widely acknowledged (Gasiorek et al., 2019; Engel et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2025). While trade can promote aggregate growth and efficiency, its benefits are often unevenly distributed across countries, regions, sectors, and social groups. Empirical evidence shows that liberalization may exacerbate income inequality, job displacement, and regional disparities, particularly in economies lacking strong social protection or adjustment mechanisms (Winters et al, 2004; Autor et al., 2014; Goldberg and Pavcnik, 2016; Pavcnik, 2017; Helpman et al., 2017). In many cases, trade-induced structural changes have also deepened existing gender and spatial inequalities, with women, informal workers, and small-scale producers often bearing disproportionate adjustment costs (Fontana, 2018; Artuc, 2021; UNCTAD, 2022). Thus, while trade remains a potential driver of development, its uneven distributive impacts underscore the need for policies that ensure inclusiveness in trade outcomes.

If increased trade is to be a pathway for inclusive development, we need actively to consider not only its positive average effect on economic growth, but also those individuals and communities that are likely to face high adjustment costs to trade shocks, those to whom the benefits of trade are constrained due to marginalization, or simply because of structural issues (IMF, 2017; Kreuger, 2019; Lyon et al., 2019; Rodrik,

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2019; Artuc, 2019). The marginalised may be less able to cope with trade shocks than are the better off. To adjust to trade shocks, workers must be able to respond to shifts in labour demand (Topalova, 2007) and firms to greater competition (Helpman et al., 2017). Those who are economically less advantaged tend to have fewer resources to cushion shocks, face geographic restrictions, and lack appropriate human capital for the expanding sectors (Autor et al., 2014; Utar, 2018). This is not to say that opportunities are not generated from trade, but that these opportunities may not be accessible to all without additional assistance (Winters et al., 2004; Saha et al., 2025).

In some cases the losses from trade policy are not merely relative, but actually negative. Although it has been often argued that such losers from trade may be few (Lyon et al., 2019), the adverse effects have been shown often to be prolonged, concentrated, and particularly heavy for workers with education and skills that are inadequate to cope with the required adjustments (Autor et al., 2016; IMF, 2017; Utar, 2018; Pavnick, 2019). Moreover, the spill overs may be complex and multifaceted, for instance combining job losses and environmental damage in specific geographical areas.

The challenges of adjustment can fall most severely on marginalised and vulnerable groups such as women and youth workers, self-employed individuals from minority or low-income backgrounds, persons with disabilities, indigenous populations, and those living in extreme poverty. In low- and middle-income countries, these groups can represent a substantial share of the population and often occupy precarious positions within informal or low-wage sectors that are highly exposed to trade shocks (UNCTAD, 2022; ILO, 2021). For instance, evidence from the garment industry in South and Southeast Asia shows that while export growth has created employment opportunities for women, it has also reinforced gendered wage gaps and poor working conditions, particularly for informal or subcontracted workers (Barrientos, Gereffi, and Rossi, 2011; Tejani and Milberg, 2016). Similarly, trade-induced competition in agricultural markets can disadvantage smallholder farmers—many of whom are women or members of indigenous communities—who face barriers such as limited access to credit, technology, and market information (FAO, 2020).

Trade policies such as tariff reduction, investment facilitation, and regulatory harmonization are generally poorly suited either to address the structural and capability-based constraints that prevent disadvantaged populations from participating meaningfully in trade, or to assist those whose marginalisation and vulnerability makes them unable to adjust to the changes it generates (Rodrik, 2018; Hoekman, 2021; Kulhmann and Bahri 2023). This creates a *disconnect* between those polices and the rhetorical claims that are sometimes made for them in terms of providing benefits for all. Rather, trade policy needs to be sensitive to any major distributional strains it creates and to accommodate them either directly or through suitable complementary polices – typically *meso*-level policies such as labour market policies to manage adjustments like retraining programs and social safety nets; industrial or innovation strategy that promotes research and development; competition policy that can ensure fair competition in domestic markets; investment policies; environmental and sustainability regulations (Saha et al., 2025).

Developing a collective and collaborative understanding of the most critical issues in the space of inclusive trade policies can provide a foundation for this and is a pre-condition for designing trade policies that can genuinely support inclusive development.

There is no simple definition of “inclusive trade”. We might think of it loosely as “embedding equity in international trade”, which implies more an approach to trade policymaking than a specific set of outcomes (Winters, 2022). It involves understanding the implications of a policy stance and seeking to ensure that, overall, its effects do not disproportionately disadvantage any group. It cannot apply to individual elements of trade policy (which almost always create losers as well as winners), but only to the overall stance. Thus, while much analysis concerns specific elements of policy, these need to factor into the whole along with any complementary polices before making a final judgement.

In this study, we consider some of the distributive dimensions of trade policy, not because they encompass all inclusivity (they do not), but because they illustrate the sort of issues that cannot be avoided if inclusivity is to be taken seriously. Fig. 1 presents a summary of our approach. It considers inclusive trade policy spanning trade policy design and implementation and that must be viewed as including complementary policies that aim to ensure that the benefits of trade are equitably shared across all segments of society, including by explicitly recognizing and addressing the diverse dimensions of marginalization. Designing such policies requires identifying who is excluded, how, and why.

Marginalization in trade can arise from multiple intersecting factors such as poverty, gender, geography, ethnicity, age, disability, education, and access to productive resources that shape individuals’ and groups’ ability to participate in and benefit from trade. The first challenge for inclusive trade policymaking is to identify different *aspects of inclusion* i.e. elements of marginalization, and then to understand how trade shocks or opportunities affect groups differently.

Trade policy design with participation in trade policy is the first step towards inclusivity, followed by specific aspects of inclusion – in this paper, we focus on poverty, human rights, gender, and disability. Policymakers can then tailor interventions to target the problems and challenges that marginalized groups face. However, managing the interactions and intersectionalities across inclusion aspects serves as a critical and challenging step to implementation and outcomes. Alongside gaps in relevant complementary policies, the result often visible are the disconnects of inclusive trade.

Economically, inclusive trade policies broaden participation in global markets, allowing a greater share of the world’s working-age population to contribute to and benefit from economic opportunities. Such inclusion enhances productivity, innovation, and market efficiency by promoting better resource allocation through comparative advantage and by facilitating the diffusion of ideas and technologies across borders (World Bank, 2020a). The World Bank estimates that trade openness has lifted over one billion people out of poverty and has led to income gains of up to 20% within a decade of liberalization (World Bank, 2020a). Moreover, the OECD (2021) finds that lowering trade barriers for underrepresented groups such as women-led enterprises and small and medium-sized firms fosters more inclusive and resilient economic growth. Thus, the issues at stake here are not merely distributive, but also potentially increase the size of the pie for everyone.

This paper seeks to explore some dimensions of international trade that can be better aligned with inclusion and development goals. Specifically, it aims to: (i) identify key trade policy issues that directly impact marginalized and vulnerable groups when exposed to trade or trade-related activities; (ii) examine trade policies or initiatives that have the potential to address the barriers to an equitable access to trade; and (iii) discuss how to give marginalized groups a more effective voice in trade policymaking, thereby contributing to inclusive trade policies.

Section 2 discusses participation in trade policymaking as a form of procedurally inclusive trade policy and as a means to improving inclusivity of outcomes. Section 3 outlines and reviews four aspects that we argue an inclusive trade policy needs to consider: the link between trade and poverty, trade and human rights, trade and gender equality, and trade and disability. That is, we illustrate issues surrounding internal inclusivity (i.e., between groups within a country) and not, for lack of space, the equally important question of whether international trade negotiations and institutions pay equal regard to the interests of developing and developed countries. As noted above, these do not encompass the whole debate about inclusive trade but are important elements of it and suggest how other elements might be considered. Section 4 seeks to draw together the common themes and key differences between our illustrative topics. Finally, Section 5 provides concluding remarks and proposes a way forward.

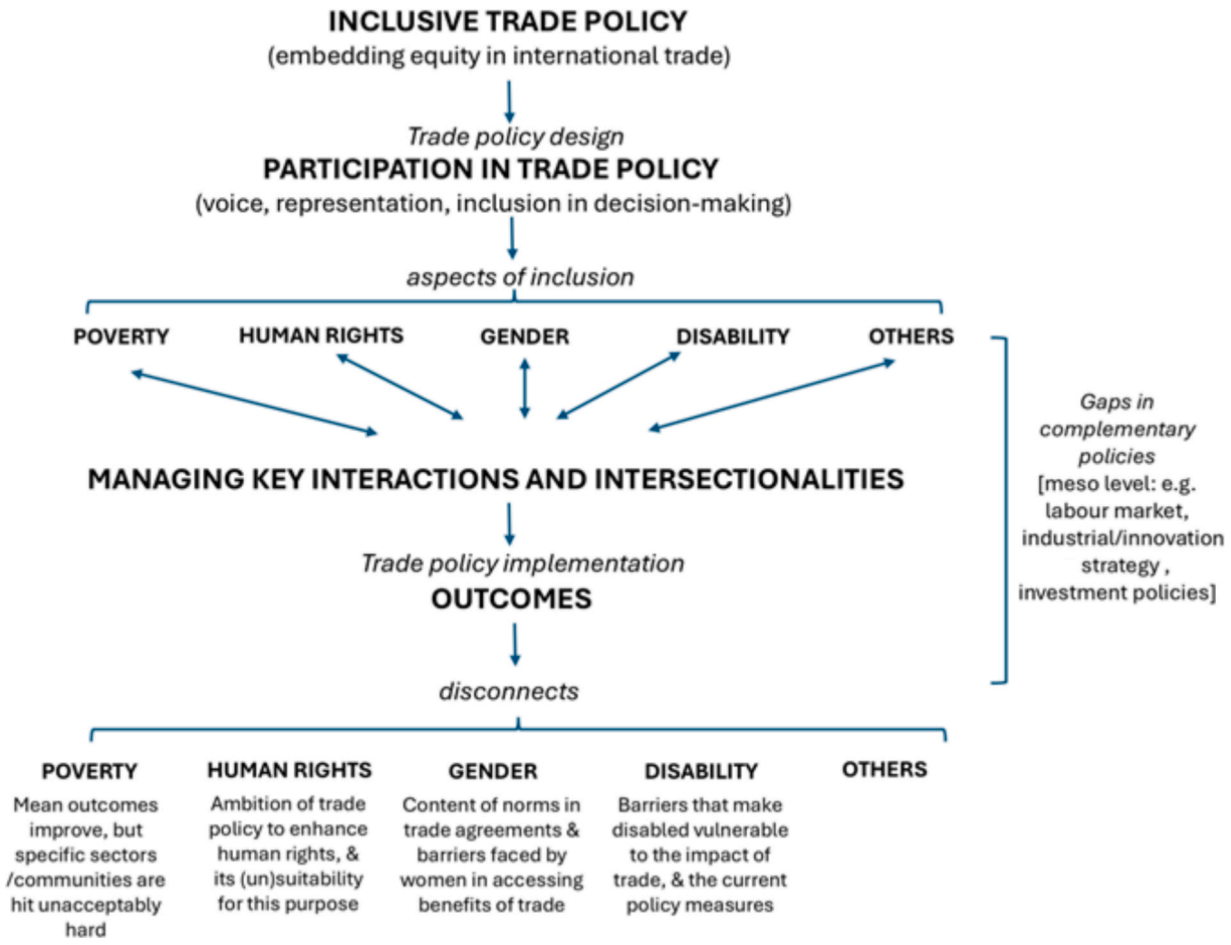


Fig. 1. Disconnects of inclusive trade. .
Source: Author's own

2. Participation in policymaking

A prima facie step towards inclusivity is surely participation in policymaking – indeed, it arguably defines procedural inclusivity. However, the form of participation determines its value in terms of outcomes, and it also must be supplemented by a degree of transparency to make it meaningful. There is often a disconnect between the promise of what participation will deliver and the actual outcome.

At the international level, the Doha Development Agenda stressed the importance of participation in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and there has been progress since then on transparency (Perez-Esteve, 2012; Lacarte, 2005). This is undoubtedly an important dimension, but in this paper our focus is rather on the inclusivity of internal processes of a country.

Business has long had informal access to the process of trade policymaking (Capling and Low, 2010; Saha, 2019; Saha, 2020; Gawande et al., 2009), as has labour when governments are sympathetic to it. But since the 2000 s, participatory approaches have become more explicit and have extended their reach beyond traditional partners to civil society, especially on environmental issues, labour rights and in voicing concerns over the negative effects of globalization. Much of this has been in the form of consultation exercises on specific stances or policies, and in some cases periodic meetings with stakeholders. Consultation has become more involved and arguably less attractive to governments as the range of issues and lists of stakeholders in trade agreements have grown, and because in some cases these agreements include clauses requiring it. The depth and modalities of participation vary greatly across countries, however. In addition, parts of government not overtly involved in trade policymaking have begun to take a greater interest in trade, e.g. in health and culture, adding to, but also complicating, the achievement of internal government coherence.

Despite the growth in such participation, there has been much academic debate about whether it has, in fact, resulted in any progressive change in trade policymaking (Dür and De Bièvre, 2007, Steffek and Ehling, 2008; Drieghe et al., 2021). Responsiveness to domestic industries' concerns about trade is an important aspect of government and is often a necessary *quid pro quo* to trade policies that benefit other sections of society (Baldwin, 1989; Hillman et al., 2001). However, not all groups have the same influence, and some sectors make a better case for their favoured trade policies than others. Engagement with business often reflects their having information (e.g. on technologies or labour issues) that the government may wish to know before it sets its trade policies (Austen-Smith, 1993). This reflects the inevitable asymmetry in information between government and business about how policies map to outcomes, which is an important role for industry associations; despite having relevant information, however, these groups still remain interest groups at heart. Systematic consultations with businesses have now become typical in trade.

Consultations with citizens, economic actors and, where relevant, sub-national levels of government, have been widely recognized as an important component of designing effective trade policy and negotiating trade agreements (Halle and Wolfe, 2007). Such consultations are intended to increase transparency, legitimacy, and the responsiveness of trade policies to the needs of stakeholders, including labour groups and civil society organizations, as well as businesses. However, evidence on the effectiveness of these consultations remains mixed. While some

studies show that stakeholder engagement can improve policy design and facilitate smoother implementation (Evenett and Vermulst, 2007; Hall and Wolfe, 2010), others highlight persistent challenges, such as the underrepresentation of marginalized groups, the dominance of powerful business interests, and the limited capacity for meaningful participation among vulnerable communities (Hafner-Burton and Ron, 2009; Krajewski, 2017). Thus, consultations often fall short of ensuring that trade policies fully reflect equity and inclusion objectives.

Drieghe et al. (2021) argue that the inclusion of civil society faces limitations in terms of achieving outcomes. First, dialogue mechanisms have been criticised for not always allowing civil society actors to directly inform actual decision-making (Steffek and Ehling, 2008; Harrison et al., 2019). Second, the civil society agenda is often not aligned with that of policy makers who may be much more focused on the needs of business (Hannah, 2016; Ford, 2018; Lawrence, 2018; Holden, 2019). The latter observation arises inevitably from the fact that interests in trade policies differ across society. Governments have to make trade-offs, so one should not expect that civil society's or inclusive objectives will prevail on every occasion. What one might reasonably expect, however, is that participatory mechanisms are structured to allow all the main interests to represent their positions effectively.

Capling and Low (2010) provide evidence on the participation of non-state actors across eight countries: Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Indonesia, Thailand, Jordan, Kenya, and South Africa. For Latin America (Chile, Colombia and Mexico), the business sector was found to be the most influential, albeit with differences in involvement for different negotiations, while civil society had less influence. Thailand had a long history of engagement in policymaking with a preference for regional and South-South cooperation. In Indonesia, there is a preference for "regional" agreements such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Trade policy was highly centralised in Jordan, and engagement was limited to preferential agreements. In Kenya, economic actors had not been very active in trade policy. For South Africa, exerting influence at the WTO was seen as important and possible, but speed of negotiations was of concern.

Overall, participatory mechanisms in trade policy face a variety of challenges, often shaped by national contexts, institutional capacity, and the political economy of decision-making. While efforts to foster participation have evolved in recent years, their effectiveness in influencing outcomes remains uneven. Targeting policy impacts beyond rhetoric requires aligning national development and equity goals with robust consultation mechanisms, ensuring that stakeholder engagement is not merely procedural but that it genuinely informs policy choices. This is particularly important for designing inclusive trade policies, as marginalized and vulnerable groups—such as the oppressed, the poor, women, youth, informal workers, indigenous populations and persons with disabilities—are often excluded from mainstream policy discussions. When the objectives of participatory processes are not systematically defined and linked to concrete policy outcomes their impact is likely to be limited – Hocking (2005) and Gheyle and De Ville (2017). Conversely, structured and goal-oriented participation can help identify trade-related barriers, distributional impacts, and potential adjustment costs, allowing trade agreements or their complementary domestic policies to incorporate provisions for equity, social protection, and inclusive development. In this sense, participatory processes are not optional—they are essential tools for translating the rhetoric of inclusive trade into actionable, enforceable, and context-sensitive policy measures.

3. Inclusive trade policy and its disconnects – Four aspects

This section discusses the issues arising in four separate aspects of inclusivity – poverty, human rights, gender, and disability. As noted above, inclusivity includes several other constituencies, but these four areas represent marginalised groups whose welfare is a common source of concern, and on which trade policy is a potential influence. The discussion is focussed mostly on outcomes rather than processes, but the latter are referred to where relevant. The disconnects mainly reflect the specificities of each aspect, but in section 4 we try to draw together the common threads.

Even though trade tends to lower inequality between countries, and within countries average incomes are often found to increase with trade, its effects tend to vary across sectors, areas, or communities. Higher exports can create new jobs and boost wages, but higher imports have the opposite effect, displacing workers and lowering earnings (Autor et al. 2016). Importantly, geographical agglomeration of industries and limited mobility, both across space and sectors, can result in very concentrated and long-lasting trade shocks. If displaced workers are pushed into informal sectors (Dix-Carneiro and Kovak, 2019), or if they exit the labour force entirely (Erten et al., 2019), their ability to enjoy decent living conditions[1] can be severely jeopardized, especially if displacement falls disproportionately on the disadvantaged.

So, what has been done to ensure that trade contributes to more inclusive and sustained positive outcomes for equitable development? The realization of heterogeneous effects has redirected policymaking communities to tackle negative spill overs by identifying specific issues and complementary policies for more inclusive development. A leading example is demonstrated by explicitly and implicitly recognizing increased trade support in specific areas such as trade facilitation and trade reform as essential elements for achieving several of the Sustainable Development Goals (UNCTAD, 2018).

With global recognition of the challenges faced by marginalised groups, there has been a significant effort towards understanding the constraints that make it difficult to benefit from trade, and a realisation that many are localised, such as distance to markets and poor access to productive sectors. As well as these 'traditional' barriers, however, there are emerging issues in contemporary trade policy, such as digital trade, e-commerce, environmental standards, labour provisions, and intellectual property rights that present new challenges for inclusion and justice. In these areas, equity and development concerns are often relegated to secondary importance or face significant resistance from stakeholders who view them as constraints on market access, competitiveness or innovation (Hoekman & Nelson, 2020; Rodrik, 2018).

3.1. The relationship between trade and poverty

The first dimension that we discuss is poverty. Poverty is inevitably linked to trade, because trade generates gains and losses, regardless of the vulnerability of the impacted workers and consumers, and through the forms taken by trade agreements and complementary policies to recognize and address any distributional impacts. Trade can help and harm anyone, hence we need to first understand how this happens. From this perspective, poverty is different from the other inclusivity dimensions that we analyse. However, the losers from trade are more likely to be those lacking protection of their rights as humans, or to belong to a vulnerable category, including the ex-ante (i.e. pre-trade shock) poor, who tend to be vulnerable themselves. In this sense, poverty is aligned with human rights, gender, disability and other disadvantaged conditions.

'Trade and poverty' has absorbed huge amounts of research over the last two decades but all that effort has failed to provide a definitive universal answer to the question 'does increased trade reduce poverty?'. That is because there is no definitive answer. It all depends. Rather, the job of researchers is to understand the determinants of the effect of trade

[1] Article 25 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control".

on poverty and to provide tools that help to anticipate or explain the outcome in any specific context. In this sense, the effort since 2000 has been very fruitful, not from any huge conceptual leap forward or new theory, but through the painstaking process of accumulating data and conducting empirical estimation.

The basic approach is not much different from that outlined in Winters et al (2004) and its precursors such as Winters (2000) and McCulloch et al (2001). It starts by observing that allowing an economy to trade more almost always increases average incomes. This is not to say that only free trade will do, but to observe that no country has successfully developed without engaging more fully with the rest of the world. Moreover, even if that engagement is stimulated by domestic developments (as Rodrik, 1995, claims for Taiwan and South Korea), it still depends on being able to sell surpluses and buy deficit goods/services abroad.[2]

Unfortunately, however, and to the inconvenience of economists, we are not all average. Within a national average there may be individuals, communities or regions that suffer from an increase in a given trade and some of these may be (or may become) poor. To start to unpack the question of 'losers', we need to recognise two critical dimensions over which people differ – what they consume and what they produce, or more broadly how they earn their income. Heavy consumers of an importable good may gain from increased imports (trade) and heavy consumers of an exportable good may lose if trade increases exports and thus drives up the price. In developed countries, there is strong evidence that opening up trade with China has benefitted poorer consumers because their consumption baskets are biased towards the goods China has supplied in abundance – e.g., Fajgelbaum and Khandelwal (2016).

However, people tend to differ more according to the sources of their income than in what they spend it on. Hence, if we are looking for deviations from an average, they are likely to be larger in the production domain than in the consumption one and so the stronger poverty effects are more likely to be located in the former than the latter. This takes us to a fundamental and obvious insight that economists largely ignored until two decades ago: if imports are liberalised and you work in an import-competing sector, you will tend to suffer, whereas if liberalising imports also stimulates exports (as we expect from general equilibrium effects such as the long-run requirement that trade is balanced) and you work in an export sector, you tend to gain. It is thus very important to be clear, when you talk about 'trade', which aspect you are measuring.

Two excellent pieces of analysis papers are often misrepresented because commentators (unlike the authors) are not careful about what is measured. First, Topalova (2010), examined the effects of the Indian trade liberalisation in 1991 in a difference-in-differences (d-i-d) analysis of Indian states according to how exposed their production structures were to tariff reductions (i.e., to import changes). She found that more exposure was associated with slower reductions in poverty. The shock she examined was defined in terms of competition from imports and the d-i-d structure eliminated any general effects on Indian exports or productivity, so this result is entirely unsurprising. When Topalova (2007) considered exposure to exports in a similar structure, albeit with somewhat less technically secure estimates, she found that greater exposure to trade in terms of exportables was associated with better poverty performance, which is also not surprising. Neither paper shows that 'trade liberalisation' or increased trade *per se* is good or bad for poverty.

Similar comments pertain to the excellent work programme on the China shock in the USA, starting with Autor et al (2013), which was focused on the deleterious effects of stiff import competition on certain jobs in the USA. Feenstra et al (2018), however, showed that when you added in the export and productivity effects stimulated by trade with China, the net effect on USA jobs was positive. Costa et al. (2016) show the same sort of result for Brazil.

One final comment on import liberalisation: in both the cases just cited, the imports competed with local producers, but when the liberalised imports provide inputs to local production, they help producers. Several studies have shown how strong this effect can be on local productivity – e.g., Amiti and Konings (2007) – and more recently Kis-Katos and Sparrow (2015) have traced its consequences for poverty.

Topalova and Autor et al. both identify the fundamental problem in their import-exposed sectors and regions: it is the lack of mobility out of the stricken sectors and regions and this, in fact, is the key issue for sharing of the gains from trade more equitably. Imagine a sector that was rigidly restricted to employing exactly the same amount of labour through time. When demand for its output went up, its price would rise and employing labour would become more profitable. Firms in the sector would compete for workers and drive wages up. If demand went down the same process would operate in reverse and result in lower wages. Increasing trade raises demand in exportable sectors and reduces it in importable ones, and workers in the latter see their rewards falling, perhaps into poverty. This is the disconnect in trade policy so far as poverty is concerned. If there is not reasonable long-run mobility domestically, trade liberalisation may improve mean incomes but hit significant communities unacceptably hard.

Now imagine that workers can move freely between sectors. There will be a migration from jobs in importables to those in exportables which will mitigate the wage changes in each sector. If mobility is perfect this will result in there being the same wage in each sector. Hence, if the production of exportables is more labour intensive than the production of importables – as we would expect in most developing countries – a balanced increase in trade will raise the overall demand for labour and hence the average wage in the economy.[3] Of course, in the 'real' world, the intersectoral migration of labour will be imperfect, because, for example, of skills and preferences, etc, and so while average wages might rise, workers in importables may not keep up and those in exportables may earn a premium, at least for several (even many) years. Moreover, to take full advantage of changing opportunities to export, one needs not only labour to move in, but also capital and infrastructure to allow the exportables sectors to expand to their maximum extent.

The other big restriction of labour mobility is geography: exportables and importables may be located in different regions (or at least be present in different proportions in different regions) and moving through space is costly and risky. Hence, increasing trade may alter regional differences in income. This is essentially the story for both Topalova and Autor et al. Topalova showed that the effects of the Indian liberalization were most pronounced among the least geographically mobile individuals at the bottom of the income distribution, and in Indian states where inflexible labour laws impeded the reallocation of factors across sectors. Autor et al (2014) found similarly that the burden was greater in the USA on low skilled workers, who found it harder to adjust and to move between sectors/regions.

This last result contains an important message for policymakers. It is not difficult to think of reasons why the poor and otherwise disadvantaged are less able to adjust (to cope with) any shock than are the better off. For example, they have fewer skills, fewer contacts and fewer assets and borrowing opportunities, which results in their having less ability to search for solutions, invest in new activities, finance moving costs or take risks. It is also conceivable that poorer workers have jobs requiring skills that are badly transferable to other sectors; put differently, their human capital might have high sector-specificity. The latter has been shown to be a factor hindering inter-sectoral reallocations and affecting long term wage and employment trajectories (Utar, 2018). Thus, in any situation of change, particular attention needs to be paid to the ability of

[2] One can imagine cases of immiserising domestic growth, but an economy needs to have or face serious distortions before that would ever come to pass.

[3] This is the basis of the famous Stolper-Samuelson theorem of 1941, which underpinned thinking about trade and poverty in developing countries until around 2000.

the poor to cope or to take advantage of positive opportunities that are generated – see Winters et al (2004) for more discussion. These effects might also be exacerbated by heterogeneity across firms – Helpman et al (2017): better firms survive import competition better (Iacovone et al, 2013) and are more heavily export-oriented; but they are also able to recruit better workers who then earn higher wages. A trade shock thus impinges harder on weak firms and, through them, weaker (poorer) workers.

Two aspects of immobility deserve brief highlighting. First, trade may impinge very differently on urban and rural areas. There are clear challenges in rural to urban migration, most clearly in the Chinese Hukou system, but also perfectly obvious in policies surrounding access to housing, education for migrants' children and health and other social services and, sometimes, in terms of ethnic and/or social discrimination – see, for example, Blaser and Landau (2019). Addressing these challenges can provide large returns in terms of enhancing aggregate responses to new trading opportunities and in sharing their benefits. Urban to rural migration is usually less fraught but can involve serious disruptions to family education and health activities. It is quite commonly observed after negative urban shocks.

The second specificity is the unique position of indigenous peoples. They may face very high barriers to outward mobility (including social and cultural reluctance) and may find that the few marketable products that they can produce are outcompeted by imports. On the other hand, their greater self-sufficiency renders them less susceptible to trading shocks. There is also a question of the extent to which indigenous communities would wish to undertake the adjustments that trade opportunities open up.

3.2. Trade and human rights

Concerns over inclusive trade policies reflect a desire to ensure that international trade and globalization align with the fundamental principles of human dignity, equity and justice. In this section we focus on the issues of civil and political liberties and on labour and social rights, which we collectively refer to as human rights.

The relationship between international trade and human rights is complex. Trade is major route towards increasing incomes for many workers, which may enhance their ability to resist violations of their rights. Further, trading with high-human-rights-standard countries can exert pressure on abusers through the activities of various organizations and consumers (e.g., naming and shaming, or boycotting), or multinational firms wanting to demonstrate an ethical import sourcing behaviour. Cao et al. (2013) find that, provided the pressure from importing countries is sufficiently high, trade can eventually operate as a transmission belt for the diffusion of better human rights practices from importing to exporting countries. Peterson et al. (2018) show that as shaming by human-rights organizations increases, higher levels of human rights abuse are increasingly associated with lower exports. Human rights abuse could also harm trade by reducing productivity and hindering investment in human capital (Blanton and Blanton, 2007). These channels put pressure on countries to address abuses, although at the expense of incomes from exporting (for the abuser country) if the responses are weak.

A more common fear is that market failures and lack of domestic regulation to protect minimum working standards and basic human rights can induce negative effects from exposure to trade. Foreign competition puts pressure on import-competing sectors, while access to markets overseas increases the returns to exporters of greater (and growing) competitiveness. Both provide incentives for firms and/or governments to try to cut costs which may, in turn, entail worse rights abuse (Srinivasan, 1998, Olney, 2013).

As part of the response to these fears, developed country governments have turned to trade agreements to regulate problematic human rights situations, essentially 'trading' progress on human rights in exchange for market access. In fact, the link is of long-standing: agreements aimed at banning trade in goods made by convict labour have existed since the early twentieth century, and the creation of the International Labour Organization in 1919 recognised that state failure to protect labour rights could distort trade and undermine labour rights in other countries (Aaronson, 2010).

Since the 1990 s, provisions and chapters on human rights have become increasingly relevant features of trade agreements of large markets such as the EU and the US, finding a more prominent place in the text, being characterized by stronger wording, and appearing more systematically across agreements (Velluti, 2016). Currently, several economies including Canada, the EFTA countries, Australia, and New Zealand are particularly 'demanding' in terms of the number and strictness of human rights provisions included in their PTAs (Lechner, 2018), although, because such clauses have to be negotiated and agreed, their strength varies substantially across agreements. Some agreements call for adherence to UN and ILO conventions (e.g., the UN Declaration on Human Rights), with provisions often being rhetorical and aspirational, while other agreements indicate specific human rights obligations and make the provisions binding and enforceable.

These provisions can serve two main goals. By making market access conditional on the respect of international conventions, they can provide a basis to punish 'serious and systematic' violations of human rights (Zerk and Beacock, 2021). In addition, detailed chapters on social and environmental issues could be used to ensure a 'level playing field' (Bhagwati, 1995) and avoid a race to the bottom (Davies and Vadlamannati, 2013). The variety of human rights objectives that can be pursued in trade agreements, together with the differences in countries' power in negotiations (basically their economic and political weight), have resulted in considerable heterogeneity in approach. The EU, for instance, includes a larger number of (binding and more demanding) civil and political rights provisions in Association Agreements[4] with small neighbouring countries, and a larger number of (non-binding and less demanding) labour and social rights provisions in (non-association) agreements with large trade partners.[5] Partners of greater commercial importance appear to 'suffer' less attention to their human rights performance (Borchert et al., 2020).

Examples of the use of sanctions in response to violations of human rights range from the withdrawal of trade preferences on selected products, as in the case of the EU's suspension of GSP preferences for Cambodia[6] (European Commission, 2020), to the termination of a bilateral FTA, although to date the latter has never occurred. In between in severity, non-trade related policies (such as financial assistance or technical cooperation programs) have been suspended (Hachez, 2015, Donno and Neureiter, 2018).

These varying responses to human rights violations highlight two factors about how trade agreements have been used to pursue human rights objectives. First, unilateral schemes such as GSP programmes are better suited than bilateral agreements to incentivize progress in or punish violations of human rights: a key reason is that suspending an FTA hurt both sides and could entail trade costs that the punishing country might not want to incur (Borchert et al., 2020). Second, some countries are just 'too big to be punished'. Among GSP members, violations led to sanctions only in a handful of cases, and have generally involved small countries: e.g., Cambodia, Belarus, Nicaragua, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Brown et al., 2011; Portela, 2018). Across FTA negotiations, on the one hand a weaker stance has been

[4] Association Agreements are a type of FTAs that "establish a legal and institutional framework for the development of privileged relations involving close political and economic cooperation" (Van Elsuwege and Chamon, 2019).

[5] These patterns are found relative to non-Association FTAs, and FTAs with economically more important, i.e., larger, partners.

[6] Cambodia's GSP preferences were suspended due to serious and systematic violations of principles laid down in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

taken between commercially relevant partners that are less-aligned on human rights issues (e.g., EU-Singapore, UK-India), possibly because insisting on a stronger human rights protection could have jeopardized the commercial gains of the agreement. On the other hand, stronger human rights conditionality clauses have been negotiated when doing so implied nearly no cost on the commercial side of the agreement, for example, in the recent agreements of the UK with the EU, or with New Zealand (Meissner and McKenzie, 2018).[7]

It is also worth noting that Limão (2007) argues that human-rights-oriented countries may maintain higher multilateral tariffs in order to create larger preferential margins in trade agreements with which to incentivise cooperation on non-trade issues.

Overall, therefore, we can identify a clear disconnect between the ambitions and intentions of trade policy to enhance human rights and its ability and suitability for this purpose. Conflicting goals have often limited its effectiveness, to the point that human rights provisions have been dismissed as 'legal-inflation' of PTAs, or found to be 'symbolic regulation', created for the purpose of reassuring regulatory advocates that their demands have been heard, rather than to effectively regulate a given area (Peacock, 2018). Even more sceptical views argue that domestic protectionism hides behind humanitarian concerns for workers in developing countries.[8] While it cannot be denied that domestic interests are one of the driving forces behind labour and environmental protection provisions in trade agreements (Lechner, 2016), it must also be recognised that there are failures permitting rights' abuse such as forced or child labour, and that such failures can be worsened by global integration (Brown et al., 2011). The latter observation leaves scope for provisions in trade agreements to offer some relief, although evidence that this is common, or effective, is hard to assemble.

3.3. Trade agreements and gender equality

The relationship between trade agreements and gender equality is a tale of two stories: the first is the result of pressure from civil society and certain political quarters over the perceived dominance of trade policy at the expense of social values; the second is the asymmetry between the binding and actionable obligations countries accept in trade agreements and the (weaker) political obligations towards gender equality embodied in the ILO and UN agreements. In an effort to circumvent the latter, it is becoming a norm to link gender with trade, with gender provisions appearing in an increasing number of free trade agreements (FTAs). Recent trade agreements include commitments to promote equal opportunities of participation for women and men in the economy, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of gender equality in international trade policies. Recognising, that is, that women and men may experience systematically different effects from trade liberalization (WTO, 2020; OECD, 2012).

A number of scholars have now shown that creating explicit linkages between trade policies and larger goals like gender equality may help trade to become a vehicle for long-term inclusive development. However, among the newer issues being debated for inclusion in trade agreements – such as digital trade, e-commerce, environment, labour and intellectual property rights – gender equality issues continue to lag. This demonstrates that, despite the many recent developments to advance gender issues using trade policy instruments, serious doubts still remain about the suitability of these instruments to lead the progress on gender equality.

A real challenge is that gender equality continues to lag in terms of legal enforceability – a lack of will to enforce and the fundamental challenges of identifying violations. Many provisions remain merely rhetorical. Where provisions are binding and, perhaps, enforceable but are not well enforced. And even if provisions were enforced, the critical issue remains that these rarely address fundamental constraints and so are likely to fail while reducing trade. This reflects a deeper limitation: many existing provisions operate primarily as cooperative or declaratory instruments, rather than as mechanisms capable of altering the underlying distribution of resources and opportunities that condition women's participation in international trade.

The WTO's database on gender provisions in FTAs highlights 300 provisions in about 100 agreements that focus on women's interests or gender equality. This means that almost one-third of FTAs currently in force and notified to the WTO contain gender-related provisions (WTO, 2022). Yet, an important question is whether the content of the relevant provisions in these agreements responds to the barriers that continue to impede women's access to trade opportunities. The growing inclusion of gender provisions has not, in itself, resolved the underlying question of their effectiveness. This section argues that the primary constraint limiting the capacity of trade agreements to advance gender equality is not merely the absence of gender-related provisions, but the misalignment between the design of these provisions and the structural constraints that shape women's economic participation. In particular, women's unequal access to productive resources such as finance, land, and digital infrastructure, combined with time constraints arising from unpaid care responsibilities, restricts their ability to respond to trade opportunities. As a result, the central transmission channel linking trade liberalization to gender outcomes operates through constrained economic mobility: while trade may expand opportunities across sectors and markets, many women remain unable to reallocate into these higher-value or export-oriented activities. This structural constraint is compounded by the predominantly non-binding and unenforceable nature of gender provisions in most FTAs.

Women are not a homogenous group; they operate in different conditions and in a multiplicity of roles. Like broader society, women as a group can be seen as a collection of various subgroups, with some being affected more deeply than others owing to certain compounding factors. These compounding factors could include, but are not limited to, race, color, region, physical condition, gender, location, and others. Owing to these different factors, women face different kinds of barriers when accessing economic opportunities. Yet, if we consider women only through their economic roles as entrepreneurs or employees, some of the most common barriers are directly related to the disadvantages they have faced in the economic, social, financial and regulatory ecosystems that surround them (World Bank, 2020b). These disadvantages may include lack of access to educational opportunities and affordable health services; the digital divide between men and women, caused by lack of affordability and digital know-how; lack of access to productive resources; gender-based discrimination and violence against women; and disproportionately high burden to discharge household responsibilities (Bahri, 2024). Specifically in the area of trade, women face high tariff and non-tariff barriers in sectors where women are most engaged such as in agriculture and textiles and a lack of access to trade-related information and business networks (ITC, 2015).

Women also face considerable challenges in accessing affordable finance and credit, which often acts as a limiting factor on their engagement in international trade (Acharya et al, 2019). Lack of sufficient access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and digital financial services, including online payments services and e-commerce platforms, can keep women-owned businesses[9] away from new opportunities offered by the recent boom in digital trade (UNCTAD, 2017). Moreover, limitations on women's ownership of land can also impact their access to credit and economic opportunities as they may not

[7] Stronger and enforceable human rights clauses bear a low economic cost in these latter negotiations because, given the alignment in their domestic stances, the partners seem extremely unlikely to violate them.

[8] Carrère et al (2021) find no evidence that labour clauses in trade agreements hinder trade flows from developing countries, however.

[9] In this article, the terms "women-owned businesses" or "women businesses" or "women-run businesses" are used interchangeably.

be able to satisfy the collateral requirements that are needed to apply for capital. Hence, unequal inheritance rights that still exist in a number of jurisdictions can limit women's access to start-up capital and productive assets, hence curtailing their ability to start or expand a business. These observations may explain why most businesses owned by women remain small in size and are concentrated in either less capital-intensive or informal sectors.

The impact of trade on women's access to economic opportunities can be twofold: it has the potential to reduce barriers and promote inclusion, but it can also exacerbate existing inequalities if structural disadvantages are not adequately addressed. Fontana (2003) highlights that trade liberalization affects women and men differently, depending on factors such as socio-economic status, sectoral engagement, and the gendered division of labor. She argues that women tend to be more affected by the negative effects of trade liberalization and face more barriers than men in taking advantage of the opportunities offered by trade. This is mainly because of biases against women in education and training, wage inequalities and inequalities in the distribution of resources, as well as unequal access to productive inputs such as credit, land and technology (UNCTAD 2009). Thus, she argues that gender-sensitive trade policy must consider both "practical gender needs" — immediate income and employment opportunities — and "strategic gender needs" — measures that tackle underlying structural disadvantages. Building on this, Bahri (2024) emphasizes that trade agreements and institutional frameworks often fail to sufficiently address the structural barriers faced by women. According to her analysis, without targeted and deliberate interventions, trade rules risk reinforcing existing inequities rather than supporting women's empowerment and equitable participation in international trade.

Current rhetoric consistently and vehemently argues that trade agreements have the potential to help women overcome these barriers, especially if these agreements are approached with a gender lens and through tailored gender-mainstreaming strategies. Two arguments in particular support this claim. First, existing and future trade agreements between countries can increase trade flows and hence lead to more business and employment opportunities for all, including women. Second, through regional or bilateral trade agreements, countries can encourage their trading partners to reduce barriers that women face. Using the lure of enhanced market access and freer trade, countries can use trade agreements to incentivize changes in other countries; these domestic changes can be aimed at bringing down the barriers that women face as employees, entrepreneurs, or consumers (Bahri, 2020). These arguments are correct in principle, but they look weak given of the substantive content of most existing agreements.

Many provisions in current FTAs focus on education and training,[10] women's employment,[11] labour standards,[12] equality and non-discrimination,[13] physical safety,[14] protection of maternity,[15] and healthcare concerns.[16] However, with a very few exceptions, these agreements, do not include provisions that directly relate to women's business capacity, market access interests, discriminatory barriers to trade, and/or their impeded access to productive resources. Hence, the majority of them fail to address the barriers that women face in accessing trade opportunities or the consequences of any unequal distributive impacts of trade liberalization on women. For example, while Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa have the highest levels of women's participation in the informal economy and employment, the trade agreements negotiated by countries in these regions have not included a single commitment on addressing women's challenges or the protection of their employment or business interests in informal sectors (IMF Western Hemisphere Dept Study, 2023).

These observations lead to two interesting findings: first that the content of gender-related provisions in each agreement is quite diverse, and second, that most of the current agreements have largely focused on women in their roles as mothers, employees, cultural or social actors and not in their leadership roles as entrepreneurs or decision-makers. The latter reveals the disconnect between the content of trade agreements and the aspiration that they will assist women in accessing the market-access and income-generating opportunities offered by international trade (Kuhlmann and Bahri, 2022). This disconnect between the barriers faced by women in accessing trade opportunities and the policy solutions offered by trade agreements might lead one to question whether the inclusion of gender provisions represents a serious effort to progress on this issue or are the correct instruments for addressing it.

Despite advancements and lofty goals that we have seen being included in existing trade agreements, longstanding distributional issues remain unaddressed, arguably because they have not been negotiated in light of countries' circumstances on a case by case basis (Dommen 2021), which, in turn, may just suggest the pro forma use of boilerplate in respect of such inclusions in trade agreements (Bahri, 2026). In this sense, gender provisions in FTAs operate largely as complementary or signalling instruments rather than as mechanisms that alter the underlying distribution of productive resources.

3.4. Trade policies and disability inclusion

A similar disconnect between trade and trade policy norms and actual barriers also pervades disability inclusion. Although persons with disabilities make up over one billion people worldwide, they continue to encounter numerous barriers that hinder their full participation in various aspects of life, including economic activities. Their interests remain largely marginalized within international economic governance, including in the regulation of international economic and trade affairs.

Trade agreements have begun to engage with issues of disability inclusion as their scope has continued to expand. While the inclusion of disability-related provisions in trade policy remains at a very early stage of development, approximately 27 percent of trade agreements now contain explicit references to disability inclusion (Bahri, 2022). However, despite this progress, most of these provisions remain narrowly framed, focusing mainly on persons with disabilities primarily as workers or as participants in social and cultural life, rather than as entrepreneurs, innovators, or decision-makers within the global economy. This limited approach reveals a disconnect between the structural barriers that render persons of disability vulnerable to the distributive effects of trade liberalization on the one hand, and the policy measures currently embedded in trade agreements on the other (Bahri, 2023).

The key challenges that persons with disabilities face—such as access to finance, productive assets, e-commerce, and digital trade—remain largely unaddressed in trade policy instruments. Particularly concerning is the persistent lack of provisions ensuring access to, and the affordability of, assistive technologies (AT) and devices that are critical to the economic empowerment of persons with disabilities, especially if they experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization (Steinstra, 2023).Hence, the limited effectiveness of trade agreements in advancing disability inclusion is driven less by the absence of disability-related provisions and more by a misalignment between the design of these provisions and the structural constraints that shape the economic participation of persons with disabilities.

Bahri (2022) argues that trade agreements can help to strengthen the economic empowerment of people with disabilities because they could trigger changes in domestic laws and policies, social norms and

[10] Such as the EU – Algeria agreement (2002); EU – Egypt agreement (2001); EU – Tunisia (1995).

[11] Examples are the Nicaragua – China FTA (2007); US-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA) (2018); Canada – Jordan FTA (2009).

[12] EU – Korea FTA (2010); EU – Viet Nam FTA (2019).

[13] As in the Dominican Republic – Central America – US Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) (2006); US – Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (2008).

[14] As the Australia – Peru FTA (2018); EU – Singapore FTA (2018).

[15] See New Zealand – Korea FTA (2015).

[16] Malaysia– Turkey FTA (2014).

dynamics, and requirements in the workplace. In particular, trade agreements can increase trade flows and create business opportunities for all, including entrepreneurs with disabilities (Lindert, 2001). Moreover, trade liberalization potentially reduces the cost and increases the availability of imported assistive devices and other pharmaceutical products and medicines. And if such products do not fall under the general provisions of an agreement, they could receive specific preferential market access and waivers. (McNamara, 2017).

The public health community has expressed reservations about the effects of trade and investment agreements on the cost and availability of health services and equipment, and these would clearly impinge heavily on persons of disability – Stienstra et al (2004) offer an interesting analysis for disabled women in Canada. These reservations include concerns about limits on subsidies to producers of health-related goods, the privatization and foreign ownership of health-related firms and restrictions on the use of intellectual property. While such concerns are valid and require monitoring and vigilance in signing new agreements, and while one can identify cases where they have created problems, they are not inevitable. Barlow et al (2022) conclude that 'The effects of a TIA [trade or investment agreement] depend, at a minimum, on the provisions the TIA contains and the nature of the trade it affects. There should be no general statements about the effects of TIAs and no alternative to a detailed analysis of specific agreements.' Similarly, Friel et al (2015) write "We have demonstrated that although trade liberalization can bring about health benefits, some health risks can nevertheless be mitigated only by changing specific terms included in or excluded from trade agreements and by preserving the policy space of member states to protect public health'.

A particular concern in this area has been restrictions on intellectual property, which can raise the cost of assistive devices and medicines while they are still under patent (Bahri, 2023). Mostly this goes back to the Trade Related Intellectual Property (TRIPs) Agreement of the WTO, but IPRs are sometimes strengthened by other agreements. Patents enable pharmaceutical manufacturers to charge higher prices than would have otherwise existed in a competitive environment, i.e., without patent protection.[17] Despite this, no existing trade agreement explicitly addresses the affordability and accessibility challenges associated with assistive technologies—an omission that underscores the persistent gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the lived economic realities of persons with disabilities in the global trading system (Jaramillo, 2023).

A number of trade agreements contain relevant provisions that have focused on the elimination of discrimination, job creation, education, skill development, vocational training and provision of social security benefits (Bahri, 2023). Yet, none have included commitments that directly deal with the affordability and availability problems that may arise from trade liberalization. This constraint is compounded by two additional limitations. First, most disability-related provisions in trade agreements are framed in cooperative or aspirational terms and lack binding or enforceable commitments. Second, they are rarely drafted as minimum legal standards that can lead to the formation of domestic policies on affordability schemes for assistive technologies, inclusive digital infrastructure, or accessible financing. Trade agreements alone cannot deliver substantive outcomes for disability inclusion in the absence of parallel domestic structural reforms, which, in turn, requires political will. However, where such will exists, trade agreements can play a catalytic role by encouraging—and, in some instances, requiring— reforms through the incorporation of minimum legal standards and implementation-oriented commitments. As such, their effectiveness depends not only on the presence of disability-related provisions, but on the extent to which these are designed to support, monitor, and reinforce domestic policy change.

[17] The proponents of patent protection argue that it is necessary to facilitate pharmaceutical innovation and also that in critical cases TRIPs allows for compulsory licensing of pharmaceuticals even when patents exit. The latter provisions have proved hard for developing countries to exercise, however.

4. Discussion

A number of key messages emerge from this brief review towards informing the future course of action in respect of inclusive trade policy and policymaking. In the areas that we have analysed, trade policy appears to have made progress towards inclusiveness' goals and has at least recognized the existence of problematic situations that can be exacerbated by exposure to trade. Provisions supporting the respect of human rights, gender equality, and disability are found in numerous trade agreements, but in all these areas disconnects persist between the agreements' hopes and intentions and their implementation, as well as the content of the provisions and the issues on the ground. Ensuring participation of the disadvantaged in the making of trade policy is a precondition to allow their issues to be considered meaningfully, and here the disconnect arises in the inevitable underrepresentation of marginalized groups. Ultimately, the poor can be classified among the disadvantaged groups, although poverty shares its own special relationship with trade, due to the ability of trade to lift or throw people into or out of work and into poverty. So, what recommendations can emerge from our review?

Trade often 'exploits' asymmetries in regulation and different levels of human rights protection if the latter can confer a competitive advantage (Busse, 2002). In addition, trade can significantly worsen the living conditions of communities and areas exposed to import competition, with consequences likely to be worse for vulnerable parts of the society. Being aware of the above issues, policy makers have attempted to pursue trade objectives while trying to avoid harm to human rights. Since the 1990 s, FTAs and GSP schemes have progressively featured more numerous and stricter provisions aimed at promoting human rights values and principles, although the application of such provisions has suffered from their scarce legal enforceability, and the tension between the conflicting goals of pursuing commercial interests and remedying to human rights abuse. A significant break-through would be represented by human-rights related provisions being legally enforceable and subject to an agreement's dispute settlement, or, where they are already enforceable (such as in the EU's FTAs where human-rights have an 'essential elements' status), by the use of the mechanisms to identify and sanction serious and systematic violations.

On trade, poverty and labour mobility, policy must facilitate the reallocation of factors of production – not just labour – between sectors because changes in trade affect sectors very differently. Chang et al (2007) show that the growth effects of trade liberalisations are related to proxies for educational investment, financial depth, inflation stabilization, public infrastructure, governance, labour market flexibility, ease of firm entry and ease of firm exit. The same sort of list applies to sharing the benefits of trade – e.g., Le Goff and Singh (2014). Second, governments could usefully facilitate the movement of people geographically. This will usually amount to encouraging urbanisation by permitting movement, reducing restrictions on city growth, and making cities function better. It can also include policies such as providing transportation links – e.g., rural roads – to allow workers to commute more easily from disadvantaged rural areas, and ensuring that facilities such as housing, health and education are readily open to in-migrating workers. These last are not easy policies – they are subtle and there is great resistance to internal migration in many countries – but, in fact, to the best of our knowledge no significantly-sized economy has developed without significant internal labour movement. Third, ease the strains of adjustment on the poor and disadvantaged. This is fair, efficient, and facilitates the politics of making the most of international trade.

On the topic of trade agreements and gender equality, we find that the majority of the provisions in trade agreements can help women overcome the barriers in accessing maternity services or mitigate the discrimination or violence they may face as a result of their gender; yet,

the majority of the existing provisions cannot help women reduce the barriers they face in accessing trade opportunities as workers and entrepreneurs. For trade agreements to work positively, we argue that the content of these provisions should directly correspond and respond to the barriers women or the disabled face in accessing opportunities offered by international trade.

Existing trade agreements have made some important strides in respect of disability inclusion by featuring provisions on non-discrimination, job creation, education, skill development, vocational training, and social security for persons with disability (Bahri, 2023). However, they largely overlook the affordability and availability challenges created by trade liberalization, particularly for marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities. Going forward, trade agreements could play a transformative role by incorporating commitments that directly reduce the cost and improve access to assistive devices. Preferential market access provisions and intellectual property flexibilities for disability-related goods could help ensure that global trade benefits all individuals, not just the able-bodied majority.

For participatory trade policymaking, two key messages are worth noting. First, the inclusive gains from trade will continue to depend, at least in part, on the standards of participation in national trade policy processes – making it important to have more systematic and objective driven goals. Second, tailoring the modalities characterising participation to country context, while being cognizant of power imbalances, will bring some certainty and familiarity with the practices that can help with information-sharing and wider participation of stakeholders in trade policymaking.

5. Concluding thoughts

International trade generates winners and losers, and some individuals and communities face high adjustment costs to trade shocks. For some groups, the benefits are constrained due to poverty and other intrinsic or structural factors. Hence trade and trade policy may not be inclusive.

Disconnects emerge powerfully across all the areas we analysed. They range from the mis-alignment between the needs and the obstacles faced by categories currently excluded from the benefits of trade and the provisions in this regard that can be found in trade agreements, through the almost inevitable dichotomy between the effects of deeper trade integration on winners and losers and the lack of adequate redistribution mechanisms, to the unsuitability of most conventional trade policy instruments to fully pursue the objective of a truly inclusive trade in the absence of complementary measures. The reciprocal nature of trade agreements, which are the outcome of (often lengthy and difficult) negotiations, also complicates the pursuit of non-trade objectives.

Our objective in this paper is to draw attention to the different aspects that are central to conceptualising inclusive trade and supporting sustained equitable development. We provide a start towards enumerating some of the issues that 'inclusive trade' needs to consider, with participation in the making of trade policy as a first step towards inclusivity, to the specific needs and outcomes across our four illustrative aspects: poverty, human rights, gender equality and disability. We would argue that these are core areas that should be considered in trade policy, although recognising that that any resulting policies need to be adapted to specific contexts and socio-economic conditions for implementation.

While research on these topics continues to draw much attention from trade and development scholars with attempts to better assess the impact of trade policy changes on these outcome areas, challenges in easing the strains of adjustment for the disadvantaged continue. And while the role of appropriate strategies and complimentary policies to accompany trade cannot be overemphasised, an important question is whether such complementary measures are sufficient to support those who are at risk of losing out. This is especially the case where desirable complementary policies are hindered low administrative capacity and/or fiscal constraints.

We have also noted that while we have considered each topic in turn, governments need to be conscious of the intersectionalities between them such that they become re-enforcing. For example, when excluded sectors or poorer communities are better integrated with international trade, women may require additional support to benefit from improved livelihood opportunities.

A further intersectionality of which policymakers should be aware is that with future generations – i.e. sustainability. Sustainability standards and regulations can have positive or negative effects on the poor, so that 'inclusive trade' can conflict with 'sustainable trade'. For example, UNCTAD (2021a and b) projects that increases in CO_2 emissions from transporting goods will triple in the next 30 years, suggesting at least potential tensions between poverty and climate policies, a topic that is ripe for further investigation.

The progressive realisation of poverty reduction, gender equality, disability, and human rights, can be fostered together with greater participation in trade policy. For better consideration of these links, it is valuable to underline the importance of ex-ante impact assessments (examining effects from trade policy changes before they are implemented), broader stakeholder consultation, as well as monitoring ex-post policy changes (examining effects after policy changes are implemented). And while complementary measures may provide support in the short-term, longer-term strategies that advocate for significant structural change would be critical towards developing future capabilities for trade.

What does this mean for the practice of international trade policy? When we look to very recent literature, there is in fact a concerted effort to push initiatives for policy and practice towards better inclusion. Some of these are particularly noteworthy and fit well with the ask for inclusion in this paper.

First, while the jury is still out on this, several governments have prioritised national public consultations to inform their stance in trade negotiations (Drieghe et al., 2021; Halle and Wolfe. 2007; Capling and Low, 2010). Yet, lessons from different approaches to such consultations, and that takes cognizance of power imbalances, could ensure more predictability for greater transparency and accountability. A critical step to informing greater inclusion in trade policy is engendering transparency in policy processes and facilitating participation from wider group of stakeholders (including not just producers and consumers but also civil society in systematic ways) in trade policymaking.

Second, empirical approaches have increasingly moved beyond the use of macro trade data to focus on detailed firm-level and household-level data, which capture the effects of trade for job creation, poverty, gender and consumer welfare at a more granular level (Cernat and Jansen, 2017). These are in fact a sign of efforts towards better understanding the micro-level impact of trade. This provides a much stronger basis for understanding the impacts of trade policies and shocks on specific groups who may not receive the average level of gains from trade. In particular, detailed micro information will allow a far better formulation of complementary policies aimed at alleviating major harms and opening opportunities where they are missing.

Third, there is now a push for mainstreaming gender perspectives (Fontana, 2016; Elson and Fontana, 2019), human rights principles and disability inclusion in trade, with the commitment to crafting gender and human rights responsive trade policies. Here, a recognition of the differences in the terms of women's and men's inclusion in production and trade activities will be of the essence and will allow greater inclusion and the avoidance of certain harms.

In sum, our analysis has highlighted four different aspects of inclusivity in trade and trade policy. They do not encompass all inclusivity but show in practical cases how easily actual policies tend to become disconnected from the rhetoric of inclusive trade. They suggest that if trade really is to benefit all, we should be much more serious about how policy maps onto disadvantaged groups in society. The answer for them

is not less trade, so much as well-informed trade policy coupled with complementary policies can help them overcome the barriers between them and trading opportunities, and the structural factors that render them vulnerable to losses from trade.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Amrita Saha: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Mattia Di Ubaldo:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Amrita Bahri:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **L. Alan Winters:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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