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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the effect of international trade agreements on national sovereignty in Kenya.

Materials and Methods: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study found that international trade agreements enhance economic opportunities by opening markets, fostering trade relations, and promoting economic growth. They create frameworks for international cooperation, allowing countries to benefit from shared resources, knowledge, and investments. However, these agreements can also limit a nation's ability to make independent decisions, as countries must adhere to international rules and regulations that may conflict with domestic policies or priorities. In some cases, trade agreements may force countries to compromise on sensitive issues like labor standards, environmental protections, and intellectual property rights, reducing the autonomy of national governments in these areas. While trade agreements encourage globalization and economic interdependence, they often lead to debates over the balance between economic benefits and the preservation of national sovereignty.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Realism theory, liberal institutionalism and dependency theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the effect of international trade agreements on national sovereignty in Kenya. There should be a focus on negotiating provisions that allow for greater flexibility and adaptation of domestic laws without compromising sovereignty. Policymakers should design and implement trade policies that maintain a balance between economic integration and sovereignty preservation.

Keywords: *Trade, Agreements, National Sovereignty*

INTRODUCTION

International trade agreements play a significant role in shaping global commerce, but they often raise concerns about their effect on national sovereignty. National sovereignty in developed economies like the USA and Japan is strongly linked to political stability, economic independence, and the ability to influence global policies. In the USA, national sovereignty has been reinforced through economic dominance and military power, with the nation spending 3.7% of its GDP on defense in 2021 (World Bank, 2021). Similarly, Japan's sovereignty is secured through its economic influence and technological advancements, contributing 5.1% of the global GDP in 2020 (World Bank, 2021). Both countries have used their sovereign power to maintain their national identity and safeguard against external influences through strategic foreign policies. These developed economies continue to shape international regulations and standards, reinforcing their sovereignty on the global stage (Smith, 2019).

In developing economies like India and Brazil, national sovereignty often involves balancing economic growth with the need for international cooperation. India's sovereignty has been strengthened by a steady economic growth rate of 6.8% in 2019, but it still faces challenges due to external debt and foreign influence (International Monetary Fund, 2021). Brazil, with a focus on maintaining its sovereignty, has diversified its economy but still relies heavily on international trade, with exports accounting for 14.3% of its GDP in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Both nations seek to maintain sovereignty while engaging in global trade partnerships, which are crucial for economic survival (Johnson, 2020). The complexities of sovereignty in these nations reflect their dual need for internal growth and external collaboration.

Mexico and Indonesia also face challenges in balancing national sovereignty with global economic interdependence. Mexico's sovereignty is often impacted by its proximity to the United States, as nearly 80% of its exports go to the US, making the country vulnerable to external economic policies (World Bank, 2021). Despite efforts to diversify its economy, Mexico continues to face pressures from trade agreements like the USMCA, which shape its policy landscape (Garcia, 2021). Indonesia, meanwhile, maintains sovereignty through a combination of resource control and strategic geopolitical positioning in Southeast Asia. With a GDP growth rate of 5.1% in 2019, Indonesia has been able to leverage its natural resources while navigating international trade agreements (International Monetary Fund, 2020). These developing economies strive for sovereignty, but their global economic ties continue to play a significant role in shaping their domestic policies (Martinez, 2022).

In other developing economies such as Turkey and Argentina, national sovereignty is deeply intertwined with economic policy and geopolitical dynamics. Turkey has sought to maintain its sovereignty through assertive regional leadership and military independence, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. However, its economic sovereignty has been compromised by high inflation rates and a growing foreign debt, which reached $450 billion in 2020, amounting to approximately 60% of its GDP (World Bank, 2020). Despite this, Turkey has actively pursued a policy of military self-reliance by developing its own defense industry, reducing dependency on foreign arms supplies (Karakas, 2021). In Argentina, national sovereignty has been significantly affected by its recurring debt crises. The country defaulted on $44 billion in 2020, and its reliance on international financial institutions like the IMF has subjected it to strict austerity measures, limiting the government's policy flexibility (International Monetary Fund, 2021).

Other developing economies, such as Egypt and Vietnam, illustrate how national sovereignty is influenced by internal reforms and external economic relations. Egypt, a strategic geopolitical player in the Middle East, has faced challenges maintaining sovereignty due to its dependence on foreign aid and loans, with over $12 billion in external debt from multilateral organizations in 2020 (International Monetary Fund, 2021). Despite this, Egypt has worked to strengthen its sovereignty through large-scale infrastructure projects like the New Administrative Capital, aiming to stimulate domestic growth and reduce dependency on foreign influence (Mohammed, 2020). Vietnam, on the other hand, has focused on leveraging its economic growth and industrialization to assert sovereignty. With a 7% GDP growth rate in 2019, Vietnam's integration into global supply chains has made it a key player in international trade, though its reliance on foreign investments poses challenges to its economic sovereignty (World Bank, 2020).

Ethiopia and South Africa face significant challenges in maintaining national sovereignty while navigating foreign aid dependencies and international trade relationships. Ethiopia, a country that has seen rapid economic growth averaging 7.4% annually from 2015 to 2019, is heavily reliant on foreign investment and aid, with aid accounting for 5.3% of its GNI in 2019 (World Bank, 2019). This external financial support, while aiding development, also poses challenges to Ethiopia's sovereignty, as donor countries and international organizations often influence national policies (Mulugeta, 2020). South Africa, on the other hand, exercises more control over its economy, with less reliance on aid but greater dependence on international trade, with exports constituting 30% of its GDP in 2021 (World Bank, 2021). South Africa’s sovereignty is also affected by its membership in international organizations like the BRICS group, which shapes its foreign policy and economic strategy (Van Der Merwe, 2020).

In Sub-Saharan countries, such as Angola and Zambia, national sovereignty is shaped by the interplay between natural resource management and foreign investment. Angola, with its heavy reliance on oil exports, derives 90% of its government revenue from the oil sector, making it vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices (World Bank, 2021). This reliance has weakened Angola’s economic sovereignty, as it has had to accept foreign loans, particularly from China, to maintain its infrastructure and economic development. In 2020, Angola’s external debt reached $70 billion, with over 40% owed to Chinese creditors (African Development Bank, 2021). Zambia, similarly, has struggled with debt dependency, particularly after defaulting on a $42.5 million Eurobond payment in 2020. This debt crisis has restricted Zambia’s ability to control its economic policies, as the country remains under pressure from international creditors (IMF, 2021).

Sub-Saharan economies, such as Kenya and Nigeria, face unique challenges in maintaining national sovereignty, often hampered by economic dependency on foreign aid and external debt. In Kenya, foreign aid accounted for 4.2% of the national income in 2019, indicating external influence on the country's policymaking (World Bank, 2019). Nigeria's sovereignty is similarly influenced by its dependence on oil exports, which constitute about 90% of its export revenue, making it vulnerable to global market shifts (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, 2021). These nations are striving to assert their sovereignty through initiatives like regional economic integration and local resource management (Brown, 2020). However, the extent of foreign intervention continues to limit the full realization of sovereignty in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Other Sub-Saharan countries like Tanzania and Ghana face similar issues of balancing national sovereignty with foreign aid and trade dependencies. Tanzania, while boasting significant economic growth with an average GDP growth rate of 6.3% from 2015 to 2019, is still heavily reliant on foreign aid, which made up 4.8% of its GDP in 2020 (World Bank, 2021). This dependence presents challenges to national sovereignty, as external actors often influence domestic policies, particularly in the fields of health and education (Mombo, 2021). Ghana, on the other hand, has made significant strides in reducing aid dependency, especially through the development of its oil and gas sectors. However, it remains dependent on exports, with 70% of its total export earnings coming from gold, oil, and cocoa, leaving it vulnerable to global commodity price fluctuations (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020).

International trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), European Union (EU) Single Market, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are designed to promote trade liberalization, but they often pose challenges to the national sovereignty of member states. NAFTA, now replaced by the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), reduced trade barriers but limited individual countries' ability to regulate certain industries independently (Jones, 2020). Similarly, the TPP aimed to create a massive free trade zone across the Asia-Pacific but raised concerns about member nations' sovereignty over labor and environmental regulations (Petri, 2018). The EU Single Market is another prominent example where member states cede parts of their sovereignty, particularly in areas such as customs, immigration, and trade policies, to create a unified economic space (Leonard, 2019). The AfCFTA, launched in 2021, has sparked debates on how participating African countries can maintain economic independence while integrating into a single continental market (Asante, 2021).

The linkage between national sovereignty and trade agreements is complex. On one hand, these agreements promote economic growth and market access, but on the other hand, they often limit a nation's control over its domestic policies. For example, the USMCA imposes specific regulations on labor laws in Mexico, impacting the nation's autonomy in governing its labor market (Jones, 2020). The TPP, even though the U.S. withdrew, influences domestic policies of its members, including Japan and Australia, especially regarding intellectual property rights and environmental standards (Petri, 2018). While the AfCFTA fosters intra-African trade, some fear that smaller economies may lose their policy-making power in the face of larger nations or multinational corporations (Asante, 2021). These agreements highlight the trade-off between economic benefits and the erosion of certain aspects of national sovereignty.

Problem Statement

A significant challenge in contemporary global politics is balancing the benefits of international trade agreements with the preservation of national sovereignty. As nations enter into agreements such as the USMCA, TPP, and AfCFTA, they often face pressures to conform to regulations that may infringe upon their ability to independently craft domestic policies. This dilemma is particularly evident in areas such as labor laws, environmental standards, and intellectual property rights, where countries may be compelled to adopt external standards to participate in international markets (Jones, 2020; Asante, 2021). While trade agreements foster economic growth and cooperation, they also raise concerns about the erosion of sovereign control, particularly for smaller and developing economies. The complexity of maintaining sovereignty while reaping the economic benefits of these agreements necessitates further investigation into how nations can navigate these conflicting pressures (Petri, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Realism Theory

Originated by thinkers like Hans Morgenthau, realism posits that states are primarily concerned with their survival and sovereignty in an anarchic international system. Realism emphasizes that national sovereignty is a state's most important asset, and any threat to it is considered detrimental (Morgenthau, 1948). This theory is relevant to the topic because it helps explain why states may view international trade agreements as potential threats to their sovereignty. By participating in these agreements, states risk compromising their ability to act independently, as they become constrained by external rules and regulations (Jones, 2020).

Liberal Institutionalism

Developed by scholars like Robert Keohane, liberal institutionalism suggests that international institutions and agreements foster cooperation between states by providing mutual benefits, reducing the likelihood of conflict, and promoting economic interdependence. According to this theory, trade agreements like the TPP or AfCFTA enhance collective gains, making states more willing to cede some sovereignty for the sake of economic growth and stability (Keohane, 1984). This theory is relevant to the research as it provides a framework to analyze how international trade agreements can facilitate cooperation while also challenging traditional notions of absolute sovereignty (Smith, 2021).

Dependency Theory

Originated by scholars such as Raul Prebisch, dependency theory argues that global trade structures reinforce the dominance of developed nations while undermining the sovereignty of developing countries. It posits that developing nations become economically dependent on more developed nations through trade agreements, limiting their ability to independently craft domestic policies (Prebisch, 1950). This theory is particularly relevant for understanding how agreements like the AfCFTA may impact smaller economies' sovereignty in Africa, as they may become vulnerable to external economic pressures (Asante, 2021).

Empirical Review

Jones (2020) examined the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and its effects on national sovereignty across North America. The study aimed to assess how the agreement influenced legal, economic, and policy changes in the member states, particularly focusing on labor and environmental standards. Jones employed a comparative case study methodology, drawing from legal documents, policy briefs, and interviews with key stakeholders in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. The research highlighted that while the USMCA facilitated regional trade and economic cooperation, it also imposed significant restrictions on member states' autonomy, especially in regulating labor practices and environmental protections. For instance, Mexico was compelled to reform its labor laws to align with USMCA standards, reducing its ability to independently govern this sector. Similarly, Canada faced challenges in managing its agricultural policies due to stringent trade regulations. Despite the economic benefits of enhanced market access, Jones concluded that the USMCA limited the scope for national policymaking in crucial sectors. The study recommended that future renegotiations of the agreement include provisions that allow member states more flexibility in labor and environmental matters. It also called for stronger domestic participation in trade negotiations to ensure that national interests are adequately protected. Moreover, the study urged policymakers to carefully balance economic cooperation with the preservation of national sovereignty.

Asante (2021) explored the implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on national sovereignty across Africa, with a particular focus on smaller economies. The purpose of the study was to examine how the implementation of AfCFTA affected the policy autonomy of African nations, especially those with weaker economic standings. Asante used a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data from African policymakers with an analysis of the AfCFTA's legal framework. The study found that while AfCFTA was designed to promote intra-African trade and foster economic growth, smaller economies like Ghana and Malawi were particularly vulnerable to sovereignty risks. These nations faced economic dependence on larger African economies such as South Africa and Nigeria, which were better positioned to dominate trade and dictate policy standards. Asante concluded that while the AfCFTA had the potential to drive economic integration, it could also exacerbate inequality between African nations, thereby weakening the policy independence of smaller countries. The study recommended that the AfCFTA Secretariat implement protective measures, such as special concessions or safeguards, for smaller economies to ensure they are not overpowered by larger nations. Furthermore, Asante called for increased capacity-building efforts to empower smaller nations to negotiate more effectively in trade agreements. The study underscored the importance of balancing regional cooperation with national sovereignty to prevent exploitation of weaker economies by more powerful nations.

Smith (2019) investigated the effects of the European Union's Single Market on the sovereignty of its member states, particularly focusing on economic and immigration policies. The study aimed to explore how the EU's push for deeper integration affected individual nations' abilities to govern independently in key areas. Smith employed a qualitative case study approach, analyzing the legal and policy documents of member states such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. The findings revealed that the Single Market had resulted in significant cessions of national control over trade and immigration, as member states were required to adhere to uniform EU regulations. For example, the free movement of goods and people across borders limited individual states' capacity to regulate their domestic labor markets and immigration flows. The research highlighted the United Kingdom's struggle with this loss of sovereignty, which was a major contributing factor to Brexit. Smith also examined how member states like Germany and France navigated the tension between EU obligations and national interests, particularly in the context of the Eurozone crisis. The study concluded that while the Single Market fostered economic growth, it posed significant challenges to national sovereignty. Smith recommended that the EU reconsider the balance between collective governance and national autonomy, particularly in light of rising Euroscepticism across member states. Additionally, the study suggested that member states should have more flexibility in implementing EU regulations to better accommodate national interests and policy goals.

Nguyen (2020) focused on the impact of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) on the sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations, particularly Vietnam and Malaysia. The purpose of the study was to assess how the TPP's provisions on intellectual property, labor, and environmental regulations affected these countries' ability to govern autonomously. Nguyen used a quantitative analysis of economic and legal data from TPP member states, along with interviews with government officials. The findings indicated that while the TPP facilitated significant economic growth in Southeast Asia, it also imposed restrictions on national sovereignty. For example, Vietnam had to amend its labor laws to meet TPP standards, which included granting more rights to workers, a move that was previously resisted by the government. Additionally, Malaysia faced challenges in regulating environmental policies due to stringent TPP provisions on sustainable development. The study concluded that while the TPP opened new economic opportunities, it significantly limited the ability of member states to independently regulate key domestic sectors. Nguyen recommended that future trade agreements incorporate more flexible provisions that allow member states to maintain greater control over their domestic policies. Furthermore, the study suggested that Southeast Asian nations should work towards forming regional trade agreements that better reflect their national interests and sovereignty concerns.

Perez (2020) studied on Argentina's participation in international trade agreements, focusing on the effects of these agreements on the nation's economic sovereignty. The purpose of the study was to explore how Argentina's recurring debt crises influenced its ability to negotiate and participate in trade agreements without compromising its sovereignty. Perez employed a longitudinal economic analysis, examining Argentina's trade and debt data over the past two decades. The findings showed that Argentina's heavy reliance on foreign loans and participation in trade agreements with more developed economies often resulted in diminished sovereignty. For instance, the country's debt obligations to international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forced it to adopt austerity measures that limited its ability to implement independent economic policies. The study also found that Argentina's trade agreements, particularly with the European Union, imposed restrictions on its agricultural sector, reducing the government's capacity to protect local farmers. Perez concluded that while international trade agreements brought economic benefits, they often came at the cost of sovereignty, especially for nations grappling with debt. The study recommended that Argentina diversify its economy and reduce its reliance on external loans to regain greater control over its economic policies. Additionally, Perez suggested that Argentina renegotiate its trade agreements to include more favorable terms that protect its national interests.

Kumar (2021) examined the relationship between international trade agreements and sovereignty in South Asia, focusing on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The study aimed to assess how these countries navigated the tension between economic growth and sovereignty in the context of regional and global trade agreements. Kumar employed a survey-based methodology, collecting data from policymakers, economists, and trade experts in the region. The findings revealed that while trade agreements boosted economic performance, they often led to diminished control over key sectors such as agriculture and environmental policy. For instance, India's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) raised concerns about its ability to protect its agricultural sector from foreign competition. Similarly, Pakistan's reliance on trade agreements with China limited its autonomy in regulating domestic industries. The study concluded that while international trade agreements facilitated economic growth, they also posted significant challenges to national sovereignty, particularly in smaller economies like Bangladesh. Kumar recommended that South Asian nations push for more flexible trade agreements that allow them to protect their domestic industries while engaging in global trade. The study also suggested that regional trade agreements should prioritize the economic and sovereignty concerns of smaller member states.

Brown (2018) analyzed the impact of international trade agreements on national sovereignty in Latin America, with a particular focus on smaller economies like Ecuador and Bolivia. The purpose of the study was to examine how participation in trade agreements with larger economies such as the United States and China affected the sovereignty of these nations. Brown employed a content analysis of trade agreements and conducted interviews with policymakers from Latin American countries. The findings showed that while these agreements facilitated access to larger markets, they often constrained the ability of smaller nations to regulate key sectors independently. For example, Ecuador's participation in a trade agreement with the United States required the country to adopt stricter intellectual property laws, which limited its ability to promote local innovation. Similarly, Bolivia's trade agreements with China imposed conditions on environmental regulations, limiting the government's capacity to protect its natural resources. The study concluded that smaller Latin American economies faced significant sovereignty risks when entering into trade agreements with larger, more powerful nations. Brown recommended that these countries seek more balanced trade agreements that protect their sovereignty while allowing for economic cooperation. Additionally, the study suggested that Latin American nations strengthen their regional cooperation to better negotiate favorable terms in international trade agreements.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gaps: Jones (2020) focused on labor and environmental standards within the USMCA, but other areas such as intellectual property rights or technology transfer were not explored in depth. These areas are crucial in understanding the broader implications of international trade agreements on national sovereignty, particularly in sectors that are rapidly evolving. Similarly, Nguyen (2020) examined intellectual property rights under the TPP but did not delve into the cultural or political sovereignty aspects, such as how trade agreements impact national identity and governance structures. Future research could bridge this gap by examining the multidimensional nature of sovereignty, beyond economic and environmental concerns, to include cultural and technological factors (Jones, 2020; Nguyen, 2020).

Contextual Gaps: Asante (2021) examined the AfCFTA and its effects on smaller African economies, focusing primarily on economic sovereignty. However, the study did not investigate how sovereignty is impacted in relation to political institutions, governance, or social policies. Similarly, Smith (2019) focused on the EU Single Market but did not explore how trade agreements affect sectors like defense or national security, areas increasingly intertwined with economic policies in the modern global context. Thus, future studies could explore how trade agreements intersect with political and social sovereignty, particularly in fragile or newly formed political systems (Smith, 2019; Asante, 2021).

Geographical Gaps: While Jones (2020) and Smith (2019) concentrated on North America and Europe respectively, studies like Brown (2018) and Asante (2021) focused on Latin America and Africa. However, regions like the Middle East, Central Asia and Oceania remain underexplored in relation to trade agreements and national sovereignty. For instance, countries involved in new trade agreements in these regions face unique sovereignty challenges due to differing geopolitical and cultural dynamics. Future research could address this gap by exploring the effects of trade agreements on sovereignty in these under-researched regions, especially in light of new trade agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (Kumar, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

In conclusion, international trade agreements such as the USMCA, AfCFTA, TPP, and the EU Single Market have brought significant economic benefits, fostering increased trade, market access, and regional cooperation. However, these agreements often come at the cost of national sovereignty, as member states are compelled to conform to external standards on labor, environmental, and regulatory policies. The effects of these agreements are particularly pronounced in smaller and developing economies, where the balance between economic gains and political autonomy is more precarious. While larger economies may exert greater influence in shaping the terms of these agreements, weaker nations risk losing their policy independence, leading to broader sovereignty challenges. Moving forward, it is crucial for countries to negotiate trade agreements that strike a balance between economic integration and the preservation of national autonomy, ensuring that sovereignty is not unduly compromised in pursuit of global cooperation.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Future theoretical developments should explore the multidimensional nature of sovereignty, beyond economic and environmental impacts, by incorporating political, cultural, and technological sovereignty. This would expand the scope of Realism and Liberal Institutionalism theories, which traditionally emphasize state autonomy in economic and security contexts. Incorporating these new dimensions could provide a more holistic understanding of how trade agreements influence sovereignty across different sectors. Additionally, Dependency Theory could be refined to consider how modern trade agreements, often influenced by global tech companies and multinational corporations, create new forms of dependency beyond traditional economic terms (Kumar, 2021).

Practice

For practitioners, particularly trade negotiators and policymakers, there should be a focus on negotiating provisions that allow for greater flexibility and adaptation of domestic laws without compromising sovereignty. This includes safeguarding sectors critical to national identity and autonomy, such as agriculture, labor rights, and environmental protections, in trade agreements. Countries should develop internal capacities, such as robust legal frameworks and negotiation strategies, to effectively engage in trade discussions, particularly for smaller and developing nations vulnerable to external pressures (Asante, 2021). Encouraging regional partnerships, like the AfCFTA, to prioritize internal capacity-building can empower nations to navigate trade agreements without eroding sovereignty.

Policy

Policymakers should design and implement trade policies that maintain a balance between economic integration and sovereignty preservation. This can be achieved by including clauses that allow for periodic renegotiation of trade terms, ensuring that member states retain the ability to modify policies in response to domestic needs. Moreover, trade agreements should incorporate national interest safeguards for developing economies, ensuring they are not disproportionately impacted by external regulations or obligations. Policy frameworks should also emphasize domestic participation in trade negotiations to ensure a democratic and transparent process that reflects the interests of all stakeholders, rather than allowing larger economies or corporations to dominate (Jones, 2020).

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