

The Journal of Policy Analysis

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The Institute for Youth in Policy

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Dear Valued Readers,

It is a real pleasure to welcome you to the 6th edition of the Journal of Policy Analysis. With every issue, this journal remains a space for new voices to share ideas, challenge assumptions, and reimagine what policy can look like. The questions being asked today are not the same as those from a year ago, and that is the beauty of this work. Policy is always evolving, and so are the people who shape it. What never changes is the honesty and conviction our contributors bring to their writing.

In these pages, you will find thoughtful pieces that tackle issues at the heart of our shared future. From economic resilience and public health to democracy in the digital age and questions of equity, these works remind us that policy is not only about systems but about people. They show how the choices we make now ripple outward into the lives of others, and into the world we are building.

I want to thank our authors for trusting us with their perspectives and for the time and energy they poured into their work. To our editorial team, thank you for your patience, your careful reading, and your dedication to elevating each piece. And to our design team, thank you for bringing clarity and life to these ideas on the page. This journal exists because of the collaboration and care of everyone involved.

As you read, I hope you pause to consider the ideas shared here, to ask new questions of your own, and to carry these conversations beyond these pages. Whether you are a student, a policymaker, an educator, or someone who simply cares deeply about the future, your engagement matters.

Thank you for being part of this with us.

Sincerely,
Williana Serve
Vice-President of Journal
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Letter from the Chief Executive Officer:

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the sixth issue of our Journal of Policy Analysis. Each issue brings new insights and bold ideas, and this one is no exception. It reflects the evolving discussions and developments at the Institute for Youth in Policy (YIP), where brilliant young minds are shaping the future of policy and civic engagement.

Since our inception in 2020, YIP has grown into a hub for vibrant and diverse thinkers. This journal is central to our mission—more than just a collection of articles, it’s a call to action and a testament to the power of youthful energy and fresh perspectives.

We aim to build the largest global network of young changemakers. Through these pages, we spark connections, share insights, and amplify voices that might otherwise go unheard. By partnering with leading institutions and fostering inclusive dialogue, we ensure that diverse perspectives enrich our collective journey. Each article here plants seeds for collaboration and impactful change.

This edition coincides with an exciting milestone: the launch of our “[Policy for the People](#)” campaign. With this initiative, we aim to expand YIP’s reach, transform from a selective institute into an inclusive movement, and ensure that every passionate young leader has access to our resources. It’s an ambitious step forward—one that embodies our commitment to empowering the next generation of civic leaders.

In this edition, you’ll meet young analysts who challenge the conventional and push boundaries. Their articles are not just meticulously researched and passionately crafted; they are an invitation to think deeply, engage meaningfully, and join the conversation.

As CEO, I am continually inspired by the dedication of our team, partners, reviewers, and contributors. Their commitment fuels this journal and drives our mission forward. I encourage you to dive into these pages and let the ideas of these bright young minds ignite your passion for policy.

Together, we can create a brighter, more thoughtful future.



Paul Kramer
Chief Executive Officer & Chairman, Institute for Youth in Policy

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Academic Papers

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Big Tech on the Ballot: The Distinct Advantages of Ride-share Companies in Popular Politics

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I. Abstract

The growing importance of “gig work” to the U.S. economy has entailed a shift in the power balance between workers and their employers. The result has been the emergence of a gap between worker’s political power in traditional and gig industries. Through an in-depth study of the political fights in California over increased legal protections for rideshare drivers and fast-food workers respectively, the paper seeks to discern the causes of gig worker’s relatively limited political power. The success of workers in the fast-food industry to expand workplace protections contrasts with the experience of drivers in the rideshare sector who failed to obtain similar regulatory gains. The research demonstrates that the different market structures and existing legal environments in the respective industries create divergent conditions for political organizing. While the gig work industry’s high level of physical and market consolidation facilitates political coordination, the fast-food sector’s more diverse and dispersed members make organization more difficult. Ride-share drivers also face unique barriers when organizing a political campaign that their counterparts in the fast-food industry do not because of their physical dispersion and lack of legal rights to unionize. The dynamics highlighted in the paper contribute to workers in the gig economy having substantially less political power and influence than those in traditional industries, even when holding earnings relatively constant. As the gig-economy comes to represent an increasing portion of U.S. employment opportunities, the diminishing political power of workers is an especially pertinent issue in contemporary society.

II. Introduction

The constant evolution of the online economy in the past decades has not been matched by an equally dynamic regulatory effort in the United States. The federal government's response has been lackluster with the plethora of Congressional hearings on big tech in the past decade yielding little tangible action in the legislative body (Brown and Nguyen, 2024). Despite the limited federal response, some states have elected to take a more aggressive regulatory approach towards big tech with California, home of Silicon Valley, being the foremost example. Amongst the state's massive technology sector, delivery and ride-share applications have drawn the ire of regulators. The pace of innovation in the sector has significantly augmented many workers' relationship to their job, rapidly undermining a number of hardfought protections workers gained during over decades. As the "gig" industries alone have now employed over 16% of working Americans at some point in their career and digital contract work grows especially important for individuals lower on the income ladder, the battle in California around regulating the industry proves especially revealing and impactful (Anderson, etc., 2021).

The growth of the tech industry has been accompanied by novel dynamics that alter the power of both industry players and the workers they "employ". The experience of drivers during their fight to regulate the ride-share industry stands in contrast to similar attempts in the more traditional fast-food industry. Through California Assembly Bill (AB) 257 and later Assembly Bill 1228, fast-food workers secured a state managed sectoral bargaining arrangement. The board AB 1228 created sets wage floors and working conditions for the entire industry and directly includes worker representatives, partially circumventing the need to organize on an individual restaurant basis. The implementation of sectoral bargaining had been a long-time goal of many unions and workers in the U.S. so the board amounted to a policy win for these advocates (Madland, 2024).

Ride-share drivers on the other hand were unable to gain even employee status and its associated privilege despite a lengthy political fight (White, 2023). When AB-5 passed the California Assembly in 2020, reclassifying many independent contractors as full employees, it provided them with the associated minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and union organizing protections.

The increase in security for the industry's workers would be temporary however, as the rideshare companies carved out an exemption to the law for their drivers. Through championing a state referendum in 2020, Proposition 22, the ride share industry was able to reverse much of AB-5 and secure a major policy win for the industry. How did ride-share apps prevent boundary-pushing regulations in their industry while fast-food chains were forced to concede to a revolutionary change in favor of their workers?

I contend that the ride-share industry's unique business model and market consolidation allowed lyft and uber to successfully prevent greater policy change like that garnered by fast-food workers. I first highlight that above all, the ability to organize is crucial to having and successfully wielding political power. Without the power to focus a group's effort in politics, money and connections have limited efficacy. The essay then discusses what factors facilitate effective coordination, focusing on the benefits of smaller groups and the existence of prior institutional connections when organizing. Small groups make integrating the voices of members easier and allow for the better enforcement of equitable contributions to the group's shared goals. When individuals with shared interests have existing connections, it facilitates trust and a level of familiarity that can overcome coordination and free riding costs. These features of organization can be the direct result of market and regulatory structures, which give certain industries and workers an innate advantage in politics.

The comparison between the ride-share and fast-food industries' policy fights are apt to support these theories because both battles occurred during similar time periods and in the same political jurisdiction. The political climates of both cases were relatively constant because the respective policy fights occurred within 3 years of one another, making an isolation of the differences between them easier. The fact the policy battle took place in the same political jurisdiction of California also suggests that the actors had the same avenues for change available to them. As a result of these constants, the true causes of the ride-share industry's relative victory and the fast-food industry's concessions can be discerned with greater confidence.

The answer to why a major faction of the tech sector was able to avoid tough regulation while a more traditional industry was not can provide deep insight into future regulatory battles. This case study of California offers an illustrative look at some of the unique challenges and dynamics involved in regulating the tech sector. With big tech's influence in the economy unlikely to be diminished in the foreseeable future, many of the factors that allowed the industry to protect its preferred policy in California are likely to be mirrored across the country. The contrast between workers' success at securing reforms in a more established industry like fast-food and the failure of ride-share contractors to enjoy similar regulatory changes illustrates the unique power of big tech. The legal status of workers is crucial to determining if the workplace protections that have been erected over the past centuries withstand the gig economy. If future attempts at assuring these worker rights are to succeed, many of the structural advantages the industry possesses must be overcome.

III. Theory

I propose that the organization of interest groups, shaped by both market and regulatory dynamics, is the major determinant of the ability to expend substantial amounts of money on politics and influence policy more generally. Smaller, more homogeneous groups with greater internal contact tend to be better able to organize political movements and campaigns. Regulatory dynamics that protect and encourage organizing also play a role in a group's ability to obtain political power. These factors are often dictated on an industry-specific basis, creating disparate levels of political influence between businesses and workers depending on their environment.

Without organization, mustering successful political pressure is extremely difficult. While independent actors who possess significant sums of money and connections, such as Elon Musk, can at times influence policy makers, large and concerted interest organizations exert even more and lasting power on political outcomes (Gilens and Page 2014). Coalitions necessarily rule in democracies because they supply the weight of multiple actors' efforts behind a single political initiative and can present a representation of more popular sentiment than any individual could (Holyoke, 2020). Thus, whenever individuals or groups share interests in the political world, organization is crucial to pressure policymakers and make use of all levers of power available to them. The benefits of coalitions in influencing politics extend beyond providing monetary advantages and include the better focusing of powerful actor's efforts.

One of the most important factors to inhibiting or facilitating organizing is the number of actors involved in a group. With concerted joint effort, actors in coalitions can ensure they contribute enough resources to make a difference, create a coherent message that resonates with policy makers and the public, and prevent redundancies and contradictions. Despite the clear benefits of coordination, there is an incentive to free ride or not contribute as much to a cause with the hope that if the group succeeds, an individual can avoid any costs while reaping the benefits (Gavrilets, 2015). Large groups also lead to more diverse opinions which can come into conflict and undermine the coherence of an organization. When large and diverse coalitions like the Chamber of Commerce attempt to influence policy, they must coordinate their stance amongst a diverse group of companies and industries which may fall on divergent sides of any one policy issue. Such division can hamstring effective messaging and lobbying for policy change. Smaller groups diminish these issues for a variety of reasons. First, small groups make tracking and normatively punishing shirkers much easier and less costly. The smaller group size also means that individual interested parties have a greater impact on the outcome of the group's effort such that they are incentivized to contribute more. These factors help address the collective action problem and facilitate more streamlined decision-making. With fewer voices in the room, a group can better incorporate the ideas and values of all its members. Overall, existing literature demonstrates that smaller group size leads to more durable organizations with less shirking (Olson, 1971). The benefits of small groups are often felt in concentrated industries where only a few large corporations are positioned to reap the rewards of each other's effort. The limited competition and extensive resources of companies in such industries means fewer opportunities exist to free ride on or undermine oligopoly efforts. In the realm of policy influence, these qualities prove crucial to success. With policy makers and the public inundated by communication and campaigns, assuring interested parties share a coherent message and lobbying strategy with maximal involvement provides tangible benefits (Holyoke, 2020).

Beyond the advantages of more condensed interest groups, the level of prior contact and infrastructure connecting interested parties is crucial to successfully obtaining political influence. To organize those with shared interests, one must necessarily establish a connection and shared political issues are not always a strong enough motivator to ensure it. The seemingly benign barrier of connection can in reality be devastating to successful collective action. The effort to find, communicate with, and convince others to join an interest group is both costly and risky. To overcome this cost when no existing connection exists, individuals must bear the risk themselves, leading to a collective action problem that cripples the development of many interest groups (Nownes, 2013).

When a group of individuals with shared interests are already in contact and possess connection though, it becomes significantly easier to organize around an issue. This connection can be as simple as sharing a workplace or industry in which individuals and corporations talk and interact regularly. The existence of an infrastructure that connects similarly interested parties can provide an obvious avenue for coordination that significantly diminishes the cost of finding and organizing with other interested parties (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). More formalized forums for interactions also exist, such as industry groups and trade unions, and are especially beneficial for wielding political power. When individuals or organizations are more dispersed however, organizing is made more difficult as existing contact is less likely to have been developed and the cost of connection increases (Rhee and Zabin, 2009). Whatever form it takes, when individuals or groups who share a political interest have strong existing connections and forums for repeated interactions, it becomes substantially easier to organize around an issue. This increased coordination results in a more forceful application of political pressure that provides a substantial advantage in policy fights.

The structure of markets can shape group sizes and connections between actors, shifting the dynamics of a political fight. More concentrated business sectors with high barriers to entry mean more constrained competition and greater opportunities for repeated interactions. The connections between market players who necessarily interact and share similar political interests leads to smaller groups with existing institutional connections. This contributes to greater organization and significantly increased political influence. One need only look so far as consolidated industries like that of Oil and their trade group, The American Petroleum Institute, to realize that industries with dominant and consolidated market players often have success in organizing politically. While consolidated industries still have competition for profit, the limited number of opinions and the prior existence of organizations based around shared interests advantage them in policy battles. This has been reflected in the greater propensity of firms to lobby or contribute to trade groups if they complete a merger (Cowgill, Prat, and Valletti, 2023). In businesses with consolidated workers, organization is also substantially easier for employees. When workers have long tenures and there is less turnover, organizing becomes less costly (Milkman and Van Der Naald, 2024). The establishment of shared goals and investments in a certain job make devoting the effort to organizing more worthwhile.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, market and industry features can prevent coordination and organization. When a market has many actors in a dispersed space and working independently of one another, maintaining interactions, let alone organizing, becomes significantly harder (Rhee and Zabin 2009).

Thus, industries without common spaces, communication, and long tenures are significantly more difficult to organize than their more consolidated counterparts. A high rate of turnover in an industry also means any chance at organizing workers faces significant levels of wasted time and effort from individuals who quickly leave the space (Milkman and Van Der Naald, 2024). These features are often built into business models and markets and are nearly unchangeable. This results in certain industries and workers being placed at a stark disadvantage in high stakes policy battles.

Finally, certain regulatory structures can also either support or undermine the organization of interest groups and their relative power. When certain groups are afforded legal protections for activities like union organizing and enforcing mandatory dues, it allows for the easier organization of interests. Legal protections or the lack thereof can also aid businesses in policy fights. This has been reflected within the U.S. where the variety in state level laws and regulations around union organizing has led to largely uneven union density between states and disparate power balances between workers and employers (Curchin and Brown, 2024). Businesses can also face regulatory hurdles to organizing as intense antitrust enforcement affects consolidation and coordination between firms in a market. No matter the entity then, the legal framework of acceptable organizing practices can alter the difficulty of starting a political movement.

IV. Research Design

To support these theories, I examine two policy battles between private-sector industries and reformers. The two conflicts both took place in California during the early 2020s, providing a high measure of comparability between the respective political environments. The political struggles examined also center around legislation in the California Assembly that increased protections for laborers. These basic similarities make any differences in outcome more clearly identifiable as the result of differing market and legal structures in the ride-share and fast food industries respectively.

The first case I examine is the fight over ride-share app worker classification as either independent contractors, or full employees. This case involved a lengthy dispute in the California legislature where ride-share apps lobbied heavily to avoid regulation and even threatened to halt operations in the state (Sammon, 2020).

Despite these efforts, the legislature passed AB-5 which established that drivers were to be considered full time employees beginning January 1st, 2020, with all the protections this affords. Viewing this as an existential threat to their business model, which relies on cheap labor and limited protections for workers, the ride-share companies turned to an expensive and risky alternative route: direct democracy (Baker, 2020). Through funding and supporting a ballot initiative, Proposition 22, ride-share apps were able to both place on the ballot and successfully pass an exemption to AB-5 in November 2020. This measure kept their drivers as independent contractors, overriding the legislature and weakening protections for ride-share workers. While promising to set some standards for driver pay and health, the initiative was largely a total success for the apps, written and funded by the industry.

The other major policy dispute I examine is the development of a sectoral union in the fast-food business. After a similarly drawn-out legislative battle, the California legislature passed legislation (AB-257) which established a board made up of representatives from the state, fast-food companies, and fast-food workers to set wages and working standards in the industry (White, 2023). This first of its kind sectoral bargaining unit increased worker power substantially, instantly providing collective bargaining to all workers in the industry without the need to organize at each restaurant. The fast-food companies continued to fight the legislation after passage, threatening to put an initiative on the ballot to reverse the legislation just as the ride-share industry had done. Unlike lyft and uber however, they did not follow through on pushing a ballot measure. While the board was amended with AB-1228 to include some restrictions on what standards it could set, the sectoral bargaining apparatus overall was left intact, providing a major win to workers and union organizers.

These two cases are strong candidates for comparison as they occur within similar political environments and have broadly similar categories of actors but differ in the specific contours of the market. This unique situation allows for the isolation of variables. Beyond occurring within short succession of one another and under the same political jurisdiction, the cases both involve a business fighting regulations that would increase worker power and protection. The two industries are also both extremely profitable and employ low-wage workers. These shared dynamics are accompanied by the fact that both industries fought regulation hard when it was in the legislature and initially lost. The largely similar beginnings to the policy fights allow us to better identify where the differences began and what caused them.

When it comes to the reaction of the respective businesses once they lost the initial legislative fight, the distinctions between the cases begin to appear. While ride-share apps organized a large and expensive ballot initiative campaign to protect their drivers' status as independent contractors, fast-food companies only wielded traditional lobbying to gain back some lost territory. The differing approaches and levels of success between the two industries pose an opportunity to understand what features of each industry caused the disparate outcomes.

The comparison of these two cases helps explain why ride-share and tech companies more generally are harder to regulate than traditional businesses. With more workers becoming involved in the gig economy, regulating the tech companies managing this new market has become deeply important (Anderson, etc. 2021). The broad similarities between the cases and the study of how the policy debates played out in California, which possesses the largest economy in the United States, provides an impactful case study of the difficulty associated with such regulation. The dynamics in this policy fight successfully isolate market and regulatory structures as the clear independent variables which allows strong conclusions to be drawn from this study.

V. Evidence

The Ride-Share Industry

When the ride-share industry lost its initial fight against their drivers gaining full employee status, the companies had a choice to make. They could either continue to lobby against the regulation in the California state government or organize a widespread campaign to pass a ballot initiative that overturns AB-5. The industry leaders choose the latter option despite similar efforts by businesses falling short in the past (Baker, 2010). The decision was bold, but the unique market and regulatory environment in their industry justifiably gave the ride-share companies confidence they could win.

The ride-share industry's extreme consolidation and the proximity of the major players in the space helped the campaign against AB-5 take off. With only two major actors in the ride-share industry, Uber and Lyft could more easily organize a campaign and communicate strategy throughout the fight.

The two driving giants control nearly the entire ride-share market, making the industry a monopsony with little outside competition (Vigderman, 2024). Such consolidation provides these companies with excess influence on both the public and policy makers as the sentiments of just two companies carry the weight of a massive industry. The smaller number of actors in the market also facilitated funding the massive campaign as the division of costs is more easily negotiated amongst two companies without the risk of third-parties free riding on their efforts (Olson, 1971). The greater ability to assure both actors made sufficient contributions and the meaningful impact of each individual company's efforts on the success of the campaign overall made sharing the financial burden less daunting. This dynamic along with access to massive sums of capital from the industry's monopsony and connection to wealthy financiers allowed the group to spend a U.S. record \$200 million on the ballot initiative (Hussain, 2024). The majority of this money came from Uber (\$60 million) and Lyft (\$49 million), demonstrating their willingness to bear the cost of fighting for policy change because they were positioned to uniquely benefit (California Secretary of State, 2024).

Beyond money, the industry needed to develop a coherent message and strategy if they were to have any chance at success. This too was aided by the ride-share monopsony as smaller groups are better able to incorporate member viewpoints and produce coherent products (Olson, 1971). The ability to efficiently make decisions on how the campaign would go about spending the massive sums of money in its coffers was a massive advantage. On any strategy issue or major moment in the conflict, the two leaders could negotiate a consensus without having to accommodate a wide variety of viewpoints. The sophistication of the campaign was highlighted by major public affairs firms such as BCSF and Clyde who prominently showcased their work with the rideshare giants. The firms highlighted how they “worked with the app-based companies to oversee extensive opinion and legal research” and “construct a well-designed initiative”, demonstrating that extensive coordination took place between the two major ride-share players to create their campaign (BCFS). The small size of the industry significantly aided this strategy development, a key aspect of any policy battle.

The coordination of the campaign against AB-5 was further aided by the existing physical and institutional connections between the two major ride-share companies. Headquartered less than 50 miles from one another, the two ride-share giants undoubtedly exist in the same tech ecosystem. With contact between top executives and workers at both companies inevitable, powerful individuals from the tech giants had a degree of familiarity with their ally in the initiative fight long before it began.

Beyond facilitating communication, the locations of both companies in the tech hub of the Bay Area meant that Uber and Lyft shared financiers who further increased connections amongst the major ride-share companies. Major hedge funds like Vanguard and Black Rock hold substantial investments in the two ride-share companies which further strengthened the connection between the companies and the shared interest in overturning AB-5. While Uber and Lyft are often in competition with one another, the breadth of existing connections and familiarity between the ride-share apps increased the major actor's ability to organize once they possessed a mutual goal of defeating AB-5. When it came to the laborious task of starting a joint campaign, the existing inter-company infrastructure connecting the two biggest players in the ride-share space undoubtedly proved useful. With familiarity comes a greater level of trust that significantly aids in the formation and durability of coalitions (Bapna et al., 2017). The prior connections between the companies facilitated their contribution to the same campaign, "Yes on 22", allowing them to pool money and jointly use top law and public affairs firms to coordinate a top-down campaign that co-opted drivers, public interest organizations, and media organizations.

These factors allowed the ride-share companies to organize an extremely targeted and innovative campaign in support of their ballot initiative. With past businesses sponsored initiatives in California like that of PG&E failing to pass in spite of massive spending, money alone was not enough to ensure success (Baker 2010). The ride-share companies used their massive investment in "Yes on 22" to fund an extensive campaign to gain public support. The group strategically donated to and cultivated connections with minority advocacy groups to build support with the relatively diverse and liberal California electorate. The Yes on Prop 22 Campaign paid the president of the California National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) \$85,000 to appear in ads supporting the measure. The Pro Prop 22 campaign also engaged in more bottom up outreach through offering members of both the NAACP and National Action Network free rides and donations (Sammon, 2020). This attempt to court influential California voting blocs who typically support the very Democratic lawmakers who passed AB-5 required more than money, it necessitated strong strategy and organization. Beyond the co-option of racial advocacy organizations, the ride-share industry also authored an outreach and media campaign, contacting over 100,000 drivers and coaching them on how to speak with the press (BCFS). The organization of this multifaceted media and influence campaign by the ride-share industry gave them a meaningful advantage in the fight for Proposition 22.

The targeting of funds and joint messaging strategy allowed the massive sums of money dedicated to the Proposition to be allocated towards influencing the groups and individuals who could have the biggest sway on election day.

The group also used their unique access to consumers and workers to target them with ads. Uber sent messages to both drivers and riders promising higher wait times and prices if the proposition failed, even going as far as to say “Prop 22 will save lives” (Vincent, 2020). This strategy allowed the ride-share giant to target drivers and riders with messages tailored to their propensity to use their apps in their daily lives. The savvy technique also provided the app makers with a captive audience since to continue using the app, users were forced to “confirm” the statement (Vincent, 2020). This was only possible because of the unique digital marketplace the ride-share industry maintains. The ability to reach an audience of users with a limited ability to shift to alternatives in the highly consolidated market space is a unique feature of the ride-share industry. With massive troves of user data and many individuals deeply reliant on its platform, Uber was able to target many rideshare users with the coherent promise of personally detrimental consequences if Prop 22 failed.

The consolidation in the industry gave weight to these ominous messages, providing the pro-Prop 22 campaign yet another strategic advantage. As delivery and ride-share apps have grown to employ over 15% of the workforce at some point in their career, the threat of unemployment stokes tangible fear in many (Anderson, etc. 2021). When an employer promises that a proposed action will lead to job losses and there exists limited alternatives for getting rehired in the industry, their message will no doubt be amplified in many drivers’ minds (Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). The threat of increased unemployment is also amplified for voters as unemployment has been shown to increase election turnout (Cebula, 2017). With both ride-share drivers and the public shown to respond to the type of employer messaging used by Uber, the Yes on Prop 22 Campaign was able to orchestrate a convincing appeal to voters. With high consolidation, lyft and uber’s threat of decreased employment and service quality represented a unified message from nearly the entire industry, providing significant weight to their claims. Without such homogeneity in industry messaging and message targeting, the propagation of corporate talking points would both be more difficult and less impactful.

Beyond the strategic advantages possessed by those supporting Prop 22, the workers and interest groups opposed to the initiative were at a severe disadvantage. The first source of difficulty for the opposition to Prop 22 was the physical distance between workers.

Drivers also lack a formal area to physically or digitally speak amongst themselves such as a breakroom or shop floor like at traditional employers. While drivers can seek out one another through non company means, the broad lack of consistent and institutionalized connections exacerbates the costs of organizing a campaign around drivers (Rhee and Zabin, 2009). The massive effort needed to connect with each individual driver and then convince them to join with other faceless individuals was a major obstacle to organizing a widespread campaign against Prop 22. Building an organic campaign based on drivers in opposition to the initiative became even more difficult because the one entity drivers consistently connected with, the apps themselves, openly supported Prop 22. While organizations advocating for drivers' interests like Ride-Share Drivers United do exist, they are small and weak when compared to the massive industry groups they came up against.

Beyond the lack of physical connections, the extremely high turnover rate within the industry meant organizing was prohibitively costly. A 2017 report found that as little as 4% of Uber drivers remained on the app for over a year (McGee, 2017). This extremely high turnover meant that even if a group went through the trouble of connecting with and convincing dispersed drivers to join the opposition campaign, much of that effort would be wasted as a supermajority of members leave the industry entirely. The added requirement of near constant organizing to keep up with industry churn made organizing a widespread driver-based campaign nearly impossible.

Finally, the regulatory contours of the battle further diminished the power of the campaign against power Proposition 22. With ride-share workers necessarily not considered full time employees until AB-5 passed, workers lacked protections like unemployment insurance, minimum wage assurances, and union organizing privileges (Brown 2020). Without such privileges, the companies' threats of increased unemployment and wait times resonated with drivers who had no semblance of income protection if they were not actively completing rides.

The lack of protections for union organizing played an important role in hurting the opposition campaign as well. Workers who feel they need greater protection from and bargaining power with their employer can typically form a union and enjoy protection from retribution for doing so. This not only provides employees more direct bargaining power with their employers but also gives worker issues a more formalized and financially powerful voice in politics (Zabin, etc., 2001). Strong unions allow workers to overcome many of the coordination and collective action issues faced by interest groups as they can compel participation through mandatory dues and integrate new workers quickly.

The absence of a powerful, grassroots campaign would have been remedied had drivers possessed a strong union. This route of organization was not available though as drivers' long-term status as independent contractors prevented them from unionizing. The prohibition on unionizing entailed a lack of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) protections which help balance the playing field and protect workers from retribution. Ride-share companies were thus not forced to negotiate with their workers and if the drivers were to go on strike to gain concessions, they wouldn't enjoy protections from reprisals (Brown 2020). While a legal grey area, independent contractors who engage in certain forms of collective bargaining may also be held liable for antitrust violations, disincentivizing even the formation of drivers' unions outside the typical NLRB route (Schneider 2023). The ride-share drivers thus lacked any semblance of a self-organized campaign or union-led effort.

There were examples of unions supporting the campaign in opposition to Prop 22 as they hoped to gain the ability to work with and unionize ride-share drivers. Despite this, the lack of existing connections with drivers and the large costs required to run a statewide ballot campaign without funds from the very group who would benefit from the regulation weakened outside union efforts. With AB-5 going into effect only at the beginning of 2020, unions did not have time to both organize the dispersed drivers and simultaneously conduct a ballot initiative campaign that could rival the ride-share industries. In the end, labor groups only raised a tenth of the money the ride-share apps did to oppose Prop 22, a partial reflection of the differential in political power (David, 2020).

The result of these dynamics was a deeply unequal legislative battle in which ride-share apps were able to outspend and out organize their opponents. The market structures and business model of ride-share apps afforded them with deep benefits in fundraising and organizing. At the same time, the contours of the ride-share business meant workers had little existing connections with which to build a campaign. The regulatory structure around independent contractors also denied regulatory protections to drivers which exacerbated their susceptibility to threatening company messages around AB-5. In the end, these dynamics played a major role in the ability of the ride-share industry to secure passage of Proposition 22 in 2020 with nearly 60% of the vote (CNN, 2020).

The Fast Food Industry

Less than two years after the ride-share industry's victory, a similar battle emerged in California over the establishment of a Fast-Food Council to regulate wages and working conditions.

This time, the industry's workers and their allies would secure a lasting victory despite some subsequent concessions. This success was facilitated by the greater competition and number of actors in the fast-food business when compared to the ride-share industry. The regulatory protections for fast-food workers and their existing connections to powerful unions also allowed them to wield more weapons in the policy fight. In the end, these dynamics resulted in a markedly different outcome from what took place in the ride-share fight.

Unlike the ride-share industry, the fast-food space is much more diverse. The existence of over 38,000 fast-food restaurants in California alone with both major national chains (who have 11,000 locations in the state) and regional chains meant the coordination of these organizations was more difficult (IBISWorld 2024; Scrapehero, 2024). There also exists substantial variation in ownership structures and reliance on franchises within the fast-food industry, further complicating organizing around common interests (Little, 2015). The variation in company policies and the sheer number of franchises in the state meant that to form a campaign amongst these groups required significant organizing costs. The act of reaching out to thousands of individuals who manage fast-food restaurants and convincing them to contribute to a campaign that any one individual franchisee is unlikely to have an impact on is difficult. The substantially larger number of interested parties in the campaign against AB-257 also meant that running a well-coordinated campaign would be more difficult (Sweeney Jr., 1973). Many fast food chains, such as Chick Fil A, market themselves partially based on their quality working standards and may not want to jeopardize losing customers to the variety of competitors if they support an unpopular measure. Both assuring relatively equitable contributions to a ballot initiative campaign and coordinating a message was thus made substantially harder by the industry's multitude of interested parties and voices.

The diversity in the physical location of restaurants also complicates the connection of fast-food franchises. With California being the third largest state in the nation, the vast space between many franchises makes organizing strategy hard. The dispersion means there are more limited connections between fast-food business owners and thus less trust to build a complex and expensive campaign on (Bapna et al., 2017). Far from the geographic connections ride-share executives possess by working in the Bay Area and interacting with similar circles of wealthy residents, a fast-food franchise owner from Sacramento is unlikely to ever be in contact with their counterpart in San Diego.

Despite these challenges to organizing, there were still institutions that connected fast-food restaurant owners during their fight against AB-257. Trade groups such as the National Restaurant Association's Fast Casual Industry Council and the International Franchise Association (IFA) existed prior to the fight in California to represent the interests of fast-food owners in politics. The existence of these organizations allowed for some coordination cost to be overcome. The large market players in the fast-food space like national chains meant that there were also entities willing to bear some level of free riding to enjoy the benefits trade groups and lobbying provide. These groups were somewhat active in the legislative fight over AB-257 and the eventual passage of the compromise bill, AB-1228 (International Franchise Association, 2023). The voluntary nature of such groups, though, allows chains who do not contribute to free ride off their lobbying efforts, undermining the power of fast food industry groups. Still, organizations like the IFA continue to lobby for preferred legislation and created the "FranPac" to elect pro-franchise candidates to office. The work of the IFA and similar trade groups provide public goods to all franchises through their work, regardless of whether all benefactors contribute to the group (International Franchise Association, 2024).

The dynamics within the fast food space played into the eventual decision to negotiate limited reforms to the original Fast-Food Council. Continuous lobbying for reforms through their existing trade groups and connections was well within the realm of established precedent for the fast food industry. This contrasted with the more monetarily and organizationally intensive option of sponsoring a ballot initiative. The effort needed to get on the ballot, coordinate messaging around the issue, and divide the monetary burden would require greater organization and uncertainty. This route for achieving regulatory change would be more difficult for the fast food industry than it had for the ride-share industry because of organizational impediments. The many actors in the fast-food ownership space meant organizing a political campaign would have been hampered by sizable free riding and substantial coordination costs. While the industry threatened a ballot measure and began fundraising for it, the aforementioned obstacles to executing such a campaign helped push them to a legislative compromise (Canham-Clyne, 2023). The ride-share companies could have gotten everything they wanted if they authored and passed a ballot initiative overturning AB-257, but this path appeared more risky than traditional lobbying for smaller concessions.

On the other side of the policy battle over the Fast-Food Council were workers and their allies. Fast food workers were substantially more powerful than their ride-share counterparts because of their greater connection both within the workplace and to influential outside groups.

Fast-food workers are somewhat geographically dispersed and have moderately high turnover rates, but the difficulty this poses to organization pales in comparison to the ride-share industry. With an average tenure of one to two years and workers possessing common restaurant kitchens where they interact with one another daily, the task of organizing a campaign around workers' interests is far from impossible (Zippia, 2021). Workers with shared interests can still connect with others and build the investment needed to make organizing for better wages and protections appealing.

Workers in the industry also possessed organizing protections that allowed them to maintain and develop connections with powerful unions. As full-time employees, fast-food workers possessed full NLRB protections, which greatly increased their ability to connect themselves to unions (NLRB). Even with a small minority of fast-food restaurants unionized, the real push by unions to grow their influence in the industry came because of the realistic promise of future unionization, facilitated in part by the successful creation of a Fast Food Council (Bloch, 2019). Through the establishment of a centralized place for workers to negotiate with employers, unions could circumvent the need to organize on a restaurant by restaurant basis. The greater potential gains from fighting for fast-food worker protections meant that unions were more willing to forcefully lobby on behalf of even un-unionized workers.

These dynamics allowed fast-food industry workers to connect with an especially powerful union in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to support their legislative fight. The SEIU has an extremely long history of organizing low wage workers, especially in key states such as California. The union also possesses substantial clout with lawmakers which the fast-food workers leveraged in their initial campaign for an industry wide council (Minchin 2020). This connection was bolstered by the past work the SEIU had done supporting legislative priorities that benefited fast-food workers. The SEIU has for decades been organizing low wage workers and led a campaign that began with fast-food workers to raise the federal minimum wage to 15 dollars (Minchin, 2020). The "Fight for 15" movement was organized in large part by the SEIU and resulted in many states and companies raising their minimum wage, demonstrating their ability to win legislative fights (Selyukh, 2020). The campaign also connected the organization with fast-food workers, providing a level of prior familiarity and trust between workers and the union. With established connections, the SEIU and many fast-food workers could more easily orchestrate an effective lobbying campaign to get a top priority passed in California.

SEIU President Mary Kay Henry hailed the California sectoral bargaining organization as “an essential steppingstone to the kind of sectoral bargaining we need”, demonstrating the strong incentive the SEIU had to partner with workers in California (GUIS, 2022).

While business interests were still able to use the threat of unemployment and market disruptions to apply some limitations to the Fast-food Worker Council, the revolutionary sectoral bargaining unit remained in place (Canham-Clyne). The regulatory and business structure of the fast-food industry overall allowed unions and workers to organize an effective political campaign in support of major regulatory protections.

Determinants of Organizing	Ride-Share Industry	Fast-Food Industry
Market Structure	Consolidated	Dispersed
Industry Connections	Moderate	Limited
Employee Protections	None	Standard
Union Connections	Limited	Moderate

Alternative Arguments

Proponents of Proposition 22 argue that the success of the initiative reflects voter’s true opinion, expressed through direct democracy and in response to an out of touch legislature. This argument downplays the importance of the ride-share industry’s massive campaign in shaping public opinion and postulates that Proposition 22 was innately popular. The logic follows that voters opposed what their representatives were doing in Sacramento from the start as it came at the behest of special interests, and they fought back through a ballot initiative (BCSF). In the end, California voters were just more inclined to support the new gig economy with all the flexibility and ease of access to services it provides. Drivers too wanted to maintain their flexibility and freedom by remaining independent contractors rather than face the burden of contracted employment (Mccarthy et al., 2025). In contrast, the fast-food industry chose to not run a ballot initiative because they felt they had less public support to build a campaign around. Organizing ability thus did not play as big a role in the decision of whether to run a ballot initiative or not. The voters in 2020 were simply more supportive of Proposition 22 than AB-5 which had been designed by out of touch representatives.

To support this theory, they point to the fact that ballot initiatives are a purer form of democracy without special interests using their connections with government officials to sway policy away from the people (Protect App Based Drivers and Services, 2025). They also point to a survey in which 72% of individuals supported Proposition 22 to back up the theory that, even before the campaign concluded, there was overwhelming support for the initiative (Vincent, 2020). With such broad support, the campaign was just the finishing touch to reinforce the California electorate's deep proclivity for the gig economy.

While this argument may have some limited validity as AB-5 certainly had its detractors and lobbying on behalf of AB-5 did occur, it significantly downplays the impact of the ballot initiative campaign on public opinion. The reality is that available polling does not support the idea Prop 22 would have certainly passed without a massive and highly organized campaign. Polls throughout the election cycle found support for the ballot measure at well under the 50% it needed to pass with some even finding opposition to the initiative in the majority (Batey, 2020). The study cited by ride-share companies as demonstrating overwhelming support for the initiative has also been called into question because it was based on a sample of only those signed up for an online newsletter related to the ride-share business (Park 2020). While the lack of comprehensive polling data makes it difficult to discern public sentiment throughout the Prop 22 campaign, it is hard to argue there was always overwhelming support for the measure.

Additionally, most Americans support the regulation of big tech meaning public opinion appears to have been predisposed against the ride-share giants. A Pew Research poll found that a majority of Americans support more government regulation of big tech with this number rising to 60% amongst Democrats (Anderson 2024). With Democrats winning the state overwhelmingly in 2020 with 64% of the presidential vote, there was almost undoubtedly support for the regulation of big tech companies like Uber and Lyft amongst the electorate (CNN, 2020). Polling showing support for regulations like AB-5 makes it difficult to imagine that a large majority of California voters favored Proposition 22 prior to the campaign. The massive sums of money the tech giants expended on the campaign itself demonstrates the value they placed on it. If public opinion truly was always on their side, highly savvy companies wouldn't elect to spend nearly a quarter of a billion dollars on the Yes on Prop 22 campaign.

Additionally, the belief that ballot initiatives reflect a more organic form of policy making is misguided. Ballot initiatives first require individuals to be organized enough to both write and petition for the measure, limiting the scope of what makes it onto the ballot.

Once groups are organized, the massive sums of money needed to pay the filing fee, hire professional signature collecting firms, and market the measure also highly favors the elite use of the policy tool. The campaigns for these initiatives are also largely focused on speed and scale rather than true education (which is more costly and time consuming), meaning that voters are given just a limited, one-sided understanding of initiatives through advertising (Garrett, 1999). In sum, ballot initiatives' cost and structure make them a tool of the elite, undermining the idea that they represent a purer form of democracy than legislative politics.

The reality is that ride-share companies knew from the start they would have to wage a tough battle if they were going to get their proposition passed (Baker, 2010). In the end, the costs and risks were overcome by the industry's advantages, allowing them to run a successful campaign. Without such organizational benefits however, the ride-share industry would likely have been forced to accept AB-5 with the possibility of making minor tweaks to the legislation just as the less well positioned fast-food industry was forced to do.

VI. Implications

The research outlined in this paper generalizes well to states and political jurisdictions with ballot initiatives. While the ride-shares industry's plethora of organizational advantages makes any political fight against the tech behemoths difficult, attempts at regulation in legislative bodies have been successful in the past. The role of legislators and regulators as guardians of public trust means pure political and financial power is somewhat rebuffed by the policy expertise and ideological conviction in legislatures and agencies. This is partially evidenced in the revival of attempts at regulating the ride share industry in 2025. California legislators have introduced AB 1340 which would allow ride share drivers to unionize, bolstering worker protections and organizational ability if enacted (McCarthy et al., 2025). While the bill has already faced strong opposition from industry lobbyists, the reintroduction of ride-share regulation in the California Assembly represents the viability of legislative politics for regulating big tech. When ballot initiatives exist though, legislator's power becomes more limited and organization becomes especially important. The increase in scale and lower levels of expertise amongst voters means organization is especially important in securing policy wins through ballot initiatives. As such, this research is primarily generalizable to politics where ballot initiatives are used.

Interest groups attempting to organize and regulate the gig economy should thus consider the impact of the regulatory arena in which they chose to fight their battles in. While worker advocacy groups in both the ride-share and fast-food industries were able to successfully win the passage of long desired legislation in the California legislature, they faced different end results because of the existence of ballot initiatives. Pro-regulation organizations would be well served by focusing more energy on regulation in states without ballot initiatives or superseding such initiatives through working at the national level. This knowledge will help pro-regulation groups better allocate their limited resources.

VII. Conclusion

To support the argument that coordination facilitated the ride-share industry's successful ballot initiative, I highlight the unique level of consolidation and proximity amongst the major ride share companies. The ride-share monopsony allowed the two major actors in the space to more easily run a large-scale campaign. The fact workers lacked much political power and were unorganized also meant the campaign to pass Prop 22 faced less resistance. These organizational factors facilitated both the ride-share companies' initial willingness to turn to the ballot initiative to improve their regulatory outlook and the ultimate success of Prop 22.

Organization was also the main issue that forced the fast-food industry to compromise on regulation. With much less market consolidation and more limited connections amongst store owners, free riding and coordination issues were impactful enough to dissuade the industry from running a ballot initiative. The industry was also up against more well-connected workers and unions which would have made passing a ballot initiative significantly more difficult. While the fast-food companies threatened to sponsor an initiative, the industry felt their political outlook meant their best option was to simply reform the council.

While the research laid out in this paper shows a strong correlation between organizational advantages and winning ballot initiatives, causation is nearly impossible to prove. Without troves of internal documents and interviews with top executives in both industries, we can't discern the exact calculus that went into each sector's decision-making processes. While it is highly likely the quality of the Prop 22 campaign was influential in securing the passage of Proposition 22, there is limited public data on its direct impact on voter sentiment. If further research could track both changes in public opinion regarding Prop 22 and better capture the thought process of major industry actors, there could be a more causal relationship drawn between organizational ability and political success.

In spite of these drawbacks, the research and conclusions shared in the preceding paragraphs reveal important insights. With big tech an increasingly large part of American life, the ability of both the state and national government to respond to and protect their citizens from industry excesses is crucial. Through the case study of California's ride share industry, policy makers, advocates, and Americans more generally can garner a clear understanding of the obstacles facing regulatory ventures.

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Navigating the Information Disorder: A Canadian Perspective

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I. Abstract

Canada faces growing legal challenges in regulating information disorder—comprising misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM)—in the digital era. This paper explores Canada’s legal landscape in addressing MDM, aiming to inform both policy development and legal practice

The paper first defines and distinguishes the three types of information disorder. Misinformation is false but unintentional, disinformation is deliberately false with harmful intent, and malinformation is true content used misleadingly to inflict harm. Understanding these distinctions is key to crafting effective legal responses. The analysis then turns to digital catalysts, particularly the role of social media algorithms and the decentralized nature of online platforms, which accelerate the spread of MDM and complicate enforcement.

Crucially, the paper considers constitutional concerns, especially around freedom of expression. While expression is a protected right in Canada, it is not absolute. Regulating harmful content without overstepping these boundaries remains a central legal tension. The study reviews existing Canadian legal frameworks—such as the Criminal Code, Competition Act, and Canada Elections Act—that address aspects of information disorder. However, significant gaps remain in implementation and enforcement in digital spaces.

Overall, the paper highlights the need for clearer regulatory strategies and improved legal tools that balance rights with harm reduction. A nuanced understanding of information disorder’s nature and impact can guide more effective legal and policy responses, ensuring a more resilient and informed digital public sphere.

Keywords: Information disorder, Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation, Digital regulation, Social media algorithms, Online platforms, Freedom of expression, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Criminal Code, Competition Act, Canada Elections Act, Legal frameworks, Policy development, Rights and harm reduction

II. Introduction

In the digital age, the information disorder, consisting of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM), has become a pervasive challenge, posing serious threats to democracy, public discourse, and individual autonomy (Bannerman, 2020). Canada, like many other countries, faces a pressing need to address this issue through effective legal mechanisms (Kandel, 2020). This paper argues that Canada must confront the multifaceted legal challenges posed by MDM and develop comprehensive solutions to regulate it effectively. At the heart of this argument lies the recognition that the information disorder undermines the foundational principles of democracy, including the right to access accurate information and the ability to make informed decisions (Kandel, 2020). In response, Canada must prioritize the protection of these principles by ensuring that its legal frameworks are robust and adaptable to the digital age.

Canada's Constitution enshrines fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, which must be carefully balanced against the need to prevent the spread of false information. Regulatory measures must therefore be carefully crafted to respect these rights while also safeguarding the public interest. Existing legal frameworks in Canada, such as Section 181 of the Criminal Code, The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, provide a foundation for addressing information disorder by establishing standards for truthfulness in public communications, regulating broadcasting content to ensure accuracy and fairness, and safeguarding the right to freedom of expression while achieving equilibrium with other societal values such as the protection of individuals from harm caused by false or misleading information (Bannerman, 2020). However, they need to be updated and strengthened. New legislation or amendments to existing laws are necessary to provide authorities with the tools they need to combat information disorder effectively. International perspectives also play a crucial role in shaping Canada's approach to regulating MDM. As a global community, it is imperative to draw lessons from the experiences and regulatory frameworks established in various jurisdictions to develop effective strategies. By analyzing approaches taken by other countries, including the US, EU, and the UK, Canada can gain valuable insights into what works and what doesn't in the fight against information disorder. Emerging regulatory strategies, such as those involving technology platforms, also offer potential solutions to the problem of MDM.

This paper argues that in response to the proliferation of information disorder in the digital age, Canada must address multifaceted legal challenges and develop comprehensive solutions to regulate MDM effectively. By analyzing existing legal frameworks, international perspectives, and emerging regulatory strategies, this paper aims to provide insights that can inform policy development and legal practice, thus safeguarding the integrity of information.

III. Information Disorder: Definitions

Information disorder, encompassing misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, represents a significant challenge in the digital age (Kandel, 2020). The term refers to the spread of false or misleading information without regard for the outcome. Information disorder can take on various forms, including misleading content, fabricated stories, and manipulated images or videos (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). These forms of information disorder can be disseminated through various channels, including social media platforms, where they can quickly reach a wide audience. Grade 1 of information disorder is characterized by a milder form, where individuals share false information without the explicit intent of causing harm (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). Grade 2 is a more moderate level, as individuals develop and spread false information with the intention of gaining financial or political benefits, but not necessarily with the aim of causing harm; however, it could easily cause 'harm' indirectly or directly (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). On the other hand, Grade 3 of information disorder represents a severe form, where individuals deliberately create and disseminate false information with the explicit intent of causing harm to others (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023).

The proliferation of information disorder, particularly on social media platforms, has become a pressing concern in contemporary society. While these platforms offer unprecedented connectivity and information access, they also provide fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of false information (Persily & Tucker, 2018). The decentralized and algorithm-driven nature of social media allows information disorder to spread quickly and widely, often without adequate oversight or moderation (Persily & Tucker, 2018). This spread of information has also created challenges, as malicious actors can exploit these platforms to spread false or misleading information. The viral nature of social media amplifies the reach of information disorder, making it difficult to contain once it has been disseminated (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). One of the key factors contributing to the successful spread of information disorder on social media is the algorithmic design of these platforms (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023).

Algorithms are designed to prioritize content that is likely to engage users with intense emotions, as highly motivating responses for engagement often lead to the amplification of sensational or controversial information.

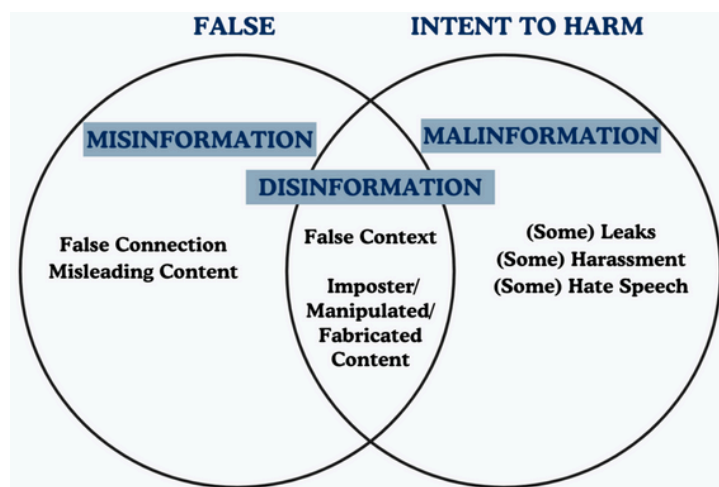
The impact of MDM on democratic societies is profound. It can erode trust in institutions, polarize public discourse, and undermine democratic processes (Bannerman, 2020). Information disorder can be used to manipulate public opinion, sow division, and undermine the credibility of legitimate sources of information. In extreme cases, information disorder can incite violence or lead to harmful behaviors, highlighting the urgent need to address this issue (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). By understanding the nature of the information disorder and its impact on democratic societies, policymakers and stakeholders can work towards developing effective strategies to mitigate its effects and promote a more informed and resilient public discourse.

Misinformation, as defined by Pérez-Escolar et al. (2023), encompasses a wide range of false or inaccurate information that is disseminated, often unintentionally, to deceive or mislead individuals. This can include misleading content, which presents information in a way that distorts or misrepresents the truth, fabricated stories that are entirely false and created to deceive, and manipulated images or videos that are altered to convey a false narrative (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). Misinformation may seem harmless on the surface, but it can still contribute to confusion and misunderstandings. While there may be no clear intent to harm, it can lead to incorrect beliefs or actions based on false information that can result in harm (Sawchuk, 2024). Disinformation is intentionally false and meant to cause harm. It can have serious consequences, such as influencing public opinion, destabilizing governments, or inciting violence (Sawchuk, 2024). Unlike misinformation, which may be spread inadvertently, disinformation is intentionally created and disseminated with the aim of misleading others (Cummings & Kong, 2019). This distinction is important because it highlights the malicious intent behind the creation and dissemination of disinformation, which is often used to manipulate public opinion or undermine trust in institutions. Malinformation refers to true information that is shared with the intent to harm a person, group, or organization (Cummings & Kong, 2019). This can include the unauthorized sharing of personal or private information, such as spreading rumors or releasing private correspondence, with the aim of damaging someone's reputation or causing harm (Sawchuk, 2024).

Characteristic	Misinformation	Disinformation	Malinformation
Intentionality	Unintentional	Intentional	Intentional
Falsity	Present	Present	Absent (based on true information)
Intent to Harm	Absent	Present	Present

The definitions of these terms also change internationally. A breakdown of definitions in Canada, the US, the EU, and the UN is as follows:

Term	Canada	United States	European Union	United Nations
Misinformation	“False information that is not intended to cause harm.” — Canadian Centre for Cyber Security (2022)	“False, but not created or shared with the intention of causing harm.” — US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (n.d.)	“False or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can still be harmful.” — European Commission (EDAP) (2020)	“Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.” — UNDP (2024)
Disinformation	“False information that is intended to manipulate, cause damage, or guide people, organizations, and countries in the wrong direction.” — Canadian Centre for Cyber Security (2022)	“Deliberately created to mislead, harm, or manipulate a person, social group, organization, or country.” — US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (n.d.)	“False or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain and which may cause public harm.” — European Commission (EDAP) (2020)	“Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.” — UNDP (2024)
Malinformation	“Information that stems from the truth but is often exaggerated in a way that misleads and causes potential harm.” — Canadian Centre for Cyber Security (2022)	“Based on fact, but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate.” — US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (n.d.)	No specific definition; often included under disinformation.	“Information that is based on real facts, but manipulated to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.” — UNDP (2024)



Adapted from Kandel, 2020

Distinguishing between misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation is crucial in understanding the intent and impact of false or misleading information and shaping responses to address these challenges effectively. Intent and impact are distinct, as a good intent can have a negative impact and vice versa. Each term reflects a different level of intent and harm associated with the spread of false information (Sawchuk, 2024). Misinformation implies inadvertent sharing of false information, while malinformation and disinformation suggest varying degrees of deliberate intent to harm or deceive (Linkov et al., 2019). This distinction via intent is essential in determining the appropriate legal and regulatory responses.

For instance, laws targeting disinformation might focus on deliberate attempts to deceive or manipulate, while laws addressing misinformation might emphasize promoting accuracy and transparency (Sawchuk, 2024). These laws could require platforms and individuals to take reasonable steps to verify the accuracy of the information they share, particularly if it has the potential to cause harm. For example, Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) targets both misinformation and disinformation (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, 2019). Under POFMA, individuals or entities found guilty of spreading false information can be fined or imprisoned (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, 2019). The law also empowers government ministers to issue correction orders or take-down notices for false information (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, 2019). This approach aims to attend to both deliberate and unintentional misinformation by holding individuals and platforms accountable for the accuracy of the information they share. Such a regulatory framework must be transparent, accountable, and subject to judicial oversight to prevent abuse.

Differentiating between these terms can inform the development of laws and regulations aimed at addressing harmful content online. The distinctions also play a significant role in determining platform responsibility. Platforms may be expected to take more aggressive action against disinformation, where there is a clear intent to deceive, compared to misinformation, which may be more about errors, misunderstandings, or a lack of knowledge. These distinctions can inform the development of policies and practices for content moderation and user engagement on digital platforms. Moreover, these distinctions can influence how legal action is pursued against individuals or entities spreading false information. Proving malicious intent may be required for certain legal actions related to disinformation or malinformation.

Internationally, varying definitions of these terms can complicate efforts to harmonize laws and regulations across borders. For example, a country that defines disinformation narrowly may have different legal standards for holding platforms accountable compared to a country with a broader definition. This can create challenges when addressing cross-border issues, such as the spread of harmful content across different jurisdictions. Differences in definitions can also influence how countries engage in international policy discussions and cooperation. Countries with stricter definitions of disinformation may advocate for more robust international agreements and enforcement mechanisms, while those with broader definitions may prioritize initiatives aimed at promoting media literacy and information sharing. Additionally, differing definitions can affect how international legal frameworks, such as those developed by the United Nations or the EU, are interpreted and implemented by member states. Countries may apply their own definitions of misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation when implementing international agreements, potentially leading to inconsistencies in enforcement and accountability.

IV. Canadian Legal Frameworks

The Canadian legal framework provides a foundation for addressing information disorder, encompassing laws and regulations that aim to prevent harm caused by false or misleading information while respecting freedom of expression. One key aspect of this framework is the Criminal Code of Canada, which includes Section 181, introduced in 2003, prohibiting the spreading of false news with the intent to injure or alarm any person (Hamilton & Robinson, 2019). This provision targets information disorder intended to cause harm or panic, emphasizing the responsibility of individuals to disseminate accurate information (Havelin, 2021). Additionally, the Competition Act's Sections 52 and 74.01 address false or misleading advertising, encompassing misinformation that deceives the public (Havelin, 2021).

During elections, the Canada Elections Act's Section 91 prohibits making false statements about a candidate, including spreading misinformation (Hamilton & Robinson, 2019). This aimed to ensure the integrity of the electoral process by preventing the dissemination of false information that could influence voters. Moreover, the Broadcasting Act's Section 5(1)(b) mandates the Canadian broadcasting system to provide a reasonable opportunity for the public to be exposed to the expression of differing views on matters of public concern, relevant in confronting one-sided or misleading information (Hamilton & Robinson, 2019). This provision is relevant in facing one-sided or misleading information by promoting diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the Canadian Human Rights Act's Section 13 prohibits the communication of hate messages by telephone or on the internet (Havelin, 2021). While not directly targeting information disorder, this provision can encompass false information intended to promote hatred against an identifiable group, highlighting the broader societal impacts of information disorder. The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) plays a crucial role in regulating the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors, ensuring that information disseminated through these media is accurate, reliable, and in the public interest. The CRTC sets standards for content, including news and information programming, to ensure that it is truthful and fair. Additionally, the CRTC oversees licensing and compliance for broadcasters and telecommunications providers, further strengthening its ability to regulate the dissemination of information (Havelin, 2021). However, the CRTC does not encompass social media.

However, these regulations must be considered in conjunction with constitutional principles, particularly freedom of expression, which is protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms outlines freedom of expression as a Fundamental Freedom and states under section 2(b) that “2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression including freedom of the press and other media of communication” (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, S2(b)). While freedom of expression is a fundamental right, it is not considered absolute in Canada. This constitutional protection of freedom of expression is fundamental to the functioning of a democratic society, as it allows for the free exchange of ideas and opinions.

The challenge of maintaining a middle ground between freedom of speech and the need to deal with information disorder is compounded by the prevalence of social media platforms.

Social media platforms have revolutionized the way information is shared and consumed, enabling individuals to interact with a vast array of content and opinions, with these platforms becoming primary sources of information for many individuals (Goldzweig et al., 2018). However, the viral nature of social media can amplify the reach of information disorder, making it difficult to contain once it has been disseminated (Bannerman, 2020). This has led to calls for increased regulation of social media platforms to combat the spread of information disorder as well as some pushing for them to be recategorized as broadcasters (Bannerman, 2020).

In addressing information disorder, it is crucial to consider the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders, including governments, media platforms, and users, within the legal framework. Governments play a critical role in setting regulations and enforcing laws that govern the dissemination of information, ensuring that legal frameworks effectively address information disorder. Media platforms, as intermediaries, should also play a role in moderating content and preventing the spread of information disorder on their platforms through mechanisms such as fact-checking and content moderation. While not a current reality, users should also have a responsibility to critically evaluate information before sharing it and to report MDM when they encounter it. Understanding and fulfilling these roles and responsibilities are essential for ensuring the effectiveness of the legal framework in undertaking MDM.

V. Case Studies

In Canada, legal responses to information disorder have been shaped by a range of defamation and hate speech cases that have tested the boundaries of free speech and the responsibilities of individuals and media organizations. These cases highlight the complexities involved in regulating false information and protecting vulnerable communities from harm.

Grant v. Torstar Corp. [2009]

Grant v. Torstar Corp., 2009 SCC 61, is a landmark case that has reshaped Canadian defamation law, particularly in the context of freedom of expression, responsible journalism, and reputation protection. This case stands out for its profound impact on the legal landscape, providing clarity on the boundaries of defamation law and introducing the "responsible communication" defense. Prior to *Grant v. Torstar Corp.*, defamation law in Canada primarily focused on protecting individuals' reputations from false and damaging statements.

However, the case recognized the importance of balancing this protection with the fundamental right to freedom of expression, especially in matters of public interest (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). This recognition was crucial in acknowledging the role of the media and other communicators in facilitating public debate and democratic discourse. One of the key contributions of *Grant v. Torstar Corp.* was the introduction of the "responsible communication" defense (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). This defense allows for a more nuanced analysis of defamation cases, particularly those involving matters of public interest. It requires courts to consider whether the defendant acted responsibly in publishing the allegedly defamatory statements, taking into account factors such as the seriousness of the allegation, the public importance of the matter, the urgency of the communication, and the reliability of the source (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). By introducing this defense, the Supreme Court of Canada sought to encourage responsible journalism and robust public debate while still providing a remedy for individuals whose reputations have been unjustly harmed. The defense has since been recognized as a crucial tool in combating MDM and defamation, as it incentivizes journalists and publishers to verify information and report responsibly on matters of public interest.

The case of *Grant v. Torstar Corp.*, 2009 SCC 61, originated from an article published by the Toronto Star concerning Peter Grant, a well-known businessman, and his endeavors to construct a golf course on ecologically delicate land (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). The article, written by Bill Schiller, a feature writer for the Toronto Star, highlighted Grant's significant financial contributions to the Conservative Party and various politicians (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). It suggested that Grant's financial support had garnered him favor with the government, particularly in his efforts to acquire crown land for the golf course project (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). The article also raised concerns from local residents and environmentalists about the potential environmental impact of the golf course development. Grant vehemently denied the implications of the article and argued that it had damaged his reputation and business interests. He filed a defamation suit against Torstar Corp., the publisher of the Toronto Star, seeking damages for libel. The case proceeded through the Canadian court system, with the Ontario Superior Court initially ruling in favor of Grant, finding that the article was defamatory (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). However, the Ontario Court of Appeal overturned this decision, holding that the article was protected by the defense of responsible journalism and the public interest. The case eventually reached the Supreme Court of Canada, where the central issue was whether the responsible communication defense should be recognized in Canadian defamation law. The Supreme Court, in a landmark decision, held that the defense should indeed be recognized, emphasizing the importance of freedom of expression in matters of public interest (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*).

The responsible communication defense introduced in *Grant v. Torstar Corp.* has proven to be a significant and effective tool in combating misinformation and defamation in Canada. By incentivizing journalists and publishers to uphold high standards of journalism, this defense helps ensure that the public receives accurate and reliable information on matters of public interest. This is crucial in a digital age where misinformation can spread rapidly and have serious consequences. One of the key strengths of the responsible communication defense is its ability to serve as a safeguard against frivolous defamation claims. Without this defense, individuals or organizations could potentially silence legitimate reporting or criticism by threatening defamation suits, which could hinder the public's ability to access important information. While not tested in the same manner, requiring plaintiffs to demonstrate that the publication was not made responsibly, the defense helps protect the public interest in receiving diverse and robust media coverage.

In *Grant v. Torstar Corp.*, the Supreme Court's references to statutes, regulations, and previous cases played a crucial role in shaping the outcome and broader implications of the decision. One of the key legal instruments cited was the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which enshrines the right to freedom of expression as a fundamental freedom. This citation underscored the Court's recognition of the importance of protecting this fundamental right in the context of defamation law. The Court also referenced previous defamation cases, such as *Hill v. Church of Scientology of Toronto*, which established important principles regarding the consideration of freedom of expression and the protection of reputation (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*). In *Hill*, the Court emphasized the need to consider the broader context of a statement when assessing its defamatory nature, highlighting the importance of context in defamation law. By referencing this and other cases, the Court in *Grant v. Torstar Corp.* demonstrated a commitment to interpreting defamation law in a manner that upholds fundamental rights and values, including freedom of expression (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*).

The outcome of *Grant v. Torstar Corp.* was a landmark decision that affirmed the importance of protecting freedom of expression, particularly in cases involving matters of public interest. The Supreme Court's ruling set a precedent for responsible journalism, emphasizing the need for accurate and fair reporting on issues that are of public concern. One of the key implications of the case is the establishment of a framework for courts to assess the responsibility of publishers when reporting on matters of public interest. This framework strikes a balance between protecting individual reputations and ensuring robust public discourse (*Grant v. Torstar Corp.*).

R v. Keegstra [1990]

R. v. Keegstra was a landmark case in Canadian legal history that dealt with the issue of hate speech and its limits under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The case centered around James Keegstra, a high school teacher in Alberta who taught anti-Semitic views to his students, including denying the Holocaust and promoting conspiracy theories about Jewish control of world affairs (R v. Keegstra). Keegstra's teachings came to the attention of school authorities and eventually led to his dismissal. He was charged under section 319(2) of the Criminal Code, which prohibits the willful promotion of hatred against an identifiable group (R v. Keegstra). Keegstra was convicted at trial, but the Alberta Court of Appeal overturned the conviction, ruling that the law violated the right to freedom of expression under the Charter (R v. Keegstra). The case ultimately reached the Supreme Court of Canada, which heard arguments in 1989. In its landmark decision, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of section 319(2) of the Criminal Code, ruling that the law was a reasonable limit on freedom of expression under the Charter (R v. Keegstra). The Court held that the harm caused by hate speech justified the limitation on freedom of expression and that promoting hatred against an identifiable group was not a legitimate form of expression protected by the Charter (R v. Keegstra). The decision in R. v. Keegstra established an important precedent regarding the limits of freedom of expression in Canada. It confirmed that hate speech laws were a valid tool for addressing discrimination and promoting social harmony, even if they restricted certain forms of expression. The case highlighted the importance of balancing individual rights with the protection of vulnerable groups and set the stage for future cases involving hate speech and freedom of expression in Canada.

The outcome of R. v. Keegstra highlighted the judiciary's role in considering competing rights and interests. While recognizing the seriousness of the infringement on freedom of expression, the Court determined that the harm caused by hate propaganda justified the limitation imposed by section 319(2) (R v. Keegstra). This decision underscored the importance of safeguarding vulnerable communities from the harmful effects of misinformation and defamation. Moreover, the legal response in R. v. Keegstra emphasized the responsibility of educators and public figures in disseminating accurate information and fostering inclusive environments (R v. Keegstra). Fast forward to the present day, where the world is grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, two Ontario doctors, Dr. Patrick Phillips and Dr. Kulvinder Kaur Gill, have come under review for allegedly promoting misinformation about COVID-19 early in the pandemic (Loriggio, 2021) (Nicholson & Bellmare, 2020).

While these cases are still in the process of being brought to provincial and federal court levels, *R. v. Keegstra* provides a precedent for the legal consideration of the responsibility of professionals in providing accurate information.

Notably, both *Grant v. Torstar Corp* and *R.v. Keegstra* cases predate the widespread use of social media platforms, which have since transformed the landscape of MDM dissemination. It is important to note that media and social media are not the same entities. Media is currently bound by legal frameworks applied to media companies, broadcasters, newspapers, and publishers, while social media does not fall under that same categorization as 'platforms', resulting in these regulations not applying to it. With the rise of social media, the spread of false information has become more rapid and widespread, posing new challenges for legal responses. Unlike traditional media outlets, social media platforms often operate on a global scale, making it difficult to apply traditional legal frameworks that are based on national jurisdiction. False information can be shared, liked, and commented on within seconds, reaching a wide audience before it can be effectively addressed. This rapid dissemination can amplify the harmful effects of information disorder, making it more challenging for legal systems to mitigate its impact. Moreover, the anonymity afforded by social media platforms can make it difficult to hold individuals accountable for spreading information disorder. Unlike traditional media outlets, where journalists and editors can be held responsible for false information, social media allows users to spread MDM without revealing their identity. This anonymity complicates legal responses, as identifying and prosecuting individuals who spread information disorder can be challenging. In light of these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need to adapt legal responses to address the unique characteristics of social media.

The problem of not having any legal precedence in online information disorder in Canada is a significant challenge. While Canada has laws that prohibit hate speech, defamation, and other forms of harmful speech, these laws were not designed to specifically address the unique challenges posed by online information disorder. Without clear legal precedents, it can be difficult for law enforcement agencies and courts to determine when online information disorder crosses the line into illegal speech. This ambiguity can create a chilling effect on legitimate speech and hinder efforts to undertake MDM effectively. Furthermore, the transnational nature of the internet presents challenges in enforcing Canadian laws against online MDM. Much of the content consumed by Canadians is hosted on servers located outside of the country, making it difficult to hold foreign entities accountable under Canadian law.

To address these challenges, there is a need for comprehensive legal frameworks that specifically address online information disorder. This could include laws that require online platforms to take proactive measures to address the information disorder, such as fact-checking and labeling false information. It could also involve mechanisms for swift and effective enforcement against individuals and entities that spread information disorder online.

VI. International Perspectives

There is a wide array of policy responses and solutions to information disorder globally. However, these measures are often implemented at a national level, with limited coordination or collaboration between countries (Post & Maduro, 2020). This lack of international synthesis on effective strategies for tackling information disorder makes it challenging for policymakers to make informed decisions based on the experiences of other nations. As a result, countries have repeatedly tried similar approaches to addressing information disorder in recent years, but these efforts have met with limited success (Post & Maduro, 2020). There is a need for greater international cooperation and knowledge-sharing to develop more effective and coordinated strategies for addressing information disorder globally.

However, two significant pieces of international legislation, **the Digital Services Act (DSA) in the EU, introduced in 2024, and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act** in the United States, introduced in 1996, represent significant pieces of international legislation that offer different approaches to addressing the responsibilities of online platforms regarding user-generated content.

The DSA, as outlined in its objective, aims to establish a harmonized legal framework for digital services, including online platforms, to ensure their accountability and a safer online environment. It introduces the concept of "gatekeeper platforms" that are subject to stricter obligations and liability for illegal content and activities on their platforms (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, 2022). Non-gatekeeper platforms also have responsibilities to address illegal content, but with more limited liability (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, 2022). On the other hand, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act in the US provides broad immunity to online platforms from liability for content posted by their users, as when the act was written, user-generated content was less prominent. This immunity allows platforms to moderate content without being treated as publishers, thereby fostering innovation and growth in the internet sector in the US (47 U.S.C. § 230(c)(1)).

One key difference between the two approaches is their treatment of liability. The DSA imposes stricter obligations and liability on platforms, especially gatekeepers, for illegal content on their platforms, suggesting the DSA is rights-based (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, 2022). In contrast, Section 230 shields platforms from liability, enabling them to moderate content without facing legal repercussions. Another difference lies in their enforcement mechanisms (47 U.S.C. § 230(c)(1)). The DSA proposes significant fines for non-compliance, with measures for supervision and oversight (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, 2022). In contrast, the protections afforded by Section 230 are primarily through legal challenges and court rulings, with platforms being held accountable for moderation decisions if deemed to be acting in bad faith (47 U.S.C. § 230(c)(1)). Furthermore, Section 230 applies to US companies domestically, whereas the DSA applies to all digital companies with services in the EU. Critics of the DSA argue that its stringent requirements, particularly for gatekeeper platforms, could stifle innovation and hinder the growth of digital services in the EU. In contrast, Section 230 has been credited with fostering innovation and the growth of the internet in the US by providing a legal framework that encourages platforms to host user-generated content without the fear of legal liability. Arguably, the rigorous requirements of the DSA respond to the failure of Section 230 to protect the rights of users. The DSA and Section 230 represent different approaches to addressing the responsibilities of online platforms regarding user-generated content. While the DSA aims to establish a harmonized legal framework with stricter obligations and liability, Section 230 provides broad immunity to platforms, fostering innovation and growth in the internet sector (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, 2022) (47 U.S.C. § 230(c)(1)). Understanding these contrasting approaches can provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of different regulatory models and inform discussions on international cooperation and knowledge-sharing in addressing information disorder on a global scale.

Neither the DSA nor Section 230 uses the term "information disorder" specifically. However, both pieces of legislation address issues related to content moderation and the responsibilities of online platforms regarding the content posted by their users, which are often associated with the broader concept of information disorder, including misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. They both play a significant role in shaping the regulatory environment, or lack of regulatory environment, for online platforms and their approach to content moderation. By establishing legal frameworks that define the responsibilities of online platforms regarding content posted by users, these laws aim to mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation and other forms of information disorder online.

VII. Regulatory Challenges

Regulating information disorder online presents complex challenges that necessitate holistic solutions. A key challenge stems from the sheer volume of information available on the internet and the speed at which it can be disseminated. The decentralized, extranational nature of online platforms, coupled with the anonymity they afford users, further complicates efforts to track and identify the sources of MDM. Additionally, algorithms that prioritize meaningful, engaging content can inadvertently contribute to the spread of information disorder by amplifying sensational or provocative material. Jurisdictional issues compound the challenge of regulating MDM online, as the internet transcends national borders. Unlike traditional media, online platforms often operate across multiple jurisdictions and may be subject to different legal standards. This makes it difficult for regulators to enforce compliance with MDM regulations and hold platforms accountable for the spread of false information. A social media platform based in one country may be subject to different legal standards than a similar platform based in another country. However, it is important to note that most social media platforms are based in the US. This disparity in legal standards can create challenges in determining which jurisdiction's laws apply and how they should be enforced. These challenges are exacerbated by differences in legal standards and enforcement mechanisms between jurisdictions, creating gaps that allow information disorder to proliferate in areas with weaker regulations.

For instance, misinformation originating in countries with lax regulations can evade accountability in nations with stricter laws, underscoring the need for regulatory equivalency rather than just international cooperation. A pertinent example is the spread of misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2020, conspiracy theories such as the "lab leak" theory, which falsely suggested that the virus was artificially created and intentionally released, circulated widely online. This misinformation, initially gaining traction in the United States, spread globally, including to countries like China, where it was amplified by state media despite stringent information controls (Savoia et al., 2022). This situation demonstrates that while international cooperation is important, effective regulation also requires equivalent standards across countries. If individual nations adopted proactive regulatory frameworks similar to the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), which mandates companies to self-regulate and address misinformation proactively, rather than reactively responding to challenges, the impact of cross-border misinformation could be significantly mitigated.

Ethical considerations and trade-offs play a crucial role in the regulation of speech in the digital realm, especially concerning misinformation. While tackling misinformation is essential to protect the public from its harmful effects, regulatory efforts must also respect the fundamental right to freedom of expression and the open exchange of ideas. This balancing act requires careful consideration of the potential impacts of regulatory measures on freedom of speech, as well as the potential for unintended consequences such as censorship or the stifling of legitimate debate. A key ethical consideration in regulating misinformation is the potential for overreach and censorship. The line between misinformation and legitimate speech can be blurry, and efforts to regulate misinformation must be careful not to inadvertently suppress valid opinions or alternative viewpoints. Additionally, the use of automated content moderation tools to identify and remove misinformation can raise concerns about the fairness and accuracy of such tools, as well as the potential for bias or error. Another ethical consideration is the impact of regulatory measures on freedom of expression.

While seeing to MDM is important, regulatory efforts must consider both protecting the public from harmful information and allowing for the free flow of ideas and information. Overly restrictive regulations can infringe on individuals' right to freedom of expression and limit their ability to access information and engage in public discourse. Moreover, there is a trade-off between the effectiveness of regulatory measures and their impact on freedom of expression. Stricter regulations may be more effective in combating information disorder, but could also have a negative effect on free speech. Conversely, less restrictive regulations may preserve freedom of expression but may be less effective in addressing the spread of information disorder. Addressing these ethical considerations requires a multifaceted approach that takes into account the unique nature of the digital environment.

VIII. Policy Responses and Solutions

Fact-checking initiatives are integral to combating the proliferation of MDM online, providing a crucial line of defense against the spread of false or misleading information. Organizations such as FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and Snopes play a vital role in this effort, employing teams of researchers and journalists to independently verify the accuracy of claims circulating in the media and on social platforms. These fact-checkers rigorously assess the credibility of sources, cross-reference information with reliable data, and consult experts to ensure the accuracy of their findings. One notable example of the impact of fact-checking initiatives is their role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the virus spread rapidly around the world, so too did misinformation and false claims about the virus and potential treatments. Fact-checkers played a crucial role in debunking these falsehoods, providing the public with accurate information and helping to prevent the spread of MDM. Through the International Fact-Checking Network, fact-checkers from around the world collaborated to verify claims related to COVID-19, ensuring that accurate information was disseminated to the public (International Fact-Checking Network, n.d.). The effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives lies in their ability to provide the public with reliable, evidence-based information. By debunking false claims and providing accurate information, fact-checkers help to build trust in the media and promote informed decision-making. However, despite their effectiveness, fact-checking initiatives face challenges, including the sheer volume of information disorder online, the speed at which false information can spread, and the challenge of reaching audiences who may be predisposed to believe false claims.

Media literacy programs play a crucial role in equipping individuals with the skills to navigate the complexities of the digital information landscape. For instance, the MediaWise initiative in the United States has been instrumental in providing media literacy training to young people (MediaWise, n.d.). Through workshops, educational materials, and online resources, MediaWise teaches participants how to critically evaluate information online, identify MDM, and differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources (MediaWise, n.d.). By empowering young people with these skills, MediaWise aims to cultivate a generation of informed and discerning consumers of information who can confidently navigate the digital world. Similarly, the European Commission has taken steps to promote media literacy across Europe through initiatives such as the European Media Literacy Week (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This initiative seeks to raise awareness about the importance of media literacy and provide individuals with the tools they need to critically engage with media and information. By funding projects that promote media literacy, the European Commission aims to empower citizens to become active participants in the digital information landscape, capable of critically evaluating information and making informed decisions (Chan, 2023). By teaching individuals how to critically evaluate information, media literacy programs not only help to reduce the spread of information disorder but also empower individuals to become more engaged and informed citizens. However, with increasingly sophisticated fake content, it's unrealistic to expect individuals, especially those without technical expertise, to accurately MDM. While skepticism is important, placing the responsibility on the public to detect MDM is unfair and ineffective.

The burden should lie with platforms and authorities to implement robust detection and verification systems, ensuring the public isn't solely responsible for navigating complex digital misinformation. As the digital information landscape continues to evolve, media literacy programs will play an increasingly important role in fostering a more informed, resilient, and democratic society.

Regulatory frameworks are often seen as a necessary tool in addressing the information disorder, particularly in the era of digitalization, where information spreads rapidly across borders. For instance, the French law, loi n° 2018-1202, Law Against the Manipulation of Information, mandates that online platform operators create mechanisms for users to report false information that could disrupt public order or distort the accuracy of the vote (Jang et al., 2019). Platforms must review and act on these reports within 48 hours, either removing or flagging misleading content, with a focus on protecting electoral integrity. The law also mandates transparency, requiring platforms to report back to the government on their actions. While these regulations are intended to uphold the integrity of information shared online, they have sparked debates about the potential for censorship and the limitation of freedom of expression. The internet transcends national boundaries, making it challenging to ensure that all online platforms comply with the same set of rules. This issue is further complicated by varying cultural and legal norms, as what constitutes MDM or harmful content may differ from one country to another. Moreover, the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks in tackling MDM is often questioned. Critics argue that such regulations may lead to overreach by governments and restrict legitimate forms of expression. Despite these challenges, regulatory frameworks can still play a vital role in addressing MDM. By establishing clear guidelines and accountability mechanisms for online platforms, these regulations can encourage greater transparency and responsibility in the dissemination of information. However, striking the right balance between regulation and freedom of expression remains a complex and ongoing challenge for policymakers around the world.

In Australia, the government has taken proactive steps to address MDM through legislative measures, recognizing the increasing influence of online platforms on public discourse. A significant focus of the Australian government's efforts has been to increase transparency around online advertising, particularly political advertising, which has been a notable channel for the spread of misinformation during elections. The rise of deep fakes highlights the need for robust legal responses to combat the spread of false information online.

Legislation mandates that digital platforms must clearly label political advertisements and disclose key details such as who paid for the advertisement, how much was spent, and the specific demographic or geographic targeting employed. These measures ensure that voters can trace the origins of the advertisements they encounter, making it easier to identify potentially misleading content and understand the interests driving it (Chen et al., 2023). In addition to regulatory oversight, Australia has made media literacy a central component of its MDM strategy. The government recognizes that equipping individuals with critical thinking skills is essential for combating the effects of misinformation (Chen et al., 2023). By implementing these measures, the Australian government aims to create a more transparent and accountable online environment that is resilient to information disorder.

IX. Future Trends and Directions

In the realm of emerging challenges, the evolution of information disorder is intertwined with advancements in technology. Deepfake technology, for instance, allows for the creation of highly convincing fake audio and video content, making it increasingly difficult to discern truth from falsehood. As this technology becomes more accessible and sophisticated, it poses a significant threat to public trust and the integrity of information online. Deepfakes can be used to create realistic-looking videos of public figures saying or doing things they never actually did, leading to the manipulation of public opinion. The proliferation of deep fake technology presents an increasingly credible risk to the integrity of democratic processes and the administration of justice. On election day, for instance, the dissemination of a fabricated video falsely portraying the death of a political candidate could materially distort public perception and interfere with the free and fair functioning of the electoral process. Similarly, the introduction of deep fake-generated evidence into judicial proceedings may undermine evidentiary standards, erode public confidence in the legal system, and compromise the principle of due process. These risks warrant urgent consideration within regulatory and legal frameworks governing information integrity, electoral conduct, and evidentiary admissibility. Deepfake technology can be used to create fake news stories that are designed to deceive and manipulate audiences.

Existing laws may need to be updated to address the unique challenges posed by deepfake technology, such as the creation and dissemination of fake audio and video content. Additionally, efforts to educate the public about deep fakes and how to identify them are crucial in mitigating their impact on public trust and the integrity of information online.

To address these challenges, future legal responses and regulatory strategies must adapt to the evolving nature of the information disorder. One potential approach is to introduce regulations that require social media platforms to implement transparency measures regarding the origin and veracity of content. This could involve labeling or flagging disputed information, as well as providing users with more control over the content they are exposed to, or even the opposite, where real content is subject to verification stamping. Another strategy could involve enhancing the accountability of platforms for the content they host. This could be achieved through legislation that holds platforms liable for the spread of false information, similar to the legal frameworks governing traditional media outlets.

Furthermore, continued research and policy development are essential to effectively address information disorder. This includes further exploration of the psychology of the information disorder, the development of new technologies to detect and address false information, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of different regulatory approaches. By fostering collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and technology companies, we can develop holistic strategies to address information disorder and promote a more informed public discourse.

X. Conclusion

By 1972, 4 years after the founding of the CRTC, the television broadcasting regulator in Canada, around 75% of Canadians had access to daily television (Williams, 2001). In 2024, 81.9% of Canadians use social media daily (Kemp, 2024). Despite this widespread use, there has been a notable absence of significant legislation regulating social media content in Canada, reflecting a similar situation in the US. The rapid proliferation of social media platforms and their integration into everyday life have fundamentally altered the way information is disseminated and consumed.

Unlike traditional media outlets, social media platforms operate in a largely unregulated environment, allowing the information disorder to spread rapidly and unchecked, with the current patchwork of legislation failing to regulate it effectively.

The phenomenon of information disorder poses significant challenges in the digital age, requiring comprehensive and multifaceted responses from policymakers, researchers, and society as a whole. Legal frameworks, such as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Digital Services Act in the EU, play a crucial role in defining the responsibilities of online platforms regarding user-generated content. The lack of coordination between countries often results in duplicated efforts and limited success in addressing information disorder. By sharing experiences and regulatory frameworks from different jurisdictions, countries can learn from one another and develop more effective, coordinated strategies to address information disorder on a global scale. Combating the information disorder requires a holistic and collaborative approach that balances the protection of fundamental rights with the need to address the harmful effects of false information. By implementing comprehensive legal frameworks, promoting international cooperation, and investing in fact-checking and media literacy programs, we can build a more resilient and informed society capable of navigating the complexities of the digital information age.

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International Interventions in Haiti: Stabilization Potential Sovereignty and Long-Term Development Policy Strategies

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I. Abstract

To what extent can U.S. and Caribbean-led interventions stabilize Haiti while ensuring its long-term sovereignty and development? This central question is explored through historical, economic, security, geopolitical, and social lenses. Key points include the legacy of foreign interventions that undermined Haitian institutions, the current dominance of armed gangs in Port-au-Prince, the challenges facing the UN-backed Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, and the country's reliance on remittances and foreign aid. Findings show that short-term stabilization efforts—such as military occupations and externally led aid programs—have often reinforced cycles of dependency, weakened governance, and fueled public distrust. The Haitian National Police remains under-resourced, while grassroots organizations and regional actors have had limited but meaningful impact. Policy implications call for a shift from foreign-led operations to Haitian-centered solutions. Security reforms must expand and professionalize the national police, while economic strategies should reduce aid dependency through investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and local entrepreneurship. Governance efforts must prioritize electoral legitimacy, decentralization, and anti-corruption measures. Regional bodies like CARICOM and the OAS should play stronger diplomatic and technical roles. Ultimately, sustainable stability requires empowering Haitian institutions and communities to lead their own development.

Keywords: Foreign Intervention, Gang Violence, Haiti, Instability, Caribbean Regional Security

II. Introduction

Haiti remains one of the most unstable nations of the Western Hemisphere. Armed groups currently control over 80% of its capital, Port Au Prince, heightening an already fragile security situation (Haiti, 2024). In particular, the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse intensified the country's political crisis, creating a vacuum in power that continued to undermine state institutions and leave governance in disarray. Corruption, mismanagement of the economy, and leadership failures have propelled instability, preventing Haiti from developing strong institutions capable of addressing its mounting problems. Despite receiving billions of dollars of aid, especially after the 2010 earthquake, more than 60% of Haiti's population continues to live below the poverty line, with limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities (Country Profile: Haiti, 2024). I would say something like "The country's economic troubles are also reflected by its GDP per capita. Standing at approximately \$1,700, it is one of the lowest numbers in the region and a sign of widespread poverty and a lack of viable economic opportunities in Haiti. (World Bank, 2023). The persistence of extreme poverty and insecurity highlights the failure of past foreign interventions, which have often prioritized short-term stabilization over long-term development and sovereignty. As Haiti continues to deal with ongoing crises, the question arises: to what extent can U.S. and Caribbean-led interventions stabilize Haiti while ensuring its long-term sovereignty and development? This study seeks to examine the historical impact of foreign involvement, evaluating both its successes and failures to determine whether a more sustainable, sovereignty-centered approach is possible, investigating the issue through economic, geopolitical, security, and social lenses. Furthermore, it explores alternative regional approaches that empower Haiti to establish resilient institutions, strengthen its economy, and reduce reliance on external assistance.

III. Historical Context

Haiti's political instability can be traced back to its founding as the first independent Black republic in 1804. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) successfully ended French colonial rule and slavery but left the new nation in a precarious position. In retaliation for its independence, France and other global powers refused to recognize Haiti, fearing it would inspire slave revolts in their own territories. As a result, world powers ostracized Haiti and the United States did not recognize it until 1862 (Office of the Historian, 2023).

In 1825, France required a payment of 150 million francs—today worth between \$20 and \$30 billion—to recognize Haitian independence, saddling the country with debt that thwarted development for more than a century (Rosalsky, 2021). This was mainly due to the fact that, to meet these payments, Haiti had to take high-interest loans from French banks, which kept the country in a cycle of debt for more than a century, severely limiting its economic development. (College de France, 2024).

While external financial burdens severely limited Haiti's economic prospects, internal challenges further undermined the young nation's stability. The struggle to build cohesive governance was compounded by leadership rivalries and regional divisions that emerged soon after independence. These internal fractures deepened Haiti's vulnerability during a critical period of nation-building.

The nation split into the northern Kingdom of Haiti under Henri Christophe and the southern Republic of Haiti led by Alexandre Pétion. (Daut, 2020). Christophe's authoritarian rule contrasted with Pétion's land distribution to small farmers, weakening central authority but promoting an agrarian society. Even after reunification under Jean-Pierre Boyer in 1820, Haiti remained fragile. Boyer, who ruled for 25 years, annexed Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic) in 1822, but his oppressive policies sparked resistance, leading to the Dominican Republic's independence in 1844 (Zapata, 2019). His downfall also began an era of extreme political instability with frequent coups and temporary, short-lived governments (MacLeod & Lawless, 2023).

Foreign influence and economic control intensified Haiti's instability. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European powers, particularly Germany and France, dominated Haiti's economy. German merchants, who controlled significant portions of Haiti's trade, armed political factions to protect their interests, while France maintained financial leverage through its banking institutions. Concerned about European influence in the Caribbean, the United States began asserting control over Haiti's finances. In 1910, American banks took over Haiti's National Bank, effectively controlling the country's treasury and customs revenues (Hudson, 2024). By 1915, Haiti's political volatility reached a breaking point with the assassination of President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam. His execution of 167 political prisoners led to mass uprisings, and he was killed by a mob in retaliation

Following the assassination of the Haitian leader, the U.S. military occupation from 1915 to 1934, initiated under President Woodrow Wilson following the assassination of the Haitian president, sought to restore order and maintain political and economic stability in the Caribbean (Office of the Historian, 2023). Under the pretext of preventing European influence in the Western Hemisphere, the occupation strengthened U.S. control over Haiti's financial institutions, restricted Haitian sovereignty, and restructured its economy to favor American interests.

While U.S. officials justified their presence as a means of further developing Haiti's infrastructure and centralizing governance, the occupation was met with Haitian resistance, most notably the Cacos Rebellion, a peasant uprising against U.S. military rule. During this time, the U.S. controlled Haiti's finances, implemented forced labor policies, and rewrote the Haitian Constitution in 1918 to allow foreign land ownership, which had been previously banned. (Chapman, 1927). The withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1934 left behind a heavily militarized state that future Haitian leaders, including the Duvalier dictatorship, would exploit to consolidate power.

François "Papa Doc" Duvalier ruled from 1957 to 1971, and established a dictatorship backed by the paramilitary Tonton Macoutes that was responsible for an estimated 60,000 deaths (Edwidge Danticat, 2013). He declared himself "President for Life" and maintained power through repression. His son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, took over in 1971, continuing authoritarian rule while allowing some economic liberalization aimed at increasing foreign investment. His regime promoted low-wage export manufacturing, particularly in textiles and electronics, and opened the country to tourism and loans from institutions like the IMF and USAID. Trade barriers were reduced and some privatization occurred, but these changes primarily benefited the elite while the broader population saw little improvement. (Country Profile: Haiti, 2024). In addition, much of this extravagant personal spending, primarily by Duvalier himself and his close inner circle, along with allegations of embezzling millions of dollars, further weakened Haiti's economy.

Fast forward to the present day, following the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021, the country has not had a proper presidential election in two years. Haiti's continuously heightening political and security crisis is driven mainly by the unchecked expansion of armed territorial gangs, all of which now exert their control over critical infrastructure, including major roadways, ports, and even fuel distribution centers.

Their dominance has severely restricted mobility, forcing businesses to shut down and as a result, creating localized economic collapses. The International Crisis Group (ICG) reported that in September of 2022, gangs blocked off ports in Port-au-Prince, which triggered shortages of fuel, clean water, and food, thereby only worsening the already dire humanitarian situation. (Crisis Group, 2025).

The Haitian National Police (HNP), comprising approximately 9,000 officers for a population exceeding 11 million, is overwhelmed and under-resourced. This disparity hampers their ability to effectively combat gang violence, leading to increased insecurity (Sanon, 2024). Further, the judiciary's paralysis enables gang rule, as courts remain largely nonfunctional. Years of underfunding, political interference, and a lack of trained legal personnel have left the judicial system unable to operate effectively. Judges and prosecutors in Haiti often receive threats from armed groups because they are seen as obstacles to gang operations and political corruption. Armed groups frequently target legal officials who attempt to prosecute gang members or corrupt politicians, using intimidation to prevent arrests, trials, or investigations. In a system with weak state protection and limited enforcement capacity, these threats are highly effective in silencing justice and allowing gangs to operate with near-total impunity. These threats cause suspended legal proceedings and a cycle of impunity that entitles gangs. The overall deteriorating security situation across the nation has led to mass displacement, with over 1 million people forced to flee their homes due to gang violence. These individuals often seek refuge in makeshift camps lacking essential services, while others risk perilous journeys to escape the country, facing threats such as human trafficking or dangerous sea crossings (Lederer, 2025). As Haiti's crisis heightens, the role of regional organizations like the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Organization of American States (OAS) in facilitating stability is under scrutiny. While past international interventions have struggled to effect lasting change, some experts advocate for a regionally led, sovereignty-focused approach to restore governance and security on the island.

The United Nations-backed Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission aims to restore stability in Haiti by addressing the widespread gang violence and political instability that have plagued the nation since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021. Their mission, authorized by the UN Security Council in October 2023, represents a significant intervention effort by the international community with primary objectives being to dismantle the influence of armed gangs, restore public safety, and create the conditions necessary for political and economic recovery.

(Vote et al., 2024) However, despite its ambitious goals, the MSS mission has faced significant logistical and operational challenges, raising concerns about its ability to achieve long-term stability in Haiti while safeguarding the country's sovereignty.

One of the major hurdles facing the MSS mission is the overwhelming control exerted by gangs in Haiti, particularly in the capital, Port-au-Prince. The MSS mission is expected to fill the military power gap, but its deployment has been hindered by logistical and funding issues. Funding shortfalls from both international donors and the Haitian government, caused by shifting political priorities and economic instability, have severely hampered the procurement of essential equipment, limiting the mission's operational capacity. In late February 2025, UN Secretary-General António Guterres recommended establishing a UN-funded logistics support office to back the Kenyan-led MSS mission, emphasizing that the mission remains under-resourced, with only 1,000 personnel deployed out of the 2,500 needed and insufficient funding to sustain operations (IPI Global Observatory, 2025). The Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in Haiti has struggled to become operational due to a lack of necessary financial resources, significantly hindering efforts to curb gang violence in the country (Blaise et al., 2025). However, in 2018 a major setback occurred when the United States, initially a strong supporter of the mission, froze over \$13 million in funding allocated for the United Nations-backed MSS mission under the Trump Administration. This decision was part of a broader 90-day pause on foreign aid implemented by the newly appointed president, affecting multiple international assistance programs, including security efforts in Haiti (Nichols, 2025). These financial constraints have significantly limited the mission's capacity to scale up its physical presence and effectively address the security situation on the ground.

Beyond financial limitations, there are operational challenges tied to the structure of the mission itself. Kenya, the leading country in the MSS coalition, has faced internal legal and political obstacles in deploying its forces with the Kenyan High Court initially blocking the deployment, questioning the constitutional basis for sending police forces abroad (Opala et al., 2024). Concerns about the effectiveness of a primarily police-based mission rather than a military force raise questions about whether the MSS can adequately combat well-armed gangs that operate with impunity. Police units are typically trained for law enforcement, crowd control, and community engagement, but they often lack the heavy weaponry, tactical training, and logistical capacity needed to confront heavily armed and organized criminal groups. These gangs frequently possess military-grade weapons and control fortified areas, rendering conventional policing tactics insufficient.

Moreover, the limited size and resources of the MSS restrict sustained operations, undermining efforts to dismantle entrenched criminal networks or maintain territorial control. This mismatch between the mission's capabilities and the security challenges fuels skepticism about its ability to restore stability and protect civilians effectively (International Crisis Group, 2024). The challenges of deploying forces in unfamiliar environments, where gang members often outgun law enforcement, further show the limitations and currently unsustainable nature of the current approach.

IV. Economic Considerations

A sustainable economic strategy is essential for stabilizing Haiti while ensuring its long-term sovereignty and development. Again, historically, international aid has played a crucial role in Haiti's economy, yet much of it has been mismanaged or directed toward short-term relief rather than long-term economic sustainability. For instance, the 2010 Earthquake aid failed to rebuild infrastructure due to corruption within the Haitian government, as well as misallocation and a lack of financial coordination (Ramachandran & Walz, 2012). Instead of fostering economic independence, these aid flows have often reinforced dependency, with foreign NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders, Project Medishare, and Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) taking over essential government functions while sidelining Haitian institutions (UNU-WIDER, 2014 ; PBS News, 2010). In fact, Haiti has been dubbed a "republic of NGOs," where these organizations often act as de facto providers of critical public services, filling gaps left by a weak state. Future interventions must shift from humanitarian assistance toward sustainable economic development, prioritizing long-term investments in infrastructure, education, and industry to create a self-sufficient economy.

One of Haiti's most significant economic vulnerabilities is its heavy reliance on remittances, which account for nearly 24% of its GDP (World Bank Open Data, 2017). While remittances provide a crucial source of income for millions of Haitians, they do not contribute to domestic job creation or industrial development. Many Haitians rely on family members abroad to cover essential expenses, leaving the country's economy largely dependent on external financial flows (Prophete, 2022). To reduce this reliance, interventions must focus on fostering domestic entrepreneurship, improving access to credit for small businesses, and investing in sectors that can generate stable employment, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and technology.

For example, Haiti's agricultural sector which employs about 50% of the current workforce, has suffered from underdevelopment due to land degradation and poor infrastructure, as well as competition with subsidized foreign imports, making it difficult for local farmers to compete in the market. Policies that support agricultural revitalization through subsidies, infrastructure investment, and fair trade agreements can strengthen Haiti's food security and create sustainable employment opportunities.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been another major factor in Haiti's economy, but historically, it has often led to economic exploitation. Large-scale foreign investments in mining and agriculture have frequently resulted in the extraction of resources with minimal benefits for Haitian workers and communities. These have primarily focused on bauxite mining and, to a lesser extent, gold exploration, while agricultural production has often centered around export-oriented crops like coffee, sugarcane, and mangoes. These ventures typically prioritize resource extraction and cash crops for international markets, providing limited employment opportunities and economic gains for local Haitian workers and communities. (Admin, 2020). For instance, foreign-owned textile factories operating in Haiti's free-trade zones pay some of the lowest wages in the region while generating significant profits for international corporations. (US Department of State, 2024)

To ensure that foreign investment contributes to long-term economic growth rather than perpetuating inequality, the government of Haiti must implement stronger labor protections, environmental regulations, and policies that require foreign companies to reinvest a portion of their profits into local development. To ensure that foreign investment contributes to long-term economic growth rather than perpetuating inequality, the Haitian government must implement stronger labor protections and environmental regulations. Such measures would safeguard workers' rights and the natural environment from exploitation, fostering more sustainable development. For example, countries like Costa Rica have successfully attracted foreign investment while maintaining robust environmental standards and labor laws, resulting in economic growth that benefits broader segments of society. (UNCTAD, 2022). Strengthening domestic institutions that regulate trade and investment is essential to prevent exploitative economic practices and maintain sovereignty over national natural and capital resources.

Infrastructure development is the last critical aspect of Haiti's economic recovery. Poor road networks, unreliable electricity, and limited access to clean water hinder business growth and discourage investment.

The World Economic Forum ranks Haiti among the lowest globally in infrastructure quality, ranking 136 out of 137 countries (World Economic Forum, 2018). Future interventions must focus on public-private partnerships to rebuild key infrastructure projects while ensuring that Haitian-led initiatives drive the decision-making process. Ultimately, economic solutions must align with Haiti's long-term development by fostering self-reliance rather than reinforcing dependency. This requires a shift from aid-driven relief efforts to strategic investments in local industries, infrastructure, and governance.

V. Security Considerations

Haiti's security crisis is one of the biggest obstacles to stability, with weak law enforcement, rampant gang violence, and a history of ineffective foreign interventions. The country's inability to maintain internal security has led to recurring cycles of foreign military involvement from countries such as the U.S., France, Canada, and Kenya, often without long-term solutions. A sustainable approach to Haiti's security must prioritize rebuilding its national police force, preventing foreign forces from overstaying their mandate, and developing long-term strategies that ensure stability without military occupation.

One of the primary security challenges is the weakness of Haiti's National Police (PNH). Political instability, government underfunding, and corruption, due to actions of leaders such as Jean-Bertrand Aristide (President: 1991, 1994–1996, 2001–2004) and René Préal (President: 1996–2001, 2006–2011), have left the PNH under-resourced and ineffective in combating the rising power of gangs. With approximately 9,000 police officers for a population of over 11 million, Haiti's officer-to-citizen ratio falls well below international standards, allowing criminal organizations to operate with impunity (Security Council Report, 2024). This deficiency in law enforcement has contributed to the unchecked expansion of gangs, which now control over 80% of Port-au-Prince, as aforementioned. Efforts to rebuild the PNH must focus on increasing recruitment, and improving training programs, such as the violence-based police training systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UN Women, 2022). In addition, addressing widespread corruption in the force is needed to build its legitimacy and public value.

Many officers lack basic equipment, and police stations are frequently targeted by gangs, further undermining operational effectiveness (Blaise et al., 2025). While international partners have pledged assistance, previous interventions have failed to create lasting improvements in law enforcement, a common theme.

Instead of short-term training missions, Haiti requires sustained investment in policing infrastructure, forensic capabilities, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms that enable long-term crime prevention (Maingot et al., 2013). By attacking police stations, assassinating officers, and looting weapons, gangs hope to both intimidate law enforcement and acquire the resources needed to expand their territorial control. These assaults often coincide with roadblocks, kidnappings, or attacks on infrastructure, tactics designed to paralyze the movement of police forces and isolate vulnerable communities. (UNICEF, 2023) In some cases, gangs also infiltrate neighborhoods near police zones to cut off supply lines and force residents into compliance, ensuring that the state's security presence is diminished and their own dominance becomes the default source of "order."

Strengthening Haiti's judicial institutions alongside law enforcement will also be essential to ensuring that arrests lead to effective prosecutions rather than arbitrary detentions that further diminish public trust. This will require legal reforms that draw on successful legislative models from other post-conflict or high-crime states, such as community-based policing statutes in Colombia or anti-corruption frameworks in Guatemala, adapted to Haiti's political and cultural realities (WOLA, 2020). These mechanisms, combined with witness protection programs and community liaison officers, would help bridge the gap between citizens and the justice system, making law enforcement both more responsive and more legitimate in the eyes of the public, therefore improving the security situation in Haiti.

Haiti has had its fair share of historical interventions, and one of the most impactful episodes was the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, initially justified as a stabilization effort amid political chaos and the protection of U.S. financial interests. The United States quickly seized control of key national institutions—occupying customs houses, installing compliant leaders, rewriting the constitution to permit foreign land ownership, and disbanding Haiti's legislature to maintain political dominance. To enforce this control, U.S. Marines trained and led the Haitian Gendarmerie, a centralized constabulary that functioned as a security apparatus more loyal to American authority than to Haitian sovereignty (Office of the Historian, 2025). Though initially intended to professionalize security, the force became an instrument of repression, enforcing U.S. control over Haitian territory and brutally suppressing uprisings such as the Caicos Rebellion of 1918–1920, during which thousands of Haitians were killed.

Similarly, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), deployed from 2004 to 2017, was intended to stabilize the country after the collapse of the government and growing gang violence. While it initially succeeded in reducing large-scale violence and supporting elections, MINUSTAH quickly became infamous not only for introducing a deadly cholera epidemic but also for numerous allegations of human rights abuses, including sexual exploitation and the excessive use of force by peacekeepers (Ivers & Guillaume, 2017). Rather than building trust between international forces and Haitian communities, the mission's presence often exacerbated insecurity in marginalized neighborhoods, where residents reported feeling occupied rather than protected. MINUSTAH's strategy relied heavily on militarized policing tactics, with peacekeepers conducting aggressive raids in gang-controlled zones such as Cité Soleil, all operations that sometimes resulted in civilian casualties and deepened tensions between locals and foreign forces (Rivers, 2023). The lack of accountability mechanisms for abuses further weakened the credibility of both the UN and Haitian law enforcement institutions, which were often sidelined or inadequately supported. Although the mission aimed to restore state authority, it failed to invest in long-term capacity-building for Haiti's national police, contributing to the current vacuum of legitimate domestic security forces. As with earlier foreign interventions, MINUSTAH left behind a fractured security environment.

Despite addressing some past concerns, such as lack of coordination and absence of clear rules of engagement, the current Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, led by Kenya and backed by the United Nations, still faces significant risks related to long-term dependency and local distrust from a security standpoint. (UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2024). Without a clearly defined timeline or concrete mechanisms for transitioning security responsibilities to Haitian authorities, the MSS mission risks becoming another prolonged foreign intervention. This could foster public resentment, echoing the failures of earlier missions like MINUSTAH, and further entrench Haiti's reliance on external actors for basic security needs.

Ultimately, foreign interventions in Haiti have historically prioritized short-term security over long-term institution-building. Breaking this cycle requires shifting the focus from external military deployments to investments in law enforcement capacity, judicial integrity, and community-led security initiatives. Without these reforms, Haiti risks remaining in a perpetual state of crisis, where international forces repeatedly step in without addressing the root causes of instability.

Moving forward, security assistance must be structured in a way that strengthens Haitian sovereignty, ensuring that law enforcement and governance institutions are resilient enough to maintain long-term stability without the need for recurring foreign intervention.

VI. Political Considerations

Next, the political considerations of the Haitian foreign intervention debate mainly revolve around the balance between need for intervention and balancing state sovereignty in Haiti. While several external actors have repeatedly stepped in to stabilize crises, their involvement has often fueled resentment among Haitians, who view these interventions as threats to self-determination. As the country struggles to establish legitimate leadership, the role of regional organizations such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Organization of American States (OAS) has become increasingly significant in shaping Haiti's political future.

Given Haiti's long history of problematic foreign interventions, regional organizations such as CARICOM and the OAS have a crucial role to play in mediating solutions that balance sovereignty with external support. CARICOM has positioned itself as a key diplomatic actor, facilitating negotiations between Haitian political factions and advocating for a Haitian-led political transition (Security Council Report, 2024). Unlike Western powers, CARICOM countries share cultural and historical ties with Haiti, making them more suitable mediators who can offer solutions without imposing neo-colonial influences. Similarly, the OAS has worked to engage Haiti in broader regional security and economic discussions, though its efforts have been criticized for being inconsistent and largely symbolic (The Haitian Times, 2025). While these organizations can provide diplomatic frameworks and political guidance, their influence is limited by Haiti's internal divisions and the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms. Moving forward, regional organizations must not only facilitate dialogue but also provide tangible support, such as technical assistance for elections, economic partnerships, and security cooperation that strengthens Haiti's self-sufficiency rather than reinforcing dependency on outside powers.

Interim governments have lacked public support, and deep divisions between political factions have prevented meaningful progress (BTI 2024 Haiti Country Report, 2024). Corruption, weak institutions, and the influence of armed groups over political decision-making have further eroded trust in the government, making it difficult to implement reforms or negotiate with foreign partners (The Haitian Times, 2025).

What little trust Haitians had in their government was built slowly through such moments of institutional delivery and democratic participation. Elections in the early 1990s and again in the early 2000s, though imperfect, allowed citizens to engage and elect leaders, temporarily reviving a sense of ownership over the state (National Democratic Institute, 2015). Investments in public infrastructure and disaster response, especially following the 2010 earthquake, demonstrated the government could at times coordinate services effectively. Community-led development initiatives and locally based civil society groups offered alternatives to national institutions and built grassroots legitimacy through participatory processes. For instance, national planning efforts like the PSDH aimed to track progress transparently and may have offered citizens some reassurance in public investments (Fischer, 2015). Nonetheless, recurring cycles of fraud-tainted elections, leadership crises, and endemic corruption repeatedly undermined these advances, deepening public skepticism toward government as a viable reform vehicle.

A major challenge is ensuring that future leadership transitions are not dictated by foreign powers but are instead rooted in Haitian-led political processes. Historically, external actors, particularly the United States and France, have played key roles in selecting and supporting Haitian leaders, often prioritizing candidates who align with their strategic interests rather than those with genuine local legitimacy (Maingot et al., 2013). For example, the U.S. supported the rise of Michel Martelly, a former pop star with little political experience, whose administration faced allegations of corruption and authoritarianism while maintaining close ties with American and business interests. Similarly, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, who received tacit support from Western powers during the Cold War, ruled through repression, patronage networks, and fear, enriching a small elite while securing geopolitical alignment. These leaders often centralized power, weakened judicial institutions, and suppressed dissent, ensuring short-term stability for foreign allies but long-term harm to Haiti’s democratic development.

In the past, political engagement among Haitian residents was often limited by fear, disillusionment, or exclusion from decision-making processes. Many citizens saw leadership as something imposed, rather than influenced by collective participation. This detachment contributed to a cycle in which corrupt leaders could rule with minimal public accountability. Today, however, there is a growing recognition that lasting political change depends on shifting this dynamic. The focus has increasingly turned toward rebuilding public awareness and national ownership of governance, where citizens are not just passive observers but active participants in government decisions, including elections.

Haiti's political crisis presents a difficult balancing act between sovereignty and intervention. While foreign assistance is necessary to stabilize the country, past experiences have left many Haitians wary of external control. Establishing legitimate Haitian leadership is essential to ensuring that interventions do not become indefinite occupations, and regional organizations must play a stronger role in facilitating sustainable, locally driven solutions. The international community must recognize that long-term stability in Haiti cannot be imposed from the outside—it must come from within.

VII. Geopolitical Considerations

Haiti's instability has long drawn the attention of international actors, with the United States, the United Nations, and regional powers shaping its security, governance, and economic policies. While foreign involvement has often been framed as humanitarian or stabilizing, it has also contributed to long-term dependency, political interference, and weakened sovereignty. The United States has been one of the most influential foreign players in Haiti, with its policies shaped by security concerns, economic interests, and migration control. Since the early 20th century, U.S. interventions have ranged from direct military occupations—such as the 1915–1934 occupation—to economic aid and security assistance (Maingot et al., 2013). More recently, Washington has focused on governance reforms, disaster relief, and policing initiatives, including a \$100 million commitment to the current Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission (Congress, 2024).

The United Nations has played a central role in Haiti's security efforts, deploying multiple peacekeeping and stabilization missions over the past three decades. The most significant was the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), which operated from 2004 to 2017. MINUSTAH's support for Haiti's electoral process was a key achievement during a period of political instability. The mission provided essential security and logistical assistance to ensure elections could proceed safely, helping to restore constitutional governance and foster political stability.

However, despite these successes, the mission faced severe criticism due to misconduct by some peacekeepers. Reports emerged of sexual exploitation and abuse, often targeting vulnerable women and children, which violated UN standards and eroded the trust between local communities and international forces.

The mission's challenges increased with its involvement in a devastating cholera outbreak. Improper sanitation practices at a UN base led to contamination of a major river system, triggering an epidemic that infected hundreds of thousands and caused over 10,000 deaths. (UN News, 2025). The UN's slow acknowledgment and inadequate response to the crisis fueled widespread anger and mistrust among Haitians, further damaging MINUSTAH's reputation. These controversies ultimately overshadowed the mission's efforts, illustrating the complex difficulties inherent in international peacekeeping in fragile and conflict-affected states.

Haiti's crisis extends beyond its borders, affecting regional security and migration patterns. The ongoing instability, marked by political turmoil, gang violence, and economic collapse, has forced thousands of Haitians to flee their homeland in search of safety and stability. Many attempt to reach the United States, the Dominican Republic, and other Caribbean nations, often undertaking dangerous journeys by sea or crossing heavily monitored land borders (The Haitian Times, 2025). The influx of Haitian migrants has placed immense pressure on neighboring countries, which have struggled to manage the increasing number of arrivals (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The fragile security situation, exacerbated by weak governance and ongoing violence, has undermined state capacity and public trust, creating conditions that propel mass displacement. As security deteriorates, the resulting humanitarian crisis has transcended national boundaries, making Haiti a focal point of regional concern for migration management and cross-border stability (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, has been particularly affected. In response, Dominican authorities have ramped up border security and carried out mass deportations of Haitian migrants (Press, 2025). These actions have heightened tensions between the two nations, with allegations of human rights abuses and racial discrimination further complicating diplomatic relations (Amnesty International, 2024). The situation underscores the deep historical and political divisions between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, making cooperation difficult but necessary for regional stability (The Guardian, 2025).

Given the widespread impact of Haiti's crisis, a regional approach is essential. Organizations such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Organization of American States (OAS) must take a more active role in addressing Haiti's challenges. This includes providing humanitarian aid, supporting governance reforms, and fostering economic development (United Nations, 2024).

However, foreign interventions must be carefully structured to respect Haiti's sovereignty and avoid repeating past mistakes that have contributed to its instability (Rutenbar, 2024). Sustainable solutions require collaboration between Haiti's government, regional partners, and the international community. Without a comprehensive strategy, the crisis will continue to fuel migration, strain regional resources, and heighten geopolitical tensions. Addressing Haiti's instability is not just a national issue but a regional and global priority that demands coordinated and long-term action.

VIII. Social Considerations

Haiti's prolonged instability has severely impacted its social fabric, placing immense strain on civil society, education, healthcare, and overall social cohesion. Despite these challenges, Haitian grassroots movements continue to play a crucial role in mitigating crises and fostering resilience. While foreign interventions have often focused on security and political reforms, addressing Haiti's long-term stability requires strengthening social institutions and empowering local communities. In the absence of strong state institutions, civil society organizations and grassroots movements have taken the lead in addressing Haiti's social and economic crises. Local organizations have been instrumental in providing essential services, from education and healthcare to food security and economic development. Religious institutions, including Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as Vodou-based community networks, have played a critical role in mobilizing resources and advocating for human rights (Maingot et al., 2013). Women's organizations have also been at the forefront of social activism, particularly in addressing gender-based violence, which has surged amid growing lawlessness. Groups such as Fanm Deside and KOFAVIV provide support to survivors, conduct advocacy campaigns, and push for legal reforms to protect women's rights (The Haitian Times, 2025).

Haiti's social institutions have been critically undermined by ongoing instability, particularly in the education and healthcare sectors. As of 2023, it was estimated that nearly 30% of Haitian children were out of school due to gang violence, displacement, and economic hardship (UN News, 2025). Many schools have been forced to close, either because they are located in gang-controlled areas or due to a lack of funding to pay teachers. This disruption threatens the future of Haiti's youth, limiting their economic mobility and reducing the country's prospects for long-term development.

Haiti's healthcare system is similarly fragile, with hospitals and clinics frequently struggling to provide even basic services. The cholera outbreak introduced by U.N. peacekeepers in 2010 remains a symbol of how international interventions have sometimes worsened rather than alleviated public health challenges (UN News, 2025). While international aid has helped keep hospitals running, foreign-led medical initiatives have often operated independently of Haitian institutions, limiting their long-term impact. Social cohesion has also deteriorated due to increased gang violence and forced displacement. As gangs tighten their control over key urban areas, families are being forced to flee, leaving behind their homes, businesses, and social networks. This displacement disrupts not only economic stability but also community structures that have historically provided informal social support (The Haitian Times, 2025). Without intervention, these patterns risk deepening social divisions and fueling further violence.

IX. Policy Recommendations

Haiti's prolonged instability requires a strategic, multidimensional approach that addresses security, governance, economic development, and social stability. Foreign interventions have historically focused on short-term stabilization rather than institution-building, reinforcing cycles of dependency instead of fostering Haitian-led solutions. Moving forward, policies must prioritize long-term security reform, sustainable economic development, and the strengthening of political and social institutions.

Security sector reform must focus on expanding and professionalizing the Haitian National Police (PNH) by increasing recruitment, raising salaries to reduce corruption, and implementing rigorous vetting and training programs. The police force should grow to at least 20,000 officers over the next five years, with specialized units focused on anti-gang operations, intelligence gathering, and border security. Foreign-led security assistance, including the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, must transition toward training and equipping Haitian forces rather than leading operations. To improve law enforcement effectiveness, community-based policing initiatives should be established, integrating local security committees that collaborate with police to reduce crime and increase public trust. Additionally, stricter border controls and customs enforcement must be implemented to curb the illegal flow of arms and drugs, with enhanced intelligence-sharing agreements between Haiti and neighboring countries.

Governance reforms should center on restoring political legitimacy through free and transparent elections. A transitional electoral council composed of civil society representatives and independent observers should oversee election logistics, ensuring security and broad voter participation. Haiti must decentralize governance by strengthening municipal governments and allocating at least 30% of national budgets to local authorities for infrastructure, public services, and security initiatives. Judicial system improvements must focus on increasing the number of trained judges, digitizing court records to improve case tracking, and expanding legal aid services. Anti-corruption measures should include an independent oversight body composed of legal NGOs such as the World Justice Project (WJP) with prosecutorial powers to investigate and penalize officials engaged in financial misconduct.

Economic development policies should shift from reliance on foreign aid to fostering self-sufficiency through investment in key sectors. The agricultural industry, which employs over half of Haiti's workforce, must be revitalized through government-backed microfinance programs for farmers, expansion of irrigation infrastructure, and the implementation of import tariffs to protect domestic food production. Haiti must move away from an overreliance on imported food by investing in modern farming techniques, seed banks, and cooperatives that enable small-scale farmers to compete in local and regional markets. Strengthening Haiti's agricultural sector would create jobs, reduce food insecurity, and lower dependency on foreign aid. Additionally, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) should be developed to attract investment in manufacturing, textiles, and agribusiness, with mandatory labor protections ensuring companies provide training, fair wages, and safe working conditions for Haitian workers. The garment industry, one of Haiti's largest employers, should be expanded by offering incentives for businesses to manufacture in Haiti while ensuring fair trade practices that benefit local laborers. Financial sector reforms should focus on expanding banking access through mobile banking programs and microcredit initiatives to encourage small business growth and entrepreneurship. The Haitian government should also implement tax incentives for Haitian diaspora investment, encouraging remittance funds to be directed toward business development rather than short-term consumption. Infrastructure investment must be prioritized to support economic expansion. Haiti's unreliable energy supply severely hinders business development and daily life, with only 45% of the population having access to electricity. Renewable energy initiatives should focus on expanding solar and wind power capacity through tax incentives, public-private partnerships, and investment in off-grid energy solutions to reach rural communities.

Road and transportation networks must also be rehabilitated to facilitate trade and market access for rural farmers and urban businesses. Expanding Haiti's ports and improving customs processing would reduce trade bottlenecks and increase economic efficiency.

Education reforms must ensure that all Haitian children have access to quality schooling. This requires a multi-pronged approach that includes reopening closed schools, increasing teacher salaries, and developing alternative education programs for displaced students. Many schools in Haiti remain shuttered due to gang violence, displacement, and lack of funding. A national school security initiative should be implemented to deploy police patrols around schools in high-crime areas, install emergency alert systems, and increase protections for teachers and students. Haiti's education system must also become more aligned with workforce needs. Vocational training programs should be expanded within secondary education, providing students with skills in construction, agriculture, and technology to increase employment opportunities. Technical schools focused on mechanics, carpentry, and electrical work can provide pathways for young people to enter the workforce rather than being drawn into gang activity due to lack of economic opportunities. Expanding digital learning access through online education initiatives and public-private partnerships can help bridge the gap in Haiti's education system, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Investment in healthcare is also crucial to Haiti's recovery. Many hospitals lack essential medical supplies, trained staff, and basic infrastructure. A national health infrastructure plan should aim to rehabilitate at least 50% of damaged hospitals by 2030, expand mobile clinics in underserved areas, and create partnerships with international medical institutions to train Haitian doctors and nurses. Establishing telemedicine programs, particularly for remote communities, would improve access to medical care. Additionally, Haiti must invest in public health education initiatives to prevent disease outbreaks and improve sanitation in urban slums.

Disaster preparedness and climate resilience must also be incorporated into Haiti's recovery strategy. The country remains highly vulnerable to hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters, yet response efforts have historically relied heavily on international NGOs rather than local leadership. A more sustainable approach would involve training community-based disaster response teams that can coordinate emergency evacuations, manage food distribution, and oversee rebuilding efforts.

X. Conclusion

Haiti's recovery depends on a coordinated approach that prioritizes security, governance, economic sustainability, and social stability. Foreign assistance should be structured to empower Haitian leadership, ensuring long-term self-sufficiency rather than continued dependency. Addressing these challenges through targeted investments, institutional reforms, and localized solutions will provide Haiti with a sustainable path toward stability and growth.

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The Policy Landscape for Neglected Tropical Diseases: An Analysis of Existing Frameworks

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Colégio Pentágono | March 19, 2025

I. Abstract

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) affect over a billion people worldwide, with the majority residing in the most vulnerable regions of the Southern Hemisphere, where inadequate healthcare infrastructure and poor sanitation contribute to their persistence. Despite global recognition and initiatives such as the London Declaration, the Kigali Declaration on NTDs, and the WHO Roadmap, these diseases continue to burden marginalized communities, aggravating economic instability and social inequality. This article explores the current framework by highlighting historical initiatives, public-private partnerships, and emerging challenges such as climate change and healthcare infrastructure gaps. Through case studies, I illustrate successes and ongoing challenges in NTD elimination. Additionally, the article examines the role of research in developing new drugs to expand treatment accessibility. By identifying policy successes and shortcomings, this analysis underscores the urgent need for sustained global cooperation, strategic investment, and integrated healthcare solutions to ensure long-term elimination of NTDs and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: neglected tropical diseases, global health, social inequality, treatment accessibility

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) as a group of 20 diseases predominant in impoverished and destitute regions in the Southern Hemisphere. Historically overlooked, NTDs currently affect over one billion people worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], [n.d.]). Furthermore, it is very complicated to establish control or elimination strategies for the diverse transmission of NTDs through flies, mosquitoes, sandflies, blackflies, snails, the fecal-oral route, and food products.

There is an intrinsic relationship between NTDs and poverty. The main focus is low-income households and vulnerable communities, where poor sanitation expedites transmission, creating a vicious cycle that is hard to break (Magalhães et al., 2023). Several diseases, such as rabies, African trypanosomiasis, dengue, and leishmaniasis, have lethal potential, significantly impacting household structures by decreasing income and increasing medical expenses (Hotez et al., 2014; Ochola et al. 2021). NTDs are often interlinked to long-term morbidity, contributing to chronic disability, social exclusion, and loss of productivity. Thus, the reliance of many affected people on already fragile and under-resourced health systems places additional pressure on their limited capacity. Over time, this strain may overwhelm service delivery, disrupt essential health programs, and ultimately contribute to the collapse of health systems in low-income and underdeveloped countries. Because these diseases are already linked to underprivileged communities, they aggravate social inequality, perpetuating intergenerational poverty (Oliveira, 2018).

Although the WHO coined the term NTDs in 2005, they are still persistent and resistant due to three main “failures”: science failures (insufficient knowledge), market failures (treatments with inaccessible prices), and healthcare policy failures (lack of funding for research and subsidized therapies) (Realman & Choffnes, 2011). In response to these ongoing challenges, in 2012, pharmaceutical companies and non-government organizations collaboratively created a document aiming to eradicate or control at least 10 of these diseases (Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases, 2012). The paper titled “London Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases” was a milestone in uniting companies, such as AstraZeneca and Pfizer, with endemic countries to achieve the seven main goals established by the declaration by 2020: eradicate Guinea worm disease, eliminate lymphatic filariasis, leprosy, sleeping sickness, and blinding trachoma by 2020 through the expansion of drugs; control schistosomiasis, soil-transmitted helminths, Chagas disease, visceral leishmaniasis, and onchocerciasis by 2020 through drug access expansion; increase Research and Development (R&D) funding through partnerships; heighten international and national collaborations through public-private partnerships (PPPs); ensure adequate funding for endemic countries in order to achieve these goals; provide support to evaluate and monitor NTDs programs; and provide regular updates on the progress reaching the 2020 goals.

For over twenty years, the urgent call for comprehensive healthcare policies to eliminate NTDs has been consistently highlighted. In a globalized world, factors like migration and travel have influenced the emergence of NTDs in non-tropical regions, such as the United States and European countries (Mackey, 2014).

In 2021, 179 countries reported at least one case of NTDs, highlighting that these diseases can no longer go unnoticed and are not limited to tropical regions anymore (WHO, 2023).

As a result of their global burden, NTDs negatively affect agriculture and global economic stability through a decrease in food security, productivity, and, consequently, family earnings. As an initiative to establish strategies to control and eliminate NTDs to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) originated by the United Nations, WHO elaborated a road map containing targets for 2021-2030 where according to the document, the household income lost due to NTDs is approximately \$33 billion annually (WHO, 2021).

Despite the challenges, there has been a growing trend in the amount invested in new chemotherapies for NTDs. A case study on investments revealed that preventive chemotherapy (PC) provided a net benefit of \$25 to affected individuals for every \$1 invested. Therefore, smart initial investments may save billions of dollars in the future (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018).

This article examines global and national policies implementing integrated strategies for preventing, controlling, and treating NTDs. Ultimately, strengthening health systems, which is essential for both enhancing life expectancy and stabilizing the global economy. By critically analyzing current policies on NTDs, this article seeks to evaluate their effectiveness and identify potential gaps, ensuring that progress toward eradicating NTDs is sustained and accelerated.

II. Background

Historical perspective on policies

The struggle against NTDs has substantially transformed over the past century. In the late 1970s, Kenneth S. Warren, a prominent medical researcher and director of Health at the Rockefeller Foundation, initiated a focused inquiry into immunoparasitology. His primary objective was to develop a cost-effective therapeutic intervention for the infectious diseases that disproportionately impacted populations in developing nations (Keating, 2014).

As a researcher committed to establishing a network of laboratories for studying parasitic diseases, Warren referred to them as the ‘great neglected diseases (GND) of mankind’ to encourage scientists to research these ‘overlooked’ diseases.

Paralleling with this initiative, in 1976, the WHO established the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR) to support research in the fight against diseases of poverty (Adetokunho, 1977). These grassroots efforts laid the groundwork for the development of targeted disease-specific programs that emerged in the following years.

Disease-specific programs

In the late 1990s, the WHO launched the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) initiative to reduce malaria mortality, improve health facilities, and elevate malaria control on the global political agenda. Its main strategies included: establishing partnerships with pharmaceutical companies to lower the cost of combination therapies; monitoring antimalarial drug resistance using WHO methodologies, as outlined in the Method for Surveillance of Antimalarial Drug Efficacy (WHO, 2009); promoting environmentally sound mosquito-control alternatives in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); and forming R&D partnerships, such as with the Fogarty International Centre of the U.S. National Institutes of Health to provide research training in Africa, the Center for International Development at Harvard University to improve economic studies on the disease, and Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV), a PPP dedicated to the discovery and development of new antimalarial drugs.

The program, with particular emphasis on sub-Saharan African countries, has successfully helped avoid approximately 6 million deaths from malaria (WHO, 1999). Nonetheless, the World Malaria Report 2024 reported that in 2023 there were 263 million new cases of malaria, with 94% of these cases occurring in African nations. Despite the significant progress, the prevalence of malaria remains inextricably linked to socio-economic factors, particularly poverty, and disproportionately affects vulnerable demographics, notably children and women (WHO, 2024).

Partnerships

In December 2003, under the auspices of Warren's significant contributions, the WHO, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) convened the inaugural Berlin conference to discuss strategic approaches towards tropical diseases. The terminology initially established by Warren fell into disuse as Professors Fenwick, Molyneux, and Hotez introduced the more widely accepted term 'neglected tropical diseases' (Molyneux, 2012; Molyneux et al., 2021).

To elevate global awareness regarding NTDs, the Sabin Vaccine Institute, in collaboration with WHO, established the Global Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases (GNNTD) in 2006 (Molyneux et al., 2021). Committed to fostering increased awareness, enhancing political commitment, and mobilizing financial resources essential for the effective control of the most prevalent NTDs, this non-profit contributed significantly to the WHO NTDs Roadmap for 2030 and received \$34 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to keep their goals and expand their range.

Furthermore, as a strategic initiative to enhance efforts, such as vector control programs and improved diagnostic access, the Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases coalition actively collaborates with a diverse array of 150 collaborators, including governmental institutions, pharmaceutical corporations, and academic associations. Following the London Declaration and with the support of this coalition, the President of the Republic of Rwanda H.E. Paul Kagame, created the Kigali Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases. This declaration seeks to galvanize the involvement of individuals, communities, and nations, positioning them at the forefront of the global response to NTDs (Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases, 2022).

Exclusion from Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Global health initiatives in the early 2000s were largely focused on the “Big Three” — HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria — due to their widespread mortality during the 20th century (Makam & Matsa, 2021). These diseases became a priority for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

However, this intense attention led to the omission of NTDs from the MDGs, which continued to have a severe impact on impoverished and marginalized communities. Nevertheless, this exclusion functioned as a catalyst to advocate for more attention towards NTDs in the global health scenario (Smith & Taylor, 2013). Over time, increasing recognition of their burden led to a major policy shift—NTDs, once absent from the MDGs, became a key priority within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Malecela, 2019).

Global integration

In the context of the 2030 Agenda, the international community established the SDGs, a comprehensive framework comprising 17 objectives aimed at fostering prosperity while ensuring the protection of the planet. This initiative was launched at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2012.

As a response to the increasing incidence of NTDs and growing global attention towards these health challenges, member countries introduced SDG 3.3 as part of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. This specific target, entitled “End the transmission of communicable diseases such as HIV, malaria, tuberculosis, and neglected diseases,” represents a significant advancement in efforts to reduce health disparities, enhance the overall quality of life, and stabilize the global economy (United Nations [UN], 2015; Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2022).

IV. Global policy landscape

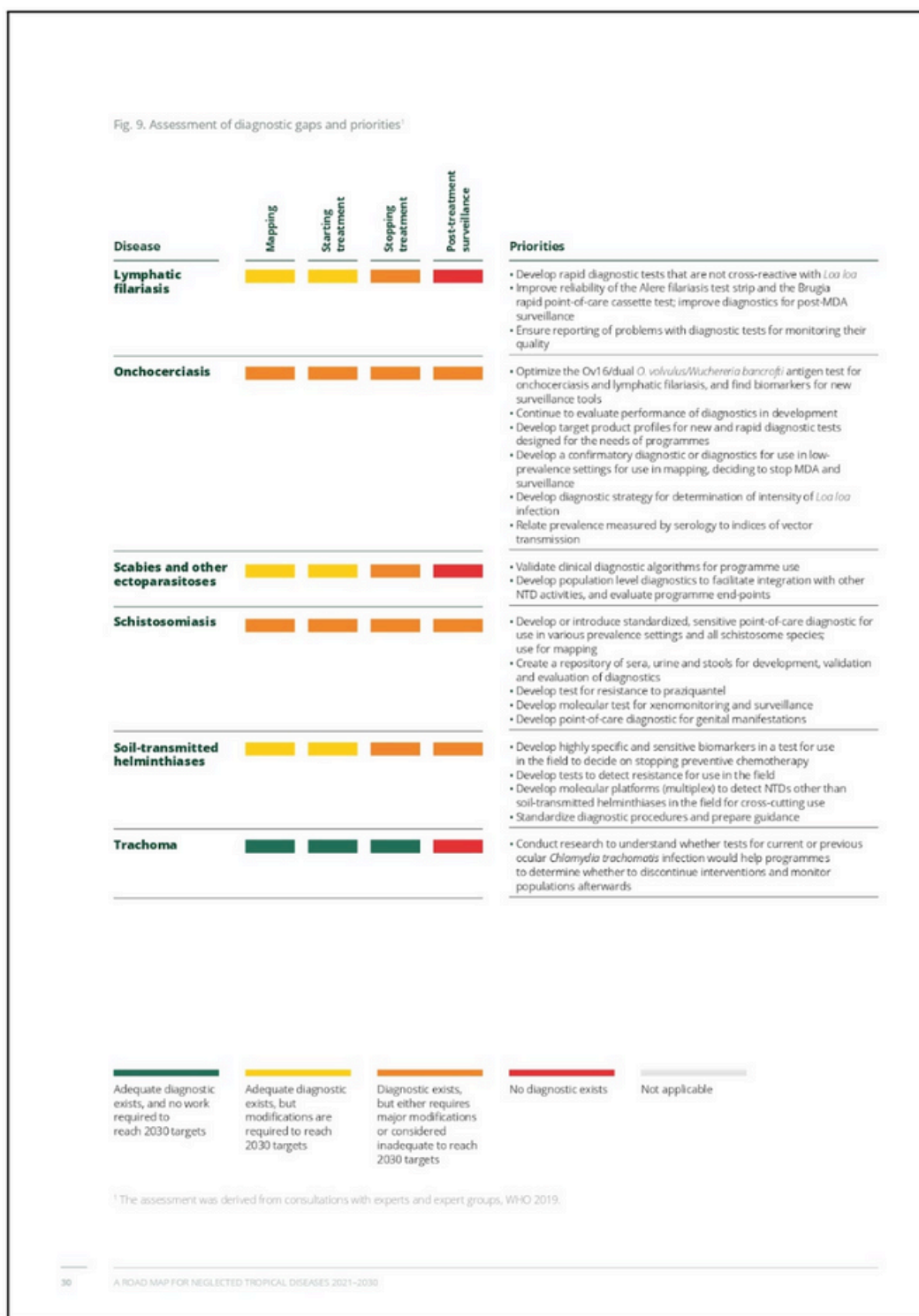
WHO Roadmap

Despite the efforts to fulfill the London Declaration’s goal of eliminating NTDs by 2020, the partnerships have not yet achieved this objective. Accordingly, a revised and more comprehensive strategy became necessary, leading to the elaboration of the WHO Roadmap (2021-2030), which outlines new approaches and targets for NTDs (WHO, 2021). The roadmap functions as both a guideline document for partnerships and prospective programs addressing NTDs, and a policy document that underscores critical challenges existing initiatives face. It identified four principal gaps that impede progress in the battle against NTDs (Souza et al., 2021; Malecela & Ducker, 2021):

- Diagnosis
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Access and logistics
- Advocacy and funding

Diagnosis

Figure 1: Assessment of diagnostic gaps and priorities for neglected tropical diseases



Disease	Screening	Confirm diagnosis	Surveillance	Priorities
Buruli ulcer				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop rapid diagnostic tools for use in a public health centre or community for early diagnosis, reducing morbidity and confirming cases Improve detection of viable <i>Mycobacterium ulcerans</i> in wound samples to distinguish between treatment failure and paradoxical reaction with methods such as mycolactone detection and sequencing of the rRNA
Chagas disease				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validate effectiveness of rapid diagnostic tests and develop affordable ones Validate effective point-of-care diagnostics for infants and adults Evaluate biomarkers of success or failure of treatment Simplify and bring up to date diagnostic algorithms to improve access and shorten time to diagnosis
Dengue				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve quality assurance for point-of-care rapid diagnostic tests Develop polymerase chain reaction test for confirmation of diagnosis
Dracunculiasis				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop field test to detect pre-patent infection in humans, dogs and other animals Develop field pond-side test for detecting <i>Dracunculus medinensis</i> DNA in copepods
Echinococcosis				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring standardized enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay for dogs to market Define target product profile, and develop optimal diagnostic for humans
Foodborne trematodiasis				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finish development of more sensitive serological techniques and polymerase chain reaction assays
Human African trypanosomiasis				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop field-adapted diagnostic and detection tools (e.g. rapid screening or diagnostic tests) for use in primary health care facilities Ensure independent, multicentre evaluation of new tools Include blood microscopy in clinical and laboratory algorithms (for rhodesiense human African trypanosomiasis)
Leishmaniasis (visceral)				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop more sensitive rapid diagnostic tests for use in East Africa Develop less invasive, highly specific tests to measure parasite level Develop less invasive test of cure of post-kala-azar dermal and visceral leishmaniasis
Leprosy				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain and strengthen capacity for clinical diagnosis Maintain access to and capacity for slit-skin smear technique Develop a point-of-care test to confirm diagnosis and detect infection in populations at risk Develop a vaccine to improve prevention of new leprosy cases
Mycetoma, chromoblastomycosis and other deep mycoses				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop rapid diagnostic or serological tests to improve early detection in primary health care settings Evaluate and standardize sporotrichin skin testing for diagnosis of sporotrichosis Facilitate skin scraping, biopsy and fungal culture and histopathology assessment of deep skin lesions
Rabies				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an ante-mortem diagnostic test for use in primary health care facilities Validate post-mortem diagnosis of rabies in animals (e.g. non-invasive sample collection combined with rapid diagnostic test) to improve post-bite treatment
Snakebite envenoming				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standardize and validate current clinically-relevant bedside diagnostic tests to confirm specific clinical syndromes (e.g. 20-minute whole blood clotting test for coagulopathy) Develop simple low-cost "Yes/No" diagnostic (immunoassay or other method for identifying biting species for disease ecology) to reduce delays in administration of antivenom
Taeniasis and cysticercosis				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and validate specific, sensitive diagnostic tools for porcine cysticercosis Develop a sensitive, specific point-of-care diagnostic for human taeniasis and neurocysticercosis in resource-limited settings
Yaws				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a sensitive point-of-care molecular test (e.g. polymerase chain reaction) to distinguish yaws from other skin ulcers (e.g. <i>Haemophilus ducreyi</i>) and to monitor resistance to azithromycin

(World Health Organization, 2021)

As a way to optimize programs' focus, the roadmap created a table categorizing priorities for different NTDs based on key intervention states: mapping, starting treatment, scaling treatment, stopping treatment, and post-treatment surveillance. The images above display a color-coded bar highlighting the stages where significant challenges arise. The rightmost column outlines the priorities for enhancing diagnostics, treatment strategies, and disease monitoring. This organized approach helps identify critical gaps and direct targeted interventions for each NTD.

Monitoring and evaluation

The roadmap indicated that the Secretariat assists member States by providing integrated data systems to enhance the collection and reporting of disease-related information. Moreover, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), WHO has developed disease-specific documents that outline epidemiological trends, helping health ministries and non-governmental institutions monitor the impact of their activities (WHO, 2021). Since monitoring data at all levels is crucial for reaching the goals towards 2030, the roadmap established five core components of monitoring and evaluation:

- **Data management platforms:** comprehensive data systems that include information about the age, gender, and location of the infected individuals to facilitate decision-making.
- **Data and analytics tools:** data systems must contain information to improve interpretation, such as weather, patterns of land, and socioeconomic factors.
- **Mapping and impact assessments:** data should be adaptable, combinable, and shareable across programs.
- **Surveillance:** routine systems need new tools for post-validation surveillance, drug efficacy monitoring, and resistance tracking, especially as diseases are eliminated.
- **Reporting:** national authorities are responsible for creating an integrated reporting system for tracking progress, ensuring coordination, and improving program delivery now and in the future.

Access and logistics

To accomplish the roadmap's goals, the establishment of an effective supply chain is essential. Ensuring the timely and adequate delivery of medicine and other health-related products requires the implementation of efficient strategies from research and development to supply chain management, quality assurance, regulatory registration, pricing mechanisms, and rational utilization. A comprehensive approach in these areas is critical for optimizing health outcomes and enhancing the accessibility of essential health commodities. To address the main challenges faced along the NTDs supply chain, the roadmap divided them into forecasting and procurement, transport and receipt at port, health ministry and warehouses, distribution, and inventory management at health facilities, emphasizing the major hindrances that slow the process of securing access to safe, effective, and affordable health products.

Advocacy and funding

The United States Agency for International Development estimates that for every US\$ 1 spent, US\$ 26 worth of donated medicine is delivered through collaborations with pharmaceutical companies (Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases, 2025). Consequently, NTDs treatments are often regarded as among the “best buys” in the realm of international development, given their capacity to yield significant social and financial returns while remaining cost-effective.

Regarding preventive chemotherapy, which entails the systematic and large-scale administration of drugs, it is projected that for each dollar invested, a return of US\$25 can be realized — reflecting an annualized return rate of 30% (Montresor et al., 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Despite the considerable mobilization of around three billion dollars through the London Declaration, additional funding is still required for certain diseases, especially those nearing elimination. As an example of this situation, in 2016, the WHO Alliance for the Global Elimination of Trachoma by 2020 calculated that the cost of the elimination of trachoma would amount to approximately US\$ 1 billion; however, only US\$ 200-300 million had been pledged at that time (WHO, 2016). Thus, NTDs must be integrated into national health strategies and budgets rather than treated as isolated programs. Such integration could be achieved at a cost of as little as 1% of domestic expenditure on health to meet the goals set for 2030.

V. Global burden and integration into SDGs

NTDs cause chronic suffering, disability, and economic adversity, disproportionately affecting marginalized and impoverished communities. A metric called the Disability-Adjusted Life Year (DALY) is used to measure the disease burden and is calculated with the following formula:

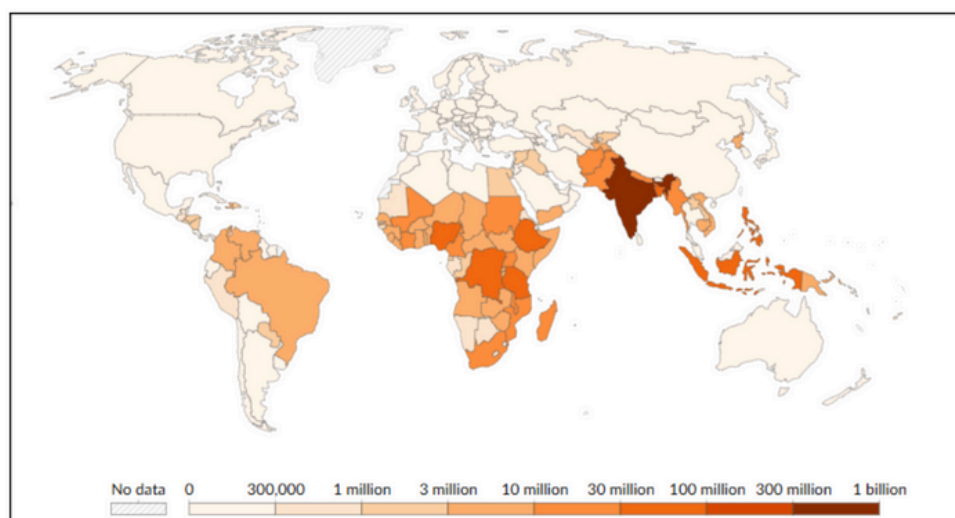
$$\text{DALY} = \text{YLL} + \text{YLD}$$

Where:

- YLL (Years of Life Lost) represents premature mortality.
- YLD (Years of Life Lived with Disability) represents the burden of disease-related disability.

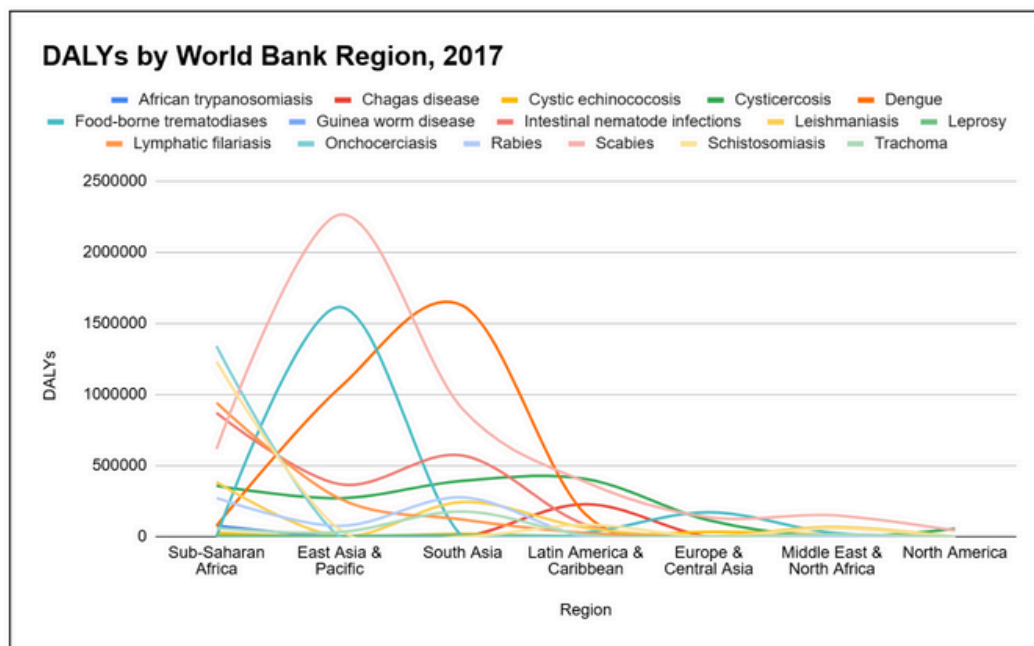
Figure 2 shows the global burden of NTDs around the world. Their significance in the Southern Hemisphere is notable, with predominant cases in Brazil, Central and East Africa, followed by some countries in East Asia. Correspondingly, Figure 3 illustrates the consequences of these cases. The World Bank, in 2017, estimated that NTDs had a total loss of more than 25 million DALYs, with scabies and foodborne trematode infections sharing the highest numbers.

Figure 2: Global burden of NTDs, showing the number of people requiring interventions per country



(WHO — Global Health Observatory, 2023)

Figure 3: Global burden of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) by region in 2017, measured in DALYs.



(Adapted from Japan Alliance on Global Neglected Tropical Diseases, 2017)

Given the substantial burden of NTDs reflected in DALY estimates, it became clear that targeted action was necessary to mitigate their impact. In response, WHO pushed their inclusion by introducing a target, under SDG 3 (Good Health and Well Being), on communicable diseases. Expressing the goal of ending the epidemic of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases, as well as combating hepatitis, water-borne diseases, and other communicable diseases by 2030.

The inclusion of NTDs in SDG 3.3 reflects a response to their historical neglect, the scarcity of funding, and the insufficient integration of these diseases into national healthcare systems and programs (Vanderslott, 2019). The incorporation of NTDs has expanded the discussion of the “Big Three” into the “gang of four” (Smith & Taylor, 2013). The WHO has acknowledged that without specific international targets, the advancement in the control and elimination of these diseases will remain slow. Moreover, emerging interventions, such as mass drug administration (MDA) and improved diagnostic tools, have underscored that the elimination of certain NTDs is not only feasible but also financially beneficial.

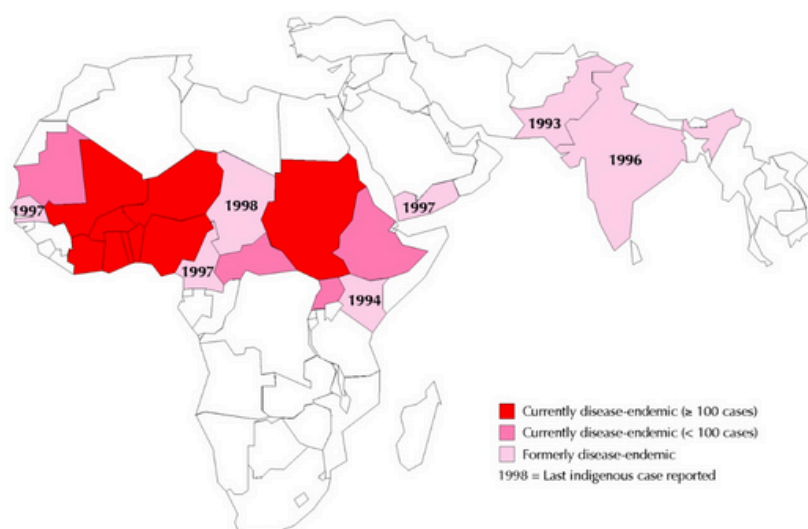
VI. National and regional approaches

Case Studies

Guinea Worm Eradication Program

Guinea worm disease (or dracunculiasis) is a parasitic disease currently limited to rural and remote areas of Sub-Saharan countries, as shown in Figure 4, that lack access to basic sanitation. The great majority of its cases are during agricultural peaks, leading to more sick people, a loss in productivity, and, consequently, an economic loss for the region (Greenaway, 2004).

Figure 4: Map of current and former dracunculiasis-endemic countries



(Greenaway, 2004)

Although rarely lethal, during the mid-1980s, there were approximately 3.5 million cases of guinea worm disease, calling the international community's attention to the issue (WHO, 2022a). Thus, the Carter Center, a nongovernmental organization committed to human rights, along with health ministries, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the WHO, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), initiated an international campaign to eradicate the disease.

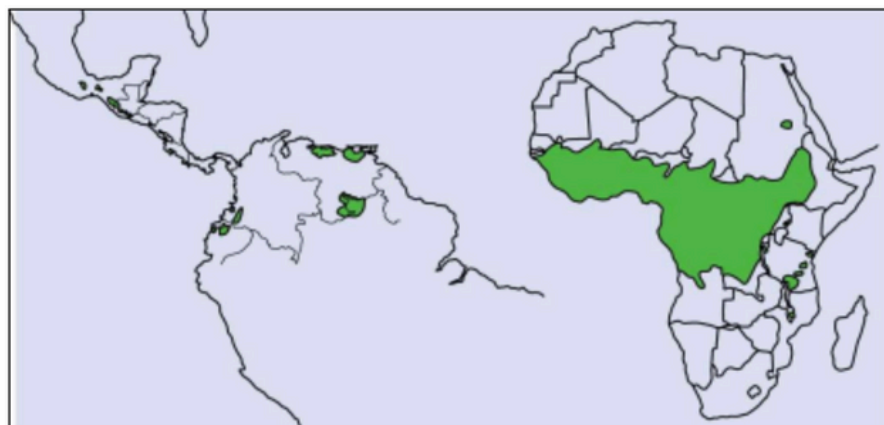
In Chad, for instance, one significant challenge was the large number of cases involving domesticated animals. To address this issue, the Carter Center, in collaboration with volunteers trained by the Chad's Guinea Worm Eradication Program (GWEP), implemented educational initiatives aimed at guiding the local population. The strategies included burning of fish discards and cash incentives for those who reported cases of animals and kept them far from water sources.

Before having been certified as free from dracunculiasis by WHO in 2000, India launched their National GWEP in 1983-84 (Kumar, 2000). Unlike Chad, India successfully eliminated the disease in its territory, having its last case reported in July 1996. GWEP, alongside WHO, strategies based on the worm's life cycle and modes of transmission included: vector control through the use of the chemical compound Temephos (ABATE®) eight times a year in unsafe water sources, provision of clear water in at-risk villages, and health education for local communities.

At the end of 2016, 17 of the 21 endemic countries ended the transmission, and 15 had the elimination of the disease certified by WHO (Molyneux & Sankara, 2017). From the beginning of the program in 1986 to 2024, the number of cases dropped from 3.5 million to 14 worldwide. Despite considerable success, five endemic countries remain: Angola, Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, and South Sudan. Although the case of human numbers is considerably low, since 2000, there has been an increase in the number of cases in animals, such as dogs, cats, and baboons. In 2023, there were 14 human cases and 886 animal cases (Hopkins, 2024). Researchers hypothesize that animals that eat more fish have a higher chance of getting infected, and that is because fish and fish guts might be a novel route for transmission (McDonald et al., 2020). Currently, the most sustainable and reliable method of stopping the transmission is to abate the infected animals (Elom, 2020).

Onchocerciasis Control Programme and African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control
Onchocerciasis (or river blindness) is a parasitic disease predominantly endemic in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Figure 5), although about 1% of cases occur in Latin America (Schmidt et al., 2022; WHO, 2022b). Currently, it affects more than 37 million people worldwide, and although it has never caused a single death, it is responsible for a global burden of 987,000 DALYs (Sighsavers, 2017).

Figure 5: Distribution of onchocerciasis in Latin America, Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula



(Burnham, 1998)

Given the significant disease burden and its global impact on affected communities, the Onchocerciasis Control Programme (OCP) was launched in 1974 to combat the disease in West Africa through large-scale vector control, primarily aerial larviciding of blackfly breeding sites. A policy-driven, intergovernmental partnership coordinated by the WHO, supported by UN Development Programme (UNDP) and FAO, and funded by donor countries and agencies through a trust fund administered by the World Bank, establishing a centralized governance model that enabled coordination of vector control operations across international borders (World Bank, 1984). Through this institutional backing, it was possible to control the vector using helicopters and aircraft at high velocity to spray larvicidal pesticides over the breeding sites of blackflies (Onifade et al., 2024). Covering an area of more than 650,000 km², this strategy played a major role in mitigating the disease (Boatin, 2008).

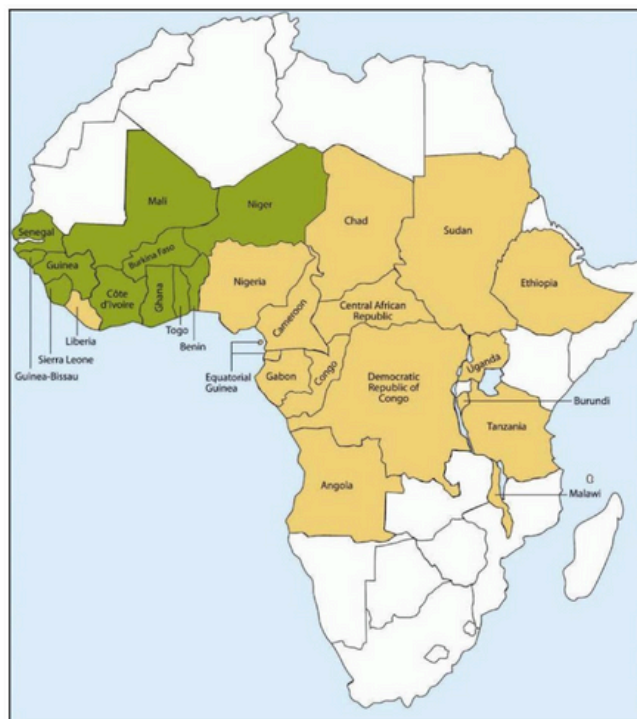
The OCP successfully reduced the transmission of onchocerciasis in West Africa, significantly lowering infection rates and preventing blindness in millions. However, onchocerciasis remained a major health concern in other parts of Africa, particularly in Central and East Africa, where OCP had not been implemented.

Thus, the WHO launched the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC) in 1995, aiming to eliminate onchocerciasis in Central and East Africa through the organization of MDA through a decentralized, community-led policy model.

Its core strategy was established through a collaborative effort involving the WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, and TDR, a novel approach named Community-Directed Treatment with Ivermectin (CDTi) was developed (Moshi, 2021). The donation of the drug was made feasible through the formally instituted Mectizan Donation Program established by the pharmaceutical company Merck. Additionally, with the World Bank serving as an intermediary, the coordination of the program was founded by donor countries and national onchocerciasis task forces, such as beneficiary governments and non-governmental development organizations (Coffeng et al., 2013).

The MDA strategy empowered, and still empowers, communities in affected regions to assume responsibility for the organization and implementation of their drug distribution. The partnerships established helped CDTi coverage from 1.5 million people in 1997 to over 112 million in 2012 (WHO, 2015).

Figure 6: A map of Africa, showing the areas covered by the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control in green and the African Programme Onchocerciasis Control in yellow



(Boatin, 2008)

Together, OCP and APOC covered 27 countries on the African continent. OCP operated from 1974 to 2002, treating more than 150 million people in 11 countries. Similarly, APOC was active from 1995 to 2015 and was recognized as one of the most successful programs in Africa. This program established a robust network aimed at enhancing primary healthcare systems across 16 countries, facilitating the implementation of more than 108 active projects (Brown, 2007).

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that only in January 2025 did Niger become the first African country to eliminate onchocerciasis (Jesudason, 2025). The country's vector control efforts were extremely important for this historical milestone. From 1976 to 1989, Niger established measures to regularly treat vector's breeding sites with a rotation of larvicides through helicopters, which was expensive, but efficient.

Following the APOC's discontinuation in 2015, the WHO introduced an initiative to sustain the achievements of APOC. This initiative, named Expanded Special Project for Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (ESPEN), extends its focus beyond onchocerciasis to encompass five PC-NTDs within the African region through MDA. Unlike its predecessors, ESPEN remains active and engages in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Africa (AFRO), Member States, and several NTD partners (Lakwo et al., 2020). As a result, it has successfully reached 47 countries, thereby increasing the prevalence and execution of MDA within these regions.

VII. Financing and innovation in NTD policies

Innovative funding models

NTDs have always faced inadequate funding due to their low commercial appeal. It is estimated that only 0.6% of global healthcare funding is allocated to NTDs programs and initiatives (WHO, 2020). Traditional funding mechanisms have often been insufficient in sustaining large-scale, successful interventions.

Past initiatives have shown that several factors are mandatory for a favorable outcome (Zhang et al., 2019):

1. A long-term commitment from a diverse range of donors, as well as the governments of endemic countries, is essential for tackling NTDs.
2. Strong partnerships between key stakeholders, including the WHO, pharmaceutical companies, local governments, NGOs, and affected communities.
3. Expanding the number of donor countries to bridge financial gaps, while collaboration among endemic nations, is key to preventing cross-border disease transmission.
4. Targeted disease control efforts, alongside investments in primary healthcare systems and capacity-building initiatives, can strengthen national programs and ensure lasting impact.

For instance, the London Declaration, which lasted for eight years, mobilized 12 companies and 80 partner organizations across different fields, leading to 14 billion donated treatments and a remarkable financial contribution of 17 billion USD donated from the R&D-based biopharmaceutical industry. Such collective efforts position the program as one of the most cost-effective in the history of public health.

Public-Private Partnerships

PPPs are collaborations between governmental institutions and private companies that facilitate funding management for NTD R&D programs (Ma et al., 2023). However, most NTDs greatly impact remote areas of the world, making investments less appealing to the private sector. Nonetheless, the world has changed since the first NTDs roadmap publication in 2012, especially because of a global recognition that NTDs are not merely a local public health issue, but a global one affecting the entire tropical region (Bush & Hopkins, 2011; WHO, 2012). Therefore, PPPs are increasingly seen as an effective means to address the challenges in drug development for NTDs (Chatelain & Ioset, 2011).

Drug discovery and development (DDD) for NTDs often exceeds 10 years and costs over \$1 billion (Williams et al., 2015; Weng et al., 2018). Drug innovation relies heavily on investment in R&D. Therefore, the WHO developed an “R&D Blueprint” to accelerate the control and eradication of NTDs. The document emphasizes the identification of key priorities and outlines strategic roadmaps, target product profiles (TPPs), and recommendations for the evaluation of vaccines and treatments.

In alignment with these global efforts, the Gates Foundation's R&D funding, committed to eradicating eight of 20 NTDs, has allocated more than \$1.8 billion to organizations focused on R&D for delivering innovative methods to control diseases. Ultimately, continuous and sustained investment in R&D is required to achieve significant progress in the field of DDD.

PPPs and R&D investments have played a pivotal role in addressing NTDs, fostering innovation, and improving access to treatments. One of the most successful cases is the Drugs for Neglected Tropical Diseases initiative (DNDi), which has received donations from the public and private sectors since 2003 (Ioset & Chang, 2011). The current goals and challenges faced by DNDi are entirely based on the patients' needs. Consequently, to secure the main necessities, a pragmatic product-development partnership (PDP) approach based on a virtual model with all R&D activities outsourced has been adopted to ease their three-pronged approaches to treatment: short (1-3 years), medium (3-5 years), and long (6-15 years) (Drugs for Neglected Tropical Diseases Initiative, 2019). Additionally, to maintain a balanced distribution of contributions, no donor may provide more than 25% of the total budget (DNDi, 2014).

After more than 20 years since DNDi's launch, the organization has developed 13 cost-effective treatments for six deadly diseases. Such initiatives include alternatives to arsenic-based medicine for sleep sickness (e.g., fexinidazole instead of melarsoprol), ravidasvir for hepatitis C, and acoziborole for sleep sickness. Ultimately, DNDi exemplifies the effectiveness of PPPs in tackling critical health challenges faced by underserved communities. By managing funding complexities and driving innovation, DNDi reinforces the importance of sustained global collaboration in the fight against neglected diseases.

Despite the major achievements of PPPs over the past couple of decades, several challenges still need to be addressed. These include a lack of transparency, accountability, and clear priorities with the public from donors (Munoz et al., 2015; Mrazek & Mossialos, 2003). In addition, these partnerships may lean toward altering existing medicines for the market rather than creating new and more effective ones for many reasons (Bors et al., 2015). PPPs' past results have shown more effectiveness in improving current medications than when creating new ones, as observed in MMV, a PPP focused on malaria treatments, which had more success in altering the formula of the already existing medicine Coartem™ into a chewable tablet. Lack of market incentives, the high cost and time required for new drug development, and inconsistent and unpredictable financing are additional reasons for this trend (Bathurst & Hentschel, 2006).

Non-governmental development organizations

Since the 1980s, a growing number of non-profit civic organizations have emerged as alternatives to support the governments of developing countries (Martín Nieto, 2007; Fowler, 2000). To differentiate these institutions from the ones associated with the State, the United Nations (UN) labeled them as non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs).

Within the global health landscape, NGDOs have become instrumental in tackling NTDs, especially through the NTD NGDO Network. These organizations have fully committed to the London Declaration during the Network's third annual meeting in Australia in 2012. Thus, a few of their commitments include:

- The integration of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programs into NTD programs where appropriate.
- The development of clear guidelines as to where and when to stop treatment.
- The finalization of baseline disease mapping to achieve the scale-up of treatment.

By aligning these commitments with broader initiatives, NGDOs have played a crucial role as major innovators for community-wide treatment and have distributed millions of treatments of PCs over the past decade (Bush & Hopkins, 2011).

Mass drug administration

MDA is a strategy in which an entire population is subjected to treatment without individual diagnosis. Highly recommended by WHO, MDA offers treatment against NTDs to more than 700 million people annually. It is estimated that, with pharmaceutical partners' donations, it is possible to treat each person for only fifty cents per year (UN, 2009).

Each drug has a specific dosing requirement and must be distributed according to the patient's weight. Ivermectin, for instance, is the only reliable drug for onchocerciasis through MDA. It is distributed at a standard dose of 150µg/kg (Campillo et al., 2020). Praziquantel, on the other hand, is distributed at a single and standard dose of 40 mg/kg, meaning the standard amount is delivered in a single administration, and is currently the only drug available to treat schistosomiasis (Olliaro et al., 2013). Azithromycin, however, used to treat Chlamydia trachomatis eye infection, is distributed at a single and standard dose of 20 mg/kg orally (Cochereau et al., 2007).

While MDA has proven to be a cost-effective strategy in reducing the burden of NTDs, its success depends on several factors. Papers on lymphatic filariasis (LF) analyzed key challenges faced during MDA distribution to control the disease in Ghana. While the entire territory was covered, there were many obstacles faced, such as the population's non-compliance with treatment (some of them discarded the drugs to avoid side effects), weak supervision of volunteers responsible for distributing the drugs, and unreliable data (Ahorlu et al., 2018; Anto et al., 2011; Manyeh et al., 2020; de Souza et al., 2016). Therefore, these challenges understate the importance of strengthening community engagement, ensuring proper training for treatment distributors, and improving data collection methods.

VIII. Policy challenges and gaps

Weak healthcare infrastructure in endemic regions

Alongside inadequate funding, weak infrastructure is one of the main reasons that NTDs continue to exist (Qian et al., 2020). Inaccessibility of clean water and sanitation contributes to the continuous life cycle of several highly infectious parasites, such as the ones that cause soil-transmitted helminths (STHs), responsible for infecting more than one and a half billion people worldwide (Hotez et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2024). According to the Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2017 report from UNICEF, rural areas are the most affected. Eight out of ten people lack clean water, and seven out of ten lack basic sanitation, living in rural areas (WHO, 2019).

A study developed by the Economics Department of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) analyzing municipalities from the North and Northeast regions of Brazil stated that, in some areas, the shortest distance from a city to a hospital with an ICU bed can reach almost 400 kilometers (Pinto, 2019). These findings highlight a critical healthcare issue and underscore an urgent need for target investments in healthcare infrastructure.

These factors are intrinsically related to poverty, creating a cycle: lack of clean water, sanitation, and basic healthcare fuels the spread of infectious diseases, reducing individuals' ability to work, attend school, and maintain productivity. Thus, deepening economic hardship. The goals of universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation can only be reached through a collaborative effort involving national governments in conjunction with communities, civil society organizations, the private sector, and international development agencies.

Governmental entities must formulate and execute policies that ensure the provision of clean water and sanitation, and improved access to healthcare facilities, such as hospitals and health posts, which are community-level clinics that provide basic medical services.

Climate change and its impact on NTD spread

The World Population Prospects 2024 report projects that, by 2100, the world's population will exceed ten billion (DESA/Population Division, 2024). However, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the exploitation of natural materials has become increasingly common. Consequently, from 1760 to 2019, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere rose by almost 50% (Zhang et al., 2019). Therefore, historical studies have substantiated the basic principle of climate change: increasing greenhouse gas emissions drives the global mean temperature upward (Booth, 2018). It is estimated that, by the end of the 21st century, the average global temperature will rise by 1.9°C (Change, 2007).

Elevated temperatures, rainfall, humidity, and increased sea levels are among the major causes of geographical shifts in vector distribution and disease transmission (Tidman, Abela-Ridder, and De Castañeda, 2021; Chen et al., 2011). Mosquitoes that transmit dengue fever, such as *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus*, predominantly thrive in environments with elevated temperatures and high humidity. Consequently, projections indicate that these conditions could expose an additional 500 million individuals to chikungunya and dengue, with estimates suggesting that this number could approach one billion by 2080 (Ryan et al., 2019). Additionally, climatic hazards bring people closer to pathogens. Heatwaves, for instance, increase water-related activities, thereby heightening the risk of transmitting waterborne diseases (Phillips, 2024).

As climate change continues to accelerate, significant shifts in the geographical distribution of NTDs are expected. These diseases are likely to spread into new regions and become more severe in existing areas due to faster reproduction and development rates of parasites driven by rising temperatures (Tidman, 2021). This requires countries to move beyond simply reacting to a health crisis. Instead, they must adopt proactive policy frameworks that incorporate climate modeling, vector surveillance, and readiness within health systems. Nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and parts of Latin America often lack policy capacity to integrate climate projections into public health planning and remain fragile due to their vulnerable healthcare systems.

To tackle these challenges, international policy efforts must focus on equitable financing and regional cooperation. This could involve establishing programs and organizations that align health, environment, and infrastructure goals; fostering partnerships across different sectors; and establishing trust funds dedicated specifically to controlling NTDs in regions most at risk from climate change (Klepac et al., 2024).

IX. Conclusion

Historical programs such as the OCP and APOC demonstrated how strong international cooperation, coordinated regional policies, and community-focused strategies can achieve sustainable disease management. Similarly, programs like GWEP and RBM have shown the effectiveness of targeted approaches that combine drug and intervention access, real-time monitoring, and interagency partnerships. These models highlight the importance of integrating treatment accessibility, real-time data tracking, and cooperative efforts as key components in combating diseases.

To effectively combat NTDs and meet the targets of the WHO NTD Roadmap for 2030, future policies must emphasize interventions that are both scalable and sustainable, taking into account the realities of health and climate change. This entails the incorporation of predictive climate-health modeling and the establishment of robust funding mechanisms aimed at long-term control.

Furthermore, collaboration between public and private sectors is essential to bolster community-based delivery systems, stimulate local R&D for diagnostics and treatments, and enhance cross-border cooperation to address the transnational aspects of NTD transmission. By harmonizing research, prevention, and treatment initiatives across sectors and borders, the global health community can make significant strides toward eliminating NTDs as a public health concern.

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Do IMF Conditionalities Contribute to Political Instability?

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I. Introduction

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, as global skepticism toward financial institutions deepens in light of widening income inequality and pervasive elite corruption. While the IMF presents itself as committed to safeguarding nations' economic security and promoting sustainable growth in developing economies, its interventions particularly through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and conditional lending tied to austerity measures, has drawn criticism for intensifying socioeconomic disparities. Austerity policies, which enforce public spending cuts and higher taxes, have deepened inequalities, fueled cost-of-living crises, and triggered social unrest in many countries. In Kenya, IMF-mandated fiscal consolidation pressured the government to adopt the controversial Finance Bill 2024, which aimed to raise an additional \$2.4 billion US dollars to service debt, largely owed to the IMF and World Bank by introducing regressive taxes on essential goods like bread, sanitary pads, and fuel to meet revenue targets. Though justified as necessary to fund education and healthcare budget increases, these measures disproportionately burdened low-income households, sparking nationwide protests under the #RejectFinanceBill2024 movement. This research paper argues that IMF conditionalities have contributed to political instability in Kenya. To support this argument, the analysis draws on three key periods in Kenya's post colonial history: the 1980s and 1990s under President Daniel arap Moi, the 2000s under President Mwai Kibaki and the present day under President William Ruto.

IMF conditional lending was conceived to stabilize economies experiencing balance of payments problems, which are defined as when a country cannot meet its international financial obligations due to a deficit in trade, investment or foreign currency reserves.

Since the 1980s, however, these programs have expanded into far-reaching SAPs that demand market liberalization, public sector downsizing, and fiscal austerity as prerequisites for financing. In theory, SAPs should focus on reducing fiscal balances, promoting long term sustainable growth and adapting economies to global markets. In reality, they often inflict acute social pain involving austerity policies such as cutting government spending on essential services like education and healthcare, as well as increasing taxes on basic goods. Empirical studies confirm a causal link between structural adjustment programs and political instability, identifying two main pathways: “hardship effects,” where the material deprivation caused by austerity fuels grievances and protest, and “alienation effects,” where the foreign-imposed nature of the reforms breeds resentment against the government for ceding sovereignty (Reinsberg et al. 2022, 2). Both mechanisms have been observed in Africa and beyond. For instance, when Jordan cut bread subsidies under an IMF program, riots ensued; in Ecuador, IMF-advised fuel price hikes in 2019 led to such intense demonstrations that the government was forced to temporarily flee the capital (Reinsberg et al. 2022, 2). These outcomes illustrate that while SAPs aim to restore macroeconomic stability, their socially disruptive effects often undermine political stability, leading to resistance, unrest, and in some cases, government crises.

Kenya’s experience is a microcosm of this global phenomenon. Each wave of IMF-mandated reforms during these three periods of governance, from the early SAPs of the 1980s to the austerity measures of the 2020s has generated political tremors. Hindsight, it is crucial to note why Kenya is particularly susceptible to the instability effects of conditionality. Since independence in 1963, Kenya’s political system has been characterized by patronage networks, ethnic clientelism, and periodic protests when the distribution of economic resources are not transparent. In this context, IMF conditions, which by design require expenditure cuts and the removal of subsidies are not just technocratic adjustments but directly affect patronage flows and the welfare of different constituencies, therefore increasing political stakes. The following sections provide a historical analysis of how Kenyan administrations have managed (or failed to manage) this situation, and how IMF conditions acted as an accelerant or catalyst for social unrest.

Kenya’s first encounter with IMF structural adjustment in the 1980s vividly illustrates how conditionalities designed to stabilize the economy instead contributed to political instability; Under President Daniel arap Moi, IMF-imposed austerity collapsed growth, fueled social unrest, enabled authoritarian crackdowns, and ultimately undermined the legitimacy of his regime.

The IMF's initial prescriptions directly triggered Kenya's economic collapse in the early 1980s. In exchange for its 1982 Structural Adjustment Loan (SAL), the Fund required Moi's government to slash public spending, remove subsidies, and deregulate prices, arguing that fiscal discipline was necessary to restore balance-of-payments stability (Ford 2024). These cuts disproportionately targeted social sectors because they were among the largest components of Kenya's budget, leading to a reduction of education spending from 22.6% to 18.7% and healthcare from 7.6% to 5.4% (Oyugui et al. n.d.). The sudden withdrawal of state support decreased demand, stunted agricultural output, and increased inflation, driving GDP growth down from 7.9% in 1978 to 2.3% in 1983, while annual inflation rose from 11.6% to 15.3% (Oyugui et al. n.d.; World Data). By 1985, the shilling had depreciated drastically and could buy only 43% of its 1979 value, eroding households' purchasing power. These economic shocks were not coincidental but rather the direct consequences of IMF-enforced austerity, which prioritized "smaller budget deficits, limited expansion of domestic credit and external commercial borrowing, gradual removal of import control and exchange rate adjustments" over the welfare of ordinary Kenyans (World Bank 1985, 3). By designing policies that deliberately cut public services and subsidies, the IMF created the economic despair that culminated in a coup attempt in 1982. IMF conditionalities continued into the 1990s, but instead of bringing about the same degree of macroeconomic collapse, they created fiscal conditions that Moi's administration took advantage of; under the guise of fiscal restraint, the administration used severe budget cutbacks to higher education as a tool to undermine these institutions' independence and limit their capacity to organise against authoritarian control.

IMF conditionalities further destabilized Kenya in the 1990s by creating fiscal crises in public universities that authoritarian leaders exploited to silence intellectual dissent, reduce funding, and provoke extreme social unrest. Structural adjustment loans mandated sweeping public spending cuts to reduce deficits, with higher education hit particularly hard. Between 1995/96 and 1996/97, funding for public universities dropped from US\$57.7 million to US\$54.5 million (6.6%), even as enrollment rose (Ngome 2007, 850). To comply with IMF austerity, Moi's government introduced tuition fees and reduced institutional support, placing the burden on students and their families. The impact was immediate unrest. In June 1991, all Kenyan public universities went on strike over tuition hikes and staff retrenchments, followed in November 1993 by a coordinated strike from academics at all four public universities demanding recognition of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU). Moi University alone recorded 24 strikes between 1985 and 2009, many linked directly to inadequate funding and unpaid staff salaries (Munene 2016, 91).

Rather than addressing the grievances that arose because of IMF-mandated cuts to tuition subsidies and staff wages, Moi used SAP-driven unrest as a pretext for repression. Moi's regime killed four students and arrested lecturers from the University of Nairobi, including five University of Nairobi and KUC lecturers held without charge or trial (HRW 2020, Amutabi 2002, 159; SAGE 1985, 42). Thus, the IMF's austerity measures did not just weaken Kenya's universities and civil society, but directly contributed to the unrest that Moi exploited to consolidate authoritarian control, demonstrating how IMF conditionalities translated economic pain into political repression. Beyond provoking unrest in universities and civil society, IMF conditionalities also reshaped Kenya's political economy, as liberalization measures in the late 1980s and early 1990s opened new avenues for elite corruption that further eroded public trust and deepened political instability.

IMF-mandated liberalization in the late 1980s and early 1990s destabilized Kenya by creating a fertile ground for elite corruption on an unprecedented scale, resulting in a fiscal crisis that eroded public trust in the government. Under IMF pressure, Moi privatized 139 state-owned enterprises by 1991 and deregulated trade, ostensibly to reduce deficits and attract investment (Githahu 2024). Instead, rapid privatization enabled Moi's inner circle to convert state resources into a patronage machine by robbing the state of important revenue generating assets and selling them to politically connected bidders at below-market prices, while weakened trade and finance regulations allowed allied firms to access state credit, manipulate export schemes, and divert funds toward political loyalty rather than productive investments. A 2001 World Bank study revealed that the president personally contributed KSh 155 million (\$2 million) to 635 fundraising events, with cabinet ministers dominating the top 20 donors, funds widely believed to have come from IMF-financed programs (World Bank 2006, 54–55). The most notorious abuse was the Goldenberg scandal, a fraudulent export compensation scheme in which Goldenberg International was paid a 35% “export compensation” (15% above the lawful limit), even though gold and diamonds were not covered under the Export Compensation Act (Maina 2019). The scandal siphoned off more than 10% of Kenya's GDP, with a subsequent Kroll report estimating Moi himself diverted over £1 billion of state funds during his tenure (Rice 2007). At the same time, Moi's regime established a network of “political banks” that siphoned money from the Central Bank to finance his Kenya Africa National Union party (KANU) election campaigns, doubling the money supply in six months (Berkeley 1996). Designed to instill fiscal discipline, these IMF-driven reforms instead produced the opposite as deficits ballooned from 6.7% of GDP in 1989/90 to 11.4% in 1992/93, while inflation reached 100% in August 1993 (IMF 1995; U.S. Department of State n.d.).

By pushing rapid liberalization without institutional safeguards, the IMF legitimized the very mechanisms that enabled the Goldenberg scandal, turning its fiscal reforms into instruments for widespread dissatisfaction and elite corruption. Simultaneously, the Fund's austerity measures deepened everyday hardship, transforming public anger into mass protest and ethnic violence.

IMF demands for fiscal retrenchment deepened Kenya's fractures by layering acute social hardship onto the political repression of Moi's one-party state, creating an unstable environment that made unrest inevitable. Central to the Fund's conditionalities was the elimination of food subsidies, a measure meant to curb the budget deficit but one that struck at the heart of household survival. The removal of maize subsidies led to a 40% surge in maize prices within six months, with a further 20% increase in wholesale maize prices soon after (IMF 1995). For Kenyan families, maize is a staple of daily life, and its sudden unaffordability ignited widespread hardship. This economic pressure intensified the public anger that fueled the Saba Saba demonstrations of July 7 1990, when 20 protesters demanding multiparty democracy were killed and over 1,000 arrested by police (Amnesty International n.d.). Without IMF-mandated subsidy cuts and public service retrenchment, the grievances—economic strain, shrinking access to public services and political exclusion—that Moi weaponized into ethnic violence would not have reached such explosive levels.

By highlighting the injustice behind Kenya's pro-democracy struggle, ensuring that calls for political reform were inseparable from demands for economic justice. Crucially, rather than uniting the country through economic reform, SAPs intensified grievances and heightened intercommunal distrust as the IMF-mandated public service cuts disproportionately affected Luo strongholds. Scholars indeed note that Kenya's adjustment policies in the early 1990s coincided with growing inequality, inflation, and increasing ethnic discrimination, with marginalized communities bearing a disproportionate share of the burden (Rono 2007, 81). Facing multiparty elections in 1992 and 1997, Moi channeled the resentment unleashed by IMF-driven austerity into ethnic divisions, deploying Kalenjin militias against Kikuyu strongholds to suppress opposition turnout (Mueller 2022). Between 1991 and 1993, these clashes left 1,500 dead—mainly Kikuyus, Luos and Luhyas—and 300,000 displaced (Berkeley 1996). The tragedy also carried long-term implications. The 1997 unrest facilitated the rise of a young Kalenjin operative in Moi's Youth for KANU '92 movement—William Ruto, now Kenya's president—emphasizing how IMF conditionalities not only destabilized the present but also shaped the trajectory of Kenya's political future.

In such a way, the ethnic violence of the early 1990s exposed how IMF austerity could inflame deep social divisions—but by the mid-1990s, the withdrawal of IMF support would destabilize Moi’s regime by dismantling the very patronage networks he relied on to contain dissent.

By the mid-1990s, IMF conditionalities had moved beyond straining Kenya’s economy to actively dismantling the political structures Moi relied on to maintain control. After years of unmet governance reforms, and Moi’s failure to curb rampant graft, the Fund suspended lending in July 1997, cutting off the foreign capital Moi needed to sustain his patronage networks (U.S. Department of State n.d.). Desperate to regain support, Moi established the Anti-Corruption Authority in 1999, only for Kenya’s courts to declare it unconstitutional in 2000. The IMF responded by canceling its \$150 million Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, effectively severing ties. Without IMF funds, Moi could no longer finance his patronage system or contain the intensified public dissent. On October 10, 1997, in the spirit of “Saba Saba”, a movement dubbed the Second Liberation formed, mobilized Kenyans into organized cells to end his dictatorship. The protests left 39 dead, 69 injured, and over 5000 arrested (Makhoka 2020). Thus, by first enforcing austerity that fueled grievances and then suspending funds that dismantled Moi’s patronage networks, the IMF both created and intensified the instability that ended his regime.

IMF conditionalities under President Mwai Kibaki restored Kenya’s credibility internationally but simultaneously entrenched political instability by constraining domestic policy space. When Kibaki assumed the presidency in 2002, Kenya’s economy was near collapse, with GDP growth at just 0.5% and debt exceeding 40% of GDP after decades of Moi-era economic sabotage (World Bank). To revive growth, Kibaki re-engaged with the IMF, signing multiple facilities between 2003 and 2005—including a Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF), an Extended Credit Facility (ECF), and an Exogenous Shock Facility (ESF)—that provided hundreds of millions in concessional loans. Each program came with strict conditionalities: deficit reduction targets, monetary tightening, hiring freezes, privatization, and anti-corruption legislation. These measures produced quick macroeconomic recovery—growth reached 5.9% by 2005 (World Bank). As the IMF noted, “prudent macroeconomic policies and a favorable external environment helped lift the economy after more than a decade of slow growth and declines in per capita income” (IMF 2007). Yet the IMF’s insistence on fiscal consolidation over flexibility meant that when a 2004 drought left 3 million Kenyans food-insecure (ISS 2018), Kibaki’s IMF-mandated Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) barred significant emergency spending.

By forcing Kibaki to prioritize deficit ceilings over famine relief, the IMF directly undermined his government's capacity to respond to crisis, fueling public mistrust and the perception that Kenya's sovereignty had been ceded to external creditors. These constraints deepened inequality and rising living costs, pushing Kenyans from quiet frustration to open protest.

Kibaki's presidency replaced Moi's blunt political repression with an IMF-led austerity drive that prioritized temporary macroeconomic stability over addressing long-standing inequalities and rising living expenses. The Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) introduced by the IMF promised to integrate poverty reduction into a growth-oriented strategy, yet in practice austerity hollowed it out. By 2005 the bottom 10% survived on as little as KSh 3,331 (USD \$25) annually while the wealthiest 10% controlled 47.7% of national expenditure, revealing stark disparities (IMF 1999; KNBS 2008, 286). IMF-backed instruments like the Exogenous Shocks Facility (ESF), designed to provide timely support to low-income countries during the 2008–09 crises, failed to protect Kenyan households (IMF 2006). Inflation still climbed from 26.6% to 31.5%, and the Consumer Price Index surged 3.51% in a single month, exposing how IMF programs secured fiscal indicators while leaving citizens defenseless (KNBS 2008, 1). This crisis was most visible in food markets. Maize flour prices rose 27%, erasing purchasing power and sparking the 2008 “Unga Revolution” riots (Musembi 2014). Austerity deepened further in 2011 when the IMF demanded removal of price controls and imposed a 16% VAT on fuel, pushing petrol prices from KES 95 to 112 per litre and inflation to 19.7% (Amboko 2023; Odongo 2012, 7; KNBS 2011). With the lowest quintile already spending 44% of their income on food, these conditions transformed everyday survival into crisis, leaving millions unable to afford basic fuel and flour. The ensuing protests were not impulsive outbursts but the predictable consequence of IMF-mandated taxes and deregulation that stripped households of economic security.

IMF-backed governance reforms under President Mwai Kibaki further entrenched elite impunity by promoting privatization and rapid liberalization without embedding credible accountability mechanisms, thereby fueling disillusionment and ultimately contributing to the 2007–08 post-election violence. While these reforms were intended to reduce fiscal burdens and enhance transparency, in practice they created lucrative opportunities for politically connected elites to capture state resources.

Privatization opened public procurement to manipulation, allowing Kibaki's close allies—including former Internal Security Minister Christopher Ndarathi Murungaru, Vice President Moody Awori, Finance Minister David Mwiraria, and Justice Minister Kiraitu Murungi—to exploit contracts for personal gain (Maina 2019). The Anglo-Leasing scandal (2004–2006) epitomized this dynamic: more than \$770 million was siphoned through 18 fraudulent security contracts involving massive overpricing and non-delivery of goods (Maina 2019). Despite the IMF's insistence on anti-corruption safeguards, not a single perpetrator was convicted—an outcome that reflected the weakness of Kenya's judiciary, the protection of elites within government, and the failure of externally driven reforms to address entrenched patronage networks. As whistleblower John Githongo revealed, the scandal "went all the way to the top" and financed the 2007 election campaign, demonstrating how IMF-backed reforms not only enabled elite corruption but also undermined democracy itself (Maina 2019). For ordinary Kenyans, who were already enduring the sacrifices of IMF austerity, such scandals exposed the hypocrisy of reforms that demanded discipline from citizens while shielding elites from accountability. By producing growth without equity and deepening disillusionment, the Fund magnified electoral grievances into a nationwide crisis. These grievances—rooted in soaring living costs, entrenched corruption, and perceptions of state capture—were directly linked to IMF-imposed austerity and deregulation, and when layered onto ethnic inequities, they magnified mistrust in the state and fueled the 2007–08 post-election violence, which killed more than 1,000 and displaced 350,000 (World Bank 2009, 1). Although the IMF extended new assistance in 2008, its conditionalities left intact the systemic corruption and inequality that had fueled instability, ensuring that the risk of future political turmoil persisted.

The Kibaki era thus demonstrates the duality of IMF conditionalities: on one hand, they restored macroeconomic stability and donor credibility by successfully completing several programs aimed at poverty reduction and economic growth. On the other, they entrenched a model of growth without equity, where austerity forced the poor into deeper hardship, liberalization enabled corrupt elites to thrive, and unresolved grievances eroded trust in the state. Far from delivering lasting stability, IMF programs left behind a strained social compact that not only fueled the Unga riots and post-election violence of 2007–08 but also paved the way for recurring unrest in the years that followed.

Following the Kibaki era's donor supervised reforms, IMF-mandated austerity under President William Ruto's debt management program laid the groundwork for Kenya's largest wave of political unrest since the return of multiparty democracy in December 1991, as regressive tax hikes and social spending cuts pushed ordinary citizens to breaking point.

When William Ruto took office in September 2022, Kenya's debt crisis was acute: public debt had reached 70% of GDP, with 68% of government revenue consumed by debt service (National Treasury 2024, 15). With little fiscal space, Ruto inherited the IMF's \$3.9 billion, 38-month Extended Facility Credit program approved in 2021, aimed at supporting economic recovery from COVID-19 and sought additional disbursements (Al Jazeera 2024). The IMF demanded fiscal consolidation at all costs, leaving Ruto no option but to pursue new revenue streams rather than increase social spending. The Finance Bill 2024 was drafted as a direct response to IMF revenue benchmarks aiming to raise KSh 302 billion (\$2.4 billion) through regressive tax hikes by doubling VAT on fuel from 8% to 16%, reinstating a 16% VAT on bread and maize flour, taxing sanitary pads and small businesses, and introducing a 5% withholding tax on content creators (Mathini et al. 2024). Meanwhile, IMF ceilings forced an average of 11% cuts to vital social programs in education, agriculture, and disaster response, even as 2.8 million Kenyans faced acute food insecurity (ActionAid 2024; Muthomi 2025). Therefore, IMF conditions did not just shape the Finance Bill 2024, but directly set out its most painful provisions, ensuring the burden of austerity fell on ordinary Kenyans and directly manufacturing the conditions for mass unrest.

The eruption of the #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests demonstrated how IMF conditionalities translated economic austerity into mass political instability, forcing an unprecedented confrontation between citizens and the state. The Finance Bill 2024—drafted to meet IMF revenue benchmarks—would have raised the price of one liter of cooking oil by KSh 168, while also imposing a 16% VAT on previously untaxed essentials like sanitary pads and a 2.5% tax on motor vehicles, further reducing disposable income already eroded by the previous Finance Bill 2023 (Adhiambo 2024; Mathini et al. 2024). From June 18 to August 8, 2024, hundreds of thousands of Kenyans—mostly youth—mobilized in 43 of 47 counties (Nation Team 2024). On June 25, 2024, demonstrators stormed Parliament after 204 MPs backed the bill; in response Ruto invoked extraordinary measures, deploying the military without parliamentary approval. This action was widely condemned as unconstitutional and reminiscent of Moi-era authoritarianism. Ruto's hardline rhetoric—branding protesters “criminals” and their actions as “treasonous”—only hardened the protesters' resolve (Madowo et al. 2024). Faced with overwhelming opposition, Ruto withdrew the Finance Bill within 12 hours, an unprecedented reversal that emphasized how IMF-mandated austerity had destabilized Kenya's politics to the point of crisis. Yet the dramatic withdrawal of the Finance Bill did not end the crisis; instead, the state's violent crackdown on demonstrators—marked by mass arrests, abductions and the use of live ammunition—exposed how IMF-driven austerity was undermining not only livelihoods but the fabric of Kenya's democracy and sovereignty.

The state's attempt to suppress the anti-tax protests further eroded Kenya's democratic image and exposed how IMF-conditionalities can destabilize Kenya's democracy by pushing the government toward violent repression. By July 1, 2024, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights reported 39 people killed, 361 injured, 32 abducted, and over 627 arrested (Mule 2024). Images of police firing live bullets and tear gas on protestors spread globally, signaling that IMF-driven austerity—while in economic form—was producing profound political consequences when enforced through state violence. Yet the struggle was not only about taxes; it became a reckoning with Kenya's sovereignty. Protesters carried placards declaring, "Colonialism never ended" and "IMF, World Bank, stop modern day slavery," framing austerity as a modern extension of external control. With more than half of export revenues servicing external debt instead of funding education, healthcare, or housing, Kenyans increasingly viewed IMF prescriptions as neocolonial impositions. Many invoked the legacy of the 1990 Saba Saba movement, portraying their fight as a struggle for economic uhuru (freedom). The rejection of the Finance Bill consequently marked a pivotal moment where IMF conditionalities were publicly identified not just as poor economic policy, but as tools of economic colonialism that threatened Kenya's sovereignty, democracy, and long-term stability. By fusing anger over external dictates with disillusionment about domestic corruption, the protests demonstrated how IMF conditionalities interact with entrenched governance flaws to amplify corruption, patronage and mass unrest.

The #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests also revealed how IMF conditionalities, by colliding with Kenya's entrenched governance failures, transformed economic austerity into a political legitimacy crisis. In 2022/23, 21.8% of non-competitive public service appointments went to Ruto's Kalenjin tribe (Goin 2024) exemplifying how external austerity reinforced a patronage system already plagued by corruption. Protestors captured this alignment of external dictates and internal graft in placards declaring, "Finance Bill is Professional Theft," framing IMF tax demands as indistinguishable from domestic kleptocracy. This dynamic reflected what Randall (2004, 45) describes as a "syndrome" of postcolonial governance in this way marked by authoritarianism, clientelism, and recurring instability. By imposing harsh fiscal measures in a system already corroded by patronage, the IMF did not just intensify economic strain but also magnified existing governance flaws into widespread political unrest. Thus, the protests demonstrated how IMF conditionalities act as triggers that worsen corruption, erode legitimacy and destabilize Kenyan politics rather than functioning in a vacuum..

The Ruto era marked a continuation of the same destabilizing dynamics that IMF conditionalities had produced under Moi and Kibaki, but also introduced a turning point in Kenya's political trajectory. Like Moi's austerity in the 1980s and Kibaki's food and fuel riots in the 2000s, Ruto's Finance Bill crisis showed how externally imposed fiscal discipline, when pursued without regard for social realities, ignites unrest. In mid-2024, protesters explicitly identified the IMF conditionalities as the direct outcome of their hardship, carrying placards denouncing "modern-day slavery" and "economic colonialism." This shift was evident beyond placards; it was audible in chants of "Ruto Must Go!" and organized digitally through hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill2024—which generated over 15 million engagements on X (formerly twitter), 1.6 million on Facebook and 6.5 million on Instagram between June 23-29, 2024, (DFRLab 2024). These hashtags, alongside #OccupyParliament became vehicles for Kenyans to circulate analyses directly tying VAT hikes and new taxes to the IMF's loan conditions, raising awareness and galvanizing Kenyans to protest. Their mobilization peaked in the storming of Parliament on June 25, 2024 and led President Ruto to concede—for the first time, a mass movement had forced a complete reversal of an IMF-inspired policy. This revealed not only the depth of instability IMF programs can produce, but also a new political consciousness—one in which Kenyans no longer view economic crises as mere governance failures, but as effects of external economic control. In short, the IMF's conditionalities under Ruto pushed the country to the brink of democratic breakdown, proving the Fund's central role in fueling political instability, until Kenyans put a halt to the Bill.

Building on the patterns through Moi and Kibaki, the Ruto era confirms Kenya's four-decade experiment with IMF conditionalities has not delivered stability but instead entrenched cycles of political unrest. Rather than nurturing sustainable development, the IMF has perfected debt dependence forcing successive Kenyan governments—most visibly in the wake of the 2024 protests—to choose between economic decolonization or perpetual austerity. From Moi's era of structural adjustment as repression (1980s–90s) to Kibaki's donor-supervised yet socially divisive programs (2000s), and finally to Ruto's violently contested Finance Bill (2024), IMF interventions have followed a destructive and predictable pattern. At each stage, IMF conditions not only ignored Kenya's unique socio-economic realities but actively aggravated inequality, eroded government legitimacy, and contributed to political instability.

Seemingly successful programs like Kibaki's PRGF proved hollow as VAT hikes and subsidy removals mandated by the IMF sparked the 2011 food and fuel riots, exposing the unbearable social costs of fiscal discipline.

Likewise, the 2024 Finance Bill, designed solely to meet IMF revenue targets, triggered a nationwide movement and violent state response. Kenya's downgrade from B3 to Caa1 under Ruto, signaling "very high credit risk" (Kimani 2024), emphasizes the IMF's broader failure to deliver sustainable development and reinforces what the #RejectFinanceBill2024 movement declared: debt is the new technique of colonialism.

After decades of reform, Kenya remains trapped in a cycle of debt, dependency, and instability. As Khaboub (2024) provocatively asks, this raises the question of whether this is due to incompetence or an intentional design of economic entrapment. IMF conditionalities have not only weakened Kenya's economic sovereignty, but aggravated the very instability they claimed to prevent, with austerity measures breeding mass protests and liberalization enabling graft. Today, 8,300 individuals control more wealth than 44 million citizens, and the top 10% earns 23% more than the poorest 10% (Oxfam n.d.)—evidence that these policies have functioned less as development tools than as instruments of class warfare, channeling wealth upward while pushing instability downward.

Nothing less than a revolution in global economic governance is necessary to break this cycle. Adjustment programs must be co-designed with national legislatures, equity impact assessments must precede austerity measures, and debt cancellation must replace perpetual servicing. Kenya's experience illustrates how, when applied in contexts of weak institutions, IMF programs amplify inequality and political instability rather than fostering growth. Comparative evidence reinforces this point while meta-analyses show that IMF programs can yield modest long-term growth in countries with strong institutions (Balima & Sokolova 2021), in weak systems like Kenya's they instead deepen social fractures and undermine political stability. Without such reforms, IMF conditionalities will continue what Kenyans now describe as economic terrorism: the systematic sacrifice of democratic prospects for creditor balance sheets. The situation in Kenya is not an exception; rather, it serves as a warning: instability will be the price of compliance as long as austerity is the cost of aid.

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Protectionism in the 21st Century: Insights from the US, India and EU

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I. Abstract

In recent years, governments around the world have increasingly turned inward in response to supply chain disruptions, widening economic inequalities, and mounting environmental concerns around the world. This shift has prompted countries to re-evaluate their engagement with global trade systems. In this context, restrictive trade measures, including higher tariffs on imports, lower import quotas, and other government regulations define protectionist policies. These measures have gained greater prominence in recent years and are being used to shield domestic industries and assert national priorities. This paper aims to examine the various causes of protectionist policies and their impact on international trade, investment, and economic growth. Through an analysis of each of the three key case studies – the US-China trade war, India's Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, and the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) – this study highlights the varying motives and impacts of protectionism in the 21st century.

The analysis begins with a discussion of the motives behind protectionism, including economic nationalism, national security, promotion of domestic industry, and pushback against globalization. Supply chain vulnerabilities and greater bilateral trade tensions are the consequences of large-scale trade wars as illustrated by the US-China example. On the other hand, Aatmanirbhar Bharat emerged in the face of global economic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which accentuated the need to reduce foreign dependence and develop domestic industries. The EU CBAM policy is rooted in a vastly different objective, an attempt to address climate change through the imposition of carbon-based tariffs on imports. While an innovative policy, concerns over transparency and the potential to be misused to undermine emerging economies are not entirely misplaced. Given the intensity and pace of these changes, it's essential that policy-makers create policies that would be able to sufficiently balance national interests and objectives with global stability and growth, while ensuring co-operation and resilience.

The findings of this paper reveal the distinct yet common outcomes of protectionism. While domestic priorities might call for protectionism, they do not infrequently disrupt world trade, create business uncertainties, and exacerbate geopolitical tensions. By examining not only why countries adopt such measures, but also how they ripple through international trade systems, this study provides a comprehensive and multidimensional perspective. This paper recommends the adoption of balanced strategies that align with domestic objectives and global trade obligations while promoting inclusive and sustainable trade practices. By delving into the causes and consequences of protectionism across diverse markets, the analysis contributes to a nuanced understanding of the concept and highlights the importance of regional multilateral cooperation, diversified supply chains, and green trade policies.

II. Introduction

Despite rising globalization in the 21st century, the global economy is witnessing a rapid hike in protectionist policies that threaten the stability of international trade and cooperation. These policies are characterized by increased trade restrictions including import quotas, tariffs, and other government control measures. These moves are expected to benefit the countries imposing them in the short-run, but in the long-run, these will only lead to increased trade tensions and uncertainties. The increased advent of protectionism in recent years can be attributed to increased economic nationalism, national security concerns, encouragement to home-based industries and a backlash against globalization.

The US-China trade war, Atmanirbhar Bharat and the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) are manifestations of the diversification of reasons as well as results of protectionism on international trade, investment and economic growth. A review of these cases shows how differing economies respond under environmental, economic, and political pressures. The US-China trade war began in 2018 under the Trump administration and led to the imposition of tariffs on the import of Chinese goods to the US; this was justified through long-standing unfair trade practices and intellectual property theft. This has heightened tensions and led to retaliatory practices from China ([Siripurapu and Berman, 2024](#)). India's Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative of 2020 began in the aftermath of Covid-19, to make India self-reliant in various sectors. India is looking to develop its resilience and employment generation capabilities as well ([India.gov.in, 2021](#)). The EU's CBAM is an innovative way to address deteriorating climatic conditions with a trade-related policy.

Extra taxes and custom duties are being levied on carbon-intensive products imported from outside the EU where carbon emission can be controlled but the goals of the climate policy of the EU cannot be hindered. However, there are criticisms about its transparency and impact on developing economies ([European Commission, 2024](#)).

In the sections that follow, the paper examines each of these three cases individually to analyze the underlying motivations for protectionist policies and their diverse consequences on trade, growth and investment. By comparing these scenarios, the analysis aims to identify common patterns and divergences, ultimately offering recommendations for balancing domestic priorities with international cooperation. The urgency of the situation calls for building more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive global trade systems at the earliest.

III. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the various factors that lead to the initiation of protectionist measures, along with other studies that examine the implications of these measures.

Reasons Behind Protectionism

According to certain studies, trade restrictions are usually driven by the desire to protect and promote domestic industries, particularly those in their early stages of development. These infant industries usually lack economies of scale and need greater support ([Sun, 2024](#)). Additionally, [Giordani and Mariana, 2020](#) argue that higher levels of education can also lead to greater protectionism as unskilled workers form coalitions to protect their incomes, emphasizing the socio-economic aspect that often drives protectionism.

Empirical Studies

Empirical research on the US-China trade war reveals that the return of tariffs and quotas has caused a significant fall in the imports and exports from US and harmed workers engaged primarily in trade ([Fajgelbaum et al., 2020](#)). A study by [Zhang, 2024](#), explains how this trade war can benefit certain countries in the short-run, but in the long-run, it will disrupt global trade and lead to reshoring.

The protectionist policies imposed by the EU are also on the rise. However, there are allegations of discriminatory imposition, as explained by [N. Stanojević, 2021](#), who says that the trade tariffs by the EU have certain discriminatory characteristics, some of which are justified in emergency situations. While rising protectionism can have negative economic impacts in the Euro area, the escalating trade tensions are expected to influence the entire global economy negatively ([Vanessa Gunnella et al., 2019](#)).

Impact of Protectionist Measures

Some studies describe protectionism as a supply shock. According to these, it leads to a fall in output and a rise in inflation in the short-run, while the impact on the trade balance is only minimal ([Barattieri, Cacciatore and Ghironi, 2021](#)). According to a different research that focussed on the long-run impact in particular, the GDP and international trade experience a significant negative impact and persistent challenges with regard to economic growth ([Gregori, 2021](#)). ‘The Risk of Protectionism: What Can Be Lost?’ explains that protectionism threatens global economic development and growth, potentially harming economic growth, poverty alleviation measures, and reduction in inequalities ([Marek Dabrowski, 2024](#)).

IV. Reasons Behind Rising Protectionism

A multitude of factors drives protectionist policies, and they demonstrate how a country chooses to respond to social, economic and political pressures.

Economic Nationalism

Economic nationalization talks about the importance of safeguarding domestic industries from foreign firms in the face of globalization. The approach aims at preserving jobs, boosting the home economy and fostering pride in home-grown products. According to the [Vicepresidentofindia.nic.in, 2024](#), “Economic Nationalism is quintessentially fundamental to our economic growth; import only what is unavoidably essential” and focus on ‘Vocal for Local’; these are crucial examples of economic nationalism in the context of India. In recent years the EU has implemented these protectionist measures to promote fair trade and anti-dumping practices, therefore protecting European businesses from potential damage ([Trendsresearch.org, 2024](#)). As global competition becomes even more intense, the re-emergence of economic nationalisation raises questions about the long-term sustainability and efficiency of such an approach.

National Security

Another strong force driving protectionism is national security. To safeguard sovereignty and strategic sectors within the country, the states may adopt a set of trade restrictions; during this period of taut world politics, the practice has been quite common. Adam Smith, in the Wealth of Nations, wrote that exceptions to free trade could be permissible "when some particular sort of industry is necessary for the defence of the country."

The Trump administration in 2017-18 utilized Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, and started reducing imports and the FDI from China. This was supposed to reduce the Chinese control on business and economy in the US, thus ensuring national security (Cato.org, 2022). However, such actions also raise concerns about escalation, retaliation, and long-term disruption in existing and emerging trade partnerships.

Pushback Against Globalization

Globalization integrates the economy of each nation with a world economy. While it increases efficiency, trade and alternatives to consumers, it also makes the smaller producers worse off and increases inequalities. Protectionist measures aim to reduce these inequalities both in terms of income and opportunities, while preventing marginalization of communities. The WTO protests in Seattle, 1999, brought attention to the down-sides of globalization, with protestors voicing their concerns about workers' rights, sustainability, environment and other social issues (Frantilla, 2019). Movements like these have forced people to look at globalization in a more critical light. This has led to a rethinking of liberal trade models and an increased acceptance of selective protectionism as a corrective and protective tool.

In conclusion, protectionism is driven by multifaceted factors to respond to changes that might occur within and outside the countries as well. Understanding these factors is crucial to understanding the impact of these measures on international trade, investment, and economic growth. Without addressing the root causes behind protectionism, global trade risks becoming increasingly fragmented, making coordinated responses even more difficult.

V. Case Studies

Three case studies are analyzed to examine the impact of protectionism across different scenarios. These highlight how changing relations between countries impact their economic growth, trade and investment journeys.

The US-China Trade War

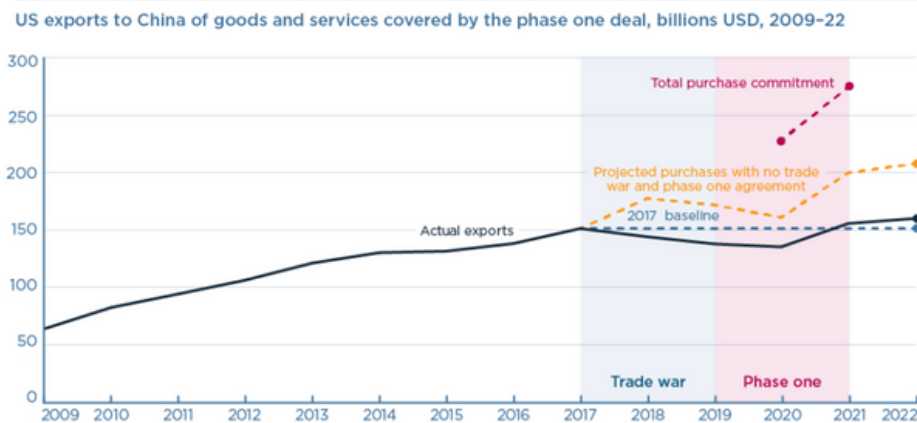
The US-China trade war is a notable example of protectionist policies and their consequences. The tensions between the two trade giants began in 2018 under the Trump administration. In 2018, the US and China were significant trade partners with the value amounting to 658.79 billion USD. However, differences arose as the imports to the US far exceeded the exports from it; the imports to the US amounted to 538.51 billion USD while the exports were barely 20.28 billion USD. This trade imbalance was driven by steel and aluminum imports to the US (Statista, 2024). Along with this, the US was also concerned about theft of intellectual property rights, the situation of the domestic industries and the unfair advantage the Chinese producers had due to huge subsidization. National security too played a role, as the dependence on Chinese money and goods was very high (Kapustina et al., 2020).

The US imposed 25% tariffs on around 34 billion USD worth of imports including vehicles, aircraft components and others. China retaliated by imposing similar tariffs on 545 goods from the United States (Mullen, 2022). Due to this tariffs from both ends have escalated leading to disruptions in the supply chains (Khitakhunov, 2020).

The trade war had a significant impact on both the countries, value chains changed globally and trading partners saw a shift. The US now imports more from Mexico, Vietnam, and Taiwan, while China exports to other countries instead of the US. The issue that the US faced was the loss of citizens' welfare due to more expensive products and limited choices especially in agricultural products, while China faced a loss in the total value of exports and saw an impact on its GDP ([World Bank Open Data, 2015](#)). Globally, this trade war led to increased market uncertainty, vulnerable supply chains and caused countries to rethink their strategy with China and the US ([Daniel Parsapour, 2024](#)). There was also a trend of reshoring as countries began to diversify their supply chains. Along with this, there were fluctuations in the stock market and investment levels due to the geopolitical uncertainty ([Fajgelbaum and Khandelwal, 2021](#)).

In 2020, a truce was signed between the two, called the Phase One Agreement, where China pledged to increase its imports from the US by 200 USD in two years. However, this target wasn't reached and this escalated the animosity further ([Bown and Wang, 2023](#)).

US exports to China continue to struggle



Source: Peterson Institute for International Economics

Following this, the trade war came into picture once again in 2024, when the US imposed tariffs on the import of electric vehicles from China. This was done as China is the highest producer of EVs in the world, and the producers have high efficiency and extremely subsidized production facilities, which the US believes puts it at a disadvantage.

The US-China trade war demonstrates how trade tensions can escalate and damage bilateral relations while harming the economies in terms of their GDP, investment and trade.

India's Atmanirbhar Bharat

A 2020 report by Acuite Ratings and Research identified 40 sub-sectors that contributed to imports of US\$ 33.6 billion from China. This was while India possessed the capacity to replace 25% of Chinese imports without any additional imports. Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan or Self-Reliant India Mission was launched in May 2020 amidst the pandemic in a bid to strengthen India's production capacity and make it self-reliant. Rs. 20 lakh crore corpus was announced by the government to promote domestic production across sectors and develop India into a global supply chain hub ([India Brand Equity Foundation, n.d.](#)).

One of the key schemes introduced under Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan was the production-linked incentive scheme (PLI) that was allocated US\$ 27.02 billion for five years from 2021-22. In addition, US\$ 5.45 billion was set aside for PLI electronics manufacturing schemes. This has attracted foreign investment, with Amazon announcing a manufacturing plant in Chennai, and Apple starting iPhone 12 assembly in the first quarter of 2021.

Self-reliance in defense is a major goal of Aatmanirbhar Bharat. The government increased the FDI limit in defense manufacturing to 74% and introduced an import embargo on 101 defense items. The Defense Production and Export Promotion Policy 2020 envisions a US\$ 25 billion turnover including US\$ 5 billion exports in the aerospace and defense sectors by 2025. India's arms imports have declined by 11% between 2013-17 and 2018-22 while defense exports increased tenfold between 2016-17 and 2022-23 to hit Rs.16,000 crores ([Economic Times Online, 2023](#)).

Atmanirbhar Bharat was the most successful on two fronts. On one hand the various stimulus packages helped revive the MSME sector that was adversely affected by the pandemic. On the other, greater self-reliance in the defence sector would help India to be less dependent on allies like the US or Russia for security needs. This in turn helps the country take an independent stance amidst tumultuous geopolitical scenarios and aids in its path to be world leader. But the policy is not without shortcomings. India must tread carefully so that self-reliance does not translate to domestic protectionism that fails to uphold quality standards. That would be detrimental to the very goals of Atmanirbhar Bharat and could potentially lead to an economic crisis similar to the one in 1990.

European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism

The European Union Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) was introduced as part of the European Green Deal to tackle the shortcomings of the EU Emission Trading System. The EU CBAM charges the embedded carbon in imported goods, thus equalizing the carbon price of domestic and imported goods and leveling the playing field ([European Commission, 2024](#)).

Five emission-intensive trade exposed (EITE) industries are covered by CBAM, namely cement, fertilizers, iron and steel, aluminum, and electricity. The impact of CBAM on trade is determined not only by the volume of exports to the EU but also by the share of CBA exports among total exports and the carbon-intensity of production.

While Russia, China, UK, Turkiye, and Ukraine make up nearly 50% of CBA exports by volume, the countries most affected by the tariff are low-income countries (LICs) in Africa like Mozambique and Zimbabwe and LDCs and developing countries in Europe such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Moldova, and Albania due to the dependence on CBA exports to EU [_\(Carnegieendowment.org, 2023\)](https://www.carnegieendowment.org).

2021 research by UNCTAD found that increasing carbon prices in the EU would boost trade for developing nations in the absence of CBAM. However, the introduction of CBAM decreases the exports of developing countries and increases that of developed countries as they are at a better position to bear the cost of switching to clean energy. Intra-EU trade is also observed to have increased, suggesting CBAM works like a tariff imposed by a trading bloc.

Similarly, there is a global loss of \$3.4 billion in real income as a result of introducing CBAM. The brunt of it is borne by Oceania, India, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, South Africa, and the Middle East. The EU on the other hand gains from positive terms of trade effect. While the effect of CBAM on employment is minimal in most countries, countries including Saudi Arabia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan can experience higher unemployment since the majority of exports to the EU are CBA products.

These three case studies—the US-China trade war, India’s Aatmanirbhar Bharat initiative, and the European Union’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism—were selected for their diversity in terms of motives, mechanisms and relevance. They illustrate distinct forms of protectionism: one driven by geopolitical and economic rivalry, another by domestic resilience and post-pandemic recovery, and the third by climate-driven trade regulation. Each case is evaluated on the basis of its impact on trade, investment and other broader consequences, allowing for a comparative analysis that captures the evolving landscape of protectionist policies in the 21st century.

VI. Policy Recommendations

Diversify Supply Chains

Protectionist policies, particularly when they develop into trade wars, have lasting effects on international trade, investment, and income.

What started as US tariffs on Chinese goods and China's retaliatory tariffs on US goods escalated to a trade war partly owing to their overdependence on each other's markets and supply chains. One way to prevent extreme shocks is to diversify the supply chains to avoid overdependence on any country. This can help mitigate the effect of barriers to a much smaller scale than desired. Additionally, it can promote developing economies such as Vietnam, India, Indonesia, and Mexico, increasing employment and income.

Promote Domestic Production Without Penalizing Imports

India's Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan is a prime example of promoting domestic growth without damaging trade relations. Introducing measures to increase investment, provide employment, and create a conducive environment for startups will automatically lead to a more favorable trade balance and stronger economy. On the other hand, trade barriers often invite retaliatory measures that spiral into trade wars that adversely impact all countries involved.

Strengthen Regional Trade Agreements

Regional trade agreements (RTAs) define common rules of trade to ensure smooth trade between two or more countries. Recently, RTAs have expanded their scope beyond tariffs and border agreements to include competition policies, government procurement rules, and intellectual property rights. When designed efficiently, RTAs are a powerful tool for all parties involved as it reduces trade costs. Deep RTAs have increased goods trade by 35%, services trade by over 15%, and global value chain integration by more than 10% ([World Bank, 2018](#)). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are some of the most prominent RTAs of the current global economy.

Strengthen the World Trade Organization

The World Trade Organization established in 1995 to liberalize global trade, has since increased global income by \$510 billion. It also stopped the 2008 financial crisis from spiraling into another great depression by preventing retaliatory protectionist measures between countries ([Ihekweazu, 2011](#)). However, changing dynamics have rendered the WTO ineffective.

The WTO has been unable to facilitate an agreement on agricultural goods, the two biggest economies, the US and China, are engaged in a ruthless trade war, and the Appellate Body has been inoperative since 2020 ([Peres, 2024](#)). Countries should cooperate to strengthen WTO, establish common rules for smoother trade, aid developing economies by leveling the playing field, and introduce economies of scale through specialized production.

Exclude LDCs and LICs from CBAM

While carbon price is an effective way of encouraging less carbon intensive manufacturing, policies like CBAM that apply it on imports can exacerbate income inequality between countries. Switching to clean energy is more expensive for low-income countries (LICs) and least developed countries (LDCs), and would compromise their growth to pay the price of a global situation created by more developed countries. For example, the economy of Mozambique is heavily reliant on aluminum exports which is covered by CBAM. Excluding LDCs and LICs from CBAM would level the playing field by placing greater responsibility on the major historical contributors. In fact this would increase the exports, trade, and employment of LDCs and LICs, boosting economic growth and development ([UNCTAD, 2021](#)).

Impose the Higher Cost of Carbon in Imports on Consumers

The high income and standard of living enjoyed by the developed countries came about as a result of industrialization with no regard for the environment. This has led to global warming and climate change in the present day. Rather than taxing the developing countries to keep the situation in check, the price of carbon must be charged on consumers in developed countries to shift demand to more sustainable choices. This will enable a lasting and positive demand side change while not punishing developing countries.

VII. Conclusion

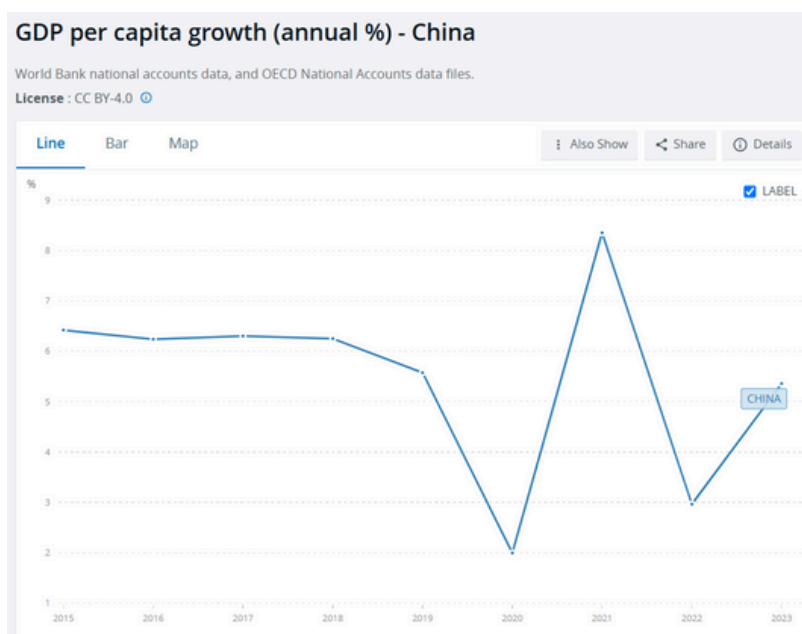
Protectionism seeks to restrict global trade through tariffs, quotas, and other government regulations to protect national security, safeguard and promote domestic industries, or push back against globalization. However, protectionist policies are often met with retaliatory measures that lead to a fall in global trade, income, investment, and growth. Such dynamics can also spiral into trade wars, as observed in recent years in the case of the US and China.

In other instances, policies like the EU's CBAM contribute to a better environment, but at the cost of the growth of developing nations. India's Aatmanirbhar Bharat is perhaps one of the examples of balanced protectionism where domestic industries are promoted through greater investment and government support while international trade is not penalized and, in fact, welcomed.

Greater global cooperation and accountability are imperative for a conducive environment to global trade. This can be facilitated by strengthening RTAs and multilateral institutions such as the WTO, diversifying supply chains, and actively supporting domestic industries rather than restricting imports. As far as protectionist policies to push climate action are concerned, developed countries must take accountability for the environmental destruction caused by them and bear the cost of preventing exacerbation of the situation while letting developing countries, particularly LDCs and LICs, pursue economic growth and development. As we move forward, aligning trade policies with equitable climate goals and inclusive frameworks will be key to fostering a resilient and sustainable global economy.

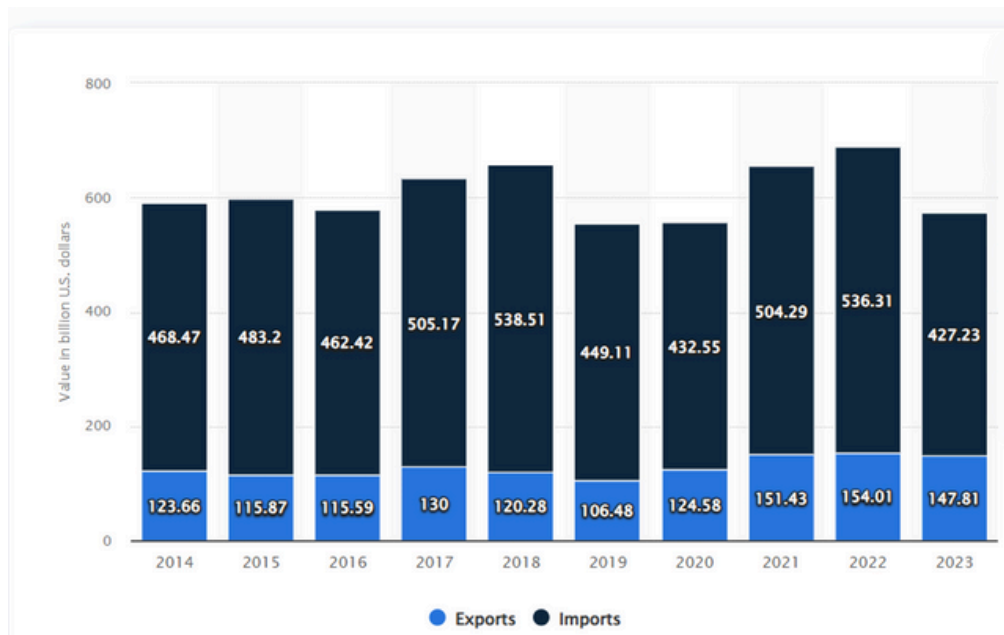
VIII. Annexure

GDP Per Capita Growth (annual%)- China



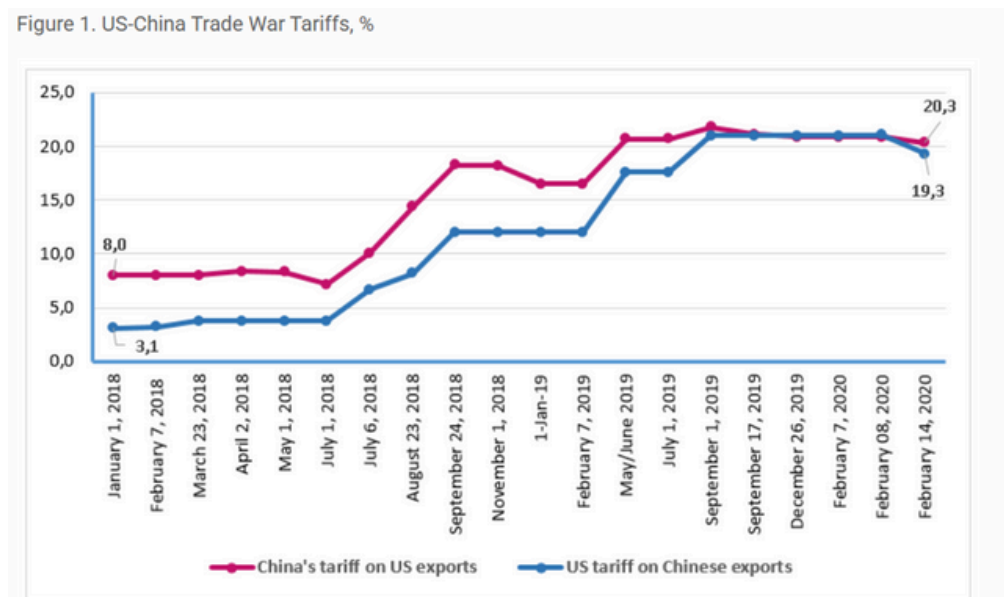
Source: World Bank Database

Total value of U.S. trade in goods (export and import) with China from 2014 to 2023 (in billion U.S. dollars)



Source: Total Value of US Trade in Goods, Statista

US-China Trade War Tariffs, %



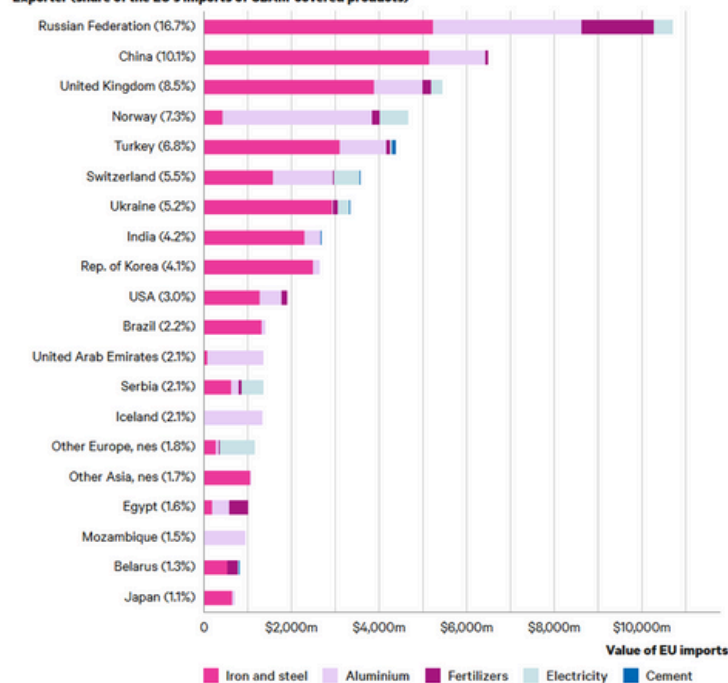
Source: Eurasian Research Institute, Economic Causes and Consequences

A scatter plot illustrating the relationship between CO₂ emissions (in kg per \$ GDP) on the x-axis and the share of five CBAM-applicable sectors in exports to the EU on the y-axis. The x-axis ranges from 0 to 2, and the y-axis ranges from 0 to 15. Data points are labeled with country codes. Most countries have low emissions and low shares, while a few like ARE, BLR, UKR, and BIH show higher shares at various emission levels.

Country Code	CO ₂ emissions (kg per \$ GDP)	Share of five CBAM-applicable sectors (%)
ARE	0.48	14.2
BLR	0.98	13.2
UKR	1.68	14.0
BIH	1.28	12.0
IRN	1.62	11.8
SRB	1.12	10.5
EGY	0.78	9.8
MDA	0.68	6.2
TUR	0.42	5.5
RUS	0.98	4.5
ALB	0.45	4.8
KOR	0.48	3.8
BRA	0.28	2.2
NZL	0.25	1.5
CAN	0.35	1.2
IND	0.88	3.2
OZA	0.82	2.8
JOR	0.65	2.0
ZAF	1.18	1.5
VNM	1.28	0.8
KAZ	1.52	1.2
CHN	0.92	0.8
PAK	1.02	0.2
SGD	0.52	0.5
TUN	0.62	0.8
ISR	0.72	0.5
MDA	0.68	0.5
SRB	0.82	0.5
LBY	0.88	0.2
AFG	0.42	0.2
IRQ	0.32	0.2
SDI	0.22	0.2
PRK	0.28	0.2
CPV	0.25	0.2
VEN	0.35	0.2
ARM	0.45	0.2
MLT	0.55	0.2
GRC	0.65	0.2
ESP	0.75	0.2
ITA	0.85	0.2
DEU	0.95	0.2
FRA	1.05	0.2
GBR	1.15	0.2
USA	1.25	0.2
AUS	1.35	0.2
SWE	1.45	0.2
DEN	1.55	0.2
NOR	1.65	0.2
FIN	1.75	0.2
HUN	1.85	0.2
CZE	1.95	0.2
POL	2.05	0.2

Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Exporter (share of the EU's imports of CBAM-covered products)



Source: Resource Trade. Earth

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