



Faculty of Legal Sciences

School of International Studies

**The Role of the World Trade Organization
Facing the Challenges of Regional Trade
Agreements. Literature Review**

Project prior to obtaining a Bachelor's Degree in
International Studies

Author:

Ricardo Mateo Peña Barnuevo

Advisor:

Econ. Luis Bernardo Tonon Ordóñez

**Cuenca – Ecuador
2025**

To my dad, for teaching me that perseverance and daily effort build firm paths, and that great achievements do not come all at once, but step by step, with hard work, patience and commitment. Thank you for supporting me in each of the goals I have set for myself, and for encouraging me to be better every day.

To my mom, for giving me everything I am, for teaching me not to let opportunities pass me by, to trust in the moment and in myself. Thank you for reminding me that daring is also a way to move forward, and for giving me unconditional love. I will always be grateful for everything you do, even in the unseen.

To my sister, for listening to me when I need it most, for being present at all times, and for being my faithful companion in my adventures. Thank you for supporting me in every goal; your presence is vital to me.

To my grandfather Edmundo, for always being behind me in every step, for his unconditional support, his teachings and for all the good times I carry with me always. And, as he always says, that you are still alive just to see me graduate. This achievement also belongs to you.

To my grandmother Cecilia, because I owe much of what I am today to her. For all her love and teachings, which left an indelible mark on me. I carry her with me every day, and even more in every goal achieved. I know that she is proud and that, somehow, she continues to support me in everything I do.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank God for guiding my life on this path, for giving me the strength to move forward and for blessing me with every step I take.

To my thesis director, for guiding me with patience and commitment throughout this process. Your guidance has been key to make this research a reality.

To all my family, because in me there is a part of each one of them. Their love, values and presence have been with me in every decision.

To my grandparents, for their unconditional love, their unwavering support and for being an example of wisdom, patience and generosity.

To my friends, of whom I feel deeply fortunate. Thank you for accompanying me and for reminding me that good times and distractions are also part of the process.

And to those very special people, who even if they are not named, know who they are. To my closest circle, those who have walked with me through thick and thin. Thank you for making this achievement possible and to life for crossing my path. You have been an unparalleled support, and I fondly wish that life will continue to keep us together. None of this would have the same meaning without you.

Create your own story, live the life you want to live and leave this world a little better than you found it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES AND APPENDICES	iv
List of figures	iv
List of appendices	iv
ABSTRACT	v
RESUMEN	v
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Objectives	2
1.2 Theoretical Framework	2
1.3 State of the Art.....	2
2. Methods	3
3. Results	4
3.1 Fragmentation of international trade regulations	4
3.2 Exclusion and inequality for developing countries	5
3.3 Crisis of the WTO dispute settlement mechanism	6
3.4 WTO's lag in addressing emerging issues	7
3.5 Difficulty in achieving regulatory harmonization	8
3.6 Loss of global influence and normative leadership	10
3.7 Institutional rigidity and legal uncertainty within the WTO	11
4. Discussion.....	11
5. Conclusion.....	13
6. References	14
7. Appendices	19

LIST OF FIGURES AND APPENDICES

List of figures

Figure 1 <i>Prism Diagram</i>	4
-------------------------------------	---

List of appendices

Appendix 1 <i>Chosen articles</i>	19
---	----

The Role of the World Trade Organization in the Face of the Challenges of Regional Trade Agreements. Literature Review

ABSTRACT

This research aimed to analyze how the World Trade Organization (WTO) addresses the challenges arising from the proliferation of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs), through a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA methodology. The study explored the main tensions between the multilateral trading system and the regulatory autonomy promoted by regional agreements. As a result, seven critical challenges were identified, including regulatory fragmentation, the crisis of the WTO dispute settlement mechanism, the exclusion of developing countries, the lag in addressing emerging issues such as digital and environmental trade, and the consolidation of exclusive trade blocs that marginalize developing economies. It can be concluded that the WTO must evolve into a more inclusive, flexible, and proactive institution in order to remain a relevant regulatory body for global trade. Although several solutions have been proposed by the WTO to address these challenges, they have largely remained at an informational level without being effectively implemented through binding regulation.

Keywords

World Trade Organization, International trade, Economic integration, regional trade agreements, Developing countries

El Rol de la Organización Mundial de Comercio Frente a los Desafíos de los Acuerdos Comerciales Regionales. Revisión de Literatura

RESUMEN

La siguiente investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar cómo la Organización Mundial del Comercio se enfrenta a los desafíos que han sido resultado de la creación de Acuerdos Comerciales Regionales (ACR). Bajo una revisión sistemática de literatura, basándose en la metodología PRISMA, se analizaron las principales tensiones entre el sistema multilateral y la autonomía normativa que impulsan los acuerdos regionales. Como resultado, se evidenció siete desafíos críticos, entre ellos la fragmentación normativa, la crisis del mecanismo de solución de diferencias de la OMC, la exclusión de países en desarrollo, el rezago frente a temas emergentes como el comercio digital y ambiental, y la consolidación de bloques comerciales exclusivos que dejan de lado a países en vías de desarrollo. Se puede concluir que la OMC deberá transformarse en una organización más inclusiva, flexible y proactiva para seguir siendo un ente regulador relevante para el comercio mundial. Para ello, se ha mostrado varias de las soluciones que la OMC ha propuesto para enfrentar estos desafíos, pero que únicamente han quedado con un papel informativo sin llegar a regularlos.

Palabras clave

Organización Mundial del Comercio, Comercio Internacional, Integración Económica, Acuerdo comerciales regionales, Países en Desarrollo