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A Survey on Agricultural Trade Liberalisation in Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the empirical evidence on agricultural trade policies and their impacts on Thai economy with a view to presenting both the positive and negative effects of trade liberalisation. While advocates of trade liberalisation argue that free trade is an engine of growth and protection leads to wasteful use of resources, critics argue that openness has its costs and sometimes it could be detrimental to economic development. The empirical evidence from Thailand was consistent with the ongoing debate on the effects of trade liberalisation on economic development. The evidence remained mixed and loaded with criticisms on the grounds of choice of liberalisation determinants, model specifications and methodology as well as other measurement shortcomings. The review suggests that the literature is inconclusive and outcomes are largely case-specific.

Keywords: Agricultural Trade Policies, Trade Liberalisation, Thailand

1. Introduction

The effects of trade liberalisation on development have been a subject of debate for centuries. Ever since David Ricardo's critique on the *Corn Laws* through to the current debate on globalisation, few topics in economics have been more seriously contested as the importance of trade liberalisation for economic development. The arguments in favour of free trade are well known and date back at least to Adam Smith's analysis of market specialisation and the principle of absolute advantage in 1776. Classical economists argue that free trade is an engine of growth while protection leads to wasteful use of resources, thereby adversely affecting economic development. On the contrary, critics argue that openness has its costs and sometimes it could be detrimental to economic development (Abbott *et al.*, 2009: 353; Chang *et al.*, 2009: 1; Gingrich and Garber, 2010: 1; Kirkpatrick and Scrieciu, 2006: 2; Nicita, 2004: 1; Rodriguez and Rodrik, 1999: 8; Stiglitz and Charlton, 2007: 32, 33; Stone and Shepherd, 2011: 5; UNIDO, 2010: 1).

The purpose of this paper is to review the empirical evidence on agricultural trade policies and their impacts on Thai economy with a view to comparing evidence in the context of the ongoing debate on the effects of trade liberalisation on economic development. The following sections include an overview of Thai economy, scenarios of agricultural trade policies, impact of agricultural trade liberalisation, studies on agricultural trade liberalisation, and conclusion.

2. Thai Economy: an overview

Thailand is one of the most advanced developing countries in the world. It chose to follow a market-oriented strategy for its national economic development since the *First National Economic and Social Development Plan* in 1961. In this context it linked local and national economic systems to global markets (Rojjanapo, 2008: 3). Initially, like many other developing countries, it adopted an import substitution strategy for industrialisation and economic development but this strategy was not successful. Thailand shifted its economic policies from import substitution to greater export-orientation in the mid 1970s with a view to achieving faster economic growth through greater linkage with global markets (Itharattana, 1999: 25; Rojjanapo, 2008: 3).

This development strategy contributed to a significant leap in achieving high economic growth during the 1980s through to the mid 1990s before the Asian financial crisis in 1997. From 2000, Thailand started to recover with moderate annual economic growth rates of 4.8 percent in 2007 but experienced a negative growth rate of −2.2 in 2009 – reflecting the impact of the world recession during 2008-2010 and internal political unrest (Blackwill, 2009: 1; Brungs, 2010: 14)2009: 1; Brungs, 2010: 14. The per capita income increased significantly from 2700 US dollars in 2005 to 3760 US dollars in 2009. Table 1 presented some basic development indicators.

Table 1: Some basic development indicators, 2005-2009

Indicators	**2005**	**2007**	**2009**
Land area (sq km)	514000	514000	514000
Population (million)	63.00	63.83	68.00
GNI per capita ($US)	2700	3400	3760
GDP (billion $US)	176.42	245.35	263.77
GDP growth rate (%)	4.5	4.8	-2.2
Life expectancy at birth (years)	70	71	72
Literacy rate (%)	92	93	94

Source: Data compiled from various tables of World Bank (2008, 2011a, 2011b)

Thailand was a rural based economy where 66 percent of the population lived in rural areas in 2009. Agriculture accounted for 41.7 percent of total employment in the same year, as shown in Table 2. The per capita arable and cropland of total agricultural population was 0.61 hectare, indicating that the majority of the agricultural population were small farmers in 2009.

Table 2: agricultural and rural sector indicators, 2009

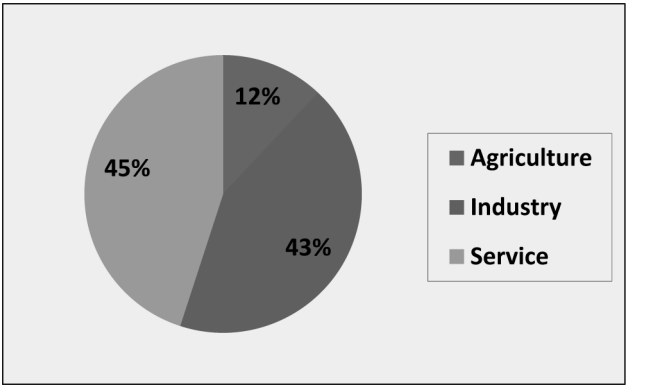
Indicators	**2009**
Total rural population (million)	44.88
Percentage rural population (% of total population)	66.00
Arable and permanent cropland (thousand hectare)	18235
Agricultural Land (% of total land area)	38.0
Per capita arable and crop land of total agricultural population (hectare)	0.61
Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)	41.7

Source: Data compiled from various tables of World Bank (2011a)

Thai agriculture was based on a dual structure: (a) large-scale commercial farmers, who produced mainly for agro-industries and exports; and (b) small-scale subsistence farmers, who struggled to produce for household consumption and domestic markets. The small-scale farmers owned an average of 2.5-3 hectares of land. They constituted nearly 50 percent of the total farm population but contributed only 25 percent of the total market value of agricultural production (Rojjanapo, 2008: 3). Rice was the main crop for most small farmers because rice was the staple food of the economy. The main agricultural commodities were rice, maize, cassava, soybeans, sugarcane, jute, rubber, coffee, milk, vegetables, and fruit.

As was typical of rapidly growing economies, agricultural output grew more slowly than GDP, implying a declining share of agriculture in aggregate output. The agricultural sector accounted for 32 percent of GDP in 1965 (Warr, 2008: 252). In 2009, agriculture's contribution to GDP accounted for only 12 percent, as shown in Figure 1. In the same year, the industry and service sector contributed 43 and 45 percent to GDP respectively.

Figure 1: Thailand: sectoral contribution to GDP, 2009



Source: Authors' chart using data from Table 4.2, World Bank (2011a)

Thailand experienced a consistent and high economic growth rate over nearly four decades. From 1968 to 2005, Thai economic output grew in real terms at an average annual rate of 6.5 percent. The broad characteristics of this growth were summarised in Table 3. During the decade of economic boom, the GDP grew at an average annual rate of 9.5 percent.

Table 3: Thailand: average real growth of GDP and its components,

(% per annum)

	Pre-boom	Boom	Crisis	Recovery	Whole period
	1968-86	1987-96	1997-99	2000-2005	1968-2005
GDP	6.7	9.5	–2.5	5.1	6.5
Agriculture	4.5	2.6	0.1	3.6	3.5
Industry	8.5	12.8	–1.7	6.3	8.5
Service	6.8	9.0	–3.6	4.2	6.2

Source: Data compiled from Table 1 (Warr, 2008: 251)

Thailand has been an open economic system for centuries. Historically, its large agricultural surplus contributed to the economy's strong linkage with global markets. It started international trade with England in 1855 (Itharattana, 1999: xv). Its major agricultural export and import items in 1995-2005 were rice, maize, palm oil, rubber, onion, garlic, potatoes, dairy products, tea, raw silk, and coffee (Itharattana, 1999: 5; Warr, 2008: 250).

The trade and price systems of Thailand were based on market economy and free trade. Thai international trade started to expand rapidly after its first economic and social development plan in 1961. It was a very open economy in terms of trade to GDP ratio. This ratio rose from 30 percent in 1961 to 75 percent in 1995 (Itharattana, 1999: 1). This ratio was 139.4 percent in 2009, implying that Thailand had a strong trading linkage with global markets and international trading partners. The broad characteristics of Thailand's trade structure were summarised in Table 4, 5 and 6. In the share of total merchandise exports and imports, agriculture accounted for 16.3 and 7.0 percent respectively in 2009. Manufacturing was the dominant sector for both merchandise exports and imports with shares of 76.1 and 68.4 percent respectively in the same year.

Table 4: Thailand: trade structure, 2009

Total trade (Exports + Imports, $ millions)	353308
Exports ($ millions)	182099
Imports ($ millions)	171209
Trade to GDP ratio (%)	139.4
Merchandise Trade (MT)	
MT Exports f.o.b. ($ ml)	152422
MT Imports c.i.f. ($ ml)	133668
Commercial Service Trade (CST)	
CST Exports f.o.b.($ ml)	29677
CST Imports c.i.f. ($ ml)	37541

Source: Data calculated **(bold)** and compiled from WTO trade data. [Online]. Available: http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBcountryPFExport.aspx?Language=E&Country=TH. [9 July 2011].

Table 5: Share of merchandise trade by main commodity groups, 2009

	Exports (%)		**Imports (%)**
Agricultural products	16.3	Agricultural products	7.0
Fuel and mining products	6.3	Fuel and mining products	24.6
Manufactures	76.1	Manufactures	68.4

Source: Data calculated **(bold)** and compiled from WTO trade data. [Online]. Available: http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBcountryPFExport.aspx?Language=E&Country=TH. [9 July 2011].

Table 6: Share of commercial services trade by main service items, 2009

	Exports (%)		**Imports (%)**
Transportation	19.1	Transportation	45.5
Travel	52.8	Travel	11.6
Other Commercial services	28.1	Other Commercial services	43.0

Source: Data calculated **(bold)** and compiled from WTO trade data. [Online]. Available: http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBcountryPFExport.aspx?Language=E&Country=TH. [9 July 2011].

The statistics of trade in key agricultural products for 1999 and 2009 was presented in Table 7. The values of both exports and imports of key agricultural products increased over this period significantly.

Table 7: Exports and imports of key agricultural products: 1999 and 2009

	Exports (million US$)			**Imports (million US$)**	
Products	**1999**	**2009**	**Products**	**1999**	**2009**
Rice	**1948.9**	**5046.5**	Vegetables	**1118.3**	**3570.8**
Shrimps, prawn and lobster	**1274.1**	**1353.7**	Aquatic animals	**751.4**	**1800.3**
Rubber	**1159.3**	**4305.8**	Fertiliser and pesticide	**623.6**	**521.3**
Tapioca products	**609.8**	**1519.6**	Animal and animal products	**477.6**	**926.0**
Poultry	**559.9**	**1385.5**	Paper and paper products	**374.0**	

Source: Data compiled from the Foreign Trade Statistics of Thailand, Ministry of Commerce. [Online]. Available: http://www.ops3.moc.go.th/infor/MenuComen/default.asp. [5 June 2013].

3. Agricultural Trade Liberalisation in Thailand

3.1 Agricultural Trade Regulation Scenarios

Although Thailand was a very open economy in terms of trade to GDP ratio, it could not be considered as a free-trading country with regard to agricultural commodities. Its agricultural market was highly protected through complicated measures and restrictions. There was strong political pressure not to liberalise agricultural imports of soybean, palm oil, rubber, rice and sugar (Warr, 2008: 250). Besides conventional tariffs and quotas, government placed enormous controls and restrictive measures on imports and exports such as non-tariff instruments and permitting a high degree of discretion on the part of government officials. The import controls included import prohibitions, strict licensing arrangements, local content rules and requirements for special case-by-case approval of imports (Itharattana, 1999: 3; Warr, 2008: 250). These restrictive measures may be summarised as follows:

1. **Agricultural policy and measures at the farm level:**
   a) Price support and price guarantee; and
   b) Buffer stock
2. **Measures at domestic consumption level:**
   c) Quantitative import control;
   d) Import tariff measures; and
   e) Reserve requirement measures
3. **Marketing measures at the export level:**
   f) Export taxes; and
   g) Quantitative export control
4. **Investment incentives**
5. **Subsidies on agricultural inputs**
   a) Fertilisers;
   b) Irrigation equipment;
   c) Farm machinery;
   d) Pesticides; and
   e) Seeds

In addition, the government applied differentiated tariff rates. The protecting tariff rates were different and they might even differ from one commodity type to another in a given year. Further, they might also differ over time (Itharattana, 1999: 6; Warr, 2008: 250).

3.2 Agricultural Trade Liberalisation under WTO Commitments

Thailand was an active member of the *Cairns Group* of agricultural exporting countries. This group put enormous pressure on the EU and Japan to sign the *Agreement on Agriculture* (AoA) during the *Uruguay Round* in 1994 (McCulloch *et al.*, 2001: 177; Warr, 2008: 250). The AoA covered three broad categories: a) market access – referring to regulatory policies and instruments related to tariff rates and quotas that govern the access of imports into a country's domestic market; b) domestic support – referring to various forms of assistance to domestic producers such as production subsidies and price supports; and c) export subsidies or export competition (CBO, 2006: 2).

Under the provision of market access, Thailand had to reduce import duties by an average of 24 percent and had to liberalise the market for 23 agricultural commodities within 10 years – effective from 1 January 1995 to 31 December 2004 as shown in Table 8. These commodities had various market controls before 1995. Moreover, under this provision, Thailand had to convert all non-tariff barriers to tariff forms and cannot imposed new non-tariff barriers after 2004. However, the minimum access for agricultural products often varies widely from what is actually imported. For instance, Thailand is now importing a greater quantities of garlic from China than its provision of market access quantities, viewed as one of the failures of agricultural trade liberalisation by Thai farmers.

Table 8: Thailand: market access for agricultural commodities

Products	Binding rate (%)	Minimum access (tonnes)		Products	Binding rate (%)	Minimum access (tonnes)	
		1995	2004			1995	2004
Milk and cream	20	2286	2400	**Dried longans**	30	5	8
Milk powder	20	45000	55000	**Coconut oil**	20	385	401
Potatoes	27	288	302	**Sugar**	65	13105	13760
Onion and shallots	27	348	365	**Soya bean oil**	20	2173	2281
Soybean meal	20	219580	23559	**Instant coffee**	40	128	134
Coconut	20	2312	2427	**Onion seeds**	30	3	3.15
Tobacco leaves	60	6129	6415	**Palm oil and kernel**	20	4629	4800
Tea	30	596	625	**Coffee beans**	30	5	5.25
Pepper	27	43	45	**Garlic**	27	62	65
Maize	20	52096	54700	**Raw silk**	30		
Rice	30	237863	249757	**Copra**	20	694	1157
Soya beans	20	10402	10922				

Source: Data compiled from Table 2.3, (Itharattana, 1999: 8. 9)

Similarly, on domestic support criteria, Thailand had to reduce domestic support by 10 percent within 10 years – from 873 million dollars in 1995 to 761 million dollars in 2004. Under the provision of export competition, there was no commitment obligation for Thailand. However, it cannot impose any export subsidies in the future (Itharattana, 1999: 8)

3.3 Impacts of Agricultural Trade Liberalisation

Itharattana (1999) surveyed studies conducted with regard to agricultural trade liberalisation in Thailand. He analysed the finding of a comprehensive study jointly conducted by the Economic Business Department of Thai

Government and Kasetsart University. This study covered 19 major agricultural commodities and used trade data from 1985 to 1996. The study concluded that the reduction or abolition of trade control and subsidy measures could affect the agricultural sector as below:

Net Export Commodities

For net export commodities, the reduction or abolition of subsidy had little effect on production, consumption, and export. This was because these commodities were already liberalised and their prices were determined mainly by international factors. These commodities included rice, maize, cassava, canned and fresh pineapple, chicken meat, coffee, frozen shrimp and squid, canned tuna, fishmeal, and tobacco leaves.

Net Import Commodities

For imported commodities, the reduction or abolition of domestic subsidy had a significant negative impact on local production. Therefore, domestic prices as well as imports of those commodities would increase to adjust domestic demand for imported commodities.

Other Agricultural Commodities

This group included commodities such as sugar that were under price control in the domestic market. The domestic price of sugar had long been fixed. If price control were to be abolished, the domestic production of sugar would decline by 30 percent, adjusting to the self-sufficiency level. However, if the government abolished the import restrictions along with the domestic subsidy, there would be a greater negative impact on domestic production.

Similarly Itharattana (1999) reviewed another survey jointly conducted by the Office of Agricultural Economics (Thai Government) and Pacific and Asian Studies of the Australian National University. Using the Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) model, this study found that full implementation of the WTO commitment by the Thai government would generate both production and price adjustments as shown in Table 9. The net effects on production and prices of major agricultural commodities such as rice, sugar, and maize would be positive. However, domestic production of soybeans, coffee and milk would decrease. The decreased domestic production of these commodities would be compensated by higher volume of imports.

Table 9: Thailand: change in production and price, 1998

Commodities	Production (percent)	Price (percent)
Milled rice	11.1	4.4
Sugar	8.1	10.2
Maize	7.1	4.7
Soybeans	–2.2	0.3
Sorghum	2.6	1.9
Coffee beans	–0.02	0.4
Rubber	0.4	1.8
Milk	–.0.05	0.35

Source: Data compiled from text, (Itharattana, 1999: 24)

The findings of Itharattana (1999) study conformed to the assumption that Thailand had a comparative advantage for many of its agricultural commodities. Therefore, agricultural trade liberalisation would facilitate the economy's expansion of farm production in accordance with its comparative advantage to absorb the accessible marketing opportunities in the global market. Apparently, this might include rice, maize, sugar, sorghum, and rubber.

Soybeans and palm oil enjoyed promotional subsidies and protection before trade liberalisation. The study argued that these commodities would be adversely affected, as Thailand would gradually reduce its subsidy and protection rates under WTO obligations. Similarly, dairy production would be adversely affected, although the primary effect would not be significant. However, compliance with WTO commitments would certainly affect the domestic promotional dairy policy.

The study argued that due to agricultural trade liberalisation, Thailand might have an export and import growth of 2.3 and 1.0 percent respectively. The study also found that rural incomes would be enhanced while the middle-income group in the urban areas might have experienced a decrease in income.

Itharattana (1999) argued that Thailand would gain a net 234 million dollars from exports and a net 36 million dollars from imports of agricultural commodities at full compliance with WTO commitments. Thailand might see a competitive export outlook for rice, sugar, maize, sorghum, rubber, cassava, and chicken meat. Similarly, it might experience a net gain from lower fertiliser import prices. Compared with developed countries, Thailand exercised low subsidisation – only 2 percent farm subsidy as a percentage of national production value in 1998. This indicated that Thailand had vast production potential in agricultural commodities over major world producers. The structures of farm subsidies of some selected countries are summarised in Table 10.

Table 10: Farm subsidy as percentage of national production value: a comparison, 1998

Country	Farm subsidy (in %)
EU	39.0
USA	21.3
Japan	32.1
Thailand	2.0

Source: Data compiled from the text, (Itharattana, 1999: 24)

3.4 Some Major Studies and Their Findings

Warr (2008) argued that income distribution in Thailand worsened in the course of economic development and adversely affected the poor and rural livelihoods in the post-liberalisation periods. He argued that agricultural trade liberalisation influenced domestic production and international trade significantly, but the prospects for further liberalisation would not be encouraging, unless that could occur through bilateral preferential trading agreements. This was particularly because of other socio-economic factors – protecting small and poor farmers, rather than gaining from international trade. However, Clark (2011) found that Thailand did not gain as much as the USA from a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA), resulting in smaller exports to the USA than imports from the USA. He argued that the adjustment pressure for Thailand was higher than for the USA because of the asymmetry in tariffs and

in the size of two economies, the size of the Thai economy being only about 1 percent of the US economy.

Lochindaratn (2009) analysed the impact of bilateral preferential trading agreements of Thailand with Japan, China, India, Australia and New Zealand and found that the *JapanThailand Economic Partnership Agreement* (JTEPA) was the best, while the *Thailand-New Zealand Closer Economic Partnership Agreement* (TNZCEPA) was the least beneficial FTA in terms of welfare gains by Thailand. He argued that Thai FTAs were welfare improving, albeit at a marginal level. Contrary to Warr's (2008) view, he also found similar results as Clark (2011), that real gains from bilateral FTAs were trivial compared with the benefits from multilateral trade liberalisation including the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a whole.

Boossabong and Taylor (2009) found that agricultural trade liberalisation was not effective in increasing production. They argued that farmers experienced losses from trade liberalisation in two ways: an increase in production costs resulting from higher input prices, and a decrease in producer prices compared with inflationary conditions.

Warr and Kohpaiboon (2009) argued that agricultural trade liberalisation adversely affected soya bean production, thereby converting Thailand from a net exporter to a net importer in the post-liberalisation era. The government adopted contradictory trade policies in the case of sugar as being influenced by powerful political lobbies (mill owners) – liberalising export but taxing domestic sugar consumption, thus penalising domestic consumers. Although some government intervention policies were good for the development of rural infrastructure, they criticised other policies such as cash transfer to village organisations and subsidised loan schemes for not being pro-agriculture, as they were not linked to increasing agricultural production.

Pupongsak (2009) found strong evidence that trade liberalisation improved both imports and exports. However, a trade deficit might still occur because of large income elasticity of demand for imports. Akapaiboon (2010) found that the output of the agricultural sector declined, labour shifted from agriculture to both manufacturing and service sectors, household income increased due to an increase in unskilled and skilled wages, and poverty reduced in the post-liberalisation era.

Warr (2010) found that agricultural trade liberalisation increased inequality amongst both farm and non-farm households, arising from a decrease in real wages of unskilled labour and an increase in real wages of skilled labour. Farm households experienced an increase in the incidence of poverty, while non-farm households experienced an insignificant reduction in poverty.

4. Conclusion

The above analyses suggest that the impacts of agricultural trade liberalisation in all studies were mixed: some studies found positive impacts but others found negative or insignificant impacts. Agricultural trade liberalisation increased inequality and income gap between the rich and the poor, suggesting that the rich gained more than the poor from liberalisation. This paper argues that mere 'price is right' or trade liberalisation would not automatically promote welfare. Besides trade reform measures, there was the need for complementary policies to enhance productivity as well as to reduce inequality between the poor and the rich.

This paper argues that the effects of agricultural trade liberalisation on Thai economy were consistent with the debate regarding the effects of trade liberalisation on economic development. The evidence remained mixed and loaded with criticisms on the grounds of choice of liberalisation determinants, model specifications and methodology as well as other measurement shortcomings. The review suggests that the literature is inconclusive and outcomes are largely case-specific.

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