

TRADE OPENNESS AND UNEMPLOYMENT: A PANEL DATA ANALYSIS OF EMERGING ECONOMIES

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Abstract

This research examines the effect of trade openness on unemployment in emerging economies using a panel of 24 emerging economies for the years 2005 to 2024 by applying panel regression and general method of moments (GMM) estimations. The findings suggest that trade openness is negatively linked with unemployment, which implies that the higher the level of openness will promote the employment growth in the acceleration of economic efficiency and expanding the market. Control variables including GDP growth, FDI and LFPRT also indicate negative link with trade openness while population growth indicates a positive relationship with unemployment demonstrating that the relationship is dynamic in a sense. Trade liberalization creates jobs, but there are still problems with structural unemployment and demographic pressures. The study ends with policy perspectives that can moderate the negative effects of trade openness on labor markets and promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Key words: Trade openness, unemployment, Gross domestic product, Foreign direct investment, Labor force participation rate.

1. Introduction

Trade openness the degree to which an economy is interconnected through international trade has become a key pillar of global economic policy. The expansion of globalization over the past decades has intensified the economic interdependence between countries and the movements of production, employment and growth. Trade openness is fundamentally been seen by developing nations as a strategic means to achieve economic growth, technological progress, and linker to the international production networks, and particularly so in the case of emerging economies. Yet, the effect of trade openness in domestic labor markets is a highly controversial question.

Its advocates claim that greater trade openness may promote growth, labor demand and productivity by leading to a reallocation of resources towards more efficient industries. Critics, however, also point to potential negative effects, including risk of job loss for lower-paying jobs not susceptible to being replaced by machines, wage inequality, and computerized unemployment. In less developed countries, with more precarious labor market structures, and less developed institutions, the relationship between trade policies and unemployment is even more complex. This research aims at contributing to this line of argument by exploring the extent to which trade openness and unemployment are related in a panel of emerging economies, through identifying the subtlety in the dynamics of this relationship.

The process of globalization has changed the economic setting of the world and had a significant impact on trade policies, market integration and labor market dynamics. Trade openness, the degree to which a country allows goods, services, and capital to move freely in and out of an economy, is one of the most important dimensions of globalization. The glamour of free trade itself is such that very few, even among those who worry about the social costs associated with it, question the key assumption of neoclassical trade theory that free trade is good for economic growth and development. But the effect on unemployment a key measure of economic health

and social prosperity remains one of the most hotly debated issues among economists and policymakers. This paper aims to contribute to this debate by analyzing the impact of trade openness on unemployment only for developing countries.

There have been substantial changes in the global economy in recent years. One is the endogenous relationship between trade openness and labor market results in the developing countries. It has been broadly understood to be a contributor to economic expansion, the dissemination of technology, and productivity improvement. The implications of this for unemployment are, however, a contentious area of research and policy debate.

Trade liberalization has various potential advantages (Such as market access in foreign countries, technology spillovers, efficient resource distribution). The traditional theory of Heckscher - Ohlin predicts that countries will gain most in terms of specialization and efficiency by specializing in industries where they have the comparative advantage. Such a specialization could be productivity-enhancing and hence also new jobs creating. Second, trade liberalization may increase competition, prompting firms in developing countries to invest in innovation and in the expansion of their productive capacity.

However, trade openness also presents certain challenges for developing countries. There is a lot of labor to lose in those industries that cannot compete against these imports. Structural unemployment might develop due to declining traditional industries, and workers' movement to other sectors could be protracted by skill mismatches, deficient training and other impediments to labor market flexibility. What is more, closer integration with world markets can also magnify exposure to economic vulnerabilities, with most of the emerging economies depending on the export of highly volatile commodities, or subject to external shocks. These details emphasize the importance of distinguishing between forms of trade openness when analyzing the influence of trade openness on unemployment in the case of emerging economies.

Emerging markets are of a heterogeneous nature due to different degrees of industrialization, economic structure types and demographic change. Perceived as the engines of world growth, they continue to struggle to ensure inclusive and sustainable development. Employment systems in these countries are characterized by high levels of informality, underemployment and wage inequality, which implies that they are very affected by the effects of the trade policies. In Brazil, for example, between 2000 and 2020 trade openness was, on average, 27.7% and the unemployment rate was 9.8%, indicating the presence of considerable labor market pressures despite a relatively low level of global integration. China on the other hand had an average trade openness of 45.7% and an unemployment rate of 4.4% in the same period which points towards the merits of a healthy export driven economy. The trade openness in India was also higher at 46.4% with an unemployment rate of 5.3%; whereas Pakistan's was comparative lower 29.8% with the lowest unemployment 2.7%. These differences highlight the heterogeneity of the experience of emerging economies, and how context specific analysis is required.

In addition, the bi-directional association between trade openness and unemployment has rendered it a significant area of investigation for policy makers who want to pursue inclusive growth. Proponents of trade liberalization have argued that openness encourages innovation, improves competitiveness and generates employment, especially in export centered industries. Critics, meanwhile, warn of job loss, wage stagnation, and growing economic inequality arising from exposure to global competition. It is important to understand these divergent dynamics if we want to make policies that allow us to maximize the positive gains of trade while limiting the negative consequences.

This study is important as it has the potential to influence policy makers in the developing world on the labor market effects of trade policies. As these countries seek increased integration into the world economy, they are confronted with the twin challenge of reaping the benefits from trade liberalization while being able to mitigate its negative impact on employment. Decision-makers find themselves working in a terrain in where trade liberalization choices have profound implications for economic equilibrium, social cohesion and political legitimacy. By providing evidence on the nexus of trade openness and unemployment, this study seeks to present a pathway to inform policies which promote inclusive economic growth.

This study is empirically based on a rich database comprising major macroeconomic indicators of up-and-coming economies over 20 years. The variables considered are the unemployment rate (UNET), GDP growth rate (GDPG), trade openness as a percentage of GDP (TRADE), foreign direct investment as percentage of GDP (FDI), labor force participation rate (LFPRT), and population growth rate (PG). These indicators, drawn from international reliable databases, offer a solid platform for exploring the complex link between trade openness and unemployment.

2. Literature Review

Trade openness determined by the level of an economy's willingness for goods and services to move freely across the borders of that economy, and to a lesser extent, this level of openness that is enshrined in theory can be dated back to classical and neoclassical economics. According to the Heckscher-Ohlin (H-O) model, a country exports goods that use its abundant factors of production intensively and imports goods depending on the use of scarce factors. The gains from specialization, made possible by trade, are expected to increase allocative efficiency and hence, economic welfare generally (Krugman & Obstfeld, 2003). Nevertheless, trade shock-induced labor market responses may trigger sectoral shifts, with their attendant transitional or permanent unemployment.

Extending from these premises, the Stolper Samuelson theorem holds that relatively abundant factors are better-off and relatively scarce factors less well-off after liberalization (e.g. labor in a capital-abundant economy). Labor-rich, low income countries are anticipated to benefit in terms of employment for increased production of labor intensive goods. However, there is empirical evidence that the relationship between openness to trade and unemployment is dependent on institutions, degree of labor market flexibility, and type of trade agreements.

Secondly, the Ricardian model highlights comparative advantage as the reason for efficiency gains driven by trade. Economies can generate the most output and the highest growth by making resources available to those sectors that are most productive. Nonetheless, the model is based on complete labor mobility, which is usually unrealistic. This mismatch highlights room for transitional joblessness as people move between sectors. In addition, factor proportions theory can be used to explain the distributive implications of trade, such as why workers employed in import-competing industries will tend to have their wages fall and their jobs disappear.

Krugman (1980) has laid down the foundations of the so called new trade theory in which the role of economies of scale and market imperfections in accounting for trade patterns is brought to the fore. In contrast to the orthodox theory, the model demonstrates the possibility of industrial concentration on specific regions through trade and the possibility of regional unemployment differentials being intensified through trade. Moreover, this model also implies that there can be distributional issues if there is to be early pain (workers not skilled in the new types of jobs suffer worse than otherwise). The theory also emphasizes monopolistic competition, in which firms benefit from greater market access but might not pass on wage increases in order to remain competitive.

A key complementary view is provided by endogenous growth theory, which connects trade liberalization with technological spillovers and growth. Romer (1990) concluded that exposure to world markets encourages the spreading knowledge and expenditure on research and development (R&D) which will finally lead to increasing the productivity. Yet, the distribution of these benefits can lead to polarization of the workforce— where highly-skilled workers gain far more than low-skilled workers. Likewise, the theory of dependence criticizes the uneven distribution of power in world trade, claiming that the possibilities of employment growth in the developing countries may be reduced through confinement of their role in low value-added activities.

Institutional economic theories are also instrumental in explaining the trade-unemployment link. According to these theories, trade liberalization's effects are conditioned by quality of institutions such as rule of law, property rights and governance. Rodrik (1999) argued that poor institutions amplify the negative impact of trade liberalization, e.g., loss of jobs and income equalization, while good institutions may alleviate these negative effects through appropriate policy responses. Labor market institutions, such as minimum wage legislation and collective bargaining systems, are also emphasized as a counterbalance to the impact of trade on unemployment.

There are a lot of empirical studies that explore the effect of trade openness on unemployment in the context of developing countries. Hasan et al. (2007) focused on India, and observed that trade liberalization decreased regional disparities in unemployment by promoting industrial diversification. In the same vein, Kim (2011) examined data for East Asian countries and found that export-led strategies reduced unemployment rates, especially in the manufacturing industry. In contrast, studies such as Greenaway, Upward and Wright (2008) have emphasised the nature of trade interindustry versus interindustry matters for how unemployment responds across the UK.

The story is rather more mixed in the case of Latin American economies. Goldberg and Pavcnik (2007) studied labor market outcomes following liberalization in Brazil and Chile and found that unskilled labor suffered negative short-run effects from import competition. The authors emphasized the need for complementary policies, such as skill training and social safety, to attenuate unemployment risks. Similarly, with respect to Argentina, studied by Galiani and Sanguinetti (2003), we showed that despite welfare increases induced by trade, the import competing sector suffered substantial losses in employment.

The role of institutional quality, such as labor market flexibility and governance, is crucial in determining the trade-unemployment connection. Dutt, Mitra and Ranjan (2009) claimed that economies with stronger institutions can make better use of the gains from opening of trade as well as the gains that arise from the reduction of idles of labor. Their study across countries found that trade openness lowers unemployment in economies with flexible labor markets but raises it in those where they are rigid. This result highlights the heterogeneous impacts of trade, which are dependent on country-specific policy and institutional environments. Other studies, such as Felbermayr, Prat & Schmerer (2011) highlight the role of labor mobility and migration policies in conditioning the trade-unemployment relationship.

Trade-driven technological change is a second important dimension related to unemployment. as demonstrated by Autor, Dorn, and Hanson (2013), import competition from China accelerated job losses in U.S. manufacturing (for which a similar trend becomes relevant for more and more emerging economies that are integrated into global value chains). On the other hand, if technological upgrading processes given a push by trade openness are set in motion, it can lead to productivity growth and high-skilled employment in the long run. On the one hand, examples

from countries such as South Korea and Taiwan show how focused industrial policies can harness trade to achieve technological upgrading and employment creation.

This duality is particularly evident in emerging economies like Vietnam and Bangladesh. Although the expansion of exports of textiles and electronics has created jobs, investment in automation and capital-intensive production have limited job opportunities for the low-skilled work force. The difficulty is finding a trade-off between a technological breakthrough and an inclusive labor policy that promote equal distribution of trade gains. The development of GVCs also poses questions about wage repression, given that employing companies tend to use wage cost to reduce labor costs.

The effect of openness on unemployment also differs regionally and sectorally. For example, agricultural trade liberalization in Sub-Saharan Africa has produced mixed outcomes, such as growth in exports that are not always to the advantage of smallholder farmers and increased competition through imports that has damaged African producers. In contrast, South Asia's industries have, on average, flourished in the context of open trading policies, thus mirroring the contrasting structural conditions of emerging economy industries. In addition, investigations on energy-intensive industry sectors, for example, in the Middle East, demonstrate how trade liberalization may increase or decrease employment, depending on global energy price developments.

Firm level analyses, such as in Revenga (1997), present examples of the adjustment costs faced by workers in industries in decline. Revenga's examination of Mexico after NAFTA also documented large decreases in import-competing sector wages, and suggested that retraining programs and transitional assistance would be required for the affected workers. The inclusion of sustainability concerns in trade agreements, including those of the EU, also reflects a move towards linking trade and social and environmental objectives.

The policy implications of the literature have highlighted the important intercession effect of policy on the relationship between trade flows and unemployment. To combat labor market frictions such as these, policies such as vocational training, education reform, and unemployment insurance are crucial. 78 And regional cooperation and inclusive trade arrangements can make developing countries more resilient to external shocks." Another area for generating employment in new sectors is the convergence of digital trade policies and e-commerce modes.

It could be recommended that new researches should focus on the relationship between trade openness; digital transformation and green growth as these paradigms are reshaping the ways in which trade operate between the countries round the world. The question of how developing economies can use trade openness to achieve sustainable and inclusive development is still an important challenge in academia and policy. Moreover, the part played by international organizations, such as the world trade organization, in promoting fair trade and open trading needs to be further examined.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Data

The data used in the study is secondary data obtained from World Development Indicators (WDI) database. This data base contains a significant and reliable set of macroeconomic indicators that will warrant the quality of the data including GDP, FDI, LFPRT and PG as control variables while the dependent variable is unemployment rate while the independent variable is trade openness covering 24 emerging economies from 2005 to 2024. The emerging countries were chosen, taking into account their flexible trade policies and labor market

peculiarities which are very important in analyzing the consequences of trade openness on unemployment. The description of variables is explained in the following 3.1 table in details.

Table 3.1. Description of Variables

Source: Authors own calculation

3.2. Methodology

A panel data regression model is applied to examine the impact of trade openness on

Variables	Description	Formula	Expected Sign	Data Source
Unemployment Rate	Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (national estimate)	$(\text{Number of unemployed} / \text{Total Labor Force}) \times 100$	(Dependent Variable)	WDI
Trade Openness	Trade (% of GDP)	$(\text{Exports} + \text{Imports} / \text{GDP}) \times 100$	Negative	WDI
GDP Growth	GDP growth (annual %)	$(\text{Current Year's GDP} - \text{Last Year's GDP} / \text{Last Year's GDP}) \times 100$	Negative	WDI
Foreign Direct Investment	Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP)	$(\text{FDI Inflows} / \text{GDP}) \times 100$	Negative or Positive	WDI
Labor Force Participation Rate	Labor force participation rate for total (%) (national estimate)	$(\text{Labor Force} / \text{Population of Working Age}) \times 100$	Negative	WDI
Population Growth	Population growth (annual %)	$(\text{Current Year's Population} - \text{Last Year's Population} / \text{Last Year's Population}) \times 100$	Positive or Negative	WDI

unemployment along with major macroeconomic control variables including GDP, FDI, LFPRT and PG. Panel estimation, which utilizes the both cross-sectional and time-series dimensions, have improved the reliability of the estimates due to its controlling for the cross-country heterogeneity and temporal factors. This approach is especially useful to compare economic dynamics in developed economies because it captures the cross country and time changes in variation. In order to achieve robust and unbiased estimates, the dynamic panel-data estimation, which accounts for time effects and corrects for unobserved heterogeneity. Especially, the Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) is used and it is a good estimation method for panel data possibly suffering from endogeneity and autocorrelation. From the results of GMM the size and significance of effect of each of the variables on unemployment is examined. In addition, we applied diagnostic tests for model fit and instrument relevance which enhances the reliability of our estimates.

4. Discussion of Results

4.1. The GMM estimation results are discussed in table 4.1 as followings.

Table 4.1: Results Discussion

Variable	Coefficient
LUNET	0.981***
TRADE	-0.0029**

GDPG	-0.1921***
FDI	-0.0029
LFPRT	-0.0036**
PG	0.0848***
Constant	0.6220**

Source: Author's Estimation, Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The findings of our estimation suggest that trade openness have a negative relationship with unemployment with a coefficient of -0.00296 which is statistically significant as well and indicates that trade openness will decrease unemployment which will be a good signal for emerging economies as more trade openness will reduce unemployment rate in such economies by providing more employment opportunities. GDP and FDI both negatively impact unemployment in these emerging economies with coefficients -0.1921 and -0.0029 respectively while the coefficient of GDP is statistically significant while FDI's coefficient is statistically insignificant. The statistically significant indicator of GDP suggests that an expansion in GDP will cause a reduction in unemployment in these emerging economies. The coefficient for LFPRT is negative having value of -0.0036 and statistically significant indicating that an increase in labor force participation will cause a decrease in the unemployment rate in these 24 emerging economies while the indicator of PG supports a positive and statistically significant relationship between unemployment and population growth supporting that an increase in population will also increase unemployment rate which could be due to the increase of unskilled population which becomes a burden on the economy. All these results aligned with previous literature.

4.2. Diagnostic Tests Results

Mean Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is calculated to check the presence or absence of multicollinearity in the data and the value of VIF explains the absence of multicollinearity in the data as the value for mean VIF (1.66) is less than 5. The diagnostic tests for autocorrelation as Arellano-Bond test for AR (1) and Arellano-Bond test for AR (2) are conducted to check for the presence or absence of autocorrelation and these indicates that there is no issue of autocorrelation in the data as explained by the values of Arellano-Bond test for AR (1) and Arellano-Bond test for AR(2). The value of Arellano-Bond test for AR (1) is 1.56 and the value for Arellano-Bond test for AR (2) is 0.43 both of these test values are statistically insignificant which ensures the absence of autocorrelation in the data. The statistics for Hansen test indicates that the instruments used in the analysis are valid as indicated by the value of Hansen test which is 18.22 and is statistically insignificant. All the diagnostic test results are presented in the following table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Diagnostic Tests Results

Test	Coefficient
Mean VIF	1.66
Arellano-Bond test for AR(1)	1.56
Arellano-Bond test for AR(2)	0.43
Hansen Test	18.22

Source: Author's Own Calculation

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of trade openness on unemployment in 24 emerging economies over the period 2005 to 2024. Using panel data estimation techniques, particularly the Generalized Method of Moments (GMM), the results reveal a significant and negative

relationship between trade openness and unemployment. This supports the argument that greater openness to international trade contributes positively to employment generation by stimulating production, enhancing competitiveness, and expanding access to global markets.

Among the control variables, GDP growth and labor force participation rate were also found to be negatively and significantly related to unemployment, highlighting the importance of sustained economic growth and active labor market engagement. On the other hand, population growth was positively linked to unemployment, suggesting that demographic pressures can strain labor markets if not met with adequate employment opportunities. Interestingly, foreign direct investment, though negatively related to unemployment, did not show a statistically significant effect in this study, possibly due to the diverse nature of FDI flows and absorptive capacity differences across countries. These findings are in line with much of the existing literature, reinforcing the idea that trade liberalization can be a catalyst for job creation in emerging markets, provided the right macroeconomic and institutional frameworks are in place. However, they also point toward the persistent challenges of structural unemployment and demographic shifts, which require targeted policy interventions beyond trade policy alone.

Policymakers in emerging economies must, therefore, strike a balance between promoting openness and ensuring that the domestic workforce is equipped to benefit from global integration. Complementary policies such as vocational training, education reforms, investment in human capital, and social safety nets will be crucial in translating the potential benefits of trade into inclusive and sustainable labor market outcomes. In conclusion, while trade openness presents a valuable opportunity for emerging economies to reduce unemployment and accelerate economic development, its success depends heavily on the capacity of these economies to manage transition costs, strengthen institutions, and pursue holistic development strategies that align trade reforms with labor market resilience.

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