Leveling of Policy-Making System Deficiencies in the Commercial Sector within the Country's Development Programs

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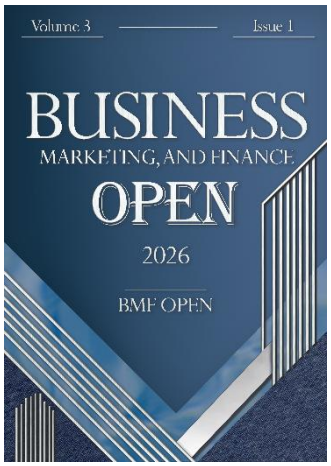

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Abstract: The purpose of the present study was to determine the leveling of deficiencies in the policy-making system in the commercial sector within the country's development programs. The research method was quantitative and, in terms of purpose, applied. The statistical population consisted of professors and experts familiar with policy-making, of whom 18 individuals were selected as the sample size using a random sampling method. The research instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire designed based on qualitative findings and prior literature. Its validity was confirmed through face validity, and its reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha test. For data analysis, the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method was employed. The findings revealed five levels of priority: (1) cultural, social, and structural causes; (2) policy-making barriers and challenges—lack of attention to sustainable development, domestic barriers, public awareness and cultural promotion, and international challenges; (3) economic and financial causes; (4) lack of a scientific approach to research and improvement of the business environment; and (5) structural reforms, which were identified as the final priority of deficiencies in the policy-making system in the commercial sector within the country's development programs. Therefore, cultural, social, and structural causes should be considered among the most important deficiencies of the policy-making system in the country and must receive special attention from planners. Ultimately, structural reforms are proposed as the final solution to improve the situation. This model can serve as a guideline for policy-makers and officials to enhance commercial and developmental policy-making in the country.

Keywords: Policy-making system in the commercial sector, national development programs, pathology, structural analysis

1. Introduction

Trade policy-making has always been a central pillar of economic development strategies, particularly in countries where structural reforms, development planning, and international trade relations are tightly interwoven. The effectiveness of such policy-making systems determines not only the direction of domestic economic stability but also the extent of integration into the global market. Over the last few decades, many countries have relied heavily on development programs to address persistent inefficiencies, adapt to the challenges of globalization, and respond to shifting socio-political landscapes. However, persistent deficiencies and disruptions in policy-making systems, particularly in the trade domain, have remained unresolved, leading to long-

term challenges in achieving sustainable growth. These deficiencies manifest in cultural, structural, and institutional barriers, as well as in weaknesses in strategic planning, international trade adaptability, and the integration of scientific research into economic decision-making [1-3].

The central role of trade in national economic development has been widely emphasized. A coherent trade policy framework contributes to economic resilience, competitiveness, and the ability to attract foreign investment. Conversely, fragmented or uncertain trade policies undermine market confidence and limit the effectiveness of reforms [4]. In contexts such as China, the uncertainty of trade policy has been shown to significantly affect financial investment decisions of energy firms, highlighting how policy ambiguity can have far-reaching consequences on industrial strategy and economic growth [4]. Similarly, research in Iran and comparable economies demonstrates that the absence of institutional cohesion in trade policy-making remains one of the most critical weaknesses limiting export development and diversification [1].

The significance of development plans in shaping trade-related policies is particularly notable in post-revolutionary Iran, where successive plans have been launched with the intention of fostering economic growth, diversification, and stability. Despite this, these programs have frequently suffered from inconsistencies in policy-making approaches and from insufficient attention to cultural, structural, and socio-economic determinants [5, 6]. Meta-analytical assessments of decades of planning underscore that while substantial progress has been made in outlining broad development objectives, the practical application of these plans often fails due to recurring systemic deficiencies [7]. One major issue lies in the lack of a cohesive and productive economic culture underpinning these plans, which further undermines their implementation and success [8].

Beyond national-level experiences, international perspectives illustrate both the opportunities and challenges posed by trade policy-making. For instance, research on the effectiveness of free trade zone policies in Indonesia highlights their potential as a solution to enhance local economies, but also points to the structural challenges in ensuring that benefits extend beyond limited geographic or industrial sectors [9]. Similarly, evidence from Chinese enterprises shows that free trade zone policies can be a driver of value chain reconstruction and green transformation, signaling that trade-related regulatory frameworks can shape broader sustainable development trajectories [10, 11]. These cases emphasize that while trade policy innovations can yield substantial benefits, their effectiveness depends heavily on the governance and institutional structures through which they are implemented.

The interaction of trade openness and monetary policy has also been shown to significantly affect economic growth and inflation, underscoring the interconnected nature of trade policy with other macroeconomic instruments [12]. In practice, this means that trade policy cannot be treated as a standalone element of economic governance but must be integrated within a broader and more adaptive framework of fiscal, monetary, and industrial policies. In countries where development plans serve as guiding frameworks for policy action, the integration of such multi-dimensional approaches becomes even more critical [13].

At the same time, the global context in which trade policy-making operates has undergone rapid transformation. Increasing digitalization and technological advancements have not only altered the structures of international trade but have also reshaped the governance and auditing systems that underpin economic policy-making. For example, digital transformation has had significant impacts on internal auditing practices, signaling a broader shift in how accountability and transparency are achieved within economic systems [14]. Moreover, the growing role of artificial intelligence in global trade and economics—particularly through predictive modeling and quantum-enhanced policy optimization—points to new frontiers for addressing long-standing inefficiencies in policy-making processes

[15]. These developments highlight the necessity of adapting traditional policy-making frameworks to align with technological progress and global economic integration.

However, many challenges persist in aligning trade policies with sustainable economic goals. Research on economic policy uncertainty illustrates that sustainability cannot be achieved without robust and predictable policy frameworks that guide business strategies [16]. In low- and middle-income countries, financial development has been identified as a critical driver of sustainable economic development, but its effectiveness depends on the presence of supportive policy environments and coherent trade strategies [17]. In the Iranian context, studies emphasize that neglecting foreign exchange policy reforms and failing to align trade balance management with national production goals can significantly weaken economic resilience [18]. These examples reinforce the idea that the pathology of trade policy-making systems must be understood as both a domestic challenge and a global concern, influenced by shifts in international markets, institutional capacities, and socio-cultural contexts.

Policy-making itself, as a conceptual and procedural framework, has long been subject to theoretical exploration. Foundational works define policy-making as a complex process that integrates models, concepts, and procedures to address collective problems in society [19]. Yet, in practice, the pathology of policy-making often arises from inconsistencies between theoretical frameworks and the realities of political, institutional, and economic structures. Comparative studies on higher education policy, for example, reveal trade-offs between access and quality, highlighting the tensions that arise when citizen-centered approaches are not fully integrated into policy design [20]. These insights provide valuable parallels for understanding the challenges in trade policy-making, where structural reforms, inclusivity, and long-term strategic vision are often sacrificed for short-term or fragmented decision-making.

In Iran, the orientation of foreign trade policies has been deeply influenced by geopolitical, institutional, and historical factors, which have often constrained the country's ability to fully integrate into global markets [21]. Furthermore, persistent government interventions in economic policies, while aimed at stabilizing the economy, have sometimes exacerbated inefficiencies and created additional barriers to sustainable development [13]. This duality—between the intended objectives of state intervention and the unintended consequences of poorly coordinated policies—underscores the importance of diagnosing systemic weaknesses and prioritizing structural reforms.

The pathology of trade policy-making, therefore, extends across multiple dimensions. It involves cultural and social barriers that limit the diffusion of productive economic values, institutional weaknesses that hinder policy coherence, and financial and structural deficiencies that restrict long-term growth potential [2, 3, 8]. Addressing these challenges requires both a recognition of historical shortcomings and the adoption of forward-looking strategies informed by international experiences and technological innovations. Importantly, structural reforms and policy coherence must be prioritized, not as isolated solutions, but as integral components of a broader developmental strategy [6, 7].

In conclusion, the study of deficiencies in the trade policy-making system within national development programs provides critical insights into the broader challenges of economic governance. By integrating perspectives from domestic experiences and international case studies, this research underscores the multifaceted nature of policy-making pathologies and highlights the need for reform-oriented, adaptive, and technologically informed approaches. Understanding the interplay between institutional cohesion, cultural foundations, financial development, and global economic trends will be essential for designing policies that not only address current

deficiencies but also build resilient and sustainable economic systems capable of thriving in an increasingly interconnected world.

2. Methodology

The method of this research was quantitative and, in terms of purpose, applied. The statistical population consisted of professors and experts familiar with the field of policy-making, from which 82 individuals were selected as the sample size using a random sampling method. The research instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire, developed based on qualitative findings and prior literature. Its validity was examined through face validity, and its reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha test. For data analysis, the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method was used.

3. Findings and Results

Initially, using the qualitative method and interview analysis, several components and themes related to the research subject were identified. Subsequently, the leveling of deficiencies in the policy-making system in the commercial sector within the country's development programs was conducted using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM). After identifying the variables, they were entered into the structural self-interaction matrix (SSIM). In fact, in order to form the matrix of interrelationships among variables, experts participating in the ISM modeling process were asked to complete the matrix according to the following principles:

V: the row factor (i) can influence the column factor (j);

A: the column factor (j) can influence the row factor (i);

X: both row (i) and column (j) influence each other;

O: no relationship exists between row and column factors (i, j).

Table 1. Structural Self-Interaction Matrix of Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1		V	V	V	V	V	V	X	V	V
2			X	X	X	A	X	A	V	X
3				X	X	A	A	X	X	V
4					X	A	X	A	X	V
5						A	X	A	X	X
6							V	X	V	V
7								X	X	V
8									X	V
9										X
10										

1. Structural Reforms; 2. Public Awareness and Cultural Promotion; 3. Improvement of Business Environment; 4. Domestic Barriers to Foreign Trade and Exports; 5. Lack of Attention to Sustainable Development and Utilization of Capacities and Resources; 6. Lack of Scientific Approach and Attention to Research and Development; 7. Policy-Making and Planning Barriers and Challenges; 8. Economic and Financial Causes; 9. Cultural, Social, and Structural Causes; 10. International Trade Challenges and Barriers.

Based on the results of Table (1), structural reforms (1) influence many indicators since structural reforms can provide the foundation for other changes. Public awareness and cultural promotion (2) affect the improvement of the business environment and cultural, social, and structural causes, while also being influenced by structural reforms and several other factors. Improvement of the business environment (3) impacts international trade challenges and is influenced by various factors. Domestic barriers to foreign trade and exports (4) are influenced by different causes and, in turn, affect international trade challenges. Lack of attention to sustainable development (5) is influenced by many indicators and can have reciprocal effects. Lack of a scientific approach and attention to research and development (6) influences many indicators while being affected by structural reforms and some other factors. Policy-making and planning barriers and challenges (7) are influenced by different indicators and, in turn, affect the improvement of the business environment and other factors. Economic and financial causes (8) have reciprocal effects with many indicators. Cultural, social, and structural causes (9) are influenced by many factors and, in turn, affect some. Finally, international trade challenges and barriers (10) are influenced by many indicators and, in turn, affect some.

Subsequently, within the framework of interpretive structural modeling analysis, the initial reachability matrix is presented in Table (2).

Table 2. Initial Reachability Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1
3	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1
4	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1
5	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
6	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
7	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
8	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
9	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
10	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1

1. Structural Reforms; 2. Public Awareness and Cultural Promotion; 3. Improvement of Business Environment; 4. Domestic Barriers to Foreign Trade and Exports; 5. Lack of Attention to Sustainable Development and Utilization of Capacities and Resources; 6. Lack of Scientific Approach and Attention to Research and Development; 7. Policy-Making and Planning Barriers and Challenges; 8. Economic and Financial Causes; 9. Cultural, Social, and Structural Causes; 10. International Trade Challenges and Barriers.

In this matrix, the number 1 indicates the existence of a relationship and influence between factors, while 0 indicates the absence of a relationship.

In the next step, by applying the concept of transitivity in the relationships among variables in the initial reachability matrix, the final reachability matrix was created. The concept of transitivity states that if variable A influences variable B, and variable B influences variable C, then A also influences C. According to the analysis of this matrix, all final numbers were identical to the initial matrix, because all transitive paths already existed in the initial matrix and no modifications were needed.

To determine the level and prioritization of variables, the input and output sets for each variable were identified. The output set of a variable/component includes the variable itself along with other variables that are influenced by it. The input set of a variable includes the variable itself along with other variables that influence it. At this stage, after determining the input and output sets, the intersection set for each variable was also determined. For prioritization purposes, variables whose output and intersection sets are exactly the same are placed at the highest level of the interpretive structural modeling hierarchy. To specify the next-level components of the system, the leveled variable is removed from the table, and the next table is formed with the remaining variables. This process continues until all variables are leveled.

To determine the level and prioritization of variables in the interpretive structural modeling process, the following steps were taken:

Determining input and output sets for each variable

- Output set: includes the variable and all variables influenced by it.
- Input set: includes the variable and all variables that influence it.
- Intersection set: the overlap between the input and output sets for each variable.

Using the final reachability matrix, the sets for each variable were determined.

Input, output, and intersection sets:

Structural Reforms (1):

Output set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}

Input set: {1, 8, 9}

Intersection set: {1}

Public Awareness and Cultural Promotion (2):

Output set: {2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10}

Input set: {1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}

Intersection set: {2, 7, 9, 10}

Improvement of Business Environment (3):

Output set: {2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10}

Input set: {1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9}

Intersection set: {2, 3, 8, 9}

Domestic Barriers to Foreign Trade and Exports (4):

Output set: {4, 5, 7, 9, 10}

Input set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}

Intersection set: {4, 7, 9, 10}

Lack of Attention to Sustainable Development (5):

Output set: {5, 7, 9, 10}

Input set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}
Intersection set: {5, 7, 9, 10}
Lack of Scientific Approach and Attention to Research and Development (6):
Output set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}
Input set: {6}
Intersection set: {6}
Policy-Making and Planning Barriers and Challenges (7):
Output set: {2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10}
Input set: {1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9}
Intersection set: {2, 7, 9}
Economic and Financial Causes (8):
Output set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}
Input set: {3, 8, 9}
Intersection set: {8}
Cultural, Social, and Structural Causes (9):
Output set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}
Input set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}
Intersection set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10}
International Trade Challenges and Barriers (10):
Output set: {2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10}
Input set: {1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9}
Intersection set: {2, 4, 7, 9, 10}

After determining the relationships and identifying the levels of variables, the final model can be drawn based on the reachability matrix. For this purpose, variables are arranged from top to bottom according to their levels. To depict the final model, considering the consistent reachability matrix and the determined levels of variables, the following steps were followed:

Sorting variables based on levels:

- Level 1: Variable 9 (Cultural, Social, and Structural Causes)
- Level 2: Variables 2 (Public Awareness and Cultural Promotion), 4 (Domestic Barriers to Foreign Trade and Exports), 5 (Lack of Attention to Sustainable Development), 7 (Policy-Making and Planning Barriers), 10 (International Trade Challenges and Barriers)
- Level 3: Variable 8 (Economic and Financial Causes)
- Level 4: Variables 3 (Improvement of Business Environment), 6 (Lack of Scientific Approach and Attention to Research and Development)
- Level 5: Variable 1 (Structural Reforms)

The variables in the model are arranged from top to bottom according to their levels. The directed lines between the variables indicate their influence on one another. In Figure (1), the developed model of the research is presented.

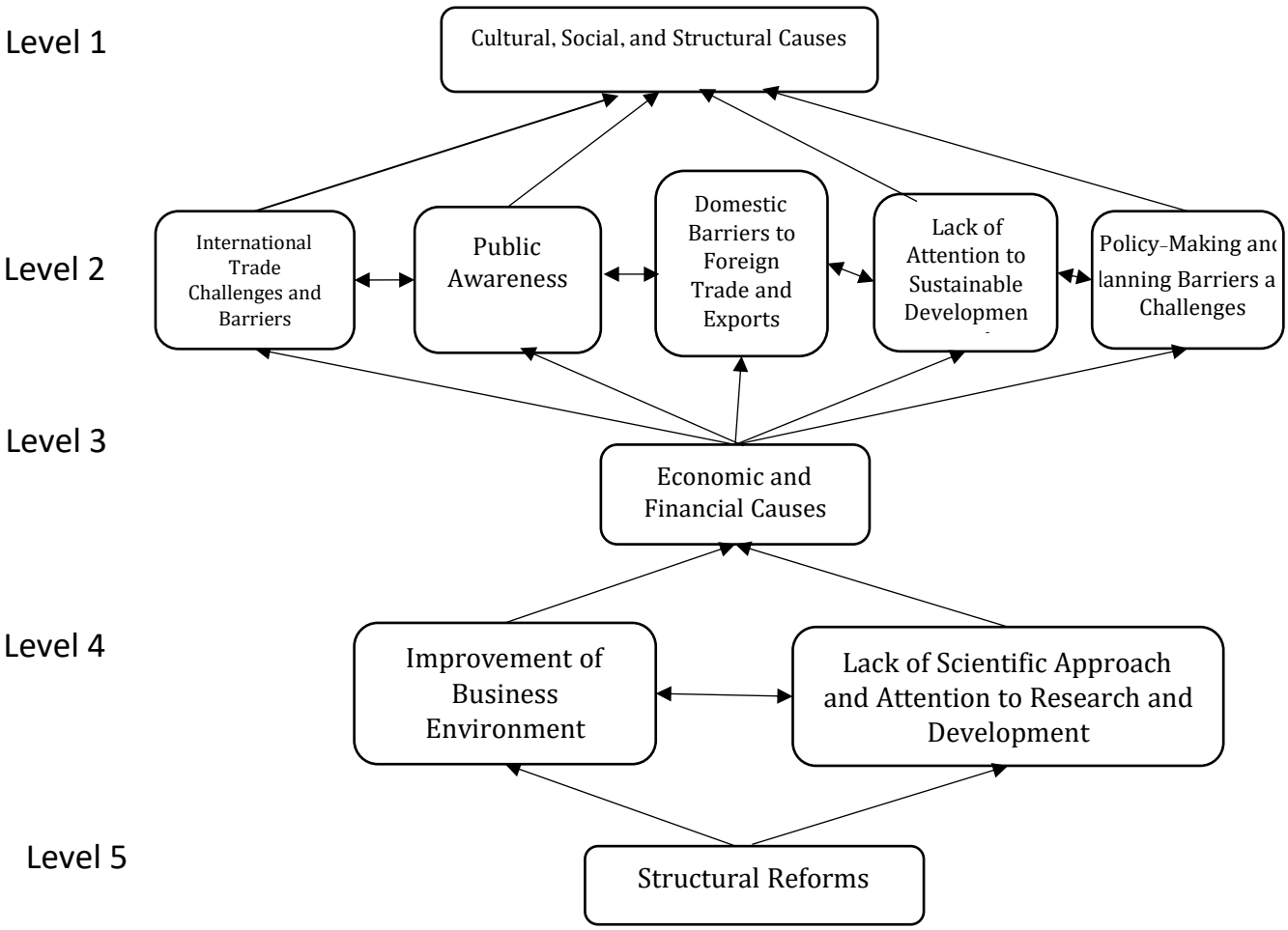

Figure 1. Leveling of Deficiencies in the Policy-Making System in the Commercial Sector within the Country's Development Programs

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study identified multiple hierarchical levels of deficiencies within the trade policy-making system in the country's development programs. The interpretive structural modeling (ISM) approach revealed that cultural, social, and structural causes form the foundational level of weaknesses in the system. These elements influence other variables and must be regarded as root causes of deficiencies. The analysis further showed that other key challenges, such as domestic barriers, lack of attention to sustainable development, international challenges, economic and financial causes, and insufficient scientific approaches, all interact dynamically, creating a complex web of systemic shortcomings. Structural reforms were ultimately positioned as the highest-level solution, exerting influence across almost all other variables. This finding highlights the necessity of prioritizing structural reform not only as an isolated initiative but as the central mechanism to achieve meaningful progress in trade policy-making.

These results are consistent with prior studies that emphasize the centrality of institutional and cultural dimensions in shaping trade policy outcomes. For instance, lack of institutional cohesion has been widely recognized as a major weakness undermining export development strategies [1]. Our results confirm this

perspective by identifying cultural and structural causes as foundational drivers of policy inefficiencies. Similarly, studies on development planning in Iran have underscored the persistence of structural and socio-cultural deficiencies across successive development programs [5, 6]. The identification of cultural and social barriers as root causes in this study therefore aligns with the broader literature, suggesting that without addressing such foundational challenges, other reforms may fail to deliver sustainable improvements.

The prioritization of structural reforms as the ultimate solution also corresponds with previous scholarship. Research examining Iran's trade policy orientation has shown that long-term improvements are possible only when reforms address deeper institutional and governance structures rather than superficial adjustments [21]. In a similar vein, comparative analyses of contingent policy-making indicators reveal that structural reforms represent the most durable path toward aligning development programs with practical realities [6]. Our findings support this line of reasoning, showing that reforms designed to restructure governance mechanisms, enhance institutional integration, and promote scientific approaches to decision-making will have wide-ranging impacts across all other dimensions of policy-making deficiencies.

The analysis also revealed the importance of the lack of attention to sustainable development and scientific research approaches. These deficiencies were found to have both direct and reciprocal impacts on other variables, suggesting that they occupy a critical intermediate level in the system. This result aligns with research highlighting the significant role of sustainability considerations in shaping trade and economic policies [16]. In contexts of economic policy uncertainty, the neglect of sustainability has been shown to reduce the resilience of economies to external shocks, thereby weakening long-term growth prospects [16]. Likewise, the absence of scientific approaches in research and development significantly reduces the ability of policymakers to implement evidence-based reforms. This is consistent with findings that emphasize the necessity of embedding research and innovation capacities into trade and economic planning to enhance competitiveness [13]. Our study corroborates these claims, identifying lack of scientific approaches as both a major influence on other deficiencies and a variable influenced by structural reforms.

Economic and financial causes were also highlighted in the results as critical interacting variables, reciprocally influencing other elements of the system. This finding supports earlier studies demonstrating the interconnectedness of financial development with sustainable economic development [17]. Without strong financial systems, trade policies are unable to effectively contribute to sustainable development goals. This perspective is further reinforced by research examining foreign exchange policy in Iran, which highlights how weaknesses in economic and financial management directly undermine the trade balance and the resilience of the national economy [18]. Our findings thus reinforce the importance of viewing financial causes not as isolated barriers but as central to the pathology of trade policy-making.

The study also highlighted the role of international trade challenges and barriers as significant factors influenced by other deficiencies but capable of exerting their own impacts. This aligns with research on free trade zones, which demonstrates that international trade-related policies can act as drivers of transformation if managed effectively [9-11]. For example, pilot free trade zones in China have been shown to promote the green transformation of enterprises, while similar policies in Indonesia and Chinese port enterprises illustrate the potential of international trade strategies to reconstruct value chains and stimulate local economies [9-11]. These insights resonate with our findings, as the study identified international trade challenges as key factors shaped by domestic deficiencies such as lack of sustainability and institutional weaknesses.

Cultural and social causes, as identified in this study, reflect not only domestic inefficiencies but also broader systemic issues in policy-making. Research on productive economic culture within development plans highlights how cultural deficiencies undermine the effectiveness of policies and reduce their capacity to generate sustainable outcomes [8]. This is consistent with our findings, where cultural and social issues formed the root level of the structural hierarchy. Similarly, research on higher education policy demonstrates how trade-offs between access and quality emerge when policy-making neglects citizen-centered approaches [20]. The parallels here are striking: just as citizen-centered policy-making can enhance higher education outcomes, culturally grounded and inclusive trade policy-making can reduce systemic deficiencies in the economic domain.

The recognition of digital transformation and artificial intelligence as influential trends in policy-making provides an additional layer of interpretation for our findings. While the study itself did not directly address digitalization, its emphasis on scientific approaches and structural reforms suggests that embracing technological innovations could serve as a critical strategy for overcoming existing deficiencies. Research demonstrates that digital transformation significantly affects internal auditing and accountability mechanisms [14], while artificial intelligence promises predictive modeling and quantum-enhanced optimization for global trade policies [15]. Integrating such technologies into policy-making structures could help address the inefficiencies identified in this study, particularly those related to lack of scientific approaches and weak institutional frameworks.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study's findings resonate with long-standing perspectives on policy-making as a complex, multi-layered process involving diverse models, concepts, and procedures [19]. The hierarchical nature of deficiencies revealed by ISM analysis underscores the interconnectedness of these elements and validates the view that policy-making must be understood as a systemic process rather than a series of isolated interventions. This systemic view is echoed in previous analyses of development planning, which argue that repeated shortcomings stem from failures to address deeper structural and cultural factors [5, 7].

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to both theoretical and practical discussions of trade policy-making by offering a structured model of deficiencies and their interrelationships. They confirm prior research emphasizing institutional, cultural, financial, and structural causes while also expanding the discussion by illustrating how these deficiencies interact hierarchically. The results thus highlight the importance of multi-dimensional, reform-oriented approaches in trade policy-making, with particular emphasis on cultural foundations, financial systems, and structural reforms as key levers for transformation.

Despite offering valuable insights, the study is not without limitations. First, the relatively small sample size of experts, although selected through random sampling, restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the research was limited to a single national context, which reduces the ability to draw direct comparisons with other countries that may face similar challenges in trade policy-making. Third, while the interpretive structural modeling method is powerful for identifying hierarchical relationships, it does not fully capture dynamic changes in policy-making processes over time. Finally, the reliance on expert judgment introduces the possibility of subjective biases, which could have influenced the weighting and prioritization of variables.

Future research should expand the scope of inquiry by incorporating larger and more diverse samples of stakeholders, including policymakers, private sector actors, and international experts. Comparative studies across multiple countries would also provide deeper insights into how similar deficiencies manifest in different institutional and cultural contexts. Moreover, integrating longitudinal methods would allow for the examination of how trade policy deficiencies evolve over successive development plans. Future studies should also explore the

role of technological innovations—such as artificial intelligence and digital governance tools—in addressing trade policy challenges, thus connecting theoretical models with emerging global practices.

From a practical perspective, policymakers should focus on prioritizing structural reforms as the foundational step toward resolving systemic deficiencies. Attention must be directed toward embedding cultural and social considerations into trade policy-making to ensure inclusivity and long-term acceptance. Strengthening financial systems and aligning them with sustainable development objectives should also be a priority. Furthermore, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating scientific research and technological tools into policy-making processes, thereby promoting evidence-based decision-making and enhancing resilience in the face of global economic uncertainties.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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