

In Profile: Dr Veena Jha



Dr Veena Jha's research addressed the fear that product standards are simply trade barriers in disguise.

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Were it not for the advice of her father, Dr Veena Jha might well be a mathematician now instead of an economist.

"I was 15 when I started university," says Jha. "I was very good in mathematics and was thinking about doing a degree in it, but my father suggested economics because the career prospects looked brighter."

Dr Jha's assessment of her career choice belies the success she has enjoyed as both a researcher and development specialist. Her teaching stints have included universities in both her native India and England, among them the University of London, where she obtained her doctorate. She has undertaken projects and consultancies for a variety of United Nations' programs, development banks, and bilateral agencies. Dr Jha now coordinates the [India Programme](#) and is affiliated to the Division on International Trade in Goods and Services, and Commodities at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

It was in this capacity that she joined forces with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in 1999 to examine the effects of product standards on trade in the developing world. The project addressed a fear that standards were hidden restrictions and nontariff trade barriers that reduced the benefits of liberalized agricultural trade, notably in fish products, peanuts, rice, mango pulp, spices, and tea.

"Often," notes Jha, "it is not the standards which are the problem, it's standard setting and where it is done. Standards have become moving targets."

Where more stringent standards are justified, developing country producers are often suspicious of new regulatory measures because they are not always implemented transparently, they are complex in nature, and their own capacity problems make new standards difficult to implement. Furthermore, "national" standards do not always conform to international standards even among countries in the same region. Thus, British standards for tea are not the same as those applicable in Germany and vice versa.

Part of the solution, Dr Jha maintains, is for developing countries to develop their own standards, especially for products in which they have a competitive advantage. Global trade in Darjeeling tea is a case in point.

“Darjeeling tea is a high value product for which India is well known. It was able to set a standard and get it internationally accepted,” says Jha.

She would like to see more proactive intervention on the part of developing-country governments and producers in standard setting.

“We [UNCTAD] believe that attention should shift from capacity building to meet standards to capacity building to **set** standards,” says Jha.

It is precisely this sort of change in mindset that she maintains is the biggest challenge in the work she does. Her current work with steel subsidies is another prime example.

“The present mindset goes something like ‘my subsidies are OK, but yours must be lowered’.” Dr Jha would see an objective, uniform, global measure of subsidies created to provide a baseline from which countries would negotiate reduction commitments.

“The current practice of playing one subsidy off against another builds a litigious regime,” says Jha. “If you want [trade] agreements that will work rather than agreements that are guaranteed to be litigious, you need a new approach.”

Researching and refining new approaches has been a landmark of Dr Jha’s career. And while her reasons for choosing to pursue a career in economics are, by her own admission, anything but profound, the loss to the field of mathematics was most certainly a gain for economics.

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