IMPLEMENTING OBLIGATIONS UNDER ARTICLE 27.3(B) OF TRIPS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Titiilayo Adebola
School of Law, The University of Warwick
T.A.Adebola@warwick.ac.uk

Introduction

- Article 27.3(b) of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) obliges member countries of the WTO to provide a form of intellectual property system for plant varieties
- The intellectual property system could be: patents, a sui genus (unique) system or any combination of systems
- Many WTO member countries from the Global South opt for the sui generis option
- TRIPS does not define a sui generis; therefore, countries have the latitude to develop systems that best suit their needs
- ‘Plant Breeders’ Rights’ as set out in the UPOV is a sui generis system promoted by actors from the Global North
- ‘Farmers’ Rights’, ‘Prior Informed Consent’ and ‘Food Sovereignty Principles’ in the ITTPGRAFA, the CBD, and Social Movements respectively are examples of counter-hegemonic sui generis norms and principles recommended by actors from the Global South
- These varied systems, norms and principles create spaces for creative forum-shopping

Research Question

- Considering the range of counter-hegemonic norms and principles that have proliferated in various international forums, and the apparent latitude in Article 27.3(b) of TRIPS, why have WTO member countries from the Global South been circumspect in their explorations of the spaces opened up by the possibilities of sui generis intellectual property systems for plant varieties?

Theoretical Framework

- This research is grounded in the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL)
- TWAIL is both a political and intellectual movement that is oppositional to unjust international norms, and seeks a reformation (or transformation) of international systems that are unfair to the Global South
- This research also critically incorporates concepts from ‘post-colonial’ contestations, the ‘struggles’ of making and framing international law, and international law from below

Methodology

- Library-based study
- Critical analysis of primary literature: multilateral treaties, national plant varieties legislations and case laws
- In-depth exploration of secondary literature: policy reports, textbooks, journal articles and civil society interventions

Research Findings

Article 27.3(b) of TRIPS offers choice, yet many WTO members from the Global South tend to mimic ‘Plant Breeders Rights’, a sui generis system set out in UPOV.

A variety of actors argue that the ‘Plant Breeders’ Rights’ system in the 1991 UPOV Convention may not be best suited to the socio-economic realities of countries in the Global South because:

i. It provides stringent requirements of Distinctness, Uniformity and Stability (DUS) which marginalises small-scale farmers in the Global South, as they tend to grow heterogeneous crop varieties (these requirements are suitable for countries that have highly industrialised agricultural sectors); and

ii. It threatens the livelihoods of small-scale farmers by limiting their traditional approach to saving seeds.

Consequently, NGOs such as GRAIN advocate that countries from the Global South ignore the UPOV sui generis system, and instead construct sui generis systems that incorporate counter-hegemonic norms and principles from other multilateral treaties and social movements.

In this regard, the African Model Law, 2000 provides exemplary guidelines for countries seeking to construct sui generis systems.

Marking major watersheds in translating Article 27.3(b) of TRIPS into domestic legal architecture are India and Thailand’s imaginative sui generis systems.

Significantly, India’s Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers Rights Act, 2001 is the first national legislation in the world to provide for the protection of farmers’ varieties and farmers’ rights to save, use, sow, re-sow, exchange, share or sell farm produce.

Similarly, Thailand’s Plant Varieties Protection Act, 1999 provides for the protection of domestic varieties (these are varieties that exist only in a particular locality).

Although the Indian and the Thai sui generis systems provide for the protection of farmers’ varieties and local domestic varieties, the practicability of these provisions are uncertain, as farmers and farming communities are yet to register their varieties.

Conclusion

- Article 27.3(b) of TRIPS opens up spaces for WTO member countries from the Global South to forum-shop when constructing intellectual property systems for plant varieties
- India and Thailand have model sui generis systems, while the African Model Law sets out exemplary guidelines for countries seeking to construct sui generis systems
- Employing the smorgasbord of sui generis alternatives, WTO members from the Global South can ignore the UPOV system, and creatively construct TRIPS-Compliant sui generis intellectual property systems for plant varieties suited to their socio-economic realities

References

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