Working papers economics - Trade in services in Colombia, 1994-2024: A descriptive analysis

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Despite the growth of modern services, Colombia’s foreign trade remains concentrated in traditional services. This poses challenges for diversifying the export basket and for promoting more differentiated, higher-technology services that can be more easily integrated into global value chains.

Publication Date: Friday, 8 of May 2026 **Approach**
Globally, services play a key role in economies due to their contribution to production and their importance in enabling other economic processes. Activities such as telecommunications, financial services, logistics, software development, and business services are essential inputs for almost all value chains. This has driven the growth of international trade in services over recent decades.

Similarly, in Colombia, foreign trade in services has evolved in line with global trends. However, studies on services trade in the country remain limited. This reflects both data constraints in the measurement of services and the fact that their rapid expansion is a relatively recent phenomenon. Understanding the evolution and dynamics of this market provides valuable information for decision-making by market participants and for the design of economic policy.

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of foreign trade in services in Colombia between 1994 and 2024. It begins by presenting relevant concepts and related literature to frame the role of services and their importance in the economy. It then describes the global evolution of international trade in services and places Colombia within this context. Finally, it analyzes the evolution of services trade in Colombia, the role of services exports in generating external income, and the relevance of services imports for domestic production.

Contribution
In the Colombian case, the study highlights the growth of the services sector and the increasing participation of services exports in total production. In addition, services imports are widely used in the production of both goods and other services, facilitating the incorporation of more advanced technologies, improvements in production processes, cost reductions, and stronger links between firms and global value chains.

The main contribution of this study is to describe the evolution and dynamics of foreign trade in services in Colombia from 1994 to 2024, an area that has been relatively underexplored in the literature. To this end, the analysis uses information on services trade reported in the balance of payments, which combines several

complementary data sources and allows for a detailed characterization of this market.

Results

The main results show the significant growth of the services sector in Colombia and its increasing contribution to the generation of external income. The analysis also underscores the importance of services imports for the production of both goods and services.

In particular, the study highlights the recent expansion of so-called modern services, defined as those that do not require face-to-face interaction between providers and consumers. As a result, their trade benefits from the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), allowing them to overcome distance-related barriers. These services are also characterized by higher technological content, greater involvement in innovation and development processes, more intensive use of skilled human capital, and deeper integration into global value chains, among other features. Consequently, compared with traditional services—which require direct interaction between buyers and sellers—modern services have important advantages in generating external income.

Despite the strong growth of modern services, Colombia’s foreign trade in services remains concentrated in traditional services. This poses challenges for diversifying the services export basket and for promoting more differentiated services with higher technological content that can be more easily integrated into global value chains.

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