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When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed almost a quarter of a century ago, proponents promised it would lead to job creation in North America, increased living standards for workers and protection of the environment. The current agreement has been beneficial to some, but reality shows the agreement falls woefully short of being the boon it was promised to be. NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice is committed to mending the gaps in income and wealth disparity, and it is clear that our trade agreements have been one of the drivers of that inequality, both domestically and abroad.

Some of the most adversely impacted communities are small farmers in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. In Mexico, for example, we have seen population losses in the countryside and increased food insecurity. In the U.S. and Canada, there are fewer farmers left to work the land as industrial agriculture takes over production. Rural dislocation has been a leading cause of migration from Mexico to the North because small farmers cannot support themselves at home. Trade policies like NAFTA widen the gaps between rich and poor.

Renegotiating NAFTA offers the possibility to address food insecurity, remedy the incentive that drives rural dislocation, and fix other problems. However, to do so, the Administration must seek changes that puts the needs of vulnerable communities first. To do so, there must be an open and transparent process so that all communities – not just the corporate community – have a seat at the table. We need a trade policy that puts people and the planet first.

Pope Francis reminds us that access to adequate food is a basic human right, one that people of faith are called by the Gospel to address. “We are in front of a global scandal of around one billion — one billion people who still suffer from hunger today. We cannot look the other way and pretend this does not exist... We need, then, to find ways by which all may benefit from the fruits of the earth, not only to avoid the widening gap between those who have more and those who must be content with the crumbs, but above all because it is a question of justice, equality and respect for every human being.”

Trade policy must address issues of inequality and the alleviation of poverty. A people first agenda means creating an environment where small farmers are not be forced to migrate to ensure that their families can survive, workers receive living wages, people have access to life-saving medicines, and the environment is protected from destruction.