

Central American Immigrant Organizations Oppose CAFTA – Propose New Approaches to Regional Integration

Sponsoring Organizations:

CARECEN, Los
Angeles, CA

CENTRO HISPANO
"Cuzcatlán," NY

Centro Presente, MA

Centro Romero, IL

CRECEN, TX

Guatemalan Unity
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Hondurans Against
AIDS, NY

Organización Negra
Centroamericana

Salvadoran American
National Network

As organizations that represent tens of thousands of Central American immigrants in the United States, we oppose the Central American Free Trade Agreement because it fails to address the most pressing needs of the region, and has the potential to deepen the profound inequalities that already plague Central American countries. Rather than ratifying CAFTA, we ask Congress to direct the Administration to investigate policy options that acknowledge the multiple ways in which our hemisphere is already interdependent and focus on creating opportunities for dignified lives throughout the region.

Over the past decade, we have seen the results of the economic formula embedded in CAFTA-style trade agreements. As part of this economic formula, steps have been taken in our countries of origin to privatize key social services, eliminate subsidies to small farmers, and establish free trade industrial zones known as "maquilas."

At the same time, we have seen poverty increase and job opportunities all but disappear. We have seen workers' rights eroded and our natural resources devastated as foreign corporations set up shop without regard to labor and environmental laws. We have seen farmers leave the land in record numbers, unable to compete with subsidized agriculture from developed countries. In recent years, we have watched many of the "maquila" industries depart Central America in search of ever-more inexpensive labor sources in Asia.

But most of all we have seen the effects of these failed economic policies in the exodus of people from the Central American region. Faced with bleak economic prospects in their homelands, many families have survived by migrating northward. The economies in Central America have become increasingly dependent on money that immigrants send home in the form of remittances. In the case of El Salvador, family remittances topped \$2 billion in 2002, constituting the largest share of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In effect, the largest export product from Central America has become people, that is, emigrant labor in United States. Based on our experience, we are convinced that this perverse pattern will not only persist but will worsen with the implementation of CAFTA.

Our opposition to CAFTA is not ideological. As immigrants, with deep roots in both our home and adopted countries, we have a deep appreciation of the potential for improved transnational cooperation. We would welcome a serious and open debate about policies that could succeed in raising the standards of living for the large numbers of poor people living in Central America. Rather than the current single-minded focus on investment and trade however, we believe that a sensible, durable integration plan would focus on creating local economic opportunity, and would include protections for our shared environment, guarantees of workers' rights, social development, and policies that acknowledge the role of migration in development in our hemisphere.

We do not want migration to be the only option for our people. We dream of a Central America that provides dignified opportunities that allow people to remain and prosper in their own communities. Unfortunately, CAFTA will take us farther from that dream.

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