COVID-19 has revealed weaknesses in our health care system, long-term care, food and water systems and social safety nets. It has also revealed incredible weaknesses in globalized trade.

Wrecking economies and livelihoods, the COVID-19 crisis has ground travel almost to a halt and put a large dent in international trade, so much so that the World Trade Organization predicts that trade will decline in 2020 by 13 to 32 per cent. As the crisis unravels international supply chains, the pandemic has shed light on another global failure: the failure of our global trade rules to encourage international cooperation and, more importantly, to prevent and combat the virus.

It shouldn’t be like this. As travel and trade increase in normal times, so does our exposure to pandemics. Business travel, international trade and tourism accelerate the spread of viruses.

Like many previous pandemics, COVID-19 is the product of international trade. Colonial-era trade, the mass deportation of African slaves to the Americas, the Silk Road – these all exported viruses and diseases worldwide.

While international trade aids the spread of viruses like COVID-19, it also undermines our ability to prevent and fight them. Trade agreements in their current form undermine health and safety systems, public health care systems, and the regulations we rely on to keep us safe. Focusing on rules to facilitate, streamline and standardize trade, these agreements offer little to deal with the social or environmental fallout of international trade.

One example of this is our shortage of N95 masks. We agreed to trade rules that facilitated the manufacturing of these masks to other countries, including the U.S. and Mexico. In April, U.S. President Donald Trump halted respirator mask exports amidst a dispute with 3M. Meanwhile, millions of face masks from other foreign countries failed to meet Canadian quality standards and couldn’t be used by frontline workers. We have had to find new ways to get these urgently needed masks. Plans to produce these masks under public initiatives are now underway. (Read more about this on pages 5 and 6.)

Investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) provisions in trade agreements, which give corporations the right to sue governments, are problematic. While ISDS provisions may have been removed from the new NAFTA agreement, they still exist in many other deals. Under NAFTA, this has made us the most sued developed country in the world as corporations attack our environment and public safety regulations.

When Italy was at the peak of its COVID crisis, with doctors deciding who would get a ventilator and who wouldn’t, international trade lawyers were discussing how Italy’s restrictions could be challenged by ISDS. Peru has already received subtle threats from lawyers and reversed some of its COVID-19-related measures because of ISDS.

This is why the Council of Canadians, and more than 600 organizations around the world, are asking for a moratorium on ISDS during COVID.

In trade agreements, corporations also are given tools to challenge regulations to make them business friendly. Known as “regulatory cooperation,” these rules allow companies – not elected politicians – to discuss rules and challenge them, which can result in weakened protections.

Trade agreements also accelerate privatization and attack public services. Private long-term care homes are an example. Some provinces have allowed care in these homes to be offered by private, for-profit corporations when the services they provide should be publicly sourced. Trade agreements stipulate that governments can privatize public services, but they cannot bring back services into the public sector.

Right now, with COVID-19 still spreading globally, inequalities and injustices are becoming more apparent. We are asking for fundamental changes to our economies and our societies in order to quell not only this crisis, but the environmental and social crises of global inequality. In order to be successful, we must overhaul trade agreements.

This text is an adaptation of an article that will soon be published in an anthology by Fernwood Publishing.