



NEW YORK — This month's toxic spill into China's Songhua River forced the evacuation of thousands of people; poisoned the water supply for millions in northeast China, including Harbin, the region's major city; and now threatens the supply for as many as 70 downstream Russian cities and villages. Thus far, most analysts following the disaster have focused on the challenges faced by urban Chinese and the real problems of lax environmental regulatory enforcement, corrupt local officials and delayed sharing of crucial information with affected populations.

But they have missed two far more significant points about the spill, which involved 100 tons of benzene, a powerful carcinogenic petrochemical that causes leukemia. First, it is not a singular event but a manifestation of a much larger structural problem within China that disproportionately impacts rural areas where the country's majority lives. And second, the world as a whole to varying degrees is implicated in this predicament, and can no longer afford to pretend otherwise.

Far from the bustling megalopolises of Beijing and Shanghai are China's rural hinterlands - the engine and the dumping ground of China's unprecedented economic growth and trajectory. These rural areas provide the country's booming cities with cheap, unorganized labor drawn from extremely poor peasant communities in the midst of their own social and environmental crises. It is also here that many toxic industries are located and through which the benzene spill first flowed and will soon flow again - out of sight of the world's media.

Rural laborers work in some of the world's dirtiest, most dangerous conditions in these far-flung township and village industries spread across the whole country. These industrial subcontractors to Chinese and international corporations spew pollution into the air and water and onto the land. And when rural workers' health is destroyed in these factories, they return to tilling the decimated lands surrounding their villages - toxic waste dumps for this unregulated production.

I spent a good part of the 1980s living along the banks of the Songhua River. I vividly remember drinking purple contaminated well water in a village with no other water source than the one polluted by the small local factory. The choice for local residents was to drink the water or leave and join the 200 million peasants searching for work in China's cities on any given day.

Such choices are the downside of China's economic success since the early 1980s, one that has

made it the producer of an ever-increasing share of the world's industrial output. The country's phenomenal growth has been accompanied by a ravaging of the rural resource base, declining peasant access to basic social services, public health and education, and a profound and rapidly growing gap between urban and rural areas, and between a wealthy minority and poor majority.

Such matters may seem distant. Their concrete manifestations, however, appear on the shelves of the local Wal-Mart and Ikea. Rural China, its environment and its people are on the bottom of a global commodity chain tied to China's emergence as the industrial platform of choice for global corporations.

While China's workers and environment pay most of the costs, we outside the country's borders, ever-eager to purchase low-priced goods irrespective of the environmental and social impacts - particularly ones as distant and hidden as those in rural China - consume the benefits. And yet, indirectly, we also bear the costs.

As the world's companies continue to rush to China to set up factories to avoid the environmental and occupational regulations elsewhere, as well as unionized labor, they are dragging communities worldwide on a downward race to the bottom as they struggle to compete with China's socially and ecologically destructive industrial platform.

It is this sad truth we must face, and it is the related challenge to the world's communities that we must directly confront. It is too easy to raise a short-lived cry of dismay at each toxic news event, pointing fingers at corrupt local leaders and industrialists, or even at the failure of China's regulatory system, only to move on to another story next week. Instead we must tackle the environmentally and socially unsustainable ways we choose to globally produce and consume.