

Climate change: What will it take to wake up the world?

By Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) and Evie Hantzopoulos, Executive Director, Global Kids - 08/08/12 10:32 AM ET

The late film director Frank Capra once delivered the following quote: "I made mistakes in drama. I thought drama was when actors cried. But drama is when the audience cries."

For too long in the environmental movement, we have been crying and complaining but, despite our best efforts, we aren't actually impacting the audience. The oceans are still rising, bizarre weather patterns continue to plague us, the polar ice caps are disappearing and most of us just ignore the dangers of climate change.

As the world's leaders return from Rio de Janeiro and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development it's important to ask, "Why?" Why haven't the inhabitants of the Earth done more to deal with the man-made effects of climate change?

Consider all the steps that have been taken. Twenty years ago another summit was held in Rio, the Earth Summit. From those discussions came the Kyoto Protocol which is designed to prevent global warming. The U.S. is the only remaining signatory not to have ratified it.

In the past two decades we have seen the public's awareness of the problem increase ten-fold thanks to efforts such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

We've had the U.S. House of Representatives pass a comprehensive cap-and-trade bill that would have curbed the heat-trapping gases scientists have linked to climate change. Unfortunately, it never made it out of the Senate.

We've even had major U.S. corporations, such as General Electric and Duke Energy, announce they support cap-and-trade action because they understand the facts and know we are on a destructive course.

Yet, here we are with no major action to deal with the problem. And the meeting in Rio, despite everyone's best intentions, looks to be another disappointment if we just rely on adults to find a solution.

That's why it's heartening to talk about a group of five New York City high school students who travelled to Rio determined to help people understand that they are the immediate inheritors of the Earth and we must do better.

Their journey to Rio began earlier this year when they joined 600 other students in a day long conference about climate change held by Global Kids, a New York City based non-profit.

Short of world or national action, there are small signs of hope. More than 500 American cities and towns have already pledged to meet the Kyoto Protocol's targets for greenhouse gas emissions reductions.

The hope, though, remains that the voices of young people will make a difference.

In many ways, there is a limit to what we can do to help today's children. Carbon dioxide can stay in the atmosphere for nearly a century, so Earth will continue to warm in the coming decades. Experts say that the climate we are used to is no longer a reliable guide for what to expect in the future.

We hear a lot about the debt we are creating for our grandchildren and great grandchildren. Yes, financial worries are important. But all the money in the world won't mean a thing if future generations can't be productive on the Earth we leave them.

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