

Learning how to advocate for mountain women at the United Nations

I was able to be present during the round table which Utah Valley University students hosted on October 2nd, 2017. The event gathered five dignitaries, representing the official from UVU and leaders of four non-governmental organizations under the United Nations. The conversation of the guests were focused on how UVU works with them at the United Nations to promote both there and around the world, mountain women, who belong to the category of the most vulnerable and poor people and communities.



Round table participants discuss mountain issues

Dr. Baldomero Lago, Vice Rector for global engagement at UVU began his brief remarks by explaining how as a result of his trip to the United Nations, UVU became not only the sole institution in the state to be recognized as an associate member of the United Nations Department of Public Information, but the only member of the region that is. “You students are

at the right academic institution,” he stated as he concluded his remarks and described new opportunities for many of us to gain experiences and skills at this highest intergovernmental institution in the world.

Dr. Jed Shilling was the next speaker at the round table, who serves on the Board of Trustees at the Mountain Institute (TMI) in Washington, D.C. TMI works at the UN as NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and provides important advice and knowledge about mountain issues including communities in North America. He started out his presentation with the importance of mountains, as they are home to a wealth of tradition and knowledge. His work revolves around conserving nature and improving the lives of rural people. Women actually do most of the work in the mountains, as the men have migrated downstream to try and find work. The mountain resources in one country are also very important to another country that is downstream. It was very good and important presentation, which also reminded us how Utah as the mountain state could be such an important actor both in North America and globally to share its experiences and resources.

Dr. Andrew Taber then took the reins to discuss the expansion, to raise awareness for climate conservation, community livelihoods and poverty alleviation. Dr. Taber is the Executive Director at the Mountain Institute. The theme of this round table revolves around issues related to the promotion of women and the mountains at the UN. These are very critical to implementing the United Nations new Sustainable Development Goals that the global community and we want to reach. No one should be left behind, people that live in remote mountain villages, and women. These issues are inseparable. Dr. Taber shared stories how he has been working with poor farmers in the Himalayas. They discovered that the farmers can reduce the pressure on natural habitats. So in turn, they have trained the farmers. Some make up to \$30,000 doing this, which puts them well into the middle class. They get them out of poverty and develop prosperity. An interesting fact about this project is that half of the farmers they are working with are women. Another example he shared was putting together a proposal based on the negative impacts on road construction. The roads do bring economic benefits, but they must be done in a positive manner for the environment. He spoke highly of UVU’s involvement with the United Nations, stressing the importance of teamwork in pushing forward with this important agenda.

The next speaker was Dr. Rusty Butler, the Main Representative at the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences (RANS). His Academy is non-political, and has general consultative status

with the UN Economic and Social Council. UVU and RANS participated in the 60th and 61st sessions of the Commissions on the Status of Women in New York. In May 2016, they were honored for contribution to SDGs at an event hosted by Permanent Representatives to the UN of such countries as Russian Federation, Fiji, and Hungary in New York. Noting the joint collaboration between the two groups, Dr. Butler spoke highly of UVU's participation with the United Nations, "this is the only institution, that I am aware of, which focuses on student engaged learning at such a high level with the UN." He concluded with high praise for UVU President Holland and others on campus, "The engaged learning model at UVU should be used by every other institution in the nation."



Student audience at the round table at UVU

The concluding panelist was Ms. Wendy Jyang, the founder of Beijing-based WJS Liahona International Services, providing humanitarian opportunities for young people. She began by saying we need to be able to do hard things: “Get involved with the UN and you will find great friends and opportunities. Always ask yourself “what if” and then go out and do it. Go help the 300 million low income people that live in the mountains.” She realized a while ago that she could help the poor people from her country, so she did it. And she did this by listening to her own heart. “Do not forget that you were once a child, and had nothing...’

There were a few brief questions after the presentations, and the first revolved around what students can do now to make a change in the community. Dr. Lago said that through the new UVUN partnership initiative, students can make a difference. Dr. Shilling stated the importance of understanding that it’s not just about mountains, but something greater. Dr. Butler then concluded that it is not efficient for a student to think that they can go out on their own and do something. It is important to pitch yourself to an entity, and get involved in that way.

It was very interesting event hosted by students, members of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), an association of student clubs, who jointly work with the United Nations. UIMF members were able to show their professional qualities and skills and the high potential of the UVU student engaged learning model.

Mark Wait, UVU Student