

Mountain targets implementation through the student engaged learning model

I would like to thank on behalf of Utah Valley University the Mountain Partnership Secretariat (MPS) for providing me with the opportunity to speak about the leading role which students, especially non-traditional ones could play in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals and the mountain targets.

For 10 years, Utah Valley University has been applying a model in engaging students in hands-on involvement and practical implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as co-curricular problem-based learning (PBL) pedagogy, in which students gain professional experiences by advocating the Sustainable Mountain Development (SMD) agenda with faculty serving as mentors. The model was able to demonstrate the interactions between mountain targets and specifically with Goal 5 about gender equality. The methodology developed by UVU has not been applied yet by any other Mountain Partnership (MP) member. At the same time all those years we at UVU always experienced a strong support to our initiative from the MPS which helped significantly improve our educational model and make it popular among students. I have to express also my own appreciation to MPS for providing a great opportunity to intern at their office during spring 2016.

According to studies, the problem-based learning approach requires students to take maximum responsibility for their learning by being placed in cooperative groups to address specific practical problems. An instructor plays the role of a guide for them by “yielding” control during real-life problem-solving cases and delegating power to students.

As a result, the model developed by UVU as a co-curricular initiative implements four major principles of the PBL model in the following ways: a) as a problem to deal with, students learn how to advocate the UN SMD agenda at different levels; b) as learning vehicles, students work jointly through the student clubs in order to implement different SMD-focused initiatives; c) as club advisors, faculty could guide the processes of students learning through the implementation of initiatives to advocate the SMD agenda; d) as a final step in learning, students practically implement assigned SMD advocating initiatives.

The UN encourages youth in implementation of the SDGs, and the Model UN (MUN) pedagogy as one of the examples of problem-based learning allows students to acquire knowledge about the UN by simulating the Security Council, General Assembly among others. In distinction to the MUN, the UVU model engages students to contribute initiatives, resources, and funds to the practical implementation of the SDGs, and in particular mountain targets. It was able also to provide engagement in SDGs implementation in addition to the youth a category of non-traditional or adult students. Non-traditional students are older than 25 years, working part- or full-time jobs, often financially challenged. They represent now more than 30% of college undergraduates in the USA and possess a wide range of professional experiences important for the implementation of SDGs.

UVU is the largest public undergraduate school in the mountainous State of Utah with one of the most successful models of sustainable development in the United States. As a member of the Mountain Partnership since 2006, UVU focused on the implementation of three recommendations of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution “International Year of Mountains, 2002:” 1) to encourage institutions in the region to join MP; 2) to make contributions to the SMD advocacy of funds and sustain initiatives established during celebrations of the UN International Year of Mountains in 2002; 3) to celebrate International Mountain Day on December 11.

Since 2007, thanks to support from the MPS, UVU hosts the international Women of the Mountains conferences as one of the leading forums in North America to advocate and contribute to the implementation of Goal 5 in interaction with mountain targets and as a follow up of the 2002 “Celebrating Mountain Women” conference in Bhutan. The university raises funds for its hosting locally.

Since 2011, UVU implements the student engaged model by establishing the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at UVU. UIMF provided students an opportunity to mobilize support and contribution from institutions in North America to the SMD advocacy globally.

What are major initiatives, which students were able to implement through the developed model?

During 2013-2015, the model encouraged students to advocate for the adoption of mountain targets by participating at the UN Open Working Groups on SDGs in New York, and by hosting at UVU Permanent Representatives of more than 20 nations accredited to the UN, including the president of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) PR of Austria to the UN, Martin Sajdik, President of the General Assembly PR of Fiji to the UN Peter Thomson, Co-chairs of the Open Working Group on SDGs, the PR of Kenya to the UN, Ambassador Macharia Kamau, and PR of Hungary to the UN, Mr. Csaba Körösi among them.

Before the final adoption of the SDGs in September 2015, UVU students contributed to a social media campaign of the MP titled “Keep mountains in the SDGs”, contacting over two hundred-fifty NGOs globally, UN ambassadors, and governments with requests to support the mountain cause.

In addition, UVU students made substantial contributions to a campaign initiated and led by the MPS to sign a petition about including mountain issues in the agenda of the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP21): undergraduate students from UVU collected more than 2,000 signatures from 6,283 gathered by the MPS globally, playing a crucial role by making sure mountain targets are included during UNFCCC COP21. This fact shows the power and outreach of the UVU method, demonstrating that while academic research is important for SMD, advocacy is crucial in cases when there is a need to rely on grass-roots efforts.

As a highlight of the UVU student engaged learning model, UIMF members hosted the fourth international Women of the Mountains conference Utah in October 7-9, 2015 for the first time as community-engaged learning initiative solely through the efforts of the Utah International Mountain Forum. More than 70 students joined the organizing committee of the Conference and majority of them were non-traditional students.

While UVU has been featured in three UNSG reports (A/62/292 from August 23, 2007; A/64/222 from August 3, 2009 and A/68/100 from August 5, 2013) as contributor to the gender and SMD agendas, the United Nations Secretary-Generals (UNSG) report on Sustainable Mountain Development A/71/256, from July 2016 highlighted for the first time not the UVU but a specifically UIMF, and its student members. It was a very important acknowledgment from the Mountain Partnership Secretariat (MPS) and the FAO-UN of the effectiveness of the UVU model with engagement of students both in hosting the conference and in adopting its final document with specific recommendations linking mountain targets with Goal 5.

As implementation of the UN Resolution “International Year of Mountains, 2002” students were able to raise from local sources and contribute more than \$250,000 during 10 years of activities to the SMD advocacy. UIMF also commemorates every year since 2010 the International Mountain Day (IMD) as an important activity to raise awareness about SMD among students and local communities.

As a new level of the implementation of the mountain targets, UIMF members currently focus on participation of different forums at the United Nations in cooperation with NGOs with consultative status under the United Nations Economic and Social Council. With continued support from the MPS, UIMF established a partnership with several NGOs in consultative status with the ECOSOC both from Utah and overseas, including the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, which has the highest, general consultative status since 2002. As a result, UVU students attended the 60th and the 61st sessions of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to advocate the cause of the mountain women and to report about the results of the Women of the Mountains Conferences hosted at UVU since 2007. As preparations for the 62nd session of CSW, they have submitted a statement and contacted several Permanent Missions to the UN to hold a joint side event during the CSW in March 2018.

Under the leadership of MPS, UIMF also contributed to the drafts of oral and written statements, which the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences (RANS) made during such UN events with focus on implementation of different aspects of SDGs as the ECOSOC Integration Segment in May 2017, the 55th Commission for Social Development (CSocD55) in February 2017, the Fourth High-Level Political Forum at ECOSOC on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July 2016, among others.

The developed UVU model demonstrates the ability of one generation of undergraduate students to gain professional advancement and recognition internationally through full-fledged contribution of initiatives and funds to the practical implementation of the mountain targets, under the effective encouragement of the United Nations Mountain Partnership. It can be used by universities in rural and mountain states elsewhere to provide similar benefits to their students and at the same time to contribute to the implementation of the post 2030 Development agenda globally.

Thank you very much for your attention.