Side Event

World Trade Organization
July 8, 2026

Empowering Mountain and Landlocked Communities Through Trade Facilitation, Market Access, and Student-Centric Learning: Lessons from the Kyrgyz Republic and the State of Utah, United States

STATEMENT

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Distinguished Delegates, my name is Antoine Mwamba, an international student from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) at Utah Valley University (UVU) and President of the UVU Rotaract Club. I thank Dr. Maksutov for organizing this event featuring student-driven learning for empowering mountain communities and landlocked developing countries through sustainable economic development, free trade opportunities, and inclusive growth.

Today's side event demonstrates the importance of education in sustainable development. Thanks to the Student-Engaged Learning (SEL) model, developed at UVU in partnership with Kyrgyz peers 15 years ago, we are participating in this event to demonstrate how students, working together under the mentorship of our professor, can connect academic learning with real community needs. Through SEL, I have personally served local communities through our partnership with the Orem-Lindon Rotary Club. Together, we have assembled hygiene kits for local Utah County pantries, raised funds to provide coats for schoolchildren in need, and participated in other community service projects. I also had the opportunity to advocate for mountain women globally, including those from the DRC, during the 70th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women on March 10, 2026. These experiences have demonstrated to me how SEL can empower students, strengthen communities, and advance global awareness.

Building upon these experiences, my research through SEL examines how open markets affect mountain communities in the DRC. According to the World Bank, trade in goods and services represents approximately 91 percent of the DRC's GDP,

highlighting the country's growing integration into the global economy. As a participant in the African Continental Free Trade Area, the DRC has new opportunities to expand regional trade, strengthen economic integration, and increase participation in regional value chains. The country also possesses more than 80 million hectares of arable land and over 1,100 identified mineral substances, offering significant opportunities for mountain communities to diversify production and participate in regional markets through better infrastructure, investment, and market access.

Despite these opportunities, the DRC relies heavily on exports of unprocessed minerals, particularly cobalt, copper ore, uranium, and other strategic resources such as coltan. This dependence limits opportunities for local value addition, economic diversification, and job creation while making the economy more sensitive to changes in international market prices.Therefore, expanding market access requires more than tariff reductions; investments in infrastructure, education, processing capacity, and trade competitiveness are essential for mountain communities to fully benefit from new trade opportunities.

As an SEL assignment, I will represent our UIMF team within a few hours in the side event “Acceleration action for mountain regions: delivering on the five years of action (2023-2027)” hosted by the UN Mountain Partnership and mountain countries, including the Kyrgyz Republic at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), in New York. At HLPF, I study the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of the DRC and Burundi, and their progress toward Target 6.6, with focus on protecting and restoring water-related ecosystems in the mountains. While I found that VNRs of both DRC and Burundi contain very little discussion of mountain ecosystems, this allows me to engage with officials from both nations during general debates and discussions at the HLPF to better understand their progress, challenges, and approaches toward achieving these goals.

In conclusion, the objectives of the World Trade Organization, the aspirations of countries such as the DRC and Burundi to maximize the benefits of free trade, and the pursuit of sustainable mountain development are closely interconnected. Achieving sustainable development requires not only strong national institutions but also fair economic opportunities, resilient infrastructure, and inclusive

education. Together, these investments can empower mountain communities and contribute to a more just and sustainable future. Thank you.