Side Event

World Trade Organization
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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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Good afternoon, Dr. Maksutov, representatives, ambassadors, and fellow advocates. I thank all of you and the World Trade Organization at large for holding this event and providing us this opportunity to raise our voice for mountain communities. My name is Megan Ashcraft. I am a Humanities Major at Utah Valley University (UVU) with a minor in political science, and the current Vice President of the UVU Rotaract Club.

This year, as part of UVU's Student Engaged Learning (SEL) model, I have worked with my fellow students to advocate for and serve our local community, in preparation for coming to the United Nations, including being part of a team who advocated for mountain women at the 70th Commission on the Status of Women(CSW70) and raising funds for the Orem-Lindon Rotary Club. My research focuses on how trade and economic development impacts disabled persons in the rural areas of Utah and the Appalachian Region of the United States, a personal issue for me, as a disabled person who grew up in Utah with familial roots in its rural areas and the Appalachian regions of Kentucky, Ohio, and Maryland.

Utah and Appalachia can appear very different when it comes to disability. Utah ranks low in disability, whereas the Appalachian states are ranked very high. This makes what these areas have in common all the more important. Their rural mountain populations face increased levels of poverty, and reduced access to education, healthcare, and employment. This is only exacerbated for disabled persons in these communities, many of whom rely on government programs which have faced challenges in recent years. The Utah Legislature rejected proposed

budget cuts to Utah's Division of Services of Persons with Disabilities in 2026, but Appalachian states have been impacted by intense cuts to Medicaid and reduced clinic funding, with thousands expected to lose coverage and be put at an increased risk for institutionalization. These decisions are influenced by the current trade and market climate in the United States which gives heavy emphasis to trade liberalization and privatization. While trade liberalization and market based economies increase efficiency and competition for private healthcare institutions, rural and complex healthcare is not seen as profitable, and those at the intersection of these identities are disproportionately affected by these policies.

Thanks to UVU's SEL model I have been able to do this research and advocate for disabled persons to be included in the conversation of Sustainable Mountain Development. I've also had the opportunity to research the Voluntary National Reviews for two other countries to learn what efforts they are making to support their mountain communities in regards to SDG 6 Target 6.6. Cameroon has been working to protect its water resources by enforcing the National Plan for the Implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management, pollution control, coordination with local organizations to protect shared water basins, and reformation of the National Water Policy. In the report's index, they highlight 41 protection and reforestation projects which have helped to restore the Bamboutos Mountain region and other areas, which is the VNR's only reference to mountain ecosystems. On the other hand, Tanzania is working to protect water resources through demarcation, strengthening water basin boards, and expanding regional water quality laboratories. There is only one explicit reference to mountains, with Kilimanjaro being mentioned in relation to water stewardship. With Cameroon and Tanzania having 5-7 and 2-3 million people living in their mountain regions respectively, the lack of mountain focused policy in regards to Target 6.6 shows that mountain communities and their water systems are underrepresented in the countries' reporting.

Overall, as we look at Utah, Appalachia, Cameroon, and Tanzania, an important truth becomes clear. Mountain communities are frequently underserved, and unacknowledged, feeling left behind and disadvantaged if their needs and concerns are not accounted for. I believe true sustainable mountain development and trade is only possible if it is inclusive of everyone, especially the most vulnerable in our communities. We must balance the growth and efficiency of trade practices with

public policy that recognizes and empowers disabled persons and mountain communities to thrive. I urge the WTO to consider this in their future efforts to influence and improve global trade.

Thank you.