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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Good Morning your excellences, my name is Natalia Figueroa. I am from the mountainous state of Utah and also have Mapuche heritage from Chile. I serve as the President of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University (UVU)

On behalf of our delegation, we thank Dr. Maksutov and WTO representatives for organizing this event on the importance of free trade for landlocked and mountain countries, and the role of education in this process. Today, we are developing entry-level diplomatic skills by advocating for sustainable development through the Student Engaged Learning (SEL) model. Since 2011, when UIMF was established, it has served as an extracurricular and has encouraged both traditional and non-traditional students through hands-on activities to address as a group real-world problems of mountain communities under the faculty mentorship.

As examples of SEL in action, we serve our mountain communities together with the Orem-Lindon Rotarians. In December of 2025, we observed for the 16th time the UN International Mountain Day at UVU, the only academic institution in North America to do so. We did this jointly with students from Alatoo University when Ambassador Djumaliev was one of the speakers. In addition, 19 UVU students, including myself, participated in a parallel event during the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women where we spoke in support of mountain women. Through SEL, we managed the full process—from planning to moderation of the event, later reported to the United Nations Mountain Partnership.

SEL is also guiding our research as contributing to our statements at the UN advocacy events. I am personally studying challenges of free trade for Indigenous Mapuche communities in the Andes, who make up 1.3 million people in Chile. The Mapuches' identity and livelihoods are deeply connected to land, water, forest and mountain ecosystems, which are so often challenged by economic development.

For example, the salmon industry has made Chile the world's second-largest producer of farmed salmon. At the same time, it caused indigenous communities concerns about water quality, ecosystem turmoil, and the long-term sustainability of traditional livelihoods. Similarly, according to UNECE/FAO, forestry exports account for 13% of Chile's total exports. However, concerns have been raised regarding environmental sustainability and Mapuche land rights, particularly in relation to water consumption, and the replacement of native forests with commercial species such as pine and eucalyptus.

Through SEL, we have developed monitoring skills by analyzing Voluntary National Reviews at the High-Level Political Forum. In my research on Norway and Liberia, Norway's VNR shows strong progress on SDG 6 through safe drinking water, sanitation, and integrated water management, while still acknowledging the need to restore ecosystems under Target 6.6; however, Liberia's VNR focuses mainly on drinking water, sanitation, wastewater, and community participation, showing that mountain water ecosystems, Indigenous, and rural livelihoods remain underrepresented in SDG 6 reporting. With SDG 6 under review this year, three of our peers are currently advocating at HLPF in New York, while the rest of our delegation will continue during our visit next week.

Based on my research, I respectfully encourage the WTO and its Members to promote an Ethical Free Trade Framework that balances economic growth with environmental stewardship and meaningful Indigenous and rural communities participation. I also encourage countries to strengthen future Voluntary National Reviews by explicitly reporting on mountain communities, Indigenous peoples, and progress toward SDG Target 6.6 so that trade and sustainable development policies are informed by the communities and ecosystems they are intended to serve. Free trade has the power to improve lives. Our challenge is to ensure that it also protects the people, cultures, and ecosystems that make sustainable development possible. Thank you.