

The Role of the Grass-Roots Approach in Implementing the Post-2015 Agenda

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Last year, 2015, was an important year for the United Nations and international community: new sustainable development goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on September 25-27 in New York as a plan of joint action for people and countries to promote progress and prosperity around the world.

The role of students and the youth in monitoring and implementing those goals is very important. I believe we are moving towards an age of global enlightenment where younger generations use their energy and initiatives to push in the direction of reaching the sustainability goals. Through their involvement they will accumulate more knowledge and experiences for the time they assume the roles of future leadership of our planet.

Utah Valley University (UVU) students have been very fortunate to be involved in the initiatives of the United Nations, with a focus on sustainable mountain development (SMD) since 2006, when UVU joined the activities of the Mountain Partnership (MP) under the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The engaged learning approach at UVU requires students to be involved in extra and co-curricular projects pertaining to local, regional, or international issues concurrently with their studies of theories in the classroom. As a result, they were able to contribute to the discussions of the new SDGs in 2013-2015, and attend sessions of the United Nations Open Working Groups on SDGs among many other activities.

A highlight of the activities of UVU students during 2015 include playing honored host to a major international event with focus on gender and SMD agendas – the Fourth International Women of the Mountains Conference (WOMC) under the umbrella of the MP at UVU campus in Orem, Utah from October 7-9, 2015. Members of Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at UVU advocate for gender and SMD agenda in the state of Utah and North America since their founding in 2011. They were given an opportunity to prove to themselves and to the international community that by hosting such a big international gathering, they will be able to demonstrate their acquired skills, knowledge, and experiences on SMD issues in addition to raising funds from different sources on local and international levels. The fact that majority of students at UVU need to combine these activities with their responsibilities in addition to taking care of their families, careers, and school studies made such efforts quite challenging. Yet, at the same time, very exciting.

One does not usually receive many offers in life to be a part of an organization that can make ripples of change throughout the world. However, I did receive such an offer during the summer semester of last year, to which I accepted. Knowing about my experiences with public relations with Provo City, Draper City, NGO “Africa is Life Changing” and my own

personal endeavors, members of the student organizing committee of the WOMC asked me if I would be interested to join them as the Public Relations and Fundraising Coordinator. The duties of this title included supervising many fellow student volunteers, gaining media attention locally and internationally, and to coordinate efforts on raising funds by soliciting organizations for fundraising opportunities. This was an exceptional opportunity to also utilize my current skill set and experiences (I work at Provo Fire & Rescue as an Office Specialist), but this event was on a larger scale than my prior experiences, so new set of challenges were set into motion and I believe I conquered these challenges within the best of my abilities.



Kamaile Harris and Jenny Starley after the Silent Auction

My activities at the conference were a result of a very exciting team effort. I was able to recruit a very good friend of mine, Kamaile Harris, who is our Salt Lake City Liaison for the Women of the Mountains conference and the Utah International Mountain Forum. Her enthusiasm and experiences as a grass-roots level activist and promoter of sustainability both in Utah and in her native Hawaii, was instrumental in the success of our conference. The other main team member of my division was Yanko Dzhukev who is our Media Relations Coordinator for WOMC and the UIMF. The three of us become a tightknit and well working team under the Logistics and Protocol Vice President, Tony Medina. Kamaile and Yanko were given a large amount of autonomy, as they both proved to be highly professional and did not need a lot of direction to complete their job functions efficiently and above all of our expectations.

Our first concern was gaining as much funding as we could. After creating a sponsorship package, I began contacting local and regional organizations that we considered to be “like-minded” in our organizational values via electronic communication. Through this method, we gained smaller sponsorships from more than 30 different NGOs and companies in the state of Utah! Each organization was deeply valued and we feel fortunate to have received so many in-kind and monetary donations, including: The Women’s State Legislature, Nu Skin Enterprises, Provo City, The Parliament of Religions, The Wasatch Academy, The Utah Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau, Charter for Compassion, and World Trade Center Utah.



During Silent Auction in Salt Lake City on August 29, 2015

As we received so many in-kind donations, Kamaile and I thought the next logical step would be to organize a silent auction. While raising an awareness about both WOMC and SMD agendas in the area of Salt Lake City, we were able to organize event at the Pacific Heritage Academy. This was a great experience and we received countless assistance and donations from our fellow volunteers, including: Tony & Stacy Medina, Deann Torsak, Jennifer Russel-Fenus, and Joshua Isbell. The highlight of this event was having Alex Azmi, Producer and Director of the documentary “To Climb a Gold Mountain,” fly out from California to screen his film during the auction. We were able to successfully raise just below \$1,500 at this event, well beyond anyone’s expectations.

After the fundraising event at The Pacific Heritage Academy, I continued to work on fundraising through soliciting sponsorships. This was a difficult task and not one I particularly enjoyed, but having committed to the task, I worked hard at contacting organizations when time allowed outside of my full-time job and full-time course load. I received approval to fill out sponsorship applications with large organizations who donate funds to non-profit groups, so I began working on this task as well. I was fortunate again to have support from Kamaile to seek advertising and media opportunities while I worked hard on fundraising. Kamaile made numerous connections to help our notoriety, including: getting free ad space in City Weekly, a state-wide newspaper; getting radio time with KRCL, a radio station in Salt Lake City; and by creating a relationship with the Pioneer Park Coalition, which brings together many NGOs, companies, and individuals in the greater Salt Lake City area to focus on improving the lives of the local community. I spent many hours submitting press releases and requests for free advertising with dozens of local and national media outlets to which many organizations published our event information on their websites. We also gained a radio commercial with KRCL. Yanko also spent an extraordinary amount of time publishing information on the Women of the Mountains social media accounts, reaching out to international organizations and inviting many prominent people to our conference.



Jenny Starley interviewed Derek Miller, President and CEO of the Salt Lake City World Trade Center

During the conference, I spend three days interviewing our participants, conference goers, and volunteers. I met many people from all over the world. It was very gratifying to see how the efforts paid off from the dozens of volunteers who helped in the preparation of the conference. I'm not sure how many people I interviewed during the three days, but my guess is around 60 or so. What I enjoyed the most during the conference was to see so many international, national, regional and local organizations come together because of their passion and belief in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly, how they relate to mountain sustainability and gender equality.

In the end, I feel that the conference was a success and it was very rewarding to know that my team and I were instrumental in its success. I believe our efforts will help future Women of the Mountains events along with helping its volunteers to develop skills and experiences which will help them in their future endeavors. We hope that as grass-roots initiative, it will help both to our students to get more skills and experiences in gender and SMD advocacy. And, at the same time, contribute to the implementation of the SDGs and post-2015 agenda of the United Nations.

Jenny Starley, PR and Fundraising, organizing committee of the Women of the Mountains Conference