

UIMF Joins UN Under-Secretary-General Ms. Alison Smale for Panel on the Role of Civil Society



From left: Samuel Elzinga, Megan Davis, Hailee Hodgson, Ms. Alison Smale, Laila Mitchell, myself, and Dr. Baktybek Abdrisaev after the panel discussion.

On Friday, March 29, 2019, members of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University (UVU), participated in a panel discussion on the role of civil society in the United Nations (UN) system, which featured as the keynote speaker the UN Under-Secretary-General Ms. Alison Smale. The panel, which was hosted by the UVU Office of Global Engagement, was the conclusion of Ms. Smale's visit to Salt Lake City to prepare for the upcoming UN Civil Society Conference on August 26-28, 2019. Joining Ms. Smale were Samuel Elzinga, President of UIMF; Lauren Johnson, and Andrew Jensen, President of UVU's Model UN Club.

After a brief welcoming message by Dr. Baldomero Lago, UVU CIO/Vice-Rector of Global Engagement, Ms. Smale spoke on both her excitement for visiting Utah to prepare for the Civil Society Conference, as well as the role that civil society and youth in particular should play during the conference. Ms. Smale stated that not only is the conference an important opportunity for the UN to extend its influence throughout the United States, but it represents an important opportunity for both the UN and the State of Utah to enhance the mission of the conference—and of the

international community—with youth and their voices. Ms. Smale commented on how she was impressed by Utah’s diverse communities, number of academic institutions, scientific and economic advances, and particularly of youth involvement in those areas, saying that youth can and must have a positive impact on local, national, and international issues—commenting specifically on issues such as climate change and the UN 2030 Development agenda. Ms. Smale implored UVU students and youth in general to become more involved in local issues related to sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but also to empower themselves and their peers to create a better future for all, in harmony with the 2030 Development agenda and the Youth 2030 Strategy.

After Ms. Smale’s remarks, Andrew Jensen asked her about her first impressions of Utah, to which Ms. Smale replied that she senses that Utah is a “society on the move,” especially with regards to SDG #4 on education and SDG #11 regarding sustainable cities. Ms. Smale emphasized the interconnectedness of the SDGs, saying that the 2030 Development agenda will be achieved only as civil society and other actors recognize their interconnectedness. Lauren Johnson then asked her about which aspect of SDG #11 is most compelling. Ms. Smale replied that its emphasis on sustainability cannot be overstated, and also that policies must be crafted according to local circumstances that take into account best sustainability practices, using the question of public transportation and alternate means of transportation as an example.

Samuel Elzinga then asked her if the Youth 2030 Strategy sufficiently ensures that youth have a voice in the 2030 Development agenda. Ms. Smale emphasized that youth must be willing to have their voices heard and must “make a lot of noise to get noticed.” For the UN’s part, Ms. Smale said that the UN should convene “unusual conversations with unusual combinations of people,” such as the Salt Lake City Civil Society Conference, which will be the first such conference held outside of New York City. Ms. Smale highlighted the part that many different voices can play in achieving the 2030 Development Agenda, saying that as more unusual voices are heard, more improved action can take place.

Andrew Jensen then asked her how to ensure that the upcoming conference has lasting impact, to which Ms. Smale replied that along with the conference outcome document, youth and others should take the lead in continuing the conversation of the conference’s topics in subsequent meetings, events, and other contexts, such as at UVU and other academic institutions. Samuel Elzinga then asked about her expectations for the conference, to which Ms. Smale stated that it is not about *her* expectations, but about what *we* in Utah expect from it. To that end, she asked all interested parties to consider how they can bring both plans of action and as many voices as possible to the conference. Lauren Johnson then asked about specific ways that youth could be involved in the conference, and Ms. Smale emphasized amplifying the youth voice through social media and all possible forms of modern communication. Andrew Jensen asked Ms. Smale how to maximize such communications, and she replied that youth must focus on bringing others from their own spheres of influence to the conference and to a knowledge of the 2030 Development agenda. Samuel Elzinga then closed by asking how to best represent Salt Lake City and Utah to the world. Ms. Smale replied that this, again, is up to civil society in Utah, and that through joint contributions between as many groups and actors as possible, that the world will know where Utah stands with sustainable development.



Michael Hinatsu with Undersecretary General

After Dr. Lago’s closing remarks and Ms. Smale received an award, the audience was given time to mingle and speak with Ms. Smale. I was given the opportunity to meet her and present to her a folder containing a number of materials highlighting how since 2007, UIMF has advocated for the 2030 Development agenda regarding sustainable mountain development (SMD) and the empowerment of women and girls in mountain communities. I was also able to share with her recent UIMF accomplishments, including our recent advocacy campaign for mountain women at the 63rd Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women on March 18-20, 2019. She expressed interest in UIMF’s efforts and shared with me information on other organizations advocating for SMD, which will help UIMF build a stronger coalition to advocate for the issues faced by mountain communities, including women and girls. This panel event was a great opportunity for UIMF and UVU in general to learn from such a high-level leader on how we as civil society can better achieve the 2030 Development Agenda.

Michael Hinatsu, UIMF Vice President