

Bringing the Civil Society Conference to Salt Lake City

Written by Dr. Baldomero Lago, Chief International Officer, Utah Valley University

On August 26-28, 2019 Salt Lake City became the host city for the 68th United Nations Civil Society Conference. This conference was very unique to the United Nations as it was the first time in history that this world-wide event was held anywhere in the United States other than New York City. This conference had been held both internationally and at the United Nations in New York, but this time it was hosted by a city within the United States outside the UN campus. How did this happen and where did it all start?

During the past decade, Utah Valley University (UVU) hosted several United Nations Ambassadors as guest speakers to their campus. Dr. Rusty Butler, previous Associate VP for International Affairs & Diplomacy began working with United Nations missions and permanent representatives which led to UVU's institutional involvement. After Dr. Butler's retirement in 2016, Dr. Baldomero Lago assumed the responsibility and continued the work with the United Nations Ambassadorial program. In addition, he expanded the academic portfolio in an attempt to have the university associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communication, previously known as the UN Department of Public Information. After following all protocols and submitting the required documentation, on December 4th 2017, UVU was duly recognized and associated with the United Nations Department of Public Information. From that moment on, UVU actively participated in promoting the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Now as an official entity, the academic institution was able to approach the UN about the opportunity to co-organize the Civil Society Conference and bring the United Nations to Utah.

Certainly, it would have been very difficult for UVU to co-organize such a large conference due to security protocols, proximity to the airport, and financial support from the community. Without hesitation, Dr. Lago approached Salt Lake City Mayor Biskupski via email and invited Mr. Felipe Queipo, UN Communications Officer for a meeting. On May 16, 2017, Dr. Lago and Mr. Felipe Queipo met with Mayor Jackie Biskupski in her office and presented the idea to bring the UN Civil Society Conference to Salt Lake City, Utah. Mayor Biskupski's vision, enthusiasm and understanding of potential challenges were brought to the conversation, but optimism was the driving element. Shortly after the initial meeting with the Mayor, Dr. Lago met with Lara Fritts and Ben Kolendar from the SLC Economic Development and presented the conference proposal in order to unite efforts between the city and Utah Valley University. After discussing themes for the conference, the issues of sustainability and inclusion were addressed and support from SL Economic Development became a reality. Mayor Biskupski as chair of the conference organizing committee assigned Mr. Ben Kolendar as the city representative for the organization of the conference. On August 22-23, 2018, Mayor Biskupski, accompanied by a

delegation of community and business leaders, attended the 67th United Nations Civil Society Conference in New York and presented the proposed plan to host the conference in Salt Lake City. At the conclusion of the event, UN Under Secretary General Alison Smale announced Salt Lake City as the host city for the 68th Annual Conference.

Shortly after the announcement, Mayor Biskupski created three organizing committees led by Chris Redgrave (Finance), Tom Love (Marketing) and Scott Beck (Logistics). In an attempt to obtain support from the state legislature, Dr. Lago convened a meeting with the State of Utah International Relations Committee which had a favorable outcome. In order to seek support from the NGO community, on October 24, 2018, the Office for Global Engagement at Utah Valley University organized an NGO conference where several UN officials, Mayor Biskupski and NGO leaders participated. Several community town hall meetings, press and news media and other outlets were used to gather the highest level of attendance and foreign country representation of any United Nations Civil Society conference.

The theme of the 68th United Nations Civil Society conference, Building Inclusive and Sustainable Global Cities and Communities, reflects that 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, with that figure expected to rise to 68% by 2050. Salt Lake City's track record on inclusion and sustainability and its experience in hosting international events, were factors that supported its hosting of the Conference.

Youth representatives played a leadership role in planning the Conference, developing a key thematic session on opportunity and employment for youth, programming a dedicated youth hub, and organizing community events, among other initiatives. Some 40% of Conference attendees were 32 years old and younger.

To continue the legacy of the United Nations 68th Civil Society Conference, Finance Chair Chris Redgrave and Mayor Biskupski allocated funds in support of youth as global leaders and established the Global Leaders Scholarship Fund.

Today, UCCD is honored to oversee the Global Leaders Scholarship Fund as an official program that promotes respect and understanding between the people of Utah and other nations. Through the Global Leaders Scholarship Fund, young adults ages 18-32, will attend international leadership events in the United States and across the globe.

As a result of this experience, youth will:

- Enhance their understanding of how Utah is a global community
- Deepen their knowledge of global affairs
- And develop their leadership skills.