

Director General's Keynote Speech to Singapore IP Week 2022

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Your Excellency, Mr. Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today at the GFIP. This is a homecoming for me in several ways – first, to be back in Singapore, second, to be back at IP Week and third, and most importantly, to be able to see many of my friends, colleagues and IP compatriots in person again.

While it is good to see IP Week and the GFIP move back to an in person format, the global situation out there remains difficult. We have emerged from the long Covid tunnel not to blue skies overhead, but to stormy clouds ahead.

The conflict in Ukraine, rising inflation and disruptions to food and energy supply chains are putting countries under great stress. And like any UN agency, growing geopolitical tensions affect the tone and tenor of our work.

However, despite these trouble times, innovation and IP-related activities have not only been sustained during these storms but have grown. International patent applications filed through WIPO reached a new high watermark last year, surpassing 275,000 for the first time. Trade Mark and Design applications coming through the Madrid and Hague systems saw double-digit growth of 15 and 21 percent respectively, and the caseload before the WIPO Arbitration and Mediation Center increased by 44 per cent.

The performance of other key innovation metrics has also been strong. On 29 September, we will release the 2022 edition of WIPO's Global Innovation Index. It will show that global R&D expenditure grew by over 3 per cent in 2020, with the top corporate R&D spenders further increasing their outlays by around 10 per cent last year.

At the same time, venture capital funding has not only reached new heights, with almost 20,000 deals agreed worldwide in 2021, but it has also become more inclusive. VC growth was strongest in Africa and Latin America last year, with investments more than quadrupling in both regions. In the Asia Pacific region the number of deals increased by almost 70 per cent, the highest growth in more than 15 years.

What is driving this frankly unexpected growth? In a word, the pandemic. While Covid has been extremely disruptive, it has also been a potent accelerator of pre-existing social shifts and technology trends. It has given many companies and countries the opportunity, or perhaps even forced them to ask themselves where are the new sources of growth? And the answer, increasingly, is digitalization, entrepreneurship and innovation – all areas where IP plays a critical role in success.

WIPO data shows that 1 in 3 inventions now relates to digital technology, including AI, big data and the Internet of Things, with digital-related innovation growing 170 per cent faster than all other patent categories over the last five years.

The other big but somewhat invisible shift, one taking place over decades rather than years, is in the geography of innovation. Today, 7 in 10 IP filings originate from Asia, Africa and Latin America, up from 5 in 10 a decade ago. Countries as diverse as Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, India, Mauritius and Viet Nam have been amongst the strongest improvers in WIPO's Global Innovation Index. And high-growth unicorn startups are spreading around the world. In 2021, 25 new unicorns emerged from the ASEAN region alone, including Indonesia's Blibli, Malaysia's Carsome, the Philippines' Mynt and Singapore's Carousell. These names join an increasingly diverse crop of companies from close to 50 countries – including unicorns from Argentina, Chile, Lithuania and Senegal.

As a result, when we think of innovation today, it must include not just the traditional innovation powerhouses, but also the emerging engines of IP growth around the world.

These fundamental and seismic changes mean that for WIPO, and the global IP community, our work cannot be business as usual. IP must now shift from a technical vertical of interest only to a handful of IP specialists, to become a horizontal catalyst for jobs, investments, business growth and, ultimately, economic and social development in all regions of the world.

This is why I am pleased to say that, with the support of all our Member States, WIPO is transforming from a technical agency to a developmental agency. With our partners, we are building a more inclusive IP ecosystem that engages not just with IP experts and professionals, but also with women, youth, entrepreneurs, startups, SMEs, researchers, indigenous peoples and other communities around the world.

A similar process of evolution is underway across many national IP offices, which are rethinking what it means to be an IP office, and seeking to add value beyond their traditional roles as passive recipients of IP applications. IPOS is an example, and one I know well, of an IP office that has morphed from IP registry to innovation agency, and through the Singapore IP Strategy 2030, helping IP to become a key business, financial and economic asset.

As IP continues to move from the periphery to the center of economies around the world, demand for our services, expertise and support will grow. At the same time, we will face the challenge of scale. To overcome this, we must forge partnerships and engage and work across industries and professions, helping to build IP as a bridge that connects all the different elements in an innovation ecosystem for the movement of ideas to the market.

WIPO is translating these insights and strategies into concrete actions and changing the way that we work.

For example, we recently completed a series of 14 interactive capacity-development sessions that reached over 150 female entrepreneurs from across Asia-Pacific, delivering weekly advice from experts in small business strategy and IP skills development, as well as providing collaboration and networking opportunities.

Through our Entrepreneurship Online Network, we are partnering with business support organizations and local IP offices in Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Viet Nam and others, to raise IP awareness and foster youth participation in the IP ecosystem.

As part of the broadening of the work of the WIPO Academy, which trained over 270,000 persons in the last two years, we have introduced courses such as “IP for startups” and “IP and exports”, which has helped SME participation from across ASEAN to increase by over 20 per cent.

Closer to home, a fortnight ago, I was pleased to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Singapore Manufacturing Federation and the Singapore Innovation and Productivity Institute to support their members to leverage their IP assets for business growth.

And I am pleased to announce a new pilot program between WIPO and IPOS to intensify our support for a cohort of intangible rich startups and SMEs on their innovation journey.

Under the banner of MINT – or Mentorship for Intangible Asset Transformation – we will partner together to provide more than a dozen firms with one-to-one expert advice and tailor-made business support on a range of IP issues, including IP financing and valuation.

The program constitutes a customization of WIPO’s existing IP Management Clinics initiative, which has supported selected SMEs to harness IP in countries such as Brazil, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Switzerland, the UK and Ukraine.

These diverse programs share a common aim: of making the value of IP understandable, visible and tangible at the grassroots level. We stand ready to explore further such initiatives with a broader slate of partners from across the region and around the world.

As the global forum for IP issues, WIPO will also continue to bring the global IP community together to build momentum behind emerging policy issues and progress innovative solutions to common challenges.

We will hold our sixth conversation on IP and Frontier Technologies later this month around AI inventions and associated policy questions. Our previous two sessions on Data and AI and IP administration reached over 2,000 participants from more than 110 countries and we will continue to build momentum behind this fast moving policy area.

A few weeks later, on 1 November this year, we will convene our inaugural High Level Conversation on IP-Backed Finance. This event will bring together stakeholders from IP, business, finance and public sectors to discuss how we can support firms of all sizes to use their intangible assets to access the financing that they need to grow.

We hope that many of you will join us as we debate, share best practices and chart the way ahead on these and other issues of common interest to us all.

As a UN agency, addressing global challenges is core to our work. In particular, climate change is one issue where innovative solutions are critical in every aspect. Our online platform for sustainable technology exchange, WIPO GREEN, connects providers of green technologies, at all stages of development, with those seeking environmentally friendly solutions from all over the world.

Not only does this facilitate tangible partnerships on the ground but it also ensures that technology adoption matches local needs. WIPO GREEN has grown to cover nearly 130,000 technologies and patents in areas such as water, transportation and energy. Our next chapter will focus on certain industry verticals, as well as supporting IP offices in designing policies to support climate change technologies in their countries.

These examples, which are just a snapshot of the work we are undertaking, underscore our commitment to be an agency that acts and executes on its beliefs, convictions and strategies, and with our partners, to deliver impact to innovators and creators on the ground. We invite you to join us on this journey.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends,

The storm clouds on the horizon may mean choppy waters ahead but never forget that the global IP community has always evolved and transformed alongside the innovators and creators that we serve, and whose positive and proactive attitude towards change must continue to inspire us.

This is therefore the time for us to renew our shared commitment to strengthening the global IP ecosystem, bringing IP closer to communities and giving intangible assets, tangible value, so that IP and innovation remain powerful catalysts for future growth, development and prosperity in Singapore, ASEAN and the world.

Thank you very much.