

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

Organization: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

Author: Daniel Gorman , York University

Date Entered: 2005-05-05

Description The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is an international organization which promotes and administers intellectual property rights around the world. Founded in Stockholm in 1967 as the successor to BIRPI (United International Bureaux for the Protection of Intellectual Property), it is a specialized agency of the United Nations, headquartered in Geneva. WIPO currently has 180 member states, each of which has an equal vote in accordance with general UN policy. Its founding marked a decisive step in the global regulation of intellectual property. BIRPI reflected the nineteenth century model of an international organization, with an ad hoc decision-making process and the administrative oversight of a single state (in its case, Switzerland). WIPO, by contrast, was designed to be a global body responsive to the wishes and needs of its members, and has afforded developing nations in particular a greater voice in discussing intellectual property rights.

WIPO's most important function is the administration of international treaties dealing with intellectual property rights, of which there are presently twenty-one. The most important of these treaties are the Paris Union on industrial property rights, the Berne Union on copyright, and the Patent Cooperation Treaty, a global patent application agreement. The PCT provides over 90 percent of WIPO's operating budget, making the organization the most economically viable within the UN. The recently concluded WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (1996) and WIPO Copyright Treaty (1996) illustrate WIPO's role in addressing new intellectual property rights in the digital age. A central objective of WIPO is to provide aid to the developing world. In the words of WIPO's present Director General, Dr. Kamil Idris, intellectual property is a "power tool of development," and WIPO provides both technical and logistical support to developing nations that wish to craft stronger intellectual property legislation. WIPO also tries to monitor "bio-prospecting," the commercial use of traditional knowledge, to ensure that indigenous peoples retain some degree of cultural and economic autonomy. Nonetheless, there exists an historic divide within WIPO between industrial and developing countries; the former generally favour strong intellectual property laws, the latter weak ones or none at all. This divide has appeared most notably over the issue of generic pharmaceuticals. In the 1970s, the lobbying of the Group of 77 developing nations kept the question of equity and access at the forefront of WIPO's agenda. From the 1980s, industrial countries, led by the United States, have pursued their intellectual property interests in part outside of WIPO, most notably through the 1994 TRIPS agreement. Nonetheless, due largely to its administration of the PCT, WIPO remains

the most important arena for the discussion of global intellectual property rights, a forum where the rights of individuals, cultural groups, sovereign states, and multinational companies are (usually) debated in a constructive manner.

Suggested Reading: **Bogsch, Arpad.** 1992. *The history of the World Intellectual Property Organization*. Geneva: WIPO.

Tomlinson, B.R. 2003. What was the Third World?. *Journal of Contemporary History* 38 (2): 307-321.

This is a pre-print version of **World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)** by **Daniel Gorman** generated from the *Globalization and Autonomy Online Compendium*. The electronic original is available at http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/glossary_entry.jsp?id=OR.0015.