

WIPO Inventor Assistance Program

Guiding principles, structure and governance



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Introduction

Every spark of genius can transform our world. With the right conditions, inventors can translate their creativity into progress, benefitting themselves and society. Unleashing this innovative potential requires a supportive ecosystem. The ability to secure a patent plays a crucial role in translating ideas into reality. This opportunity should be available to all inventors, regardless of their financial means.

Yet many inventors do not get this chance. Many cannot afford the professional support needed to manage the application process. As a result, countless inventors never apply for a patent. Others try but often abandon their efforts after wrestling with the complexity of the procedure. This situation can have far-reaching consequences. Our most brilliant ideas may never illuminate the path to economic growth.

The Inventor Assistance Program (IAP) addresses this challenge head-on. It connects individuals and small businesses with qualified professionals who guide them through the patent process. This expert support increases the odds of turning innovative ideas into commercial assets.

The IAP serves as a catalyst for global innovation, empowering inventors who might otherwise be left behind. The Program represents our joint commitment to support creativity and innovation wherever it arises.

Together, we are building a future where innovation thrives, patents facilitate progress, and every inventor has the chance to make a lasting impact.

The IAP is open to qualifying countries, entities and individuals, who accept the following Guiding Principles.

Guiding principles

1. The IAP supports participating countries to develop their innovation ecosystems by expanding access of local innovators to the patent system, and ultimately transform their creativity into a new source of revenue, jobs and inspiration.
2. The IAP levels the playing field for inventors by providing them high quality patent related legal services delivered by volunteer professionals at no cost. As a result, IAP beneficiaries can get their ideas evaluated on their merits and benefit from patented assets.
3. The Program's volunteers support individuals and small businesses in participating countries that are under-resourced according to the eligibility criteria determined by each country.
4. The Program does not ask its volunteers to support clients who can afford to pay for their services or spend money out of pocket. The Program's volunteers benefit by building their professional networks, developing their skills, and supporting promising innovators.
5. The IAP supports beneficiaries build international patent portfolios to gain traction in a global market through its network of volunteers.
6. The IAP can be a stand-alone program or plugged into a domestic initiative. To maximize impact, the IAP can incorporate other support services to facilitate the protection and use of patents.
7. The Program encourages participating countries to address the affordability of patent protection by providing a fee reduction scheme for IAP beneficiaries and makes efforts to find other means to reduce the costs associated with patent protection.
8. The IAP is a partnership. Its implementation and growth require the commitment and shared responsibility of the Governments of participating countries, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), volunteers, the IAP Steering Committee and sponsors, as further described in the Program's Structure and Governance.

Changes to guiding principles

Any changes to these Guiding Principles and the Program's Structure and Governance shall be approved by the IAP Steering Committee.

Becoming an IAP participating country

Why join the IAP

By helping inventors develop high-quality patent applications, the IAP increases the chances of securing a patent, ultimately increasing the total value of IP assets in the economy. It also facilitates communication with applicants, reducing the time IP offices spend on formalities.

What countries can join the IAP

The IAP welcomes countries which have a goal to increase the local use of a patent system, to enhance the innovation ecosystem and to increase the total value of IP assets within the economy.

To join, countries must endorse the IAP's Guiding Principles and commit to actively supporting the Program's implementation and growth, as described in detail below.

Additionally, participating countries should have:

- an established culture of innovation;
- a low rate of patent filings by local innovators;
- a limited success rate of local innovators using the patent system; and
- an established local patent profession.

The IAP can be a stand-alone program or plugged into other domestic initiatives.

How to join the IAP

Interested governments should submit an official letter expressing interest in the Program and explaining how the Program can benefit the country. The letter should also describe how the local innovation ecosystem would accommodate the Program in the country.

Countries wishing to join the IAP should provide details on how the IAP will operate in the country. This includes identifying:

- the IAP focal point who will be responsible for managing the Program locally;
- the composition of the National Screening Board (the group responsible for evaluating local IAP applications);
- income and other eligibility criteria for beneficiaries to qualify for the Program;
- a plan for promoting the Program within the country; and
- local groups or institutions committed to supporting the Program.

A template for the request letter can be found on the [WIPO website](#). Eligibility criteria for current participating countries are available online.

WIPO is available to work with countries to develop their plans to implement the IAP.

Who can request to join the IAP

A country may be represented in the IAP by its Patent Office, or any other government agency, department, or office authorized to act on behalf of the Government regarding IAP activities.

Steering Committee approval

Admission to the IAP is subject to the approval of the IAP Steering Committee. The Committee evaluates applications based on:

- the IAP's current capacity for new members;
- the state and capacity of the country's local patent system; and
- current patent filings and grant rates for local applicants.

Who can benefit from the IAP

The IAP offers support to individual inventors and small businesses that:

- are residents¹ of an IAP participating country;
- have basic knowledge of the patent system, and;
- meet the local income and other eligibility criteria established by the participating country.

¹ The residency criterion is defined individually by each participating country. In general terms, an applicant is classed as being resident in the country in which they live permanently, or where their business is established (provided that the country in question is participating in the IAP).

What the IAP provides

The IAP connects its beneficiaries (eligible inventors and small businesses) with skilled professionals who volunteer their services to secure and commercialize patents at no cost (*pro bono*). These services may include:

- drafting and filing patent applications;
- managing patent applications and corresponding with Patent Offices during further prosecution process; and
- providing guidance for commercializing patents.

The specific services provided should be agreed between the IAP beneficiary and the volunteer in writing, meaning the scope of representation may differ from case to case. These services cover national filings in the beneficiary's own country and other selected jurisdictions, including through the [PCT system](#).

While volunteers provide their services for free, the IAP does not offer direct financial assistance. Beneficiaries remain responsible for official fees paid to the Patent Office, translation costs, and any other out-of-pocket expenses necessary to complete applications.

Additional support

Some countries offer discounts for IAP beneficiaries or have other mechanisms to reduce the costs associated with patent protection. Certain PCT fee reductions may also be available to beneficiaries. For more information, beneficiaries can reach out to the relevant [Patent Office](#) or IAP focal point, or review the [PCT fees](#).

What's not included in the IAP

The IAP's assistance does not include patent litigation services. The Program's services are limited to patents and utility models² and the associated application processes and not extended to other types of IP rights.

² Definition of "utility model" varies by country and can be referred to as "short-term patent", "utility innovation", "innovation patent" or "functional design".

How the IAP works



Inventors start by applying to the Program through the [IAP Online Platform](#). The focal point reviews their applications to check if the person meets the [eligibility requirements](#) in their country. The National Screening Board then reviews the applications considering local criteria and volunteer availability and selects beneficiaries for the IAP support in their country. In some cases, the inventor may be asked to provide additional information.

Once selected, inventors are matched with IAP volunteers, taking into account the technical field of the invention and the volunteer's expertise. The volunteers then help the beneficiary navigate both the patent application process and commercialization of their patents.

Proof of eligibility

Participating countries may ask for supporting documentation of an inventor's eligibility, such as tax returns, income statements, and affidavits.

Confidentiality

The IAP prioritizes the protection of an inventor's confidential information. Applicants are only required to provide a brief, non-confidential description of their invention. If the local selection process necessitates more detailed information, it will be handled with strict confidentiality. Access to any sensitive details is limited to the IAP country focal point, National Screening Board members, and the assigned volunteer for selected applications. Inventors with concerns about the confidentiality of their application are encouraged to contact their local Program's focal point.

Beneficiaries with multiple patent applications

There is no limit on how many applications can be supported for an IAP beneficiary. However, volunteers are assigned to a specific IAP application, and the beneficiary cannot ask the volunteer to help with another application without going through the selection process. Each IAP application is considered separately by the National Screening Board.

Roles and responsibilities

The IAP brings together a diverse set of players who are each essential to the Program's success, including:

- participating countries;
- volunteers;
- WIPO;
- Steering Committee; and
- sponsors.

The role of each of these actors is described below.

Participating countries

Each participating country takes an active role in implementing the IAP and tailoring it to local needs. Participating countries need to:

Build the local IAP framework

- establish the local IAP eligibility criteria;
- set up and facilitate the National Screening Board;
- nominate the local IAP focal point and notify WIPO of any changes to the focal point; and
- establish and maintain a country IAP webpage.

Collaborate with WIPO

- work with WIPO to solve any challenges faced by the focal point; and
- encourage other local innovation support services to help implement the IAP.

Promote and support the Program

- promote the Program to local innovators;
- recruit and recognize local volunteers; and
- consider options to enhance the affordability of patent protection for the IAP beneficiaries, for example, by offering fee discounts and creating funds to reduce the costs associated with patent protection.

If a country no longer wishes to participate in the IAP, it can withdraw by sending written notice to WIPO. Withdrawal will take effect on the date of the acknowledgment of receipt of such notice. Withdrawing from the Program will not affect beneficiaries already accepted to the IAP by the national screening board before this date.

IAP focal point

The country IAP focal point works in close partnership with the WIPO IAP team, to keep the Program running smoothly. The focal point's responsibilities are to:

Coordinate and manage the IAP

- act as the main point of contact with the WIPO IAP team;
- coordinate the IAP application selection process with the National Screening Board, often serving as the Board's secretary;
- monitor the national IAP dashboard on the [IAP Online Platform](#) and update relevant information;
- work with local volunteers by reviewing their applications, admitting them to the Program, and keeping an up-to-date roster using the [IAP Online Platform](#);
- match beneficiaries and local volunteers using the [IAP Online Platform](#), including reassigning IAP cases when needed; and
- support local IAP beneficiaries and volunteers by answering questions and addressing their challenges.

Improve the Program

- participate in regular coordination meetings with the WIPO IAP team and other IAP focal points; and
- gather insights on local implementation practice and challenges and suggest improvements.

National Screening Board

The National Screening Board plays a pivotal role in the IAP process, serving as the gateway for local inventors to access the Program's benefits.

Composition and structure

Each participating country decides on the composition and procedures for its National Screening Board. It is recommended to include a mix of experts from the Patent Office, R&D community, and other national agencies responsible for innovation and business development. A diverse group brings a wealth of perspectives that can support local innovators.

Key responsibilities

The National Screening Board's main job is to review IAP applications and decide who qualifies for the Program in their country. The evaluation of IAP applications is not a patentability examination and does not impact any decision taken by the relevant Patent Office.

Beyond selecting beneficiaries, the Board plays a crucial role in spotting promising inventions early on. To protect these potential innovations, all Board discussions should be kept confidential. This safeguards the patentability of inventions under discussion by the Board.

Volunteers play a vital role in the IAP's success, offering essential support that helps inventors turn their ideas into valuable assets. Their expertise and dedication are fundamental to the Program's ability to make a meaningful impact.

The IAP welcomes volunteers who agree to the IAP's Guiding Principles and are ready to offer their services on a *pro bono* basis. Volunteers can be:

- patent attorneys and agents;
- patent drafters;
- patent search specialists;
- IP commercialization specialists; and
- other professionals specializing in patents who can assist with securing and commercializing patents.

To maintain high-quality service, IAP volunteers must possess relevant practical experience. Those filing patent applications and prosecuting them must be qualified to practice before the Patent Offices in their respective jurisdictions.

Volunteers can be part of a law firm or self-employed.

How to become a volunteer

To become an IAP volunteer, professionals should apply via the [IAP Online Platform](#), specifying services they would offer to the Program.

Admission to the Program is at the discretion of the country focal point or WIPO, based on the volunteer's qualifications, skills, and experience.

Working with the IAP

The IAP values its volunteers and strives to ensure a positive experience.

Choice to accept a case

Volunteers always have an opportunity to review any assigned case, to confirm availability and check potential conflicts of interest.

Volunteers primarily assist local beneficiaries with national and PCT applications. If a beneficiary wishes to file abroad, the local volunteer facilitates the process by working with volunteers in other countries, for example, with a volunteer supporting the national phase of a PCT application.

On occasion, a volunteer may be requested to help beneficiaries from other participating countries, for example, to support the national phase of a PCT application.

Case management and insights on the Program's improvement

IAP volunteers are expected to manage and update their assigned cases using the [IAP Online Platform](#). This includes accepting and rejecting cases, providing updates regarding major milestones, such as filing patent applications and office actions and patent grants. Additionally, volunteers are encouraged to work with local authorities and WIPO to improve the Program.

No out-of-pocket expenses

The IAP does not ask volunteers to pay anything out of pocket or provide services not listed in their profile. If needed, the Program can assign additional volunteers to a case to provide complementary expertise or services. It is recommended that volunteers inform their IAP beneficiaries about relevant costs of patent protection and payments in writing.

Scope of services

The scope of services is defined case-by-case, through agreement with the beneficiary. The quality of services should be the same as provided by the volunteer for paying clients.

Legal and ethical considerations

Volunteers are advised to enter into written agreements with beneficiaries to establish a professional relationship and inform the beneficiary about any relevant costs. An agreement template that can be used for this purpose can be found [online](#).

The volunteer-client relationship shall be governed by the laws, rules and ethical standards that apply in the jurisdiction where the representation occurs. Please note that the IAP is unable to provide malpractice insurance for its volunteers.

Benefits of becoming an IAP volunteer

IAP volunteers become part of an international community of experts. They benefit from the opportunities to enhance their knowledge, professional skills and networks. By getting solid advice, IAP beneficiaries may ultimately become their paying clients.

Recognizing IAP volunteers

WIPO and participating countries work to recognize the contribution of IAP volunteers. Volunteers can opt to be included on WIPO's website and in the Program's promotional materials. Promotional badges are also available to IAP volunteers, via the [IAP Online Platform](#), to use on their own website and materials.

Withdrawing from the IAP

Volunteers can withdraw from the IAP by giving written notice. Withdrawal will take effect on the date of the acknowledgment of receipt of such notice, and no new IAP cases will be assigned to the volunteer. All previously assigned active cases will be reassigned to a new volunteer. Volunteers remain responsible for supporting cases assigned to them until these cases are successful reassigned. Volunteers withdrawing from a case are expected to conduct a hand over with the new volunteer to ensure smooth and continuous services to the IAP beneficiary.

WIPO

WIPO plays a key role in implementing, coordinating, and developing the IAP. WIPO's responsibilities fall into several key areas:

Coordination and support

- manage the process for new countries joining the IAP;
- collaborate with local authorities and IAP focal points to facilitate the Program in each participating country;

- operate and maintain the IAP Online Platform and manage general inquiries about the Program;
- maintain the IAP volunteer roster for jurisdictions beyond participating countries and facilitate matchmaking with these volunteers;
- collect and analyze feedback from beneficiaries and volunteers;
- provide metrics on the IAP to participating countries and relevant parties; and
- organize and support regular meetings of the IAP Steering Committee.

Empowering inventors and volunteers

- support targeted capacity building and awareness initiatives for potential beneficiaries;
- provide the IAP Learning Module for new inventors, to educate about the benefits of patents, the patenting process, and *pro bono* services provided by the Program; and
- assist participating countries in developing their patent profession, including training and mentorship for IAP volunteers.

Promotion and engagement

- develop promotional materials and share success stories on an international level, including on WIPO's official website and social media;
- collaborate with sponsor organizations to promote the Program among potential volunteers, and to enhance other value-added services for IAP beneficiaries; and
- recognize and publicize the contributions of IAP volunteers.

Facilitate the exchange of best practices and develop the IAP

- foster dialogue and knowledge sharing among IAP focal points and other supporters;
- build connections with existing support services to facilitate the Program's implementation; and
- address challenges related to the Program, such as international filing and cost barriers for beneficiaries.

In this context, WIPO does not provide legal advice or assistance to IAP volunteers and applicants/beneficiaries.

Steering Committee

The IAP Steering Committee serves as the central governance body for the IAP and provides strategic direction and support to the Program. The Steering Committee:

- shapes the Program goals and scope, contributing to the IAP growth;
- identifies priorities and potential risks to the Program;
- approves new participating countries, including their eligibility criteria;
- approves new IAP sponsors;
- monitors IAP implementation and assesses progress;
- guides and participates in IAP capacity building activities and training;
- publicizes the Program and provides direction for communication campaigns;
- supports the recruitment of volunteers in new and existing participating countries; and
- raises additional funds for the implementation of IAP activities as needed.

Members of the Steering Committee commit to participate in IAP activities, including the regular meetings of the Committee.

Joining the IAP Steering Committee

New members of the Steering Committee must be approved by the majority of current members.

A list of current Steering Committee members is available on the [WIPO website](#).

Changes to Steering Committee membership

Steering Committee members representing a sponsor may be replaced by the sponsor as necessary.

The Steering Committee may remove a member if they are no longer actively participating. For representatives from Patent Offices on behalf of participating countries or those representing volunteers, the Steering Committee may decide to rotate representatives as needed.

Members may withdraw from the Steering Committee by sending a written communication to WIPO. Withdrawal will take effect on the date of the acknowledgment of receipt of such communication.

Sponsors

Sponsors play a vital role in expanding the IAP's reach and impact. They contribute in a number of ways, including:

- recruiting volunteers;
- promoting the Program;
- offering additional value-added services to IAP beneficiaries; and
- providing other financial or in-kind support.

The IAP welcomes a diverse set of sponsors, including businesses, commercial providers, law firms with established *pro bono* programs in participating countries, regional or international IP lawyers associations, patent attorneys and inventors' associations.

Becoming a sponsor

Sponsorship is subject to the approval of the IAP Steering Committee. Potential sponsors should contact [WIPO](#) with an expression of interest, explaining how they will contribute to the Program, and they will agree in writing to the IAP Guiding Principles.

Sponsors agree that their names and logos may be used by WIPO for promotional purposes. A current list of sponsors is available on the [WIPO website](#).

End of sponsorship

Sponsors may withdraw from the IAP by sending a written notice to WIPO. Withdrawal will take effect on the date of the acknowledgment of receipt of such notice.

IAP Online Platform

The IAP Online Platform serves as the digital infrastructure for the Program. It is used by applicants/beneficiaries and volunteers, country focal points and WIPO.

The Platform's main functions include:

- application management for volunteers;
- application management for applicants/beneficiaries, with customization available for participating countries;
- case management of selected IAP beneficiary cases;
- matchmaking of selected beneficiaries and volunteers;
- providing evaluations by beneficiaries and volunteers; and
- metrics on the Program.

The Platform is administered by WIPO and available to all participants in the Program at no cost. It is available in multiple languages and can be translated to meet the needs of new and existing participating countries.

How to measure the success of the IAP

We encourage countries to track the success of the Program's implementation locally, by considering the following parameters:

- increased number of patent filings by resident individual inventors and small businesses;
- increased quality of local patent applications;
- reduced level of patent applications rejected on formal grounds;
- increased use of patents commercially by local entities;
- enhanced patent drafting skills of local professionals and *pro bono* culture in the field of patents;
- strengthened innovation support services available to local inventors.

