

WIPO Director General Daren Tang Remarks
High Level Political Forum 2021 - Marrakesh Treaty Momentum After Five Years
Wednesday 7 July 2021

Your Excellency, Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Othmane El Ferdaus,
Your Excellency, Omar Zniber, Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations Office at Geneva,
Your Excellency, Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations Headquarters in New York,

Dear Colleagues and Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to join you this afternoon and to reflect on how the Marrakesh Treaty, and WIPO's Accessible Books Consortium (ABC), is supporting progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I would like to thank the Permanent Mission of Morocco for partnering with WIPO to host today's event. From the time it hosted the Diplomatic Conference, Morocco has been steadfast in its support of the Treaty and it is fitting that this important agreement bears the name of Marrakesh.

I would also like to thank those who have helped to support the Treaty's development in recent years. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the World Blind Union (WBU) without whom none of this would have been possible. It is also a pleasure to welcome Martine Abel-Williamson to her post as the recently elected President of the WBU. I look forward to working closely together.

I am also pleased to share the stage with Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes – UN Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility. WIPO is committed to ensuring that the Marrakesh Treaty furthers the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and strengthens the implementation of the SDGs.

And it is a pleasure to have Sahilendra Singh with us – Additional Secretary within India’s Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade. India was the first country to ratify the Marrakesh Treaty and is home to some of the most powerful examples of the impact this work is having on the ground.

It was the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson who remarked “some books leave us free and some books make us free”. I believe the same can be said of international treaties. Some introduce or enshrine norms that help to advance or safeguard our freedoms and rights. Others help to empower people to live the life they want to lead, turning legal provisions into something that has profound and lasting force. This describes the Marrakesh Treaty.

In just five years, it has grown to cover 105 countries and is expanding learning and education possibilities for the over 250 million people who are blind, visually impaired or otherwise print disabled.

But when it comes to Marrakesh – and the work of the Accessible Books Consortium – it is not the statistics that take center stage but the people whose lives it has changed around the world. This is where our work truly comes alive and is advancing progress towards SDGs 4, 10 and 17.

When we at WIPO think about the impact of the Treaty and the ABC, we think of young people such as Matias Joel Sune from Argentina who can now study from the same textbooks as his classmates in mainstream schooling. Or Jasser Hamdi and Yasmine ben Slimane from Tunisia who are using DAISY books to complete their studies.

We think of Nilesh Kumar Keshri who dreamt of joining the Indian Civil Service but – due to limited access to the required reading materials – struggled to pass the famously challenging Civil Services Exam.

Four times he entered into the CSE and four times he came up short. But on his fifth attempt something changed. Nilesh was able to use accessible materials to prepare. This time he placed within the top 1 per cent of applicants and, today, he holds the rank of Assistant Commissioner within the Indian Revenue Service. As Nilesh puts it, “I now believe that nothing is impossible”.

Mostly, we think of the horizons lifted and the life chances raised. We think of the optimism, the aspiration and the increased independence that Marrakesh and the ABC are supporting around the world.

Thanks to ABC’s global books service, people who are blind, visibly impaired or otherwise print disabled now have access to more than 630,000 books in over 80 languages. This is a significant achievement and testament to the remarkable impact that governments, civil society and commercial organizations create when they work in partnership to deliver social and humanitarian goals.

But the book famine is still with us. Despite the progress made over the last five years, the WBU estimates that fewer than one in ten published materials is available in an accessible format. We also know that there remains inequity between north and south, with people in developing countries much less likely to benefit from accessible books and materials.

Add to this a pandemic that is limiting access to education, increasing joblessness and hitting our most vulnerable communities the hardest and it is clear that we need to renew our collective efforts if we are to reduce inequalities and advance the 2030 agenda.

Friends, Ladies and gentlemen,

As the world steps up its post-Covid recovery, our ambition is to build on the last five years and ensure that Marrakesh and the ABC play a full role in delivering a just and sustainable future.

But while our work has real momentum behind it, there is no room for complacency. We must continue to raise awareness of the barriers print disabled people of all ages face and work concertedly to encourage more countries to accede to the Marrakesh Treaty and to implement its provisions into international law.

We must also continue to strengthen the ABC. Capacity building and skills development are crucial to ensuring developing countries have the means to create accessible materials. More work must also be done to encourage publishers to ensure books are 'born accessible' and released in formats such as EPUB3 and Braille.

Our ambition is that ultimately all countries will join the Marrakesh Treaty and that every library for the blind will partner with ABC's global books service. To achieve this, WIPO is committed to continuing our collaboration with stakeholders and member states to further the Treaty's objectives and support those who are blind, visually impaired or otherwise print disabled play a full part in social and economic life.

Once again, thank you for joining today's side-event and demonstrating your support for the Treaty, the ABC and their collective aims. I look forward to working together with all of you to transform more lives around the world.

Thank you.