Intellectual property body gives artisanal businesses a boost
By Dominic Low domlow@sph.com.sg

The Straits Times
Tuesday 13th September 2022
1179 words
Page 1,4 | Section: General
1235cm on the page
Tech

Intellectual property body gives artisanal businesses a boost

Its initiatives help entrepreneurs, even from small communities, use IP to benefit their ventures

Dominic Low

The world body for intellectual property (IP) is making its mark even in small communities, bringing its influence to help groups around the world.

For instance, it is working with a group of women in Mexico’s Oaxaca state to boost their handicraft business after their traditional silk weaving, called Seda de Cajonos, obtained geographical indication status in March.

Geographical indication is a type of IP which recognises and protects products that have a quality and reputation unique to their geographical origins.

The World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) is helping the women in their efforts to leverage the geographical indication protection and other types of IP, such as trademarks, to market and brand their handicrafts, said its director-general Daren Tang.

“They wanted Wipo to help them community to connect to the world in a way that respects their culture and heritage,” he said last Thursday.

This project is among several initiatives by Wipo aimed at helping communities around the world use IP to benefit their businesses.

“We’re looking at IP as a way to help people to connect to the world, rather than just something that specialists and lawyers are interested in,” he said.

He also cited an initiative started in Uganda last year that has helped 70 female entrepreneurs incorporate IP management into their business strategy.

“We’re helping backyard businesses – something quite informal, but we need to help them grow,” he said.

And part of that growth means that they need to start looking at IP as one of the many tools they need to better (use) in order to be successful in growing their businesses.

Mr Tang also hopes that fears of intellectual property (IP) being used by large companies to stifle innovation will be a thing of the past.

“The videos talk about how it feels to create something, how it feels to have a new idea and then what happens when someone comes along and takes away that idea,” said Mr Tang, adding that the concepts are explored in a non-technical manner.

One of the main aims of these centres is to connect research with market needs, including helping them to establish technology and innovation support centres that provide access to IP resources, and to upgrade existing ones to be places where ideas are incubated.

“One of the main aims of these centres is to help countries overcome their biggest challenge of translating research into a stable product,” said Mr Tang.

Even in developed countries, you’ve got good research and something that works... but when you commercialise it, it encounters a lot of challenges,” said Mr Tang.

Wipo has made efforts to help countries understand that IP is not just a legal or technical topic, but is also relevant to many aspects of their economies, such as their home-grown businesses and artists.

“If you look at our social media platforms and our media engagement now, we are telling stories about how IP actually affects people’s lives,” said Mr Tang.

He cited a programme launched in Jordan, to register trademarks and grow their handicraft businesses.

The initiative will also help the women create a collective “Made in Petra” brand that will be a symbol of quality for their products.

Mr Tang also hopes that fears of bifurcation of the global economy – where businesses have to choose between separate regulatory systems – arising from rivalry between China and the United States will not be realised.

“IP plays an important role in innovation and collaboration systems in order to really be a force for good for the world,” he said.

Photo: World Intellectual Property Organisation
The rapid development of technology has given rise to challenges on the intellectual property (IP) front, with several recent patent applications filed by people naming artificial intelligence (AI) as the inventor.

Mr Daren Tang, director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo), said: “IP offices (around the world) don’t quite know how to react to this. But the... reactions so far have been that the inventor still has to be a human being.”

The jury is still out, and the topic will be discussed during one of Wipo’s forums later this month, he added.

The issue of AI as creator has been in the news recently, after a man won first place at a fine art competition in the United States by using an AI-generated piece.

The win last month created a stir online, with artists accusing the man of cheating. Similar novel issues might be faced by Wipo in the coming years, while the organisation continues to be led by Mr Tang, 50.

Mr Tang made headlines in May 2020 after he was appointed the organisation’s chief, becoming the first Singaporean to helm a United Nations agency.

He was elected by members of Wipo’s coordination committee on March 4 that year, beating lawyer Wang Binying of China by a vote of 55 to 28.

The Wipo General Assembly subsequently approved his appointment at an extraordinary session, making him the agency’s fifth director-general since it began operations in 1970.

The former chief executive of the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore is also Wipo’s first Asian director-general.

His predecessors at Wipo were from the Netherlands, Sudan, Australia, as well as one who held Hungarian and US citizenships.

He is currently serving a six-year term from Oct 1, 2020. Speaking to The Straits Times and Lianhe Zaobao last Tuesday, Mr Tang noted that intellectual property activity worldwide has continued to grow despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

There was a record high of 277,500 international patent applications filed through Wipo last year, according to a Wipo statement in February. There were 275,900 such applications filed in 2020 and 265,800 in 2019.

Mr Tang said the pandemic had created opportunities for businesses and countries to innovate. “Innovation is a way of energetically and proactively dealing with disruption,” he added.

“And it’s also a way of looking for opportunities in the midst of disruption.”

Mr Tang said Wipo also faces longstanding challenges such as geopolitical disputes, which can make it difficult for the agency to get member states to agree on issues.

He added that it also has to overcome the challenge of showing the world that it, like other UN agencies, is still relevant and involved in overcoming global problems.

“People need to see that we can make a difference in their lives,” he said, adding that Wipo cannot be a talking shop but has to be action-oriented.

“So it cannot just be (organising) seminars and workshops for a very small group of people,” said Mr Tang.

“It has to be things which are impactful on the ground.”

On his biggest achievement at Wipo so far, Mr Tang said he has been having a fulfilling time transforming the agency’s focus from technical IP matters to helping businesses worldwide grow.

“It is to... bring the message to everyone that IP is not just for experts and specialists, but that it is a very powerful catalyst for jobs and investments, for business growth and for economic and social development,” he said, adding that the organisation’s transformation is still ongoing.

Dominic Low