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ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF INVENTORS' ASSOCIATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Less than 20 years ago, in 1980, there was not a single inventors' association in Africa. Things have moved very fast since then: in 1985, there were 10 inventors' associations already; in 1991, 15; and today, in August 1999, I know of inventors' associations in 22 African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Dem. Rep. of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo and Tunisia.

If we look at the status of the inventors' associations in Africa and elsewhere in the world, as well as their activities, we will see that the role and functions of inventors' associations are not the same from one country to another. Therefore, any attempt – including on my part – to define the role and functions of an inventors' association will always be subjective.

However, I have a certain advantage in this respect. My vision is based on a long and worldwide experience: first, during the last 15 years of my career at WIPO and then during the nine years of my presidency in IFIA. During these 25 years I have lived and worked in Geneva, I have had the opportunity to visit inventors associations from around 35 countries, to participate in the creation or launching of several of them, and last but not least, my regular contacts with the 90 inventor associations from all over the world which are members of the International Federation of Inventors' Associations (IFIA).

My presentation addresses four topics:

- I. It is essential to challenge certain psychological barriers;
- II. It is necessary to have activities in favor of the inventors of your country;
- III. It is advisable to have activities geared towards the promotion of inventive activity in your country; and
- IV. Some other important considerations that will affect positively the role and functions of an inventors' association.

I. IT IS ESSENTIAL TO CHALLENGE CERTAIN PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

1. Inventors associations in most developing countries face a specific difficulty. Local inventions are underestimated. Only foreign goods are ... goods! Only foreign ideas ... are ideas! Only foreign inventors ... are inventors!

This is a big problem. A psychological problem which, like all psychological problems, is difficult to cure. Yet, this should be one of the challenges of inventors' associations in developing countries.

However, it is not enough to speak, to write, to declare that creativity and inventivity have no frontiers. Words are not enough. Recognition is essential – public recognition. That's why it is important that countries pay tribute to their national inventors, using all possible means.

I would be happy if only one per cent of the glory attached to football players could be given to inventors. Publicity not only informs the public, but also encourages potential and prospective inventors – all those men and women with ideas and who feel lonely and too often neglected. I can assure you that publicity has a tremendous stimulating effect on inventors – humans, being what they are. It gives them self-confidence and a sense of self-esteem.

2. Inventors' associations in all countries face another psychological difficulty related to the image of the inventor in the society. On the one hand, inventors are considered as the representatives of the genius and creativity of a nation, and on the other, they are considered to be along the margins of society: they are non-conformists. Simply said, the inventor is misunderstood. Most people have this mental picture of the inventor: an absent-minded person, an eccentric or even a “crackpot”.

What can be done to rectify this image? Mainly, through information-awareness campaigns that address public opinion. There is considerable scope for campaigns to inform and alert the public on the subject of famous and anonymous inventors, discoveries, inventions and innovations of today and yesterday in your countries and around the world. Another incentive would be through the public awarding of prizes; anyone seeing the prizewinner will very quickly realize that the inventor looks like anyone else – he/she does not have a blue left sock and a green right sock any more than he/she wears goggle-like glasses. The public can thus see for itself that the inventor's creation really is the answer to a specific need, which makes our daily lives easier. In more advanced cases, this could be a medicine or a drug that can save lives.

3. If the image of the inventor should be corrected and improved, then this cannot be separated from the saying that the image of the inventors' association itself should remain that of a respectable organization. Otherwise, how can the association find other organizations and institutions willing to cooperate with it, or willing to assist it or to fund some of its activities?

To succeed in projecting a constructive image, an association should definitely act in two directions: outside the association to convince the authorities, other institutions and the general public, and within the association to increase the number of its members as well as to strengthen the harmony and solidarity among them.

II. IT IS NECESSARY TO HAVE ACTIVITIES IN FAVOR OF THE INVENTORS THEMSELVES

1. Inventors' associations should of course defend the interests of inventors, lest the latter lose the urge to invent. This is something that would appear to be self-evident, yet is all too prone to be overlooked. And there is much to be done in this area. Who has not heard the lament of the frustrated, or the despairing inventor? It is up to the associations to bring pressure to bear on their governments with a view to making the patent law more favorable to inventors. It is up to the associations to work in favor of the adoption of special legislation and structures that could assist inventors.

2. Inventors' associations should never forget that the vast majority of inventors dream of seeing their inventions recognized as truly new, patented, produced and marketed. The question therefore is how to assist inventive dreams to become economic realities.

A first level of activity is to see that the inventors get proper advice and training. Inventors have the qualifications which are necessary for creative work, but they often need to be correctly oriented in all the many other steps of the invention and innovation process. The association can be of some help in this respect. But in general, it will have to convince other organizations – the Patent Office or the government agency in charge of the promotion of inventive activity – to undertake this responsibility. And when such help is already offered, to inform the inventors and encourage them to take advantage. For example, WIPO has a program by which it offers free of charge patent searches to inventors from developing countries.

A second level of activity for an inventors' association is to help – often indirectly – the inventors in publicizing their inventions, without necessarily getting involved in the commercial business itself in order to maintain their non-profit status.

III. IT IS ADVISABLE TO HAVE ACTIVITIES GEARED TO THE PROMOTION OF INVENTIVE ACTIVITY IN YOUR COUNTRY

1. The training of **potential inventors** is a must. We think of all what could be done at engineering faculties, technical schools, and research institutes. The role of the association consists in drawing the attention of the authorities to such a problem.

2. Inventors' association should not forget the **youth**, the most important group of potential inventors. Associations should encourage the adoption of programs which develop creativity among girls and boys. Contests and exhibitions are among the most common methods to achieve this objective. Therefore, it is important to develop relations with government ministries responsible for youth affairs.

Associations should also give a supportive hand to science clubs. It is very often in such clubs and workshops that young people discover unsuspected talents and develop them. Such activities help them to be “broken in”, graduating from theory to practical application. Some members of the association can offer time and experience to science clubs.

The objective of all such activities is not necessarily to increase the number of inventors, but rather to increase the number of future generations of “thinking” people. In addition, activities directed to the youth can provide a good opportunity for inventors' associations to gain greater recognition.

3. I should like now to speak of the other half of the world – **women** – who are glaringly overlooked in the history of invention. Women inventors do exist; indeed, they very badly need to be supported. Most of the time, their inventions are hidden from public view and their talents insufficiently harnessed. Having studied this issue very closely for many years and written several books on the subject of contemporary women inventors, I can assure you that women inventors play a particularly important role today.

But there are so few women inventors, you may say. Precisely: it is up to the association to help bring them in the limelight, to give them special attention and recognition. In this area, there is a lot that can be done with women's organizations, women's magazines, etc., as well as governmental authorities responsible for women or gender affairs.

IV. SOME OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS THAT WILL AFFECT POSITIVELY THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF AN INVENTORS' ASSOCIATION

1. **Membership.** If inventors' associations are created for inventors, the association should nevertheless be open to other men and women of goodwill who can give inventors a helping hand in various ways: with legal advice, contacts with persons of influence in business, politics or the media.

In addition to individual members, many associations also have corporate members: companies, organizations, industrial and business enterprises. Their presence in the association is considered useful for several reasons: it offers inventors the opportunity to meet representatives of industry and business, and adds to its financial resources.

The greater the number of its members, the more an association gains in power and influence. Inventors' associations must therefore consistently recruit new members to remedy the loss of some of its members, a natural phenomenon in similar associations, and to avoid becoming a kind of local club known only to its few members, without a grip on the political life of the country. The names and addresses of local inventors can easily be obtained from the Patent Office.

2. **Leadership.** This is a very important condition of success, but also a very sensitive question to speak about at a meeting which is attended by so many leaders of inventors' associations.

3. **Money.** One often hears that it is because of lack of money that an inventors' association is paralyzed in its activities. If I do agree that money is necessary and important, I also think that worthwhile projects can encourage sponsors to help an association.

3. **Relations with government authorities.** An inventors' association should not be solely a pressure or negotiating group. It should also be a *giving* organization, one that offers the State its services for specific research or projects that the authorities would regard as a matter of priority for the country. All efforts should be made to establish and maintain good relations with the Patent Office and other government institutions responsible for the promotion of innovation in the country. An essential role of an inventors' associations should be that of a sort of transmission chain between the inventor and his government. Inventors' associations absolutely must persuade their governments that it is in a country's interest to support its inventors by all means at its disposal. It is they, very often, who bring about creation, growth and renewal of business, which in turn provide employment and export goods abroad... .

5. **Relations with inventors' associations in other countries.** Another condition for an inventors' association to be effective is to take advantage of the experience of sister associations in other countries by adopting some good ideas and avoiding mistakes others have made. This can be done through bilateral relations, and by joining IFIA, the only organization which groups inventors' associations worldwide, and a unique spokesperson for inventors.

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