

World Intellectual Property Day – April 26, 2020
Climate, Heritage and Intellectual Property

On the occasion of World Intellectual Property Day 2020, we, the undersigned organizations, call on the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to take urgent action to help save our cultural heritage.

The world's cultural heritage is at risk from the devastating effects of climate change. Globally, libraries, archives, museums, sites and other cultural heritage institutions are suffering the grave consequences of fires, floods, and other disasters related to climate change. Damage to, or disappearance of, any heritage material impoverishes the heritage of all nations. The need for action is urgent, in line with Sustainable Development Goals 13 and 11.4.

The World Intellectual Property Organization, the global body that sets international copyright rules, has a pressing responsibility to act to ensure that important and unique collections in libraries, archives, and museums that are faced with the real threat of climate change can survive.

Digitisation and storage in the cloud are among the most effective ways to safeguard our heritage, as already recognised in the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage, including in digital form. But digitisation requires the making of copies, and too many national copyright laws fail to allow digital preservation for copyright-protected material. In fact, over a quarter of WIPO member states do not permit preservation at all, even for print formats.

Moreover, inconsistent copyright laws and a lack of clear possibilities to import and export works often prevent cultural heritage institutions from working together across borders. Cross-border cooperation would enable digitised copies to be stored in different places, crucially minimising the risk of loss, as well as helping to reduce costs, and avoid duplication of effort. This will particularly help countries which are less developed, who have fewer resources.

Yet despite the clear public good, without adequate copyright laws heritage institutions are obliged to seek permissions and pay remunerations, often from the public purse, just to make a preservation copy. Cultural heritage institutions urgently need an international legal instrument with clear rules allowing preservation of collections, including across borders. WIPO alone has the mandate to set this global standard, and only WIPO can solve the cross-border problems.

We must act now to facilitate the work of cultural heritage institutions in achieving their public interest mission, and to mitigate the cultural losses brought about by climate change.

We must act now to safeguard our heritage.

