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IT'S EVERYONE'S PROBLEM
Protecting Intellectual Property
(Editorial signed by Ambassador James D. McGee)

When intellectual property rights protections fail, the results can be deadly. During a meningitis epidemic in Niger in 1995, more than 50,000 people were inoculated with fake vaccines, resulting in 2,500 deaths. Thirty infants died in India in 1998 and 89 Haitian children died in 1995 from cough syrup prepared with a toxic chemical used in antifreeze. The 1989 crash of a Norwegian aircraft was blamed on a fake bolt in its assembly; fifty-five people died.

"Intellectual property rights" is a fancy name for product accountability and the protection of human creativity. It's the legal mechanism – through copyright, patents and trademark – that ensures that the products we buy are genuine, and that someone else doesn't take credit for our ideas. Intellectual property rights don't just protect inventors; they protect everyone whose safety depends on product reliability in every country in the world, including Madagascar.

The protection of intellectual property rights enhances countries' development, and promotes their business and artistic environments. Such protections stimulate advances that benefit the entire world – in the form of technology, medicine and other processes. Protecting intellectual property is crucial to protecting public health and safety in countries across the globe.

Why should we care about protecting intellectual property? At the dawn of the 21st century, 70% of global economic output is generated by services, many of which depend on new and evolving technologies. Global GDP grew twenty-fold in the last century – from \$2 trillion to \$41 trillion and most of this increase was due to innovation. In 2004, the World Economic Forum reported that the 20 countries perceived as having the most stringent intellectual property protection were among the top 27 countries in terms of economic growth competitiveness. In contrast, the 20 countries perceived as having the weakest intellectual property protection were among the bottom 36 countries.

In a world where ideas form the common currency, intellectual property piracy erodes a country's economy and its cultural identity.

Copyright laws encourage the creation of literary works, computer programs, artistic works, and expressions of national culture. In a world where culture can be shared with the click of a mouse, intellectual property piracy steals the just rewards of talented artists everywhere. Malagasy music is beginning to develop a worldwide following and the creative musicians of the "Red Island" should reap the benefits of their creativity."

Patent laws encourage the discovery of new and improved products and processes, while ensuring the freest possible public access to information regarding those new products and processes.

Trademark laws encourage the development and maintenance of high-quality products and services, and help companies promote customer loyalty.

Information and communications technologies, safe medicines, and the other innovations that form the backbone of today's economy are only possible because of intellectual property rights. The hopes we all have for a better future depend on those inventors and innovators who will make the world more bountiful and those artists who make the world more beautiful – if their creative efforts and hard work are protected.