Democracy 2030 - Crowdsourced Laws: Mr. Max Weyland, Research Associate, Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR)

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members, Assembled Dignitaries.

Many thanks for granting to me the privilege to address you today. The chamber in which we find ourselves truly inspires awe – it is a remarkable place; heavy with history, yet full of promise for the future. This chamber is arguably the single most important place for any Namibian citizen, for it is here that decisions are made that affect every moment of our days.

Unfortunately, there isn't enough time or space for every Namibian to be in this chamber, and address it on matters affecting them, giving their input into legislation that will so crucially shape their lives. Seeing as space is limited we have to think a little bit outside of the box -- and I have been asked to give an introduction on one approach that could see an unprecedented number of ordinary Namibian citizens take part in shaping the laws that affect their lives.

Crowdsourcing, in general terms, means using the input from as many people as possible when completing a task, and in these days it usually involves using the internet as the central technology through which participants contribute. Usually everyone is invited to contribute to a project, without limitations. The best example is probably Wikipedia -- it is completely written by anonymous volunteers from over the world. And Wikipedia already shows the strengths of crowdsourcing. If you look at a traditional Encyclopedia like the *Britannica*, written in London, you will find very little information about Namibia. But because Wikipedia allows everyone to contribute, you have pages and pages on our country, our history, and our politics -- including pages on many people who are present in this room!

Crowdsourcing has been used for a while now to strengthen democracy and help governments do their job better. In Kenya and Tanzania, an app called Ushahidi lets any citizen report irregularities at the polling station, which are then passed on to law enforcement agencies. Also in Kenya, there is an app that lets people give feedback on the service they have received. This makes it a lot easier for government to identify which areas need strengthening, as they have a real-live picture of what is going right and what needs more work.

Should a tsunami ever hit Walvis Bay, people could turn to a free tool from Google to report that they are ok - and their family could see on the same page that they are fine. And software that automatically scans Facebook and Twitter could let emergency responders find out where the damage is worst so that help could first go to those who need it most.

These are some examples of the situations in which it makes sense to rely on information submitted by everyday citizens.

The question is, does this make sense for crafting laws? The Members of Parliament in attendance will know better than most that laws are very complex things. They are full of technical language and interact in complicated ways with existing laws, policies, and

regulations. Crafting an excellent law is a tough task. Will adding more voices to the process not be a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth?

Evidence from around the world suggests that this is not the case, and that involving the crowd makes for better laws that better address the needs of citizens.

What would it look like to Crowdsourced a law?

It can start small. Either individual MPs or Parliament as a whole can ask their followers on Facebook or Twitter for input. That is already a form of crowdsourcing.

Or you could simply ask citizens for an impetus. Lawmakers can try hard to keep their ear on the ground to try and find out what the people need, but it is impossible to hear everyone's voice. New technologies mean that we can bring citizens' voices to Parliament. In the UK and in Finland for example, there are websites where people can bring up issues. If one of these issues - or a draft bill - receives a certain number of signatures, Parliament has to discuss it. This has already led to the passage of a law in Finland. As you will all know, we already have a system for petitions here in Namibia where people can bring up concerns for Parliament to discuss. Surely it cannot be too difficult to update this system for the modern era, to enable citizens to more easily connect with their representatives?

Other countries have tried more complex systems. In Finland, legislators tested a new system by reaching out to citizens for three stages of a new law regulating snowmobiles (luckily not a law we will need here any time soon). First, they asked them about general issues that the law should address. Then, they asked people how they would solve these issues. Finally, they had people vote on the different ideas, and legal experts then used this input to draft the actual legislation. For other laws, there have been websites that look a lot like Wikipedia, where people can simply log in and edit the document.

These are just some ways in which citizens have contributed to the process of making actual laws. And so far, evidence suggests that this process has been very effective. Studies after the fact found that the vast majority of inputs from citizens were constructive and useful. In addition, most crowdsourcing initiatives attracted a number of experts on the topic who added crucial information and expertise to the process.

This is not to say there are no challenges with Crowdsourced legislation. The most obvious issue is that of representation. Especially if the main technology used is the internet, any crowdsourcing project will exclude those who do not have access to a computer or smartphone. But these are also often the people who need to have their voices heard the most. I do believe, however, that if we put the bright minds of Namibians to this task they will be able to find a system that manages to avoid this pitfall to a great extent.

And the benefits of crowdsourcing legislation by far outweigh the shortcomings of the approach.

Many Namibians still think that laws are something that comes from above to impose rules on them. Encouraging people to take part in drafting laws would empower them to see themselves as active participants in Democracy. This shift in thinking will go beyond their involvement in making laws: the more people think that government is something they can participate in, the more they will find ways to do so -- whether it's by being more active in engaging their representatives or starting conversations with other Namibians about important challenges our nation faces. Crowdsourced laws, and the broader ideas of engaging citizens in government decisions, can be a key part of the puzzle when it comes to creating a Namibia where participatory democracy is the order of the day and everyday citizens feel empowered to speak up and take a role in determining the future direction of their nation.

Another benefit that should not be discounted is that citizens' voices are actually useful in improving legislation. Even the most educated expert on a certain topic cannot have lived all the experiences that a broad range of contributors can bring to the table. If a system is designed in such a way that a broad cross-section of society can contribute to the discussions, then it is virtually guaranteed that the law that comes out at the end of the process will be better than if it had only been drafted by a few persons considered to know best about a subject. The guiding idea behind a democracy is that the people know what is best for them. Crowdsourcing laws puts this belief into action to actually empower the people to make their own laws.

None of this means that Members of Parliament have to fear for their jobs, of course. Namibia is a representative democracy, our MPs will not be replaced by a bunch of people on the internet. But our Parliament has already shown its commitment to hearing people's voices, and crowdsourcing using new technologies offers a way to hear from even more citizens.

Crowdsourced legislations has made appearances not just in places such as Finland or the United States, but also in Brazil, where citizens recently helped draft a law that clarified consumers' rights on the internet. These ideas are spreading fast around the world, but we are still in the beginning stages of learning about how best to engage people in making laws. This means that Namibia can be a leader not just in Africa, but world-wide, and show the way forward in coming up with innovative ideas on how best to create systems that really engage most Namibians, especially those who do not usually get a chance to give an input into the law. Our cellphone and radio coverage is exceptional for a country of our size, and we have many brilliant young people who have the technical knowledge to do this sort of thing and would love to prove their worth. So when thinking about democracy in 2030, we should plan to have a democracy where MPs can solicit feedback from the people and get it virtually in real time. A system where MPs can ask citizens what issues matter to them, and can bring them up in the chamber to address these issues. A system where, when a law is being drafted, people who have unique insight into the topic -- whether they are highly educated, or whether they have personal experience -- can contribute something that no-one had previously considered. A system where the promise of democracy is an everyday reality as average citizens get to directly shape the laws that govern their lives.
Thank You