



## **“We’ve Created a Profession of Seminar Attendees”: Why Councils Work Better than Seminars**

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Inside his grass-roofed tuckle, away from the heat of the sun, Joseph began explaining the history of involvement by international NGOs in his East African country. “The assistance rarely reaches out into the bush where the people are. So much money has disappeared in the hands of a few in the cities. *The INGOs have created a profession of seminar attendees,*” he said with a smile. “The same people go from one seminar to the next, getting paid with food and travel honorariums. They claim that they have traveled from far away villages in the bush, but they are really from a different neighborhood in the city. One NGO in the region claims to have trained 100 people in a seminar. A different NGO claims they have trained 100 people in their seminar. What they don’t realize is that they are training the same people!”

In early 2005, Rwandan President Kagame announced a temporary halt to all NGO-sponsored HIV/AIDS conferences and seminars being held in Kigali at the nice hotels. He said that the HIV message is not getting out into the rural villages. The same people from the city keep attending all the various conferences and very few are traveling into Kigali from the rural areas.

A weakness with seminars and conferences sponsored by international NGOs is that they are an artificial gathering of people for a few days. They tend to target educated people accustomed to receiving information from experts in a lecture style presentation. They also target people who have time on their hands and can travel to attend the conference. Oral culture people (people who can’t, don’t or won’t read) typically don’t attend seminars. If they do, they struggle to learn from such a highly lettered culture approach to training.

When leaders in Afghanistan gathered to write their new constitution in 2003, more than five hundred Afghans gathered in tents in a large field. The Loya Jirga, or Grand Council, met for three weeks—discussing, debating, and arguing the various tenets of their constitution. The final constitution was agreed to by group consensus, not by individual vote. Since Afghanistan is a highly oral culture, it was natural that they would work together in this manner. There were no outside experts giving lectures or presentations. Afghans themselves did all the talking.

The concept of a *council* fits better with oral cultures than the concept of a *seminar*. A council implies a gathering of peers who know each other and share a common community connection. There is no certain expert who knows all the answers. The council discusses and debates the issues as a group in the context of their community. Often stories are told and songs are sung relating to the issues. They come to a consensus as a group, not as individuals. By contrast, a seminar implies that an expert or panel of experts has convened to share their knowledge with the rest of the attendees. The attendees typically are there only to receive the information. The presentations are usually conducted in a lettered culture way, outlining principles, concepts, and facts that may or may not relate to practical living in oral communities.

Oral culture people thrive when they engage as a group with people they know and trust, are given equal opportunity for expression, interact with the issues through stories, dramas, songs and dance, and are able to relate the issues to their everyday life experience. Councils, rather than seminars, give them the opportunity to learn in their own cultural context.

T4 Global has been conducting *council* training among oral culture people for over five years in places like Afghanistan, India, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, and Sudan. Visit our website at [www.T4Global.org](http://www.T4Global.org) to learn more and download evaluations of some of our work.