



## Telling Stories Together Covering local issues across ethnic divides



Fazni from the Matara Media House conducts an interview for a story on IDPs in Batticaloa

Internews' Regional Media Initiative, funded by USAID / OTI, provides training and resources for local journalists to cover issues in their communities. The Initiative includes:

- Establishing local Media Houses as institutions providing training, production, and resource support for journalists across ethnic lines in the east and south
- Providing training and production support to other regional journalists through Colombo-based activities
- Providing grants and training to independent producers, with a focus on community coverage

The resurgent war is dividing Sri Lanka's communities further apart. In the East this means local issues can become a flashpoint for civil disputes. In the South, poor information limits the understanding of war's civilian impact. For many Sri Lankan journalists, the conflict has colored their coverage of local issues. In this context local voices disappear, buried in the daily news round of politics and war.

Internews is fostering more balanced reporting by bringing Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala journalists together in cross-production activities to cover stories that affect local communities' lives. Cross-productions take place through Internews' Media Houses, established in Matara and Ampara over the past year. These exchanges allow journalists from different communities to see all sides – and can challenge perceptions.

For one story, journalists jointly covered a local tsunami reconstruction dispute at Deepagavi that has split community attitudes. 'Before this cross-production I misunderstood the Deepagavi issue,' said Sinhala journalist Ravindra Medagedera. 'I thought the Muslim community had unjustly treated the Sinhalese, and I wrote that in my stories. But now...I realize there was no injustice... This problem is over-politicized.'

The exchange between journalists is not only about stories, but also about individual relations. 'Before the cross-production, I didn't like the Sinhala language and I had a bad impression of Sinhala people,' said Kalivani, a Tamil trainee from Batticaloa. 'But since [meeting southern colleagues through] the cross-production I love the language, and I've now enrolled in a Sinhala class.' Internews provides interpretation at all stages, to maximize both formal and informal exchanges.

Cross-production participants also held meetings with fellow journalists and community representatives across the east. These background briefings give a detailed picture of communities affected by military conflict and ethnic strife.

Internews has run three cross-productions so far, with two bringing journalists together from within Ampara, and one bringing journalists from the South to the East. All cross-production stories were broadcast on Real Voices, a weekly program that airs on local radio stations in the East and South.