

## LEBANON: Promoting Peace and Reconciliation Through the Media

In May 2008, Lebanon witnessed a violent political conflict that eventually led to the end of an 18-month long political paralysis and the election of a new President. In the wake of the conflict and in the few months that followed, Internews Network launched five civil society projects in Lebanon to promote media as a tool for reconciliation and development. The projects, which were launched under a small grants program from which two more projects will be issued, are located throughout Lebanon and focus on community reporting, youth involvement, online media tools, information technology, and media for development. As Lebanon prepares for Parliamentary elections in the midst of intense political tensions, the success of these five groups can help address post-conflict political polarization and regional development challenges and put freedom of access to media at the forefront of Lebanon's democratic development.

### FIRST MEDIA MONITOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

After the political violence ended, a group of young activists in Lebanon reflected on the role of the media during the conflict. The Lebanese media were accused of instigating violence by aligning themselves with narrow sectarian interests that eventually led to the violent conflict.

With the support of Internews Network, the Lebanese Civic Media Initiative (LCMI) founded by activist Wissam Salibi works towards advancing human rights and civil peace through the media by advocating for quality journalism. In an effort to track and analyze hate incitement in Lebanese media, LCMI created an online media monitor, which highlights cases of hate incitement by all political actors and then uses this evidence to make vi-

able recommendations to media practitioners.

LCMI researcher Karim Mufti explains that "Lebanon is unique in the Arab world because it allows journalists to freely express themselves. Our aim is not to repress this right but to enable the public to identify the thin line between the freedom to attack political opponents and inciting hatred among Lebanese communities."

As Lebanon prepares for Parliamentary elections, Salibi explains that their neutral approach is key to success. "We now have documented evidence which will enable us to make viable recommendations to media practitioners. This is the value of our project with Internews Network; it has given us solid foundations for future legal work in media and advocacy for pro-human rights media in Lebanon."



PHOTO BY: LCMI

The Lebanese Civic Media Initiative posts "Anti-Hate Incitement in the Media" posters around Beirut as part of their project focusing on reducing hate-incitement in the Lebanese media in the run-up to the June 7 Parliamentary Elections.

### YOUTH NEWSLETTER IN TRIPOLI

Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon, is located on the Northern coast and combines a large number of economically marginalized and diverse sectarian villages. The last two years witnessed violent clashes in Jabal Mohsen and Bab Al-Thabane in the North between mainstream Sunnis and Alawites.

Local community leader, Dr. Wafaa Chaarani of the Tripoli-based Development Studies Center, has launched a

"Internews has given us a space for our ideas to surface, a platform to discuss problems and make them visible to all of Lebanon."

— Karima Chobbo, 24-year-old trainee



INTERNEWS

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*Internews is an international media development organization whose mission is to empower local media worldwide to give people the news and information they need, the ability to connect, and the means to make their voices heard.*



Young people participate in a small group activity at a Youth for Tolerance workshop in Beirut that connected students from different communities.

project with Internews Network bringing together five Sunni and five Alawite youth to be trained in investigative reporting. This process helps them to better understand the background and causes of the violence that they have witnessed. These youth grow to understand that the conflict is largely caused by dire economic conditions. The teens will be creating a local newsletter which will report on their findings and explain their improved understanding of the conflict of their region. Chaarani firmly believes that the unbiased voice of local youth can change hearts and minds.

### ONLINE FORUM FOR YOUNG ACTIVISTS AND WRITERS

The July 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon resulted in emotional trauma and anger across the country. Elie Awad, founder of Youth for Tolerance (Y4T), saw a need to diffuse this anger by “promoting understanding and tolerance for diversity.”

Through a series of workshops in schools and summer camps Y4T teaches students about conflict and conflict resolution. These interactive modules are targeted towards 16-22 year old students. With the help of Internews Network Y4T is launching an online forum monitored by the young trainees and seeking to engage Lebanese youth from across the country in discussing the conflict in a

peaceful way.

With outreach in the North, South and Mount Lebanon, Y4T promotes the forum as a space for communication during the upcoming Parliamentary elections. Internews’ grant is helping build their capacity as they prepare for municipal and district elections in 2010.

“We want to see what users are most interested in, channel young people’s talent in taking pictures and using new media tools such as cellular phones to report on their community issues,” said

Awad. Y4T envisions the platform ultimately developing into an independent entity managed directly by the youth themselves.

### NEW MEDIA TOOLS FOR DEVELOPMENT

In Lebanon, digital activism is on the rise. A large number of Lebanese civil society organizations have opened accounts on various social-networking sites, such as YouTube and are using them to expand their message and reach a global audience. Chaker Noun is the founder and director of Baldati, a Lebanese NGO that connects people from communities all around Lebanon by advertising local programs, events, clubs and professional groups on a website called Baldati.com.

Baldati now wants to move from static to more dynamic website content. Through a grant from Internews Network, Baldati will launch a pilot web-casting project, called “B-Tube,” as an addition to their website. Baldati has purchased the necessary equipment to be distributed to the NGO’s village coordinators. The coordinators are being trained on the use of equipment, web-casting and investigative journalism to post their stories on three Lebanese villages chosen as a sample of economically marginalized communities where conflict resolution and conflict transformation become critical for peace and coexistence.

### LOCAL COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER IN SOUTH OF LEBANON

Barja is a small town located near Saida on Lebanon’s South coast. Barja suffers from very difficult economic conditions and most of its youth move to the capital Beirut for work. “There is not much to do in Barja,” explains one young student.

Beit El Tourath (“Heritage Home”) is an organization dedicated to preserving Barja’s history and culture through art exhibitions and publications. The organization used to issue a yearly newsletter focusing on Barja’s cultural artifacts and local news but because of financial difficulties, the newsletter has been out of print for several years. Internews Network recently provided funding for Director Mustafa Hajj to re-launch the newsletter with a new focus on youth and women.

Mustafa and his colleagues gathered a group of 15 young writers and social activists from Barja and have trained them in investigative journalism. “Internews has given us a space for our ideas to surface, a platform to discuss problems and make them visible to all of Lebanon,” said Karima Chobbo, a 24 year old trainee.

“Our role cannot be to solve the problems directly,” added twenty-one year old Adham Sayyid. “That is the role of our elected officials. But we want to use this newsletter to raise awareness on the issues that concern and threaten our daily lives. For example, Barja has one of the highest cancer rates in Lebanon because of pollution, bad waste management and electric plants. People are dying and we often hear of amputations. The state needs to see this and our job will be to show it.”

The project under which these small grants are launched, “Communicating to Humanity: Media and Civil Society in Support of Lebanon’s Reconciliation,” is funded by the US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.