eBario to be replicated

Long Lama and Ba Kelalan to get similar award-winning project

By **Samuel Aubrey**

KUCHING: The award-winning eBario project by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) will be replicated in two other remote locations — Long Lama and Ba Kelalan — to bridge the digital divide in the state.

Unimas deputy vice-chancellor (research and innovation) Professor Dr Peter Songan said yesterday the university is also spreading its expertise to Sabah to develop similar projects in Buayan and Tawau.

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Professor Dr Peter Songan, Unimas deputy vice-chancellor (research and innovation)

The projects will be implemented under a RM4 million fund from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations (MOSTI).

"The groundwork for these projects has already been done... We will have constant dialogue with the locals, and train them to use the ICT (information and communication technology) facilities," he told reporters after the opening of the Sixth International Conference on Information Technology in Asia (CITA).

The eBario project has been internationally recognised for its innovativeness and effectiveness in bridging the digital divide in rural communities, which do not have basic amenities such as electricity, water and telecommunications.

It has done Unimas and Malaysia proud by being acknowledged and recognised with numerous awards such as Mondialogo Award (Berlin 2005), eAsia Award (Taipei 2004) and Information Technology Premier Award (Kuala Lumpur 2003).

It also won the Industry Innovators Award for Systems Development & Applications from the Society of Satellite Professionals International (Washington DC 2002), and was named one of the Top Seven Intelligent Communities by the World Teleport Association in 2001.

In Bario, the project involves a computer laboratory and community telecentre, both of which are heavily utilised by the community.

The computer laboratory at the school — SMK Bario — is equipped with computers as well as Internet access and is used by the students.

The telecentre on the other hand provides education, e-government services, e-commerce, health, telemedicine and personal communication.

Computers at the school are powered by diesel generators, while computers at the telecentre are solar-powered.

Internet access is provided through a satellite via solar-powered VSAT (very small aperture terminal).

LET THE CONFERENCE BEGIN: Dr Chan (second right) with (from left) Unimas computer science and information technology faculty dean Professor Dr Narayanan Kulathuramaiyer, Songan, Bujang and CITA chairman Associate Professor Dr Alvin Yeo at the official opening. — Photo by Jeffery Mostapha

Songan said for the four new projects, Unimas will adopt the same approach in Bario, whereby the local communities are familiarised with the ICT facilities to ensure the projects reach their objectives and full potential.

"We will not just 'drop' the technology there without the local people being trained to use it," he said.

On the two projects in Sabah, he said Unimas will be working together with counterparts from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and local non-government organisations (NGOs).

"We are now ready to spread out our expertise to Sabah," he said.

Meanwhile, Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Dr George Chan, who officiated at the opening ceremony, said the government is encouraging studies by local universities on cheaper energy alternatives for rural communities in Sarawak.

In welcoming the efforts of universities to help bridge the digital gap in Sarawak, Dr Chan said he has also tasked Curtin University of Technology's branch campus in Miri to study the implementation of a combination of solar, wind and hydro-powered generators.

This, he said, was to reduce the dependency on diesel-powered generators, which are costly especially for supply of power to rural IT centres in Sarawak. He said Bario would be the location for the pilot project.

"It would see power being supplied from three sources — solar energy, wind and hydro power from the river and stream," he said.

He admitted that it would not be easy to extend ICT coverage to all 5,000 villages in Sarawak, but he believed the task will take less than 10 years to be realised with the assistance of technology advancement and cheaper energy options by local universities.

Also present at the opening ceremony were Assistant Minister of Infrastructure Development and Communication Datuk Lee Kim Shin, Assistant Minister in the Chief Minister's Department Datin Fatimah Abdullah and Unimas board of directors chairman Tan Sri Datuk Amar Bujang Mohd Nor.