IPSTAR Empowers Schools in Rural Thailand with Broadband Internet

Chiang Rai, the northernmost province in Thailand, has a rural population scattered throughout vast, mountainous and heavily forested lands with few telecommunication infrastructure in place. Nearly 95 percent of its 1 million population live in the rural area, where most communities subsist through farming and tourism. People living in remote communities are often isolated due to the lack of telecommunication service — contributing towards the widening digital divide gap between the urban and rural areas.

The Situation

Many rural schools in Chiang Rai are simply beyond the reach of broadband Internet. It is not viable to rollout terrestrial infrastructure for the remote schools due to the high installation cost of copper wire. A Wireless Local Loop (WLL) that uses microwave radio transmission for Internet is also not suitable for very harsh terrain, or schools that are 20 kilometers away from the nearest Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) office.

Distance Learning via IPSTAR

Therefore, the concept of teachers and students enjoying fast, reliable and always-on broadband access to digital libraries has been considered unviable for many rural schools. But not until recently, when some remote secondary schools in Chiang Rai have been provided with broadband Internet access via IPSTAR — through the distance learning and rural development projects initiated by Mae Fah Luang University and the National Telecommunications Communication.

Mae Fah Luang University has developed ebooks and documentaries for both far-flung teachers and students, and through satellite broadband Internet, the university can deliver online educational contents — ranging from Science to English — to remote schools. In addition, students from remote schools can send their homework online via IPSTAR. Phra Mahavishnulak Virotrangsri, Principal of Prapariyadharma School, said, "Internet connectivity would enable all monks in the school to broaden their knowledge, and at the same time, helping them to create their own website after they graduate".

The impact of broadband Internet on the teachers' instructional style has been dramatic. Instead of spending most of their time standing in front of the room and talking, teachers are now giving project-based activities; and instead of relying on textbooks, they are now directing students to research educational materials from the Internet.

Many remote students are benefiting from the project. Broadband Internet allows these students to access updated online educational contents that are oftentimes not available in their textbooks or in the school library. The distance learning project really helps to change how education is delivered inside the classroom, to empower teachers with up-to-date contents and to encourage students to become more interactive in learning.

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