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\$100 laptops aim to bring children the world

By Seattle Times news services

TUNIS, Tunisia — Researchers unveiled a prototype of a \$100 hand-cranked laptop computer on Wednesday and said they hoped to place them in the hands of millions of schoolchildren around the globe.

About the size of a textbook, the lime-green machines will be able to set up their own wireless networks and operate in areas without a reliable electricity supply, MIT researchers said at a United Nations technology summit.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other groups have been pushing hard to create a low-cost laptop, part of a U.N. effort's aim that "everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate" in the benefits of information technology.

The goal is to provide laptops free of charge to children in poor countries who cannot afford computers, said MIT Media Lab chairman Nicholas Negroponte.

Governments or charitable donors will pay for the laptops but children will own them, he said.

"Ownership of the laptops is absolutely critical," he said. "Have you ever washed a rented car?"

Negroponte said the computers might become commercially available to the public at a higher price — perhaps \$200 or so.

Its designers concede that the prototype they unveiled was missing some crucial features, such as a cheap display screen and a working hand crank.

But expectations are high, with distribution expected late next year or early in 2007.

"These robust, versatile machines will enable children to become more active in their own learning," U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said at a news conference where the laptop was unveiled.

"It will change ... the way children everywhere think about themselves in relation to advertising the world," said Seymour Papert, a professor emeritus of education and media technology at MIT. "It is the next big step toward a vision of learning being transformed as radically as medicine, communications and entertainment."

The laptop project has doubters, who wonder how useful its wireless connections will be in villages where access to the Internet is expensive or nonexistent. Some also have expressed concern about whether, despite their distinctive coloring, millions of the laptops will really get to and remain in the hands of children.



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This is a prototype of Design Continuum's hand-cranked \$100 laptop, designed for students in developing countries.

The leaders of the "\$100 Laptop Initiative" said they wanted a machine that would be a substitute — at one stroke — for computers, textbooks, libraries, maps and movies that may be missing from poor children's lives.

To save money, the computers will run off the free Linux operating system instead of a proprietary system like Microsoft Windows.

The display screen has been a challenge. In regular laptops, that alone can be worth much more than \$100. For this laptop, the display needed to be much cheaper to produce — around \$35 — and it needed to do more, including switch to read vertically like the page of a book.

"We call that the 'curl up in a bed' mode," and it's crucial to a child using the computer outside school, said Kenneth Jewell, an "envisioner" at Design Continuum, the firm in West Newton, Mass., that was hired to design the laptop's exterior.

Some elements aren't ready. The screen on the prototype unveiled Wednesday is still of the old, expensive type, and the hand crank was for show only. Backers estimate they'll need another six months to complete development of the machine.

Five corporate sponsors, including Google and Advanced Micro Devices, have chipped in \$2 million apiece to form a nonprofit group, One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), to oversee the project.

Nearly a half-dozen developing countries, including the education ministries in Brazil and Thailand, have expressed interest in ordering 1 million or more units, says Alexandra Kahn, spokeswoman for the MIT Media Lab.

The U.N. Development Program has agreed to help distribute the machines.

American students could benefit, too.

Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has proposed a \$54 million program to equip each of his state's 500,000 middle- and high-schoolers with the laptops, which the students would be allowed to keep. Other states may follow suit.

Negroponete — the brother of National Intelligence Director John Negroponete — said there will be a good way to measure the device's impact on the lives of poor children.

Their "first English word will be 'Google,' " he wrote in an e-mail.

Compiled from Reuters, The Washington Post and The Christian Science Monitor

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