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Low-cost laptop targets global digital divide.

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Apart from the hand crank on the side it looks and behaves much like any other laptop on the market. The big difference is the price.

At Dollars 100 (Pounds 58, Euros 85), this notebook computer, the prototype of which was unveiled yesterday in Tunis, costs about a 10th of the price of the average open-market model.

The brain-child of **Nicholas Negroponte**, founder and chairman of the legendary Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab, the laptop was conceived as a way of improving access to technology for students in developing countries.

The machine, part of Mr Negroponte's non-profit One Laptop Per Child initiative whose sponsors include Google, AMD and Rupert Murdoch, will be sold only to ministries of education.

No firm orders for the computer have yet been signed but the group is in talks with several countries, including Brazil, Thailand, Egypt, China, Nigeria and South Africa. Brazil and Thailand had expressed the most sustained commitments to date, Mr Negroponte said.

Mr Negroponte was in-spired to begin the project after seeing Cambodian children benefiting from dona -ted computers. He said production would begin at the end of next year, with up to 10m units shipping in 2007.

The laptops are designed for tough, developing country conditions, with a dual-mode display that can switch from colour to black and white, to make it easier to view in bright sunlight. The screen can be built for Dollars 35 or less, compared with the usual Dollars 100.

The laptops are encased in rubber to make them more durable, and a hand crank provides power when there is no electricity. There is also a dual-mode display that can switch from colour to black and white, to make it easier to view in bright sunlight.

Software has been stripped down to the basics. The computer has a 500 MHz AMD microprocessor and runs on free Linux software. It can connect to the internet through wi-fi.

The one thing the laptops cannot do is save large amounts of data, because they have no hard drive. Instead, they use flash memory like that in a digital camera.

Mr Negroponte said the Dollars 100 price was still too steep for many countries and promised to bring this down further over time as technology advanced. However, it was likely to remain at the Dollars 90-Dollars 100 mark for the next few years.

The laptop is the latest in a series of low-cost devices that have been developed to try to bridge the digital divide. Ndiyo, a UK non-profit group, has developed a computer called Nivo that costs

less than Dollars 100. And Indian scientists have designed a low-cost hand-held device known as the Simputer.

