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$100 laptop expected in late 2006

By Declan McCullagh
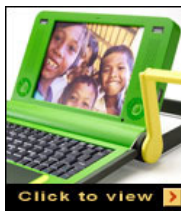Staff Writer, CNET News.com
Published: November 16, 2005, 1:55 PM PST

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TUNIS, Tunisia--A hand-cranked laptop that will cost roughly $100 is expected to be in the hands of schoolchildren in poorer countries by late 2006.

MIT Media Lab Chairman Nicholas Negroponte said at a United Nations Internet summit here that his nonprofit organization was negotiating with manufacturers and would have an initial order placed by February or March. Thailand and Brazil are among the six governments that have showed the strongest interest, Negroponte said.

The final design, shown for the first time here, incorporates a low-power display designed by project engineer Mary Lou Jepsen that's designed to run for up to 40 minutes in black-and-white mode with 1 minute of cranking.

The case color is a combination of a lime green and a yellow hue reminiscent of No. 2 pencils. "It was the hardest decision," said Negroponte, who runs the One Laptop Per Child nonprofit group that's organizing the effort. "We wanted to use color because it's a message of playfulness."

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"This is truly a moving experience," said U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who showed up at the beginning of the event here. "It's also a moving expression of global solidarity and corporate citizenship."

In principle, the project seems simple: Design a laptop with built-in wireless and minimal power consumption, find manufacturers willing to build it for about $100, convince governments to buy it in quantities of at least 1 million as an initial order, and give it to schoolchildren to keep as their own property. (The goal is tens of millions produced and distributed within two years.)

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But negotiating with governments has proved to be strenuous--Negroponte called it "very hard"--and the price quotes to build the machine remain closer to $110 than $100. "We're not even going to promise they're $100," he said. "They may be $115. What we're promising is that the price will float down."

Another worry is what happens to the laptops after they're handed gratis to students with families that are struggling to survive. The average Nigerian, for instance, makes $1,000 a year--so a family would have a strong incentive to sell the laptop because they need the money.

"One of the things you want to do is make sure there's no secondary market," Negroponte said. He said one solution would be to make sure "the machine will be disabled if it doesn't log in to the network for a few days."

The proposed design of the machines calls for a 500MHz processor, 1GB of memory and a unique dual-mode display that can be used in full-color mode, or in a black-and-white sunlight-readable mode. It's not clear yet how much cranking will be needed for the higher-power color

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mode.

It's expected to run an open-source operating system, probably Linux, Negroponte said, rather than a closed-source product from Apple Computer or Microsoft. Companies including Google, Advanced Micro Devices, News Corp. and Red Hat have donated to the project.

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