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PROTOTYPE: The nonprofit One Laptop per Child organization is developing a \$100 computer for the world's poor children.
DESIGN CONTINUUM

A low-cost laptop for every child

Effort to link the world's rural poor to the Internet with a \$100 computer gets a boost from the United Nations.

By **Christa Case** | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

In Cambridge, Mass., Nicholas Negroponte and his team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have been chipping away at a long-held dream: producing a laptop so cheap that governments could afford to link every child in the world to the Internet.

Wednesday, that idea could be lifted to a whole new level.

Mr. Negroponte, chairman of MIT's Media Lab, will unveil his brainchild with United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan at a technology meeting in Tunisia. The meeting of the UN's World Summit on the Information Society is aimed at beginning to put into effect its stated goals where "everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate" in the benefits of information technology.

To do that, MIT and other groups have been pushing hard to create a low-cost laptop.

For example, the Indian government in cooperation with the US-based Jhai Foundation, has plans for developing a \$200 machine for rural villages.

Negroponte's goal is even more aggressive: a \$100 computer.

So far, the MIT group has whittled production costs down to less than \$130.

To save money, it will run off the free Linux operating system instead of a proprietary system like Microsoft Windows. But the proposed machine will be full-color, capable of wireless connection to the Internet, and rugged enough to survive getting dropped in the mud.

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

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

Also, the UN Development Program has agreed to help distribute the machines, particularly to countries whose orders fall short of the million-unit bar Negroponte had originally set to help keep costs down.

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.

OLPC officials estimate they'll need another six months to complete development of the machine. Production will begin in the third quarter of 2006, with distribution late next year or early in 2007, says Ms. Kahn.

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Ultimately, "this is not about machines," says Seymour Papert, a pioneer of childhood learning and a principal with Negroponte of the OLPC effort.

"It is the next big step toward a vision of learning being transformed as radically as medicine, communications, and entertainment," he says.

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