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Thousands of $100 laptops to within a month

Eight nations to get their hands on the kit...

REUTERS

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The **One Laptop per Child** (OLPC) project will deliver nearly 2,500 of its $150 laptops to eight nations by mid-March.

The experiment is a prelude to mass production of the kid-friendly, lime-green-and-white laptops scheduled to begin in July, when five million will be built.

The gadget's technological triumphs include a hand crank to charge its battery, a keyboard that switches between languages, a digital video camera, wireless connectivity and Linux open source operating software tailored for remote regions.

The project's operators say the price should fall to $100 apiece next year, when they hope to produce 50 million of the so-called XO machines before dipping below $100 by 2010, when they aim to reach 150 million of the world's poorest children.

Walter Bender, the group's president of software and content, said: "We're pledging to always drive the price down. Rather than continuing to add features to keep the price inflated, we're keeping the feature set stable and driving the price down."

A string pull, which Bender likens to a "salad spinner", is replacing the hand crank. A minute of pulling generates 10 minutes of electricity. The display switches from colour to black-and-white for viewing in direct sunlight - a feature unavailable in laptops 10 times more expensive.

State educators in Brazil, Libya, Pakistan, Rwanda, Thailand, Uruguay and possibly Ethiopia and the West Bank will receive the first of the machines in February's pilot before a wider rollout to Indonesia and a handful of other countries.

But not everyone is applauding. Some predict the project will be a financial burden on countries that can least afford it with no guarantee of success. Others say the money would be better spent on food, medicine, libraries and schools.

Some African officials question whether the project suits the education of children outside the US. Still others question whether the laptops will simply end up resold in illegal markets by cash-strapped families and communities.

Wayan Vota, whose blog monitors the project, said: "On the technology I think the project is amazing and wonderful. What gives me pause is the social implications, the economic implications [of how they plan to implement it].

"Essentially they want developing countries - or countries that already have a significant amount of debt or other commitments - to borrow even more, or to use even more of their limited resources, to buy the laptops and to implement them in a way that is untried and untested on a large scale."

Vota, who is also director of Geekcorps, a not-for-profit organisation that promotes communication technology in developing countries, predicts staggering costs for some poor nations.

He said: "If you look at the cost of doing one laptop per every Nigerian child it actually turns out to be 73 per cent of the entire Nigerian budget - that's not the educational part but the entire national budget of Nigeria."

Some educators may also be hostile toward it because the machines are designed to encourage students to experiment with everything from music and creating videos to writing their own computer programs, said Ethan Zuckerman, a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society.

Zuckerman said: "You'll find some classrooms where the teachers are excited about letting the students experiment and explore but you'll also find a lot based on rote and repetition."

But Vota and Zuckerman praised OLPC, which was founded by Massachusetts Institute of Technology academics, for its pioneering innovations, including a laptop that needs just 2 watts of power compared to the typical laptop's 30 to 40 watts, and does away with hard drives, relying instead on flash memory and four USB ports to add memory devices.

Groups of the laptops can communicate with each other even without an internet connection under a pioneering "mesh" network so children can swap images and collaborate on projects. It boasts a music sequencer with digital instruments so children can play and create music.

OLPC's Bender said the laptops can be remotely shut down to prevent them from being sold in black markets.

But Vota contends that hackers will try to buy them and will easily crack their code. "For people earning $1 a day the temptation to sell it for $300 will be very strong," he said.

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