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Towards a better life for the people

Children Are Global In Nature—Negroponte

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Prof. Nicholas Negroponte has become a famed person today. He is leading a digital revolution for making a \$100 Laptop of. “a flexible, ultra low-cost, power-efficient, responsive, and durable machine with which nations of the emerging world can leapfrog decades of development, immediately transforming the content and quality of their children’s learning”, according to www.laptop.org site. He calls it the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) Project

Currently on leave from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Nicholas was a pioneer in the field of computer-aided design, and has been a member of the MIT faculty since 1966.

The Professor is attending the Digital World Africa 2006 Conference, where he warned at the opening ceremony that, the OLPC is not about teaching, but about learning.

During a tea break, at the lobby of the Transcorp Hilton, Abuja the venue of the conference, Vanguard’s Luka Binniyat and Miebi Senge took him up on his initiative. Apart from talking technology he also shared his love for children.

What was your inspiration to designing the One Lap Top Per Child Computer?

I have been doing things for children for a long time. For 40 years I have been worrying about children and learning about them. I have been doing projects in developing world for almost twenty five years in very remote and rural parts . . .

Including Africa?

Yea! Including Africa. I was in Senegal in 1982. But what changed was that it became possible to do what was thought impossible. For example, it was not possible to think of a \$100 Laptop per child as recently as two years ago. But, both technically and the imperative to do it has made it possible. So, it is more about timing. It was not that I woke up one morning and decided to do a \$100 Laptop. It was the timing that made it possible, technologically, economically and in terms of telecommunication infrastructure. So it just all happened. It was like moons all lining up in the same order. And the time is right, now.

What is the drive?

You mean my personal drive? It is that I have arrived at a stage in my life that I don’t have to make money. I don’t have to improve myself academically. So it seems like the right time to use all the contact and technology momentum of MIT Media Lab to this for the betterment of the world; for children to learn, particularly for children who will not have access to this because they are too poor; they are too remote or they are too rural. So the imperative was very simple.

Software and Hardware makers go for the profit. Where are you coming from?

I am coming from the point of view that the actions that have to be taken need to have two properties that most people don’t think of. One, it has to be global and it has to be in very large scale. And if it does not have scale, it would not be taken sufficiently serious for industry to change its behaviour. And if it is not global, it will not affect bigger issues like poverty elimination and world peace. So global in scale of the two is a very important element.

What do you think of children?

We don't think of children as consumers that sit there absorbing materials given to them. We think of them a lot more as manufacturers. They make things. They design things. They build things. They communicate with each other. And if learning is having to be to a doing thing, the best way to learn something is to do it. It turns out that with computers you can simulate so much that you can do a lot of "doing" and we have found children able to write computer programmes, make remarkable content and the whole concept of a child just being a passive recipient is changing, so that is the direction we are going.

We understand that Bill Gates and some others in this business have criticized this initiative as untenable. What is your response to this?

I don't respond to such criticism. Because criticising this project is like criticising the church, or the Red Cross. We are a happy humanitarian organisation. We will work with anybody including Microsoft and Intel and others who have criticised us. It is actually shameful to criticise us, because the motivation is not to compete in the market place. The motivation is to change the way education happens by providing a different way of learning. So we don't respond to criticism because always often, these criticisms are often wrong, including that of Bill Gates. Technically they didn't look deep enough for what we were criticised for. In fact, what we were criticised for were not faults at all, they were our strength. Well, I don't want to get into a small nuclear war with Bill Gates, a great baron.

Did your childhood influence the way you think about children today?

Well, I grew up in a very privileged environment. My family was rich. We did things that most people did not have the chance to do. And I grew up in Europe and the United States. So I lived a very privileged life. And in the process of doing that, one of the things I was always able to do was travelling a great deal. I always see the world and understand the world as a single place. So I don't think of myself as American, or Greek, or anything. I always see the world from a global point of view. I don't have a Nationalistic bone in my body, No!. So that probably affected this too. Perhaps the most important thing is that we should not think of these as a Nigerian project, or Brazilian project, or an American project, but to think of it as a global project. And I think that children by their nature are a very global. They are not nationalistic.

Give us a hint about how you acquired the knowledge to conceptualise and design this project.

I went to MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in 1961 and never left. You know MIT makes a very good platform for learning. And I have been there for a very long time- 45 years. I studied Architecture and then did computer aided designs and then read computers.

It was obvious that poverty is about the most common feature in third world countries with deficient power infrastructure. That is why, for sure, the OLPC is manually powered. The question is, how would you be sure that these computers will end up with children, not racketed by adult for adult use.

This is a very common question and a good question. What we are doing is a combination of cultural as well as technical solutions. First of all if it gets to rich children, that isn't bad, especially if the rich children are willing to pay for it. Because we plan to sell to reach children at double the price. So that every child who buys one in the develop world is funding a child in the developing world. So we will actually, specifically try to get them to rich children. The other issue which you did not ask directly is parent selling the machine or people stealing it and taking it to the grey market. I have two observations here. One, in the United States, thousands of cars are being stolen everyday.

Now, one single Post Office truck has never been stolen. Not one! Now why is that so? And the answer is because there is no secondary market for a Post Office truck. It is a Post office truck! You can spray paint on it, you can do anything on it, but you don't want to be seen stealing a Post Office truck. We will make these Laptops so distinct that if you are seen using one, you better be a kid or an adult. Now that doesn't solve anything. People steal from churches; people steal from the Red Cross. But it helps. And technically there are ways of defeating and making it useless if the child himself or herself is not using it. And we will use those techniques. So these combinations of the cultural forces and the technical blocking key solutions we think will help.

Are you encouraged by Nigeria's posture to this project?

We are very encouraged by President Obasanjo. He has been an extra-ordinary supporter, as you have heard in the speech of the Minister of communication this morning. He said, in a few words, we subscribe to One Laptop Per Child. Well, that to me is much support and we have promised him that we will do it for Nigeria first. We have committed to bringing our first machines here. Because we believe that the testing that can happen here, will be the most extreme. The requirements here are much more severe than in some of the other countries.

We know that Nigeria has paid for one million of these computers. What is the global subscription like?

Globally we are planning to launch 5 million machines, one million each in five countries. And the five countries are chosen in as far as we are signing agreements. We are at the moment not signing new contracts until we can show working machines. Even though some countries have asked that we sign agreement. We have recommended that they wait until November when we have the real machines and we are really testing them in the country.