

“One Laptop per Child” initiative in Africa: the issues

By K. Jemael Mohamed

Nicholas Negroponte announced at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2005 that his non-profit foundation One Laptop per Child (OLPC) aims to provide every child in the developing world access to knowledge and modern forms of education.

Mr. Negroponte said his initiative, started in 2003 with a ten-year plan of connecting 600,000 schools will give a laptop to every child in Africa at a price of 100 dollars.

Admittedly, since the luncheon of the project, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab co-founder's project that looks like a myth to many seems to win enormous supports.

United Nations Development Program (UNDP) among world corporate giants like Brightstar cooperation, e-Bay, Google, Nortel Networks and News cooperation back Negroponte's concept of one laptop per child.

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan saw the project as a glorious opportunity for children in the developing countries.

Annan and Negroponte officially unveiled the working prototype of the laptop at the World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis-Tunisia, North Africa.

OLPC directors have disclosed that the laptops are expected to be available

by the end of 2006 or early 2007. Mr. Negroponte said the laptops will only be sold to governments and issued to schools.

Because many schools in developing countries don't have electricity, the laptops will use built-in hand cranks for energy.

According to OLPC, the laptops will have a 500MHz processor and 128M bytes of DRAM, with 500 M bytes of flash memory.

The laptops will also have wireless broadband that, among other things, allows them to work as a mesh network with each laptop being able to talk to its nearest neighbours, creating an ad hoc local area network.

Against the backdrop of the vision to create potent learning tool for the underprivileged children, one can not over emphasise the enviable and immense results to be achieved by selling them to developing

countries.

It was reported last July that Nigeria was the first African country to officially

is not wholeheartedly welcome in some quarters. It has been described as a marketing hype which aims to put money in the pockets of hardware manufacturers and software giants.

At the same time the project is finding it difficult to sell the idea to a

the money would be better spent on universal secondary education. "We need classrooms and teachers more urgently than fancy tools," he averred.

Initially, OLPC announced that each laptop will cost \$ 100; but later warned that price may fluctuate.

The foundation Chairman is also quoted as saying that the actual price of the laptop probably will be \$ 135, maybe \$ 140.

The OLPC boss said they want to make every release cheaper and cheaper. He assured that price will go down to meet their target of \$ 100 by 2008.

OLPC also faces competitive challenges from Intel that has announced to manufacture \$ 400 machines, dubbed Eduwise, for Africa and other developing nations.

The Microsoft consortium has entered into a partnership with the eAfrica Commission, under the aegis of New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) to achieve one of its goals of computerizing schools in Africa.

Nicholas Negroponte and his supporters of the OLPC concept strongly believe that the project is about preparing children to help build their own education and tear down those barriers that prevent them from realising their potentials.



potentially a developing country like

India. India has given Nicholas

Negroponte's "One Laptop per Child" a slap in the face. The Indian Education Secretary Sudeep Banerjee was recently quoted as saying that the One Laptop Per Child idea was a "pedagogically suspect." He believes

ordered and paid for one million of the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) devices. The project which professes to transform the content and quality of children's learning in developing countries