

India's \$35 laptop scheme needs help

AS THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT proudly displayed a [tablet computer](#) which it claimed would cost just \$35, questions were being asked as to whether the device would ever see the light of day. With India's track record, we wouldn't bet on it.

Perhaps the Indian Government and its citizens should take it as some form of flattery that the media decided not to deride the device itself but rather its path to market. On the surface there's little to argue about. A basic touch screen tablet designed for millions of children at a price which would make anyone who purchased an Ipad more than a little jealous.



The problem is, not only did the Indian government fail to provide a release date but it is still looking for a firm to build the device. Then came the news that while India's human resource development minister Kapil Sibal had said, "The motherboard, its chip, the processing, connectivity, all of them cumulatively cost around \$35, including memory, display, everything," the bill of materials ended up at \$47. That figure doesn't even include logistics and labour.

What's more, Sibal's grandiose statement that the device "is our answer to MIT's \$100 computer" seems to put the cart miles before the horse. Given the issues Nicholas Negroponte had getting his vision off the ground, it is a grave mistake to think that even India's government would have an easy ride to realise its dream of cost effective computing for all.

To many Negroponte might just be the guy who dreamt up the '\$100 computer', but the reality is somewhat different. He is the man who started MIT's legendary Media Lab, helped shape tech magazine Wired and even invested in several start-ups including Skype and the Zagat Survey. Negroponte has quite a pedigree, but even his XOPC laptops failed, partly due to the very same problems which it seems Sibal has not considered when bandying about the \$35 a device claim.

When the one laptop per child (OLPC) program was initiated, Negroponte stated that for the project to work, it needed to harness economies of scale. Thanks to Intel railroading the XOPC by releasing the Classmate, the massive, multi-million unit orders never really materialised and the price stagnated. India's tablet, however, gives Negroponte another crack at realising his vision. India, the largest democratic populous in the world not only represents a huge market but the future.

Negroponte's [offer](#) of "free and open access" to Sibal should not be construed as some grandstanding gesture from a man who is clearly disappointed that his efforts fell short of his own goals. It offers the chance for the Indian government to learn from OLPC's mistakes, curtail development steps, lower cost and actually bring a product to market.

Though the past 20 years have seen India become a technology powerhouse, when it comes to low cost laptops its success has so far been less than impressive.

Failures such as the [Simputer](#) and the [Sakshat](#) have left many questioning whether Sibal is merely making a bid for political glory. After all, details were worryingly scant and given that Sibal was

essentially asking for firms to come forward saying it can build the thing at a price point that would satisfy him, it's probably best not to take the \$35 tablet as a given.

Negroponete himself has had a chequered history with the Indian government after it decided to go it alone to try and produce the Sakshat, a computer that the government claimed would sell for just \$10. The Sakshat failed miserably and in the end the government decided to buy a sack load of XOPC devices. The question is, how will Sibal see Negroponete's offer? A way of muscling in on the publicity and the work done by Indian universities and its government or an opportunity for both parties to get what they want.

The truth is, the Indian government needs to work with Negroponete's foundation, if for nothing else, to give it some credibility. The pricing figures Sibal announced seemed like they were plucked straight out of the Mumbai smog. For Indians this sort of pie in the sky political posturing that generates mass publicity simply offers up a chance for the country's politicians to embarrass the country.

Negroponete's plea to Sabil not to limit its tablet to just Indian children should be seen as an opportunity for India to provide the world with an answer to low cost computers with open hardware and software. Common sense suggests it should be a no-brainer but politically, Sibal may not want to be seen as accepting outside help. It's a shame because working with the OLPC would also help both parties to drive down the cost of producing devices through the economy of scale that Negroponete so yearned for.

In the commercial arena competition is a good thing for the consumer, however it's clear that neither the OLPC Foundation nor the Indian government wants to make a load of cash out of low cost computers. As Negroponete has put his ego to one side and extended the hand of cooperation, Sabil and his team should do the same.

Political points scoring by damaging kids' education is something that no one wants to see. A lot of the criticism levelled at the Indian government is testament to the desire to have a low cost computer that can truly affect the lives of millions. One hopes that in the zeal to promote the best of India, Sabil and his team don't ignore others who are willing to help. It would be a shame for everyone, least of all Sabil's political ambitions. μ