Digital guru floats sub-$100 PC

Nicholas Negroponte, chairman and founder of MIT's Media Labs, says he is developing a laptop PC that will go on sale for less than $100 (£53).

He told the BBC World Service programme Go Digital he hoped it would become an education tool in developing countries. He said one laptop per child could be " very important to the development of not just that child but now the whole family, village and neighbourhood". He said the child could use the laptop like a text book. He described the device as a stripped down laptop, which would run a Linux-based operating system, "We have to get the display down to below $20, to do this we need to rear project the image rather than using an ordinary flat panel.

"The second trick is to get rid of the fat , if you can skinny it down you can gain speed and the ability to use smaller processors and slower memory." The device will probably be exported as a kit of parts to be assembled locally to keep costs down. Mr Negroponte said this was a not for profit venture, though he recognised that the manufacturers of the components would be making money. In 1995 Mr Negroponte published the bestselling Being Digital, now widely seen as predicting the digital age. The concept is based on experiments in the US state of Maine, where children were given laptop computers to take home and do their work on.

While the idea was popular amongst the children, it initially received some resistance from the teachers and there were problems with laptops getting broken. However, Mr Negroponte has adapted the idea to his own work in Cambodia where he set up two schools together with his wife and gave the children laptops. "We put in 25 laptops three years ago , only one has been broken, the kids cherish these things, it's also a TV a telephone and a games machine, not just a textbook."
Mr Negroponte wants the laptops to become more common than mobile phones but conceded this

was ambitious. "Nokia make 200 million cell phones a year, so for us to claim we're going to make 200 million laptops is a big number, but we're not talking about doing it in three or five years, we're talking about months." He plans to be distributing them by the end of 2006 and is already in discussion with the Chinese education ministry who are expected to make a large order. "In China they spend $17 per child per year on textbooks. That's for five or six years, so if we can distribute and sell laptops in quantities of one million or more to ministries of education that's cheaper and the marketing overheads go away."