Title:
Do the world’s poor children really need a $100 laptop?

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Summary:
The chairman and founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab recently launched the $100 laptop to the world’s media. Is it necessary?

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Article Body:
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MIT rolled out a non-profit association, called One Laptop Per Child, to design, manufacture and distribute laptops that will be provided to various governments at cost price and issued to children by participating schools on a basis of one laptop per child. These machines will be rugged, Linux-based and so energy-efficient that hand cranking alone can generate sufficient power for operation.

The internet connectivity question is addressed in a few different ways, including the use of Wi-Fi, WiMax, 3G and satellites, as well as fibre, coaxial cable and plain old telephony. Competition, deregulation and the fact that the developing world is now the only new telecommunications market, will all perhaps contribute to wider reaching availability, greater bandwidth and, most importantly in these countries, lower connectivity costs.

The solution offered is a $100 laptop: a durable, versatile machine at a price the developing world can afford. The fact that this has been achieved is actually a remarkable achievement, the very notion of which until very recently was shunned by industry leaders as impossible.

The strongest argument in favour of this cheap laptop idea rests on the laurel that the greatest assets of a people are its children, and so the highest social priority is on the education of these children. Throughout disease, natural disasters, war and poverty, education features as the primary solution to the problem.

Most educators would argue that effective learning stems from a fundamental

level of personal curiosity about a subject, and in a sense the ability to self-teach. The key point here is not so much what each child knows so far, it is rather the perspective that they can bring to bear on a problem. It is well known from case studies that network learning, augmented by technology, computers and Internet connectivity, bears heavy fruit in academic terms.

The economics of a $100 laptop base around the following: Around half the purchase price of a new laptop is taken up by the cost of sales, marketing, distribution, and of course the ever shameless profit-margin. By sidestepping the entire retail market and distributing directly to governments in the absence of profit-driven aims a huge chunk of the price per model is evaporated.

Physically the most expensive aspect would be the display. The use of an MIT technology called E-Ink that offers the potential to be as low as 10 cents per square inch and offer daylight readable clear resolution is promising. The processor, memory and power can be stripped down, as the functionality of the machine need not be so advanced beyond surfing, email and word processing all as open-source, slimmed down software that takes up little computing resources.

It’s now without doubt that the $100 laptop will happen. As to whether it’s a good idea? Everything about says yes, although the sociologists have yet to gather their argument on this one it seems.