

Low-cost ICT devices –

ICT is changing the world that people live in. The question is whether the new trend of marketing affordable end user products in developing countries actually promotes development?

Rising demand and steady improvement of infrastructures are attracting the increased interest of western ICT hardware manufacturers in capturing the growing markets of developing countries. There can be no argument in principle against introducing needs-based, affordable devices to certain market segments. In fact, some low-cost devices such as the Asus EeePC are proving very popular on European markets, too. However, from a development perspective we should be encouraging solutions which are developed in developing countries or with the collaboration of the target group. Approaches initiated by the developing countries themselves, such as the Grameenphone Community Information Centres (<http://www.gpcic.org>) and the simputer (<http://www.simputer.org>) show that ICT helps to expand the income-earning, educational and communications opportunities available to the poor.

Chances and risks

A highly-publicised and much-discussed example of low-cost devices that show promise of promoting development is the so-called “100 dollar laptop” or “One Laptop per Child” (OLPC) initiative. Ethiopia and China have expressed an interest in using these devices for educational purposes. Yet these countries are among those under fire for Internet censorship, strict governmental control of their citizens’ communications and persecution of critical thinkers. Under such conditions, can the use of these devices improve school students’ development and education? Do these nations also aim to promote critical thinking skills, one of the objectives of the OLPC initiative (<http://www.olpc.org>)? It is more likely that their main objective is to lay the groundwork for economic growth through the early learning of IT skills.

Creating development opportunities most importantly involves improving access to knowledge, to allow people to learn and qualify for skilled jobs. Amazing educational outcomes can be achieved by offering free access to learning – even without teacher guidance and classrooms – as



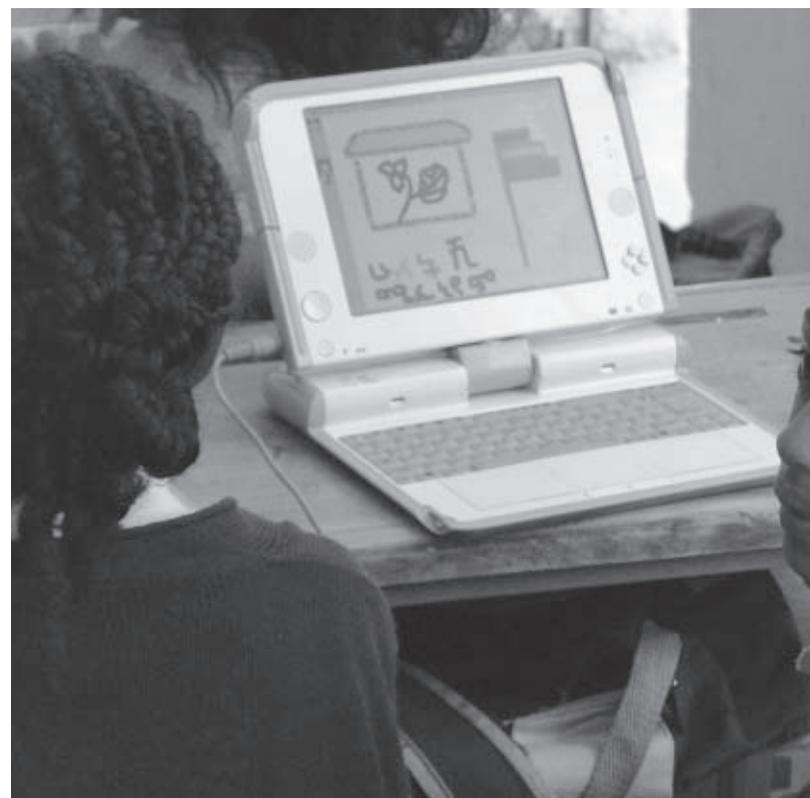
Geraldine de Bastion

was clearly demonstrated by the “hole in the wall” experiment (<http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com>). This approach, which has already been tested on several continents, is based on interaction, collaborative learning and the placement of computers in safe, public locations – not solitary learning with the aid of a computer or cell phone. It shows alternatives to the western idea of “one device per user”, which does not always reflect the reality of the developing countries.

What can development cooperation do?

There is a risk that the spread of technical solutions such as the 100 dollar laptop to environments where access to national and international sources of knowledge is not free, or where there are no plans to promote a culture of learning, will lack the desired effect.

Development cooperation should ultimately be about providing opportunities and options – and these should include creative learning environments, free access to learning and computer acquisition as part of an overall, integrated strategy.



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new solutions for development?

Since Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have fallen in price, making “low-cost devices” a viable option for the developing world, they have become a hot topic. This article argues that low-cost devices such as the so-called “100 dollar laptops” are a boon to development cooperation, and although their use is still hesitant at present, their future potential is enormous.



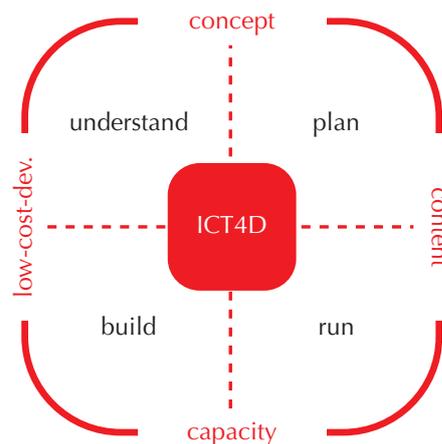
Thomas Rolf

Is it absurd to give children in Ethiopia a laptop which is worth more than their parents earn in a year? Particularly when hunger is stalking the land and the education system is crying out for school buildings, books and teachers?

“ICT for Development” (ICT4D)

Education is undeniably one of the most sustainable ways to change people’s lives for the better. However, the presumption here is that a wide section of the population has access to learning and information, and that abstract and critical thinking are encouraged. To achieve these objectives, a combination of sound development strategy, capacity-building, teaching content and efficient technology (see image) has proved to be successful. It is a widespread misconception that “ICT4D” is a technologically dominated approach. In this context ICT is simply a means to an end. It is an indispensable tool that both provides information efficiently, affordably and on an ongoing basis, and allows the necessary communication.

particularly disadvantaged. Years or even decades will pass before investment in national ICT infrastructure reaps dividends across entire countries. Therefore, in an effort to prevent the rural populations from being left behind, the availability of low-cost devices makes



“islands of information” a feasible option for education and private sector promotion. Such devices can be used in numerous ways, from providing price information systems for agricultural products, through “community information centres” to various applications in the fields of education and health.

As an integral part of a robust overall strategy, it is indeed correct to give children in Ethiopia a laptop, because even just the value of the books stored on them exceeds that of the laptop by far. This in itself is a crucial point. (Besides, who would deny children access to schoolbooks because they cost as much as their parents earn in a month?) It may seem ironic to distribute emergency aid and computers at the same time, but it is one way of breaking the endless cycle of dependency. The true madness would be to underestimate the lasting value of the learning which ICT4D can additionally deliver.

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Low-cost devices in rural areas?

Each day the gap between the least-developed countries and the industrialised nations is widening in terms of ICT distribution and use. People in the rural areas are



Photo: Th. Rolf

Ethiopia and China are interested in using low cost devices in their national educational programmes.

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