

The "e-green" Revolution in Uruguay's Classrooms



IDRC's Vice-President, Resources, and Chief Financial Officer, Denys Vermette checks out the XO laptop.
IDRC Photo

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By Susan Murray

Primary students attending public schools in Uruguay will soon be seeing green in their classrooms, thanks to a global pilot initiative to deliver millions of low-cost laptops to the world's poorest children within the next year. The distinctive green, textbook-size computers were developed by the non-profit [One-Laptop-Per-Child program](#) (OLPC) project. They feature a hand crank or foot pedal to charge the battery, a keyboard that switches between languages, a digital video camera, wireless connectivity, and open-source operating software tailored for remote regions.

Dubbed the "XO," the durable computer was unveiled at the November 2005 World Summit on the Information Society by Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of OLPC and creator of the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Cost was kept low – about US\$100 per computer – by slashing unnecessary functions, storage space, and energy requirements.

OLPC's goal is to extend Internet access to children living in remote areas by selling the laptops directly to governments for distribution through schools. Several developing countries have since committed to the project, with the Government of Uruguay announcing its "Ceibal Project" in December 2006.

Uruguay's president, Tabaré Vazquez, sees this project as promoting equity as much as education, says Juan Grompone of the Faculty of Engineering at the University of the Republic and an advisor to the Ceibal project. "Half of the children in Uruguay live below the poverty line," he says. "This is also a country that can no longer rely on our agricultural base. We have to prepare our students for the new knowledge economy."

The first phase, now underway, will see laptops given to the 150 students in the town of Cardal in the province of Florida, about 100 kilometres from the capital, Montevideo. The Laboratorio Tecnológico del Uruguay is implementing this pilot. Project organizers have ambitious plans to provide laptops to all primary school students in Uruguay by 2009.

Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is assisting the OLPC roll-out program in Uruguay. Five other Latin American countries have also expressed interest. IDRC supported a face-to-face meeting with partners to determine how to best analyze and evaluate the ongoing pilots and will support a future meeting scheduled to assess the initiative's progress.

Uruguay, a laboratory for the world

While many have hailed the project's attempt to bridge the world's digital divide, some have questioned the social and logistical issues surrounding its goals. IDRC is supporting an analysis of the issues surrounding the provision of laptops to children in developing countries.

"For example, there is still a debate among some teachers on whether the government should be spending money on technology when many kids still need basic nutrition," says program officer Alicia Richero, who is based in IDRC's regional office in Montevideo.



Concerns over theft, repairs, and maintenance have also been raised.

However, Juan Grompone is optimistic. He says that Uruguay is a perfect location to test the feasibility of the one laptop per child program since the small country has only 300 000 primary school students. In addition, he says that the president is committed to the project and the national telecom company is pledging to provide Internet access to all schools by 2009.

"When it comes to one laptop per child, Uruguay will be the laboratory for the world," he says.

Susan Murray is a Senior Communications Strategist at IDRC.