Free computer tablets: has this scheme really been thought out?

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At a seminar on June 15 hosted by The Nation and Asean TV on the subject "July 3 Election: Foreign Trade, Investment and Tourism", four guest panellists participated, each representing a major or significant Thai political party. Each panellist was interviewed by an Asean TV moderator and then in a question-and-answer session by members of the audience.

One of the subjects discussed was the state of the education system in Thailand and how each party would address the shortcomings of the system. The representative of the Pheu Thai Party, Dr Olarn Chaipravat, chief economic strategist of the party, stated that his party would provide Android Tablets, at a cost of about Bt5,000 each, to 800,000 to 1 million middle-school children nationwide at a cost to the government of only about Bt4 billion to Bt5 billion and would "… encourage parents to oversee their children's studies. These moves are aimed at solving the issue of the lack of skills in both foreign languages and mathematics among our children." (Front page, The Nation, Thursday, June 16). This move, he postulated, would go a long way to solve the education crisis.

I do wonder if Dr Olan and his colleagues have thought through the additional costs necessary to support this proposed use of Android Tablets. For instance, many of the students to whom the tablets would be issued barely have enough money for shoes to walk to school. To me, shoes would seem to be a priority. But I digress. Let me pose some questions related to the tablets:

Are there already enough computers in Thailand's schools so that the students are already computer literate? Bear in mind that most of the parents of the children today are not.

Who will sell these Android Tablets to the Ministry of Education and schools? How many suppliers?

Is this distribution of 800,000 to 1 million Android Tablets a one-time shot or a long-term repetitious programme to cover future students coming into the educational system?

Will this transaction be totally transparent? How will that be accomplished?

Who will teach the students and the teachers how to use the Tablets? Who will teach the parents of the children about the use of the Tablets? How much will that cost? Who pays for such instruction?

To effectively use the Tablets, they must be able to connect to the Internet. And to do that, there must be WiFi routers present in the schools or learning places. How many will need to be installed? How much will they cost? Who pays for such installations?

For the WiFi system to work, it must be connected to a telephone landline or be linked to a mobile phone or a satellite? Thailand is still in the Dark Ages with its antiquated 2G telecom system - way behind all of its neighbours. How many such connections will be required? How long will they take to be installed? Who will install them? How much will they cost? Who pays for such installations?

Who will pay for the air time that each Tablet uses via WiFi and landline or mobile phone charges? How much will that be?

Many of the school children who will receive the Tablets come from homes without electricity. How will they charge the batteries in their Tablet? Who will pay for such electricity supply?

If there are few PCs/computers in children's homes, how can the students synchronise their Tablets to back up information? Who pays for that? How much will that cost?

Software for Tablets is constantly being improved and made available to users. How can you be sure that the upgrades are installed in each of the Tablets? How much will these upgrades cost? Who will pay for them?

Without access to the Internet, upgrades can only be installed from another computer? Whose computer? In rural areas?

Children, being children, are likely to be somewhat rough on their Tablets and may damage them, crack the screens, drop them, break them on hard surfaces or in liquids, lose them, have them stolen, and otherwise cause them to be useless for the purposes intended. What will stop parents from selling the Tablets to pay for family expenses? Will such children be entitled to a replacement? What procedure must the child follow to prove loss of the unit, whether or not he or she is at fault? Who pays for the replacement?

What happens if a child misuses the Tablet for personal purposes - i.e. playing games? Spending time on social networks?

The lifespan of a computer - and the Tablet is a computer - is about three years. What happens thereafter to the child who receives a Tablet today? What happens to the million or so Tablets? How will they be disposed of? Who will pay for the collection and waste processing of the Tablets?

The 800,000 to 1 million students - is that a present count or does it cover new students coming into the system every year? Will more Tablets be purchased for these new students? How many? What cost? Who pays?

Will the Tablets become the property of the student or will they remain the property of the State? If they are given away by the State, what is the legal authority to do so?

Do the Tablets need to be returned to the State? What happens if the Tablets are not returned?

Is the Android Tablet programme a one-off program or will it continue into the future? For how long? At what cost? Who pays?

I trust that those in the Pheu Thai Party who have worked out this programme have done their maths and factored in all of the related costs and the long-term impacts and residual costs and benefits therefrom.

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