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INNOVATION ECONOMY

## Differing visions, with one goal

The Boston Globe

By Scott Kirsner

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Last November, Iqbal Quadir and Nicholas Negroponte sat next to one another on a dais, addressing the United Nations press corps.

The two men had taken very different paths to the UN: Quadir was born to a middle-class family in Bangladesh, and Negroponte, the child of a Greek shipping magnate, spent his formative years on Manhattan's Upper East Side. And as Quadir and Negroponte laid out their visions for bringing new technologies to the developing world, they could hardly have been more different.

Negroponte had been meeting with heads of state to try to persuade them to purchase millions of the inexpensive XO laptops he'd helped design. "For the next few years," Negroponte told the reporters, "I deal with governments - federal governments."

If Negroponte, founder of One Laptop Per Child, was following a "top-down" strategy to get his laptop disseminated, then Quadir was advocating a bottom-up approach. Through a joint venture called GrameenPhone, Quadir had helped bring telephony to infrastructure-bereft Bangladesh, and in the process turned tens of thousands of people across the country into entrepreneurs.

Grameen's "village phone ladies" took out small loans to buy cellphones, then sold talk time on the phones to their neighbors. Suddenly, some of the women were earning \$1,000 a year in a country where the average income is about \$380.

"I have learned from history that actually, the countries that are developed,

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where governments behave and serve the public, are those where the citizens have empowered themselves through technologies and business," Quadir said at the UN.





In the months since that news conference, Quadir has raised \$50 million and started a new center at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Legatum Center for Development and Entrepreneurship. The center, located in the same Cambridge office complex as One Laptop Per Child, will begin offering scholarships next fall to MIT students crafting plans for new businesses that could help developing countries.

"Our vision is bottom-up economic development - creating more GrameenPhones in the world," Quadir says.

Quadir is also working on a project to deploy small, portable generators throughout Bangladesh, to see if selling electricity to those who lack it could be as successful as peddling minutes on a cellphone. That venture, Cambridge-based Emergence BioEnergy Inc., has attracted \$1 million in backing. The Emergence project has been in the works for three years, and it will be the next big test of Quadir's bottom-up approach.

Quadir conducted a six-month field trial of generators in 2005, using a so-called Stirling generator made by Dean Kamen's New Hampshire company, Dekka Research and Development. But when Emergence deploys more generators next year, it'll use a machine from Washington-based Infinia Corp. that is already in production, unlike Kamen's device. The Infinia generator spits out one kilowatt of electricity and it can use the excess heat produced in power generation for other purposes, such as dehydrating fruits and vegetables grown in the village, keeping them from spoiling. The generator is powered by a plentiful fuel - cow dung - which it first converts into methane gas. [Continued...](#)

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