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# **INFORMATION NOTES**



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## **FINAL NOTE ON WFP YEAR 2000 (Y2K) PREPARATIONS**

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## BACKGROUND

1. The Board took note of an information paper on this subject (WFP/EB.3/99/INF/16) at its Third Regular Session in October 1999.
2. Y2K, also known variously as the Year 2000 Problem, or “the millennium bug”, is the term used to describe the potential failure of information technology (IT) prior to, on or after 1 January 2000. This potential exists because of the widespread practice of using two digits, not four, to represent the year in computer databases, software applications and hardware chips.
3. Y2K-related difficulties were predicted to arise when that year is “00” and IT would be unable to differentiate it from the year 1900. The associated but unrelated calendar anomaly that must be included in Y2K systems repairs is the fact that Y2K is a leap year, unlike most other turn-of-the-century years.
4. The Year 2000 Problem is not limited to IT systems but may potentially affect all systems with in-built date-sensitive micro-processors (embedded chips) such as those systems which manage national power, gas and water supplies. WFP initiated its assessment of Y2K and its potential impact through reviewing date storage methods in mainframe and PC-based applications. This work began in the late autumn of 1996.
5. In the summer of 1998, WFP adopted the four-phased approach suggested by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in their July 1998 Session. This approach was comprised of Awareness, Inventory Assessment, Action Plans and Contingency Plans. In October 1998 WFP started the awareness process with a “Year 2000 Brief” issued to all headquarters units and offices away from headquarters. This document was followed by a briefing note—“Preparing for the Year 2000”—in December 1998.
6. The Y2K Project was promoted as a business/management issue through the guidelines on inventory assessment (March 1999), action planning (April 1999) and contingency planning (July 1999). The strategic focus of the Y2K Project was to ensure that:
  - a) the food pipeline for the hungry poor was not interrupted;
  - b) the services available to WFP staff were protected; and
  - c) the operational environment was maintained reasonably secure.
7. This focus required alliances with major partners—FAO and IFAD in Rome for finance, personnel and infrastructure; UNDP and the Office of the United Nations Security Coordinator (UNSECOORD) for security coordination in the field; UNICEF, UNHCR and other agencies for logistics; the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for communications with the G-8 countries (through the International Y2K Cooperation Center (IY2KCC), established by the United Nations and the World Bank)—that were preparing for the technological impact of Y2K. It also required the inclusion of Y2K compliance clauses in the contracts with service providers.
8. The existing management structures were used for the implementation of the Y2K Project. They were supported by a network of Y2K focal points in all country/liaison offices and headquarters divisions, Regional Coordinators in the four Regional Bureaux, two Corporate Coordinators and one Project Manager at the central level. The WFP Executive Staff Sub-Group on Administration constituted itself as Y2K Steering



Committee and set up a Task Force consisting of the divisional focal points, Regional and Corporate Coordinators at headquarters and headed by the Project Manager.

9. Based on requests from country, liaison and headquarters offices, the Executive Director approved a Y2K budget of US\$1.162 million (including a reserve of 20 percent for late requests). Most was earmarked for the upgrading of IT, telecommunications (TC) and security systems and the purchase of generators in case of power failures. The Africa Region (OSA) alone absorbed 72 percent of this budget; 14 percent went to headquarters; 8 percent to the Latin America and Caribbean Region (OLC); and 5 percent to the Asia and Eastern Europe Region (OAE). The necessary equipment was installed before the end of 1999.
10. Food was stocked to authorized levels in WFP warehouses at the discretion of Country Directors to guarantee feeding of beneficiaries for at least three months in the event of an interruption in the food pipeline.
11. Y2K awareness of Country Directors was enhanced in the final phase on a selective basis, using analytical country information that was obtained from a variety of sources.

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### CRITICAL EVENT PERIOD

12. WFP was thus well prepared for the critical event or “roll-over” period from 1999 to the year 2000. A “critical event team” was established at headquarters, consisting of key managers who were either on the premises or on call from 31 December 1999 to 4 January 2000, when regular business resumed. Critical event decision-makers were also identified in all country and liaison offices. One WFP senior staff participated in the United Nations Y2K Crisis Team in New York.
13. On 1 January 2000 a selected group of 28 countries were called in order to ascertain the individual country status. No unusual developments were reported.
14. By 3 January 2000 all country and liaison offices had reported on a standard template about eventual disruptions in main areas (electric power, telecommunications and computer systems, transportation systems, energy, water supply and sanitation, finance systems, public services, host country status, humanitarian impact). Only minor disruptions were reported in some countries.
15. By 11 January 2000 an update on the situation in all country and liaison offices showed some additional disruptions. None of them were of a nature to suggest that the “millennium bug” would cause humanitarian disasters anywhere.
16. It cannot be excluded that Y2K-related disruptions will occur in a number of countries during the months to come. They are, however, not likely to affect WFP operations. The WFP alert has therefore been called off, the critical event team dissolved, and the Y2K Project closed with effect from 31 January 2000.

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### LESSONS LEARNED BEYOND Y2K

17. WFP’s Y2K Project met its goals of ensuring that the food pipeline for the hungry poor was not interrupted, that staff were not harmed and that material assets were protected during the transition from 1999 to 2000. Furthermore, there were no significant systems interruptions. Existing management structures were used in the Project, thus avoiding



duplication in work and reducing costs. The Project strengthened inter-agency coordination and WFP's leading role in logistics coordination. A robust headquarters "critical event" plan—and a management structure to support it—were created. These can be adapted in the emergency planning done for other potential disasters. Finally, frank "lessons learned" were extracted during the concluding, evaluation phase of the Project. Relating mainly to communications and management issues, they look beyond the Y2K Problem, and will be of use to managers at all levels of the organization.

18. **On the communications side:** There is need to improve the e-mail address system, achieve a more effective use of e-mail generally, and the need to introduce systems that help to prioritize and manage information. Country office staff responded more quickly to information requests when given customized forms on clearly defined subjects.
19. Managers have difficulties in determining corporate priorities when confronted with an overload of information and requests. For large scale projects corporate buy-in is essential. This requires thorough briefing on new initiatives. Despite advancements in communications technologies, it cannot be assumed that information is read or absorbed just because it is offered. Meetings or on-site presentations are more effective at producing results or raising awareness. Participatory approaches are to be preferred.
20. **On the management side:** Large-scale projects require continuity in the management team. Early clarification of roles is essential.
21. Projects of a technical nature should not stay too long in the technical "arena" if they are to be embraced by all staff.
22. A clear link must be established between the project activity and improved operations to avoid low-priority ranking. Staff must be convinced that there are definite consequences of action/inaction to requests for information—both in terms of corporate results and as regards individual accountability. This is particularly true for requirements with a long lead-time.
23. During large-scale projects that require Programme-wide responses, an ongoing analysis should be made of which offices neglect to respond to information requests, and do so in a timely fashion. Different approaches should be developed for offices that fail to comply.
24. Being perceived as a leader by partners in an important area provides collateral benefits. WFP country offices should seize on such opportunities when presented with them.

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## CONCLUSIONS

25. The Y2K Project gave WFP an ideal opportunity to update, upgrade and harmonize its IT/TC and security systems in a shorter time frame and with higher priority than would otherwise have been applied, using a special provision in the Programme Support and Administrative (PSA) budget.
26. The project has enhanced the leading role of WFP as the logistics organization of the United Nations system.
27. Communication channels with FAO and IFAD in personnel, finance, security and infrastructure matters were strengthened.
28. The G-8 countries have acknowledged the effectiveness of the United Nations system in responding to potential humanitarian threats. The role of OCHA has been reinforced.



29. Intense Y2K staff communications have developed a sense of togetherness between field and headquarters staff.
30. The success of the Y2K Project, and the fact that no significant Y2K-related disruptions have so far occurred, has conveyed a general sense of achievement to WFP staff at large, who are now better prepared to face new challenges that lie ahead.

