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Fruit Scheme

Delegations will find attached the report from the Commission COM(2012) 768 final.

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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND
THE COUNCIL**

**in accordance with Article 184(5) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1234/2007 on the
implementation of the European School Fruit Scheme**

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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL

in accordance with Article 184(5) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1234/2007 on the implementation of the European School Fruit Scheme

1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Article 184(5) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1234/2007¹ (hereinafter ‘the Single Common Market Organisation (CMO) Regulation’), this report concerns the implementation of the European School Fruit Scheme (hereinafter ‘the Scheme’) over the first three years of its functioning in the period running from 1 August 2009 to 31 July 2012.

The Single CMO Regulation requires that the report address two main issues in particular, namely the extent to which the Scheme has promoted the establishment of well-functioning School Fruit Schemes in Member States and the impact of the Scheme on the improvement of children’s eating habits.

The report is based primarily on an analysis of the information provided by Member States on the application of school fruit schemes in their countries, and more specifically on the information from annual monitoring reports and evaluation reports, submitted in accordance with Article 12 of Commission Regulation (EC) No 288/2009², as well as on the findings of an external evaluation. Those sources are based on data for school years 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 only, since school year 2011/2012 has not yet been evaluated.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE SCHEME AND ITS MAIN ELEMENTS

The foundations of the Scheme were laid down in the context of the 2007 reform of the Common Market Organisation for Fruit and Vegetables. The Council invited the Commission to come forward with a proposal for a school fruit scheme to tackle the issue of falling consumption of fruit and vegetables among children. The European Parliament also fully endorsed the initiative. Political agreement on the Commission proposal was reached in November 2008, paving the way for € 90 million of European funds to co-finance the purchase and distribution of fresh and processed fruit and vegetables and bananas to school children every year, as well as for a number of related measures.

The Scheme's overall objective is to provide a policy and funding framework at the EU level for Member States initiatives aimed at reversing the declining consumption of fruit and vegetables particularly for children, who are the most vulnerable consumers. The aim is thus to increase, on a lasting basis, the share of these products in children's diets at an early stage

¹ Council Regulation (EC) No 1234/2007 of 22 October 2007 establishing a common organisation of agricultural markets and on specific provisions for certain agricultural products, OJ L 299, 16.11.2007, p. 1.

² Commission Regulation (EC) No 288/2009 of 7 April 2009 laying down detailed rules for applying Council Regulation (EC) no 1234/2007 as regards Community aid for supplying fruit and vegetables, processed fruit and vegetables and banana products to children in educational establishments, in the framework of a School Fruit Scheme, OJ L 94, 8.4.2009, p. 38.

when their eating habits are being formed. Furthermore, the positive impact on consumption would meet CAP objectives including the promotion of earnings in agriculture, the stabilisation of markets and the availability of current and future supplies. Similarly, a more educational dimension was envisaged through mandatory accompanying measures which serve as a tool to establish links with agriculture, nutrition, health, environment and physical activity, working together to enhance the overall impact of the Scheme. In addition, the Scheme contributes to the EU objective of combating rising levels of obesity and chronic diseases linked to an unhealthy diet, as set out in the 2007 White paper on ‘Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues’³.

Member States wishing to participate in the Scheme have to draw up strategies at a national or regional level in conjunction with public health and education authorities prior to the period of implementation. The EU funds co-finance national programmes up to a level of 50%, which is increased to 75% for convergence and outermost regions of the EU, with the balance provided from national and/or private contributions.

The key elements of the Scheme are as follows:

- (a) distribution of products in educational establishments, ranging from nurseries to secondary schools.
- (b) accompanying measures to raise awareness about the importance of fruit and vegetable consumption as well as healthy eating habits, and to strengthen the link with agriculture through for example farms visits or gardening sessions.
- (c) networking, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of Schemes in individual Member States.

3. EVALUATION OF THE SCHEME’S FUNCTIONING AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN’S EATING HABITS

In addition to the abovementioned Member State and external evaluations, the European Court of Auditors (hereinafter the ECA) published its Special report No 10 in 2011⁴ containing the results of the joint audit of the Scheme in conjunction with the School Milk Scheme (SMS), in which it considered the effectiveness of the two schemes. ECA in particular assessed whether participation is sufficiently encouraged, whether the EU subsidies have a direct impact on the beneficiaries’ consumption and if the schemes are likely to meet their educational objectives and influence future eating habits. Furthermore, in 2011 a study was conducted by CEPS⁵ under a special contract with the Commission, which focused on estimating and evaluating the administrative burdens generated by the School Milk and School Fruit Schemes.

³ White Paper on a Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues’, COM(2007) 279 final, 30.5.2007.

⁴ Court of Auditor’s Special report No 10 of 2011 ‘Are the School Milk and School Fruit Schemes effective?’.

⁵ Centre for European Political Studies (CEPS) Special report ‘Measurement of administrative burdens generated by European legislation, Administrative burden quantifications of School Fruit Scheme and School Milk Scheme’, 7 December 2011.

3.1. Establishing well-functioning Schemes in Member States

Given the large number of parameters which could be used to assess the extent to which a well-functioning Scheme has been established in the Member States, this report focuses on evaluating the Scheme's administrative implementation in Member States and the challenges in terms of (a) its efficiency, (b) difficulties encountered, (c) administrative costs and burdens, (d) accompanying measures, and finally financing issues.

3.1.1. Administrative implementation and its challenges

There are various approaches and conceptual designs for implementing of a well-run school fruit scheme. Even within a single Member State or region, the way the Scheme is run may differ because of the decisions taken at school level. The national evaluations assessed the implementation of the Scheme and the satisfaction of schools and staff involved in its practical implementation. This so-called process evaluation has established that the Scheme has been successfully embedded in Member States and that it has been very well received by children, teachers and parents alike. In the 2010/2011 school year, many of the problems experienced in the first year of application were to a large extent overcome and the Scheme is running smoothly in the vast majority of Member States. There are, however, still a number of Member States and/or regions finding it difficult to implement (see subparagraph (b)).

Evaluations further conclude that the requirement to establish a partnership between education, health and agriculture has been met successfully, especially in the phase of adapting the European Scheme to the national/regional framework and when developing the scheme's conceptual design or strategy. This partnership was somewhat less structured at school level, which can be attributed to lack of contact between the various stakeholders.

(a) Efficiency of the Scheme

The external evaluation established that there is no easy way of calculating which schemes are the most efficient. As the performance of the Scheme is characterised by several results which could all be used as impact indicators, the efficiency has to be measured in more than one way. For example, it is difficult to say whether reaching more children with a lower consumption increase would be better than reaching fewer children with a higher consumption increase. However, the evaluation assessed the efficiency in an approximate way.

The findings show that the ratio between the quantity of fruit and vegetable products distributed and the budgets spent varies significantly between Member States (from € 0.90 to € 7 per kilo). This price, however, can be attributed partly to distribution costs, which vary considerably for a number of reasons such as geographical features (remote areas, islands), population density and the choice of products offered. A low price per kilogram of products does not in itself guarantee efficient distribution.

Looking at the frequency of distribution in relation to the budget spent, it appears that the most efficient schemes are those where a small amount of money is spent on products for a relatively high frequency of distribution, such as in Estonia (€0.91 per kilo of fruit with 2.6 distributions per week). The higher distribution efficiency in terms of the products distributed can be partly explained by a lower price being spent per kilo of products.

When calculating the ratio between the numbers of children in the target group reached and the budget spent per child, it is clear that 8 Member States or regions have a high share of

participating children. They reach more than 60 % of their target group because their spending per child is significantly lower. Member States or regions which spend with a very high expenditure per child generally reach only a small percentage of children. There are some exceptions, such as Hungary, which on the other hand distributes only one type of fruit (apples).

Moreover, the evaluation observed that the level of EU co-financing influences the extent to which the target group is covered. A higher percentage of EU aid enables Member States to reach more children within a target group.

(b) Challenges and difficulties related to implementation

Understandably, the greatest implementation difficulties were encountered in the first year following the Scheme's launch in 2009. These start-up problems mainly concerned the high administrative burden, logistical/organisational challenges and securing the required national funding.

The administrative burden and problems related to national or private co-financing are explained in greater detail in subchapter (c) and in Chapter 3.1.2. respectively.

Logistical problems mostly concerned schools' capacities to handle the preparation and distribution of products. There were also problems with finding suppliers, particularly in remote areas. Member States have managed to overcome start-up problems in different ways. For example, in order to alleviate logistical difficulties, the Netherlands has reduced the number of suppliers. Consequently, the volume of the contract has become more attractive for product delivery, and administrative efforts and control costs have been reduced. Poland introduced a flat rate per portion, which has had a positive effect on simplifying and streamlining the process of granting aid.

(c) Administrative costs and burdens

In general, in terms of documentation, reporting and control obligations the evaluation reports consider the administrative work related to the Scheme to be manageable and on average level compared to other policy measures under the CAP. Thus, these requirements do not in themselves constitute an obstacle preventing Member States or schools from participating.

The external evaluation establishes that the administrative burden in regionally organised schemes, such as Catalonia or Saxony-Anhalt, appears to be higher in relation to the number of participating schools and children than it is in centrally organised schemes. This is in line with the CEPS report, which indicates that such burdens are like fixed costs and do not increase when the scale of the scheme increases.

On the other hand, the evaluations identified considerable burdens in relation to implementing and executing the Scheme at school level. Such burdens arise from the organisational challenges linked to Member States' decisions on how the Scheme should be implemented. In certain cases schools are even entrusted with securing and managing the contracts with suppliers. In most participating Member States and regions schools are faced with tasks related to the logistics and delivery of products, as well as managing their preparation and distribution to children. This is time-consuming and requires additional manpower. Some Member State evaluations warn of excessive burdens on schools, which might discourage them from participating in the Scheme.

In certain cases the administrative burden arose from very stringent national requirements imposed by Member States in the first year, which were subsequently changed in the light of the experience gained. For example, Poland loosened its requirements for the packaging and preparation of products because the suppliers were not able to meet them. Moreover, the Commission simplified Commission Regulation (EC) No 288/2009.

(d) Accompanying measures

Accompanying measures carried out under the EU Scheme vary from one Member State to another. In general, the public authorities responsible for education, health and agriculture set the conceptual design of the measures. The most common approach is to offer schools a variety of teaching material and suggestions for accompanying measures and to let them decide how to implement them. On the other hand, some national or regional schemes do not provide schools with any support for carrying out these measures. In a few Member States and regions accompanying measures are simply carried out within the regular school curriculum. The wide discrepancies in the approaches and, consequently, the strength of these measures can also be partly attributed to the fact that they are not co-financed from the EU funds and thus there are no additional minimum requirements as regards their implementation.

From the analysis two types of programmes emerge: those where the measures are the central element of the intervention, for example in Ireland, and those which integrate them as an ‘additional extra’, as in the Netherlands. Thus, spending on accompanying measures differs, with the Netherlands and France spending less than € 1 per child in the first year, while Ireland spends more than € 25 per child, its system being based on rewards (small prizes).

As regards the impact of accompanying measures, the research conducted in Ireland demonstrates that their Food Dudes programme, which is based on strong accompanying measures, is essential for a sustainable increase in children’s fruit and vegetable consumption. For other Member States, which adopt different approaches, the overall short-term impact of the accompanying measures is difficult to evaluate at this juncture.

3.1.2. Issues related to the financing of the Scheme in Member States

As explained in previous chapters, the Scheme is based on the principle of co-financing. The share of the funds which have to be provided by Member States can come from public or private sources. It is clear from national and external evaluations that it is increasingly difficult to make co-financing available, in particular if it is to be secured exclusively by schools, municipalities or parents. Thus, co-financing has been portrayed several times as one of the biggest challenges in the implementation of the Scheme and a reason why certain regions within Member States have decided not to participate in the Scheme.

(a) Sources of national co-financing

In most participating Member States and their regions, national co-financing is based exclusively on public funds. Only Slovakia, Denmark, Austria and Flanders (Belgium) ask for a parental contribution and 3 Member States / regions incorporate private funding within their co-financing concept (Baden-Württemberg, the Netherlands and Flanders).

Private contribution to financing can be a positive opportunity to extend the Scheme’s scale, if long-term participation and private interests can be handled properly. The identification and contracting of private sponsors seem to be more efficient under the responsibility of the national / regional control authority than at school level. The evaluation also establishes that the Scheme does not expand in regions where the public contribution is very limited and

private funding needs to be organised by participating schools. This is the case in France and Germany. Baden-Württemberg, with a public contribution of only 4 %, has specific problems with regard to expanding its programme, whereas this is not the case for the neighbouring regions of Bavaria and Rhineland-Palatinate, which receive a public contribution of 50 %. In France, where there is no national co-financing, the budget is provided either by municipalities or by the schools themselves from their canteen budget.

(b) Parental contribution

The introduction of a parental contribution to the financing is viewed differently, although it may ensure some involvement of parents in the scheme and provide additional budget. Basically, it is assumed that an obligatory financial contribution by parents has a negative influence on the participation rate, especially if schools have many children from a less privileged social background. Furthermore, the message from school headmasters is that collecting money at school level requires a great deal of organisation. These assumptions are confirmed, for example, by Latvia's experiences. There it has been observed that the implementation of the School Milk Scheme stopped when public funding was reduced.

(c) Impact of EU co-financing

The evaluation thus concludes that EU aid — both the financing percentage and the absolute size of EU funds available — has a positive or even essential impact on the Scheme's effectiveness. EU funds are essential for the success of nation- (or region-) wide schemes in nearly all participating Member States, regardless of the underlying co-financing concept. In addition, in the eyes of the public, EU involvement lends extra credibility and weight to national and regional schemes.

3.2. Evaluation of the Scheme's impact on children's eating habits

Bearing in mind that the national evaluations assessed only two years of the Scheme's implementation and that different evaluation methods were employed, the results in relation to its effectiveness cannot be conclusive, particularly when it comes to the long-term impact.

(a) Impact on children's eating habits

Taking these limitations into account, the results of most of the national and regional evaluations indicate that the Scheme has led to an increase in the amount of fruit and vegetables consumed by children. By way of an example, Poland recorded a 21 % increase in consumption. Similar positive results were established on the basis of interviews carried out as part of an external evaluation. Only four evaluations were unable to identify an impact on consumption, either because there are not yet sufficient grounds to judge the Scheme's impact on consumption after only one year of implementation, as in the Netherlands, or because no significant statistical differences in consumption patterns were established.

In some cases, encouraging children to eat more fruit and vegetables also has a positive spill-over effect outside the official distribution times in schools, for example on after-school consumption in Romania or on days where fruit distribution was not planned, as in the Netherlands. However, the conclusions were different with regard to the impact of the Scheme on the lifestyle of children in general, such as the consumption of popular snacks or sweets. In certain cases it was established that there was no visible impact, while occasionally a positive change was identified. Interestingly, many evaluations conclude that the Scheme does not affect the consumption of all participating children in the same way. The differences

were observed in relation to gender, with girls consuming more fruit and vegetables than boys, as well as in types of products, where fruit is preferred to vegetables. Some evaluations have furthermore observed the Scheme's positive impacts, particularly in relation to socio-economically disadvantaged groups, which have warmly welcomed the Scheme.

(b) Impact on parents

In most evaluations the effects of the Scheme on parents and their consumption were omitted, or tackled indirectly by examining only their attitude towards the Scheme in general and their children's diets. Although many evaluations did conclude that parents responded very positively to the Scheme and its objectives, in the case of France and Poland the Scheme did not have a visible impact on parents' consumption. Other evaluations indicate that the impact of the Scheme was positive as regards parents' attitudes towards their children's diets. For example, parents provided more fruit and vegetable products in lunch boxes in Ireland, Poland and Malta. There was also greater variation and availability of those products at home (Italy) and, to a lesser degree, there was a positive impact even on parents' own consumption.

3.3. Recommendations received

The evaluations identify major improvements in the functioning of the Scheme compared to its challenging start. Nevertheless, several recommendations were put forward to strengthen the Scheme.

Firstly, to off-set the financial constraints experienced by many Member States and regions and to strengthen the Scheme's impact by extending its scope,

- It is recommended the EU co-financing rate be increased, as the current 50% and 75% are seen as obstacles to higher uptake. Overall EU aid should also be increased beyond € 90 million.

Secondly, with respect to the implementation of the Scheme and the distribution parameters, the following recommendations are made:

- Sustained distribution (≥ 35 school weeks) should be aimed at, as only sufficiently long participation can generate a sustainable impact with respect to improving children's eating habits as envisaged by the Scheme.
- Diversity of offer is seen as an important success factor for the effectiveness of the Scheme. It is recommended to offer at least 5 to 10 different products to keep children interested. However, this recommendation could be difficult to follow where Member States decide to give preference to local or seasonal fruit and vegetable products.
- Products should continue to be distributed free of charge. This is seen by many national evaluations (Germany and the Netherlands for example) and also the ECA report as determining the success of the Scheme, having an impact on participation and effectiveness.
- Furthermore, a high frequency of offering products is recommended, ideally three times a week. This recommendation, similarly as the previous three, is inherently linked to the question of financing the Scheme and the available budget.

As regards the target group of the Scheme:

- Several Member States see the need to extend the Scheme's target group to allow more children to benefit from it. This is inherently linked to the funding available.
- It has also been established that there is a need for a targeted approach to more 'vulnerable' groups, such as socio-economically disadvantaged groups which show high interest in the Scheme. However, while it is recommended that the Scheme should target this group, it should not be restricted to it so as to avoid stigmatising the schools they attend and in view of the difficulties in establishing criteria for identifying these groups and schools precisely.
- Several evaluations also see a need to find better ways to target boys who tend to consume less fruit and vegetables than girls.

As regards the administrative and organisational burden,

- It is recommended that in order to reduce the administrative burden, ways should be explored of harmonising the reporting obligations and administrative procedures of the School Fruit and School Milk Schemes. In addition, solutions should be found in national strategies to help schools cope with organisational and logistical tasks.

Finally, given the importance of accompanying measures and in order to overcome the shortcomings identified in their implementation, it is recommended that:

- Member State should be encouraged to pay more attention to the approach they use since the impact of those measures hinges on the methodological approach.
- It is recommended that these measures should be made eligible for EU aid by providing a minimum level of funding with a view to strengthening their role and ensuring consistent implementation.

As concerns the Scheme in general, many national evaluations recommend that:

- There is a strong need to increase the Scheme's visibility and provide more and better targeted information, as well as to involve different actors and stakeholders more systematically.

4. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

After only three years of the European School Fruit Scheme, it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions, particularly with respect to its sustainable impact on children's eating habits. It may nevertheless be established that, judging by the initial evaluation results and the Commission figures from the monitoring exercise, the Scheme has been successfully embedded in the Member States and that its efficiency is increasing in terms of the budget used and the benefits for children (over 8 million) compared to the start-up phase.

As regards the Scheme's effectiveness, national evaluations indicate that the Scheme has strong potential and is an appropriate tool to exercise a positive influence on the eating habits of children and parents alike, encouraging them towards consuming more fruit and vegetables in the future, provided that the Scheme's long-term continuation is ensured.

Several recommendations and proposals for improvements were put forward in the evaluations carried out by the Member States and the external contractor, as well as by the

ECA special report. Some of the most important recommendations have already been addressed with the proposed changes to the Scheme in the context of the CAP 2020 reform proposals. Thus, in order to enable even more children than the current 8.1 million to benefit from the Scheme, the Commission has proposed further strengthening it by raising the overall EU budget available for the Scheme to €150 million. It is also proposed to increase the rates of EU co-financing which is considered to be one of the main parameters for the success of the Scheme. The external evaluation considers current co-financing rates to be one of the key obstacles to a higher uptake of funds.

In addition, given the importance attached to accompanying measures, the Commission proposed to make those measures eligible for co-financing from the EU budget under certain conditions and within a threshold to be established at a later stage. This will strengthen their impact and coherence to the overall benefit of the Scheme.

Given this positive feedback concerning the Scheme's effectiveness and efficiency after the first three years of implementation, it is important at this stage to start thinking about the future. Moreover, the ECA report called for greater coordination and synergy between the School Fruit and School Milk Schemes to make sure that they present a harmonised approach to nutrition and that they are managed efficiently.

The Commission has therefore launched an impact assessment process which will build on the findings of the evaluations, the improvements already made, and take into account the ECA report. It will assess the impact of the existing schemes and analyse if and how they should evolve in the future by considering different options, including a possibility of a new wider scheme. Furthermore, it will examine the role and design of accompanying measures which are an important tool for informing and educating children about the importance of agricultural products, agriculture and farming, as well as about healthy eating habits and lifestyle.