



An EU school scheme fit for the future

24 November 2022

A conference entitled “An EU school scheme fit for the future” took place in Brussels on 24 November 2022, as part of a consultation process in the context of the review of the School Scheme. It gathered 78 participants in the meeting room and 1501 participants followed the web streaming¹. Participants included national authorities, EU bodies and a broad range of stakeholders, including producers, trade and business representatives, NGOs and researchers.

The event discussed the challenges of the School Scheme in the context of the review along with the societal, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability. The possibility of better aligning the scheme with EU policy priorities, notably the EU Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy, and Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan, were explored. The results of the 2022 CAP Special Eurobarometer Survey - dedicated section on the EU School Scheme - and of the public consultation were presented, as well as preliminary findings of the evaluation. The European Parliament report from July 2022 and preliminary findings of the EESC evaluation report were also presented.

9:30-9:40: CONFERENCE WELCOME

Moderator **Tamsin Rose** kicked off the conference, recalling that the aim was to gather different views on measures to improve the scheme and to the extent possible their impacts, as input for review.

9:40-9:50: OPENING BY COMMISSIONER

Mr **Janusz Wojciechowski**, the EU Commissioner for Agriculture, welcomed participants and thanked the services in the Directorate-General for Agriculture as well as their colleagues in health, education and research for their commitment on the School Scheme. His address focused on the following elements:

In 2020-2021, around 15 million schoolchildren benefitted from the Scheme which, in addition to the main value of supplying fruit, vegetables and milk to children, contributes in a wider programme of educational activities, including farm visits, school gardens and workshops, to encourage healthy eating habits and reconnect children with farming activities.

¹ [An EU school scheme fit for the future \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

In June 2022 the Commission invited Member States to review their request for aid under the School Scheme, in light of the unprecedented situation brought about by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. A total of 2.9 million EUR was redistributed to accommodate for the needs of displaced Ukrainian children in EU schools, evidencing the value of the Scheme for society and solidarity.

Prior to the review of the Scheme, a public consultation was launched earlier this year. Mr **Janusz Wojciechowski** concluded by underlining the importance of the Scheme and wished everyone a fruitful discussion.

The **moderator** moved on to two polling questions via Slido to spark discussion with participants (including those following online). The first question tested the audience's compliance with the WHO recommendation of eating at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. She concluded that the five pieces a day is more aspirational than realistic since 63% (out of 83 votes) of respondents said that they did not meet this target. The second poll looked at whether the audience has children who benefit from the School Scheme or not. Some 29% (out of 68 votes) did not know whether their children benefit, 34% said they do, and 37% said they do not.

9:50-10:30: HIGHLIGHTS: EVALUATION, PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND EUROBAROMETER AT A GLANCE

Ms **Brigitte Misonne**, Head of Unit for Animal Products at the Directorate-General of Agriculture and Rural Development, presented the timeline and steps of the review, the results of the 4 [Eurobarometer 2022](#) questions related to the Scheme and the preliminary results of the [Public Consultation](#).

In the same vein, Ms **Sophie Hélaine**, Head of Unit for Policy Performance, highlighted results of the recently published report (23 November 2022) on the [Implementation of the EU school fruit, vegetable and milk scheme impacted by the Covid pandemic](#).

Ms **Brigitte Misonne** linked these findings to the evaluation of the current scheme and stated that two main "problems" were identified so far. Therefore, two general objectives are proposed for the review of the Scheme: increase sustainability aspects and improve effectiveness and efficiency in the Scheme's implementation and governance. Those are further broken down into seven specific objectives, one of which falls outside the school scheme review – the upcoming Framework for Sustainable Food Systems.

At this stage, **three possible policy approaches** need to be assessed: a rather soft approach, a targeted review and a very ambitious transformation of the Scheme. The idea is to assess the impact of a combination of measures in order to have the best possible series of solutions at the end of the process. The measures within these policy approaches were tested during the conference through Slido polls. The idea was to assess the impact of combining various measures in order to **build the best possible portfolio of solutions at the end of the process**.

10:30-11:25: SESSION 1: MILESTONES TOWARDS HEALTHIER DIETS, WHAT'S NEXT?

Ms **Ana Mendoza Martínez** from the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA) - Directorate General for food industry, presented the implementation of the Scheme in Spain taking into account of their institutional organisation (General State Administration, 17 autonomous communities and local administrations). Collaboration between agriculture, education and health authorities is operated at these different levels.

She described the fund allocation among the autonomous regions, based on the number of children aged 6 to 10, underlining how the Mediterranean diet forms the common ground in the School Scheme, which is reflected in the choice of products: fresh fruit and vegetables, salads, gaspacho, drinking milk, plain yoghurt, curd, cheese, etc.

Finally, she cited some areas for improvement in the scheme, namely the simplification of administrative procedures, early definitive allocation of funds, reduction of restrictions to healthy processed products and more synergies with food waste reduction policies.

Ms **Mojca Gabrijelčič Blenkuš**, from the National Institute of Public Health in Slovenia, presented public food procurements in the JA Best-ReMaP project. The project involves 36 partners from 24 European countries and aims at improving children's food choice and changing obesogenic environments.

In the framework of this project, she elaborated on good practices in the public procurement of food in Slovenia. It highlighted synergy between the Ministry of Public Administration (coordinating the school food public procurement activity), the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (promoting local food production) and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (guiding schools). Besides these, other ministries and actors also play a role in the public procurement process, which allows for a good inter-sectoral cooperation and public procurement policy.

She underlined that under the Child Guarantee, children should have access to at least one healthy meal per school day, and in this respect the School Scheme is an important opportunity.

Ms **Mojca Gabrijelčič Blenkuš** concluded that the health aspect is a milestone, and in Slovenia, guidelines are included in law and menus are planned according to these guidelines. She referred to recent evidence showing that ultra-processed food have negative health consequences and should be restricted.

Ms **Anna Paola Quaglia** from the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission presented the results of a participatory study "Imagining 'eat' together: the school meal". Providing a healthy, sustainably produced meal is a fundamental political objective, but on its own, it is not enough to drive change. Her research considers other dimensions – beyond nutrition – that are important in school meals.

The qualitative study was conducted in 7 schools in Italy, Germany and Portugal, and included workshops with children aged 9-13, parents, teachers, etc., to explore what constitutes a school meal from a health and sustainable perspective, such as food waste. The results show how important it is to start the conversation and involve children in discussing how a school meal can work, as many other factors (the canteen atmosphere, time pressure, the peers ...) are important.

The first reaction from the audience came from Mr **Erwin Schöpges**, (European Milk Board) president of a milk cooperative that is involved in the School Scheme. His question was directed to all three speakers wondering about what is being done for the (over)packaging of products in cited projects/schemes.

Ms **Mojca Gabrijelčič Blenkuš** replied that they assess quality, health and sustainability criteria in their project. Right now, Member States are compiling lists of food, marking all quality and other criteria in relation to individual food items to be included for testing the procurement procedure. Without preempts the results are, she agreed that over-packaging is an important issue.

Ms **Sophie Hélaine** also stressed this will be included in the impact assessment.

The second reaction came from Mr **Guy Francq** (European Milk Board), who wanted to stress importance of the scheme to contribute to fair milk prices when directly delivered to schools, an opportunity to align fairness throughout the food supply chain.

Two Slido questions were addressed to the audience.

The first Slido question was about which nutrition/health attributes are the most relevant when choosing products for the Scheme. The Slido poll showed preference for a low level of fats/sugar/salt (54%), followed by a low level of processing (47%) and no added fats/sugars/salt (37%) (out of 51 votes).

The second question related to national food-based guidelines being a valid basis for choosing products for the Scheme. Here, 85% of the audience (out of 68 votes) agreed that food-based guidelines should form the framework of the Scheme.

11:50-12:45: SESSION 2: ECONOMIC ASPECTS. STRENGTHENING THE EU AGRI-FOOD SECTOR?

Ms **Monika Niewiarowska**, from the Polish National Support Centre for Agriculture presented the implementation of the School Scheme in Poland and underlined its success and importance, as children's food choices are seen as a long-term investment in terms of healthy diets and support for the agri-food sector. About 80-90% of primary schools, which are their target group, are reached through the Polish School Scheme.

The high uptake can be attributed to several key elements: long duration, frequent distributions (2 times per week), no parental contribution, reduced burden on schools and a flat rate system. Poland can strengthen these elements by making extensive use of the EU budget and increasing it by a national top-up (EU budget 44% - national budget 56%). Regarding the choice of products, preference is given to local products with no added sugars. Moreover, the approved suppliers are mainly retail companies and not producers themselves.

She mentioned some challenges, such as the need for a higher budget to maintain the relevance of the Scheme in times of high inflation, and tabled ideas such as mentioning the Scheme on the packaging of the products distributed, or the inclusion of teachers in the target group as they can serve as role models.

Mr **Philippe Binard** from the European Fresh Produce Association in Belgium presented insights from the fruit and vegetables sector and spoke about the challenges, e.g. encouraging fruit and vegetables consumption among children, the logistics of handling perishable produce and preventing food losses, and the possible economic benefits for the sector from the Scheme in a long term perspective.

More importantly, he stressed the importance of providing a diversity of products, from a diversity of production methods and sourcing, allowing children to discover a whole range of products throughout the year and enjoying them in their diet. Lastly, he gave recommendations to emphasize the health aspect in the Scheme for children, raising awareness through education, increasing the frequency and product diversity, optimising collaboration and increasing the budget.

Ms **Merete Myrup Christensen** from the Danish Agriculture and Food Council, presented insights from the milk sector. She first addressed the economic aspects of the school milk, showcasing the Scheme as a long-term investment to strengthen the agri-food sector, as it concerns the consumers of the future, teaches healthy habits and provides essential nutrients to children. A Swedish study on the effects of healthy school lunches shows its importance, with a higher benefit for children from low income families.

The Danish school milk model is managed by the Danish Dairy Board and provides milk to 24% of Danish children aged 6-9 on a daily basis. However, the required documentation is a heavy burden on schools, so reducing red tape would make the School Scheme more attractive. Finally, she exposed 7 main reasons to include milk in the school lunch: long-term economic benefits, improved performance, sustainability, important nutrients for growth, protein quality, high nutrient density, inclusion in food based dietary guidelines, and its role in taste and food culture.

To wrap up the session, a Slido wordcloud session was launched.

The first question was how to measure the Scheme’s success in order to reduce the administrative burden (eg. checks). The word cloud below on the left shows the result of 59 responses.

The second word cloud enquired about how to improve the spending under the scheme. The word cloud below on the right shows the result of 59 responses.



Mr **Francisco Caldera**, representative of the Portuguese Ministry of Agriculture, refuted the debate about ‘bad or good products’, which should focus on the different production systems - more or less sustainable -. Similar approach should be considered with regards to healthy diets (instead of ‘healthy products’). He stressed that Member States may have differing views on these concepts, so attention should be paid when defining a healthy diet. The representative from the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture asked whether the Polish Ministry of Agriculture had faced any negative reactions from the producers. Ms **Niewiarowska** replied that their system allows for different types of suppliers. Producers can indeed participate in the Scheme, but there is not a lot of interest given the practical and logistic issues.

14:30-15:10: THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S AND EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE PERSPECTIVE

In a recorded contribution, MEP **Marc Tarabella**, presented the perspective of the European Parliament on the Scheme and the results of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) study.

He underlined the importance of the Scheme and the opportunity of aligning it with the policy objectives of the Green Deal, Farm to Fork Strategy, Beating Cancer and the European Child Guarantee. However, its current potential is undermined by the following elements: budget, coverage, scope of eligible products, method of distribution and uneven implementation across Member States.

Therefore, he advocates for a progressive increase in the budget in the coming years and the possibility to redistribute the Scheme budget among Member States in case of underutilisation. He further argued that at least 10 percent of the budgets should be allocated for the implementation of educational activities, which have proved to be one of the most successful components of the Scheme. The products to be featured in the distribution should be unprocessed, preferably organic and originating in the Union.

Besides, it is fundamental to reduce the administrative burden in the Scheme's implementation, since it represents one of the main obstacles to the success of the Scheme. He encouraged the development of an enhanced communication strategy in order to boost the take-up of the skills by schools and Member States with low participation rates.

Mr **Arnold Puech D'Alissac**, member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), presented the preliminary results of the EESC evaluation of the Scheme, focused on five countries: Finland, France, Ireland, Lithuania and Romania.

The EESC's key recommendations to make the scheme more effective and relevant are: simplification of procedures to reduce the administrative burden, more flexibility for the choice of products, linkage to regional food policies and expansion of the educational component. Moreover, civil society should be better included in the Scheme, through the involvement of parents, families, teachers, school staff and organisations.

After these two presentations, the moderator opened the floor for questions.

The moderator pointed out that, according to the presentation of Ms Mojca Gabrijelčič Blenkuš, Slovenia is the only country having used a derogation in their public procurement rules in order to prioritise local production. Up to 20% of the budget is used by schools to conclude contracts directly with farmers.

The moderator returned to Slido for three more questions.

The first question concerned the involvement of civil society in the Scheme. These were the results of 56 responses:



The second question enquired about the most important characteristics for sustainable food. The top three responses (out of 80 votes) were: low environmental impact (60%), nutritious-healthy (46%), local-short supply chain (40%) and fair income for producers-farmers (40%). Other responses included minimal packaging (23%), unprocessed-minimal processing (18%), animal welfare (16%), little/no pesticides (11%), respect of workers' rights (10%), organic (10%) and GMO free (4%).

The last Slido question for this session, about what should the reviewed Scheme do to become more sustainable, obtained 69 responses: 43% preferred to set specific objectives to achieve, 41% to provide guidance to Member States and only 16% to set compulsory criteria for the Member States (EU law).

15:25-16:30 SESSION 3: EU SCHOOL SCHEME ON A GREENER PATH

Ms **Sofie Verhoeven**, from the City of Ghent, presented the SchoolFood4Change project in the context of Ghent's food strategy. In Ghent, 54 schools (39%) participate in the School Scheme, 47 of which distribute only fruit and vegetables.

The [SchoolFood4Change](#) is a European H2020 project and consists of several project areas: planetary health and cooking, the Whole School Food Approach (WFSA) and sustainable catering. Different actions are set up for the WFSA in Ghent, such as the research project "Lekkers op School" (effects of healthy food on children), the bottom-up initiative "Brooddoosnodig" (solidarity food system) and different workshops and the research project "De Experimententuin" (education methodology food literacy).

Regarding sustainable catering, several principles are applied in Ghent (e.g. Fairtrade, recyclable packaging, minimum 20% organic ...) thanks to a multi-stakeholder approach. Several actions have also been set up to reduce CO2 emissions, with a protein shift to balanced meals of 50% vegetable and 50% animal proteins.

Mr **José Manuel Bisetto**, an organic farmer from Spain and member of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, presented the project 'Ecoescoles' in the Valencia region, focused on education through organic farming, sustainable food and the environment. The project uses a bottom-up approach that starts from the classroom and relies on a public-private partnership to secure funds and develop the projects.

Communication is a key aspect to publicise the projects and raise awareness among society. In this context, it is also important to involve all stakeholders and especially children, as they are often left aside from the debate. The project also focuses on strengthening the role of agriculture in the region, as farming is increasingly becoming an unprofitable activity, leading to farm abandonment.

Ms **Nanna Lien**, from the University of Oslo in Norway, presented several aspects about youth expectations from fruit and vegetables programs at school. She demonstrated that children and

youngsters are “picky eaters” demanding good-quality food (appearance, taste and texture) and variety in food offerings. Moreover, the social context (peers, role models) and environmental concerns are relevant when considering food choices.

She also presented the CO-CREATE project, which explores how policy changes can support healthy eating and physically active lifestyles to halt the rise of adolescent obesity rates. The project aims at working closely with youth across Europe to develop novel policy options that will contribute to obesity prevention and reducing inequalities.

Finally, she presented the new Fresko project from Norway (2022-2024), which aims at generating new knowledge on the adoption, implementation and impact of school-based primary prevention interventions.

The moderator opened the floor for questions.

Ms **Anna Paola Quaglia** appreciated the good example from Ghent and stressed the importance of a food policy at urban or territorial level. She wondered what political condition is needed to create this strategy and what exactly schools could (co)define in their vision of food. She also asked who kick started the Ecoescoles project.

Ms **Sofie Verhoeven** recalled that a food council develops the city’s food policy and that allocates funding for these projects. There have been significant cuts recently, which has made the implementation more difficult. As schools cannot cover every topic, they focus on specific aspects (protein transition, food waste ...).

Mr **Arnold Puech D’Alissac** asked how can municipalities cope with inflation while having a fixed budget - not to decrease distribution. He also wondered about the involvement of local producers, the prevention of food waste and the treatment of most disadvantaged children.

Ms **Sofie Verhoeven** acknowledged that budget is indeed a problem. With the SchoolFood4Change (H2020) project, they were able to secure funds until 2025. They hope to collect enough evidence in the project to persuade politicians to invest. Regarding food waste, she stated that children have difficulties with changes in their meals, as they need to taste food 8 to 10 times before they can decide whether they like it or not.

Ms **Monika Niewiarowska** agreed that on the importance of the social aspect. A study carried out a few years ago to understand what prevented children from eating fruit and vegetables. Before joining the Scheme, the most popular answer was “I don’t eat it, because other children are not eating it either”. After a few years of implementation of the Scheme, this was not an issue anymore.

Ms **Nanna Lien** stressed the importance of creating an enabling a proper environment for school meals.

The moderator directed the attention of the audience to Slido for one last time for four last questions.

The first question enquired whether the Scheme should be limited to target groups. Ms **Brigitte Misonne** recalled that the products distributed through the Scheme are not part of regular school meals. Out of 64 responses, 41% were against any limitation to specific target groups. The rest advocated for restricting the Scheme according to age groups (38%), socio-economic criteria (16%) and other criteria (6%).

The second question wondered whether food diversity should be a priority in the Scheme. Out of 47 responses, 79% were in favour.

The third question concerned how to increase the share of products with sustainability criteria distributed under the Scheme. Out of 52 votes, a majority (63%) pointed to increasing the budget of the Scheme, followed by focusing on cheaper (local, seasonal, etc.) products (52%), focusing on higher-value products (15%) and other (15%).

The final question concerned the budget that should be dedicated to educational measures. Out of 59 votes, the two most popular responses were '5-15%' and '15-50%' with 44% each, followed by '0-5%' (15% of the responses) and 'more than 50%' with only 3% of the responses.

16:30-16:40: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The **moderator** concluded the day with all the findings and perspectives shared by the participant.

Ms **Brigitte Misonne** outlined the next steps in reply to a question from the audience. The first report study was published the day before the conference, but there will be two more studies in the first part of 2023. In parallel, an impact assessment is being carried out. It will accompany the Commission's proposal to the Parliament and the Council. The latter, to be tabled by the end of 2023, could propose a revolutionary Scheme, or a slightly different Scheme or maybe more realistically, something in between. Afterwards it will be up to the Parliament and the Council to decide.

16:40-16:50 CONFERENCE CLOSING

Mr **Wolfgang Bartscher**, Director-General for Agricultural and Rural Development, started by thanking all participants and the moderator for the day. He ensured participants that their remarks would contribute to the impact assessment.

He noted consensus for a more balanced diet and the key role of education in this respect. The School Scheme can make an important contribution to ensure that consumers turn to more sustainable food systems.

He noted divergent opinions with regard to which product should be part of the scheme and which not. He recalled that children's nutritional needs should always be at the forefront. The review should also take into account the collaboration of different entities.

He concluded by calling for a serious reflection on what sustainable food really means: CO2 footprint, biodiversity, animal health, animal welfare? Sustainability goes beyond environment and climate; it also has an economic dimension (farm income) and a social one (vibrant rural areas). He pleaded for looking at all aspects in a fair and evidence-based manner.