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JOINT MEETING MEMBER STATES AND STAKEHOLDERS, BRUSSELS
EU SCHOOL FRUIT, VEGETABLES AND MILK SCHEME:
TAKING STOCK AFTER THE FIRST SCHOOL YEAR

OPENING ADDRESS

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome! I am happy to see so many of you and from such a broad range of organisations.

This shows that the EU school scheme is a truly attractive programme. And, more importantly, it shows that its objective, instilling healthy eating habits in children, is shared by the EU institutions, national governments, business, NGOs, schools and parents.

Commissioner Hogan has asked me to convey his warmest regards to everyone. In particular, he would like to thank to those of you who will be sharing your experience and views. He hopes this will prove a fruitful and enjoyable meeting.

I would like to welcome everyone representing the EU institutions: Ms Kowalik-Lubina from the Council, Ms Moraut from the Committee of the Regions and, last but not least, Mr Pezzini from the Economic and Social Committee. Ms Cionco from the European Parliament registered but could not finally attend.

On the Commission side, the meeting brings together several departments that work together closely on the EU school scheme.

I am personally involved in this healthy cooperation, which is essential for a healthy project: in the department for agriculture, I oversee the work of those of my colleagues who draft the rules for the school scheme and of those who follow up implementation of those rules, liaising on a regular basis.

Colleagues in the departments in charge of health, education and research are also actively involved. There may be, at times, some differences in positions but dialogue across policy areas is always enriching. Events like today's meeting are designed to promote dialogue also beyond our offices.

I would now like to share with you some thoughts on the choice of today's sessions.

First, a **stocktaking exercise**. Representatives of the fruit and vegetables sector and the milk sector will recall their reservations on the Commission proposal to merge the two separate school schemes, back in 2014.

The issue was not only the difference in the supply chains and logistics of the two products. More than that, the concern was that the merger might jeopardise one or the other scheme. On the one hand, some in the milk sector feared that resources would shrink in favour of school fruit and vegetables. On the other hand, some in the fruit and vegetables sector expressed doubts that a merged scheme would keep a strong health and educational component.

We are all familiar with the law that anything that can go wrong will go wrong. This has not been the case for the EU school scheme. One year after its start under a single legal framework, the choices in the national and regional strategies for the implementation of the scheme show that the balance of the products that schoolchildren receive has been maintained. Secondly, they show that the health and educational dimension is not only kept but enhanced. We are happy to provide highlights of these encouraging trends.

The second session will focus on **school milk**. This is because of the significant changes compared to past practice. The national authorities in charge of health and nutrition now endorse the choice of milk products that children receive under the EU school scheme and any exception to the general ban on added salt, added sugar and added fat.

We will hear the experience of the Austrian Ministry of Health that is also interesting for its ongoing work on health and nutrition as part of the programme for the Presidency of the European Union. We will also hear the experience of some authorities in charge of the design and management of the scheme, in Poland and Ireland, to have the two sides of the coin.

We wish then to put the EU school scheme in the **broader perspective of joint action to make schools a healthy place**. The supply of fruit, vegetables and milk to children,

combined with educational activities (farm visits, school gardens, workshops) under the EU school scheme is necessary but not sufficient. Other initiatives, such as on school curricula, school meals and legislation, are needed for successful results. You will therefore hear about EU action on health and physical activity and, in the ensuing forum for discussion, contribute with your practical experience and your views.

The last morning session will focus on **local production and short marketing chains**. Last but not least! Discussions with other institutions in the framework of the reform of the school scheme have shown the strong support by those institutions to the possibility for participating countries to give priority to local products, short supply chain and other environmental benefits, namely organic production.

An ever-growing number of consumers in the EU turn to local and short supply chain products. This choice is due to a perceived higher quality, namely linked to freshness, to a lower carbon footprint, and to the benefit for local communities through a fairer price or better outlets for producers. At the same time, national and local authorities and bodies need to comply with the principles and rules for the functioning of the single market that prohibit discrimination in the EU. Striking the right balance is not always easy.

We are keen to get your practical insight on the approach followed, lessons learnt and suggestions for improvement.

Moving on to the afternoon, the distribution of fruit, vegetables and milk to children is part of a wider educational programme to reconnect children with farming and encourage healthy eating habits. **Teachers** play a crucial role and they need resources for it. While educational activities primarily target children, it makes sense for them to involve teachers as well. This is why you will hear some examples by a researcher who, in addition to having hands-on experience, assessed the impact of training programmes for teachers under the school fruit and vegetables scheme.

This links to the following session. The **Joint Research Centre**, the European Commission's science and knowledge service, supports our policies with independent evidence. We will hear the results of the harvest of the best scientific evidence for food dietary guidelines. This has clear practical implications, as it can support implementation of sound policies and effective tools.

The same goes for **monitoring and evaluation**. The requirement to monitor and evaluate the school scheme is not a technical aspect for statisticians but a political choice, in line with the ever-growing focus on performance of the Common Agricultural Policy as a whole and, indeed, of all EU policies. We are convinced that the school scheme is a success story and an investment for the future. We need your help to demonstrate this and show what tangible results it brings.

One of the sessions deliberately includes no presentations. This is the session on **simplification**. The aim is to allow you to take the floor and discuss the results and the challenges as much as possible.

We all know that simplification is anything but simple. And this is the case for a number of reasons. First of all, what may be a simplification for some categories of beneficiaries does not necessarily imply that life is easier for others. To give a specific example, the single legal framework for the school scheme may reduce significantly the red tape for administrations but not necessarily for aid applicants if the rules and procedures dating back from separate schemes are not changed or IT tools are not fully exploited and so on. We are looking forward to an open and constructive exchange of views with issues and possible solutions: if something does not work, what may work or work better?

Finally, the meeting will give auditors the opportunity to give their point of view on the aspects to pay attention to for the proper **management and control** of the EU school scheme.

The scheme has a budget of 250 million euros per school year. This needs to be managed rigorously, with regular checks applied by the Member States and verified by the Commission.

I look forward to your active participation for informative, interactive and thought-provoking sessions. Thank you very much!

Rudolf MOEGELE