



EAPF Position on EU School Scheme

Brussels, 26 July 2021

Schools are at the heart of children's life and a pillar in their education, including with regard to nutrition. In this respect, the EU school fruit, vegetables, and milk scheme (hereafter EU school scheme) plays a valuable role in 'reconnect[ing] children with agriculture' and educating them about healthy and sustainable eating habits. There lies an important mission of the EU, which the European Alliance for Plant-based Food (EAPF) fully endorses.

EAPF and its members welcome the opportunity to provide insights on how to enhance the contribution of the EU school scheme to sustainable food production and consumption, while raising awareness among younger generations about nutrition and farming. In our views, **a revision of the scheme is required towards better inclusiveness, promoting food products responding to children's needs – as diverse as they are-, and enabling the shift to sustainable plant-based diets**, in line with the EU Farm to Fork Strategy¹ and Beating Cancer Plan².

According to the current architecture, 40% of the EU school scheme budget is dedicated to milk and milk products (€ 100 million/school year, out of 250 million/year). That encourages misconceptions among children according to which cow milk and milk products are necessarily good for their health and the only available source of essential nutrients to their development. The milk component of the scheme disregards the environmental impacts of dairy, the diversity of food sources for essential nutrients, and the disadvantage of crop farmers who do not benefit from the scheme.

EAPF calls on the European Commission and Member States to revise the EU School Scheme and to integrate plant-based foods as part of eligible products. We particularly encourage the EU to promote:

1. **Food products enabling the shift to healthy and sustainable plant-based diets;**
2. **Schools as agents of change;**
3. **A level playing field on the EU agri-food market.**

¹ "[A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system](#)", 20 May 2020, page 13.

² "[Europe's Beating Cancer Plan](#)", 3 February 2021, page 11.



1. Promoting foods enabling the shift to healthy and sustainable plant-based diets

The EU school scheme should promote plant-based foods responding to children's nutrition needs (e.g. fortified plant-based drinks) and belong to sustainable plant-based diets. Subsidising milk products and denying the role of plant-based foods contradict the EU objectives, both from a health and an environmental perspective.

Fostering healthy foods

Good nutrition (appropriate intake of vitamins, minerals, and essential nutrients) is crucial for children's good physical and mental development. It is thus essential to secure access to diverse sources of macro- and micronutrients. While milk and milk products are perceived as nutritious – due to the presence of vitamins (D, B12), calcium and potassium-, its content in trans fatty acids (TFA) is commonly disregarded.

TFA can occur naturally in ruminants (cow, sheep, goat) or stem from industrial processes turning liquid oils into solid fat. Excessive TFA intake is linked to increased 'bad' cholesterol and higher risk of cardiovascular diseases. However, whereas industrial sources of fats are subject to strict EU rules and shall not contain more than 2 g of TFA/100 g of fat (i.e. < 2%), dairy and meat are exempted from this requirement, as well as from labelling TFA content. Yet, according to the 2014 report of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, animal-based products generally display a TFA content above the 2% threshold³. This information is not conveyed to consumers.

In contrast, plant-based foods help diversify diets and provide for various sources of nutrients. For instance, they can be rich in mono- and polyunsaturated fats and fibre, thus contributing to preventing different forms of cancer⁴. Furthermore, fortified plant-based drinks are valuable options for children suffering from lactose intolerance or health conditions whereby dairy consumption is unsuitable. Fortified with the right vitamins and/or minerals, plant-based drinks are as nutritious as dairy. It is thus essential for school schemes to encourage children to eat more fruit, vegetables, as well as plant-based foods – made of (whole) grains, legumes and pulses.

Aligning to sustainable, more plant-based diets

The EU has committed to decarbonising its economy by 2050 and to achieving sustainable food systems. Farming stands at the beginning of the agri-food supply chain: The environmental impact of the food we eat starts from the way the primary ingredients are produced. Therefore, the development of sustainable food systems is intrinsically linked with sustainable farming

³ JRC, European Commission. 'Trans fatty acids in Europe: Where do we stand?', Science and Policy Reports, 2014.

⁴ O'Keef. S.J. et al. Fat, fibre and cancer risk in African Americans and rural Africans. Nature Communications. 2015.



practices. In this context, school restaurants can drive better sustainability of the agri-food chain.

Over 60% of the EU's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in agriculture is attributed to livestock farming, which would represent 78% of agriculture's negative impact on biodiversity, according to the European Court of Auditors⁵. Away from traditional practices, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) encourages the diversification of food systems, whereby '[b]alanced diets, featuring plant-based foods, such as those based on coarse grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, and animal-sourced food produced in resilient, sustainable, and low-GHG emission systems, present major opportunities for adaptation and mitigation while generating significant co-benefits in terms of human health' (2019).⁶

Shifting towards more plant-based diets⁷ is fundamental to rebalance the global emissions of the agricultural sector, contributing to the EU's overall objective to reduce GHG emissions by 55% by 2030.⁸ EU agri-food subsidies should thus support farmers in their transition to more sustainable production, and particularly sustain food crop and legume production for food purpose. Doing so would secure sustainable, accessible, and affordable plant-based diets for children across Europe.

EAPF calls on the European Commission to:

- 1) Revise the scope of eligible products in order to promote, distribute and increase the consumption of plant-based foods, and
- 2) Promote products stemming from less carbon-intensive agricultural practices.

2. Schools as agents of change

Education and dietary habits

Schools are powerful agents of change, moulding and spreading common knowledge among the young generations. This also applies to education about nutrition and dietary habits as school canteens provide one of the three daily meals. The 2019 report of the Imperial College London⁹ acknowledges the role of public-sector catering in enabling the shift to sustainable diets. Their contribution is twofold: First, they provide a testing ground, whereby are exposed

⁵ European Court of Auditors, Biodiversity in Farming, Audit Preview, May 2019.

⁶ [Special Report on Climate Change and Land](#). Section B. 2019.

⁷ ["Food System Impacts on Biodiversity Loss: Three levers for food system transformation in support of nature"](#), Chatham House, 3 February 2021; "Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems", The Lancet, January 2019, 1-147.

⁸ Clark, M. A., Domingo, N. G., Colgan, K., Thakrar, S. K., Tilman, D., Lynch, J., ... & Hill, J. D. (2020). "Global food system emissions could preclude achieving the 1.5° and 2° C climate change targets", Science, 370(6517), 705-708; IPCC Report "Climate Change and Land", Section 5, August 2019.

⁹ Carmichael, R. ["Behaviour change, public engagement and net zero"](#), Imperial College London. 2019.



to and can try new food products – the first step towards adopting different habits. Second, they are instrumental in informing and raising awareness among children about nutrition, what composes healthy diets, and food composition.

However, educational measures or campaigns should not only be targeted at children, but also at staff. School canteen staff plays a role in teaching them about sustainable and health food choices. Science-based training in nutrition and plant-based diets, as well as in the preparation of plant-based meals, is necessary to inspire behavioural change.

Social inclusion

Schools – public establishments in particular – also fulfil a societal mission: to make education accessible to all regardless of their socio-economic background. All children should have access to at least a healthy school meal a day, as per the European Child Guarantee. While this principle is paramount for fighting food poverty and hidden hunger, it should also encompass food quality criteria. The EU should provide incentives for Member States to ensure sustainable plant-based food meals are available in school canteens.

EAPF invites the European Commission and Member States to support schools in their mission towards children, teachers, and canteen staff through **educational measures to ease the shift towards sustainable plant-based diets.**

3. A level playing field for plant-based foods

Tackling market distortions

Despite growing demand for plant-based foods out of medical, health, environmental or ethical concerns, hurdles to market access remain. This is particularly the case in the public sector, whereby animal-based products – especially dairy – are presented as default food choices.

Plant-based foods – processed foods made from crops, fruit, vegetables, pulses, and fermentation-derived products – have been relatively absent from the EU agricultural promotion policy. Only a few products (vegetable oils, some processed fruits in the form of jam or compote and fruit juice) have been supported over 2014-2020, representing about 20% (€ 45 million) of the budget allocated to meat and dairy products (€ 223 million) over the same period¹⁰.

¹⁰ [“Marketing Meat: How EU promotional funds favour meat and dairy”](#), Greenpeace, April 2021.



The gap is even wider under the EU school scheme, for which only raw fruit, vegetables, and milk (products) are eligible. Such bias is detrimental to the transition to healthy and sustainable diets as it:

- Deepens the divide between crop farmers and livestock farmers. The former has less opportunities to valorise their output and do not benefit from the EU school scheme's ambition to reconnect children to agriculture;
- Slows down the uptake of sustainable plant-based diets;
- Distorts further competition between animal-based and plant-based foods on the EU single market.

The EU school scheme needs to facilitate access to diverse types of nutritious and sustainable food for children across the EU, if we are to shift our dietary habits and educate them about sustainable plant-based diets.

Towards consistent policy ambitions at EU and national level

EAPF calls for consistency in the implementation of the EU F2F Strategy. We welcome the EU target of minimum 25% of EU agricultural land dedicated to organic farming by 2030, which is instrumental for achieving sustainable food systems. However, we are concerned that the organic target could counter the shift to more plant-based diets **if fortified plant-based foods cannot pretend to the organic labelling.**

School canteens increasingly turn to organic food, so as to provide children with healthiest, most sustainable meals. However, fortified plant-based foods are not eligible to organic certification according to the current Regulation (EU) 2018/848¹¹. Therefore, they would de facto be excluded from school meals, especially in countries or regions promoting 100% organic in public procurement. The transitions towards organic agriculture and sustainable plant-based diets are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

EAPF thus calls on the European Commission and Member States to see to consistency between the EU organic target and the shift to plant-based diets, as part of the measures to ensure a level playing field for plant-based foods in Europe.

The European Alliance for Plant-Based Foods (EAPF) brings together like-minded organisations in the plant-based value chain around a unique mission: To put plant-based foods at the heart of the transition towards more sustainable and healthy food systems. The Alliance represents companies and organisations supporting and promoting plant-based foods.

¹¹ European Commission, [Regulation \(EU\) 2018/848 on organic production and labelling](#).