

## **ECHO Milk Interim Report**

### **Annex I.**

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#### **1.3 Narrative summary**

Milk deliveries to schools started later than planned during the 2016-17 academic year due to delays in the supply chain and lengthy customs clearance procedures. Syria has a strong regulatory framework related to food, which stipulates that the shelf life of UHT milk in Syria is six months and that food items such as UHT milk need to arrive in Syria with at least half of their shelf life remaining. The first batches arrived at Syria ports in October 2016, later than planned due to delays at the port of origin and consequently they had less than half of shelf life remaining. In addition, in line with Syrian regulations, before being transferred to WFP warehouses, the milk had to undergo the required testing scheme, including microbiological test that take 21 days. This required WFP to obtain an exemption from all relevant entities to be able to distribute the milk in spite of these delays. Following extensive negotiations, involving a wide range of Syrian government bodies, the milk reached WFP warehouses at the end of November, enabling the distributions in schools to start in December. However, concerns remained that due to the above-mentioned delays, combined with the perishable nature of the commodity and the winter break observed by public schools between December and January, quantities might not be fully absorbed by the schools ahead of the expiry date. This prompted the need to identify alternative options to utilise the milk quantities ahead of the expiry date, in order to minimise losses. As a result, WFP made a decision to include milk in the GFA programme rather than being forced to destroy the expiring quantities. Accordingly, WFP distributed 477 mt of UHT milk under the GFA programme, reaching approximately 160,000 children. The decision was made in consultation with the Nutrition Sector, and the milk was distributed to families with children between the ages of 5 and 12 years of age, and in areas with a high percentage of IDPs and high levels of food insecurity.

In light of these challenges, WFP has put in place measures to ensure a smoother supply chain and implementation for the upcoming academic year. For instance, thanks to extensive negotiations, WFP obtained a waiver on the shelf life requirements, allowing the arrival of milk at Syrian ports with a remaining shelf life of two months instead of the three months initially required, thus gaining some more flexibility in the import lead times. Moreover, the relevant Syrian authorities granted a second waiver enabling WFP to uplift the milk at the port immediately after the collection of samples for the lab tests and transfer it to WFP warehouses, where they can be stored in better and safer conditions compared to the port during the 21 days needed to complete the lab tests and clear the commodity for dispatch. In addition, coordination across functional units within WFP at the country office, regional bureau and Headquarter levels has been strengthened, with regular coordination meetings currently held on a weekly basis.

As explained above, delays in the first year of implementation, combined with the overall increase in milk quantities to be procured and distributed under this action, prompted WFP to adjust its distribution plans for the 2017-18 academic year and increase the number of governorates in order to be able to absorb the additional milk supplies. Accordingly, during the 2017-18 academic year, WFP will double the milk ration provided to school children during school days, targeting 500,000 children across 10 of the 14 Syrian governorates, in order to distribute 18,000 mt of milk under the FSSP.

In addition, it is anticipated that part of the milk procured under this action will continue to be reallocated to the General Food Assistance (GFA) programme when required by operational conditions during the 2017-18 academic year. Acknowledging the potential risk of milk being utilized as a substitute for breast milk, WFP, in consultation with the Nutrition Sector, will sensitize its cooperating partners regarding any upcoming distributions of milk under the GFA programme. Sensitization will be conducted in order to ensure that beneficiaries are duly informed about the milk distribution and are aware that the milk is intended for children aged 5-12 years to avoid any misuse of the product and unintended negative effects. Special briefing sessions for partners will be organized for this purpose. In addition to placing awareness raising labels on the milk cartons, additional communication and sensitization materials will be produced, such as banners and posters at distribution sites as well as on-the-spot awareness sessions for beneficiaries. Partners will be asked to assign dedicated staff at distribution sites to ensure that the message will be effectively delivered. As noted above, during the 2016-17 academic year, 477 mt of milk was reallocated to GFA, reaching approximately 160,000 children, and the above measures were implemented to minimize the misuse of the product. During the 2017-18 academic year, the potential reallocation to GFA could reach up to 9,000 mt, noting that the total reallocation will not exceed the quantities distributed in schools during the period of the action.

As of August 2017, WFP is finalising the tenders for the milk requirements in the 2017-2018 academic year. The procurement of milk for the 2017-18 academic year was initiated in June and is currently underway. The procurement process, however, suffered significant delays following a revision of the official Syrian specifications for milk, which forced WFP to temporarily put on hold the tendering process to review the revised specifications and ensure its ability to comply. Following extensive discussions on the newly introduced requirements, including temperature control requirements during transport, freezing point and acidity, WFP was able to resume the tendering process in August. Compounding the revised specifications, the packaging requirements (200 ml) added an additional layer of complexity, as it further reduced the range of eligible suppliers. So far, only four suppliers have been identified who can meet the complex Syrian specifications and packaging requirements. The procurement of approximately 11,800 mt of milk planned for the next academic year has been initiated, which will be followed by a new tender for the remaining quantities. WFP anticipates that finding additional suitable suppliers who can meet both the Syrian specifications and the 200 ml packaging requirements might prove challenging, potentially jeopardising WFP's ability to procure and utilise all planned quantities during the agreed timeframe of the action. Accordingly, should needs arise, WFP may evaluate revising the packaging requirements in order to have a greater supplier availability, which would result in necessary programmatic adjustments.

It should be noted that the amount of milk distributed through both the FSSP and the GFA, as well as the total number of children benefitting from it, mentioned in this report differ from what had been previously communicated through the monthly updates and the latest modification request. The difference is due to the fact that at the time of the earlier submissions the reconciliation of data was ongoing, which caused some inaccuracies in the final calculations.

### **3.1.6. Update on Needs Assessment**

Insufficient food production, combined with reduced government subsidies and currency depreciation, has led to continuous and sharp food price increases since the beginning of the crisis. According to recent reports from WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) unit, as well as the CFSAM, the average price of a standard food basket decreased by nine percent compared to last year to SYP 32,000 (USD 60). However, this still remains eight times higher compared to pre-crisis levels, while income levels have remained stagnant, further reducing the ability of poor households to meet their basic food needs. Furthermore, there were substantial differences at the governorate level, as prices only dropped significantly in Deir Ezzor, Al Hasakeh and Rural Damascus governorates, while in all other governorates the prices increased by an average of 11 percent.

Accordingly, the food security situation in Syria has progressively deteriorated since the start of the crisis, as almost 80 percent of the households across the country are struggling to cope with a lack of food, or money to buy food, particularly in areas where employment opportunities are extremely limited and markets are disrupted. As a result of the progressive deterioration, the CFSAM identified ten million people as in need of various forms of food assistance. This includes 6.9 million people who are food insecure, and 3.1 million people who are at risk of becoming food insecure if not adequately assisted.

According to the 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview, released in December 2016, 13.5 million people require humanitarian assistance in Syria, including 5.8 million children. Some seven million Syrian children live in poverty, while one-third of school aged children are not attending school, with one-third of schools remaining out of service.

### **3.2.7. Update on beneficiaries**

Acknowledging the potential risk of milk being utilized as a substitute for breast milk, WFP, in consultation with the Nutrition Sector, sensitized its cooperating partners regarding any upcoming distributions of milk under the GFA programme. Sensitization was done in order to ensure that beneficiaries were duly informed about the milk distribution and were aware that the milk was only intended for children aged 5-12 years to avoid any misuse of the product and unintended negative effects. Special briefing sessions for partners were organized for this purpose. In addition to placing awareness raising labels on the milk cartons, additional communication and sensitization materials were produced. These include banners and posters at distribution sites as well as on-the-spot awareness sessions for beneficiaries. Partners were asked to assign dedicated staff at distribution sites to ensure that the message was effectively delivered. Through these measures, WFP ensured that the risks of milk being used as a breastfeeding substitute were severely minimized. Furthermore, WFP and its partners had the responsibility of ensuring that the milk was distributed to families that were deemed eligible under the GFA programme, thereby applying WFP's set vulnerability criteria in order to support the most vulnerable families.

### **4.2.3 Indicators**

During the 2016-17 academic year, distributions of fortified date bars were carried out over 135 days, representing 96 percent of the overall school days in the academic year. Milk distributions could take place only during 90 days, or 64 percent of the total school days, as

milk distributions commenced only in December 2016 due to delays resulting from lengthy import and clearance procedures for this commodity (see the Activities sections under Result 1 for further details). When considering only the school days for the December 2016 – May 2017 period, during which milk was distributed, milk distributions took place during 97 percent of the 93 school days.

#### **4.3 Results**

##### **Result 1: Nutritious foods (fortified date bars and UHT milk) distributed in sufficient quantity, quality and timely to targeted school children**

###### **1. Beneficiaries**

In addition, children reached through the FSSP include 2,200 school children in three primary schools in Aleppo city who received fresh meals on school days under a small-scale pilot project launched by WFP in March 2017. Under this project, children received fresh meals during school days consisting of one sandwich and a piece of fruit or vegetable, providing over 500 kcal per child. In addition, the programme provided employment opportunities for 20 Syrian women in Aleppo City, the majority of whom are IDPs, who prepared the meals that were distributed to children attending school. WFP also provided the fortified wheat flour to produce the sandwich bread baked every morning.

The FSSP was implemented in 1,671 schools in sub-districts with high prevalence of food insecurity, poor education indicators and high concentration of IDPs. To ensure the provision of a comprehensive education support package, WFP targeted schools already receiving UNICEF education support, which includes the provision of teaching and learning material, school supplies, training for teachers, remedial classes and classroom rehabilitation. Girls represented approximately 49 percent of the school children assisted.

###### **2. Transfer Modalities**

When considering milk distributions, 4,024 mt or 45 percent of the planned tonnage, were distributed as part of WFP's FSSP during the 2016-17 academic year. Milk distributions were severely impacted by significant delays resulting from lengthy and complex customs clearance and lab test procedures (see Activities section under Result 1 for additional details), particularly during the first half of the academic year, which caused milk distributions to be delayed until December. Moreover, milk distributions were also slowed by the same challenges related to access and late approvals that negatively affected the overall implementation of the FSSP. However, by the end of the academic year, milk distributions had reached nine governorates, instead of eight initially envisaged by the original proposal. This contributed to partially mitigate the challenges initially encountered and allowed for increased milk distributions in the latter part of the academic year. It should be noted that the amount of milk distributed in schools mentioned in this report differs from what had been previously communicated through the monthly updates and the latest modification request. The difference is due to the fact that at the time of the earlier submissions the reconciliation of data was ongoing, which caused some inaccuracies in the calculations.

It should be noted that since March, approximately 2,200 children in three primary schools in Aleppo city were reached with fresh meals (one sandwich and a piece of fruit or vegetable) instead of fortified date bars.

Moreover, as part of its support to the Education Sector, since November 2016, WFP launched a new project targeting out-of-school children. Under this project, families enrolling their out-of-school children in UNICEF's accelerated remedial classes receive monthly cash-based transfers supporting food consumption at household level. By the end of the academic year, the project had reached 1,086 children, improving access to food for 5,500 people in Homs and Lattakia.

#### **4. Activities**

Once delivered by WFP to its partners, the UHT milk and fortified date bars were stored at the school premises prior to the distribution to children. However, storage at some schools remained a challenge due to the lack of adequate physical infrastructure and conditions to safely store the commodities. For instance, in Aleppo, schools are generally overcrowded resulting in a lack of space to safely store the commodities. Milk storage raised particular concerns due to the perishable nature of the commodity. WFP therefore initiated the procurement of storage units, which were placed inside the school premises where the milk could be stored. An initial pilot batch of ten prefabricated storage units have been locally procured and installed in Aleppo to date, and procurement is underway to purchase and install an additional 100 storage units for the milk across the country. In addition, in order to minimise quality issues, WFP regularly conduct training sessions for school principals and teacher involved in the implementation of the FSSP. Trainings covered different aspect of the implementation, including storage and handling of commodities.

During the 2016-17 academic year, distributions of fortified date bars were carried out over 135 days, representing 96 percent of the overall school days in the academic year. Milk distributions could take place only during 90 days, or 64 percent of the total school days, as milk distributions commenced only in December 2016 due to delays resulting from lengthy import and clearance procedures. However, it should be noted that due to a combination of access constraints, delays in obtaining the necessary approvals and supply chain issues, distributions could not take place consistently and in a sustained manner throughout the year in all governorates and in all schools assisted.

Monitoring of activities took place in approximately 13 percent of the 1,671 schools assisted throughout the year. In Homs, Damascus and rural Damascus, monitoring could not take place at planned scale due to security constraints and consequent difficulties in obtaining the necessary travel approvals for both WFP field monitors and third party monitoring staff to conduct the visits in these governorates.

#### **5.1.3. Report on gender and age marker**

Serious protection related concerns for children and adolescents including early marriage among girls and the recruitment of adolescent boys by armed groups continued during the reporting period. WFP's education support programme therefore aims to encourage school enrolment and attendance, thus reducing the exposure of children and adolescents to serious protection concerns. Across the reporting period, at WFP supported schools, 91 percent of the children were enrolled in classes, thereby achieving a very high attendance rate considering the context.

Lastly, acknowledging that as per the 2017 HNO 1.7 million children are currently not attending school in Syria, WFP launched a pilot programme in late 2016 to encourage vulnerable families with out-of-school children (OOSC) to enrol them in accelerated learning sessions supported by UNICEF. This programme facilitates the re-entry of OOSC into mainstream education opportunities by providing families with a cash-based transfer, based on attendance, enabling families to buy fresh food items at selected retailers. WFP currently supports 1,086 OOSC and their families, benefitting almost 5,500 people, and aims to support 50,000 children by the end of 2017.

### **5.2.3 Report on resilience marker**

The transition towards locally produced fortified date bars was also progressively scaled up, contributing to enhanced local capacity and improved food value chain. In 2016, WFP bought almost half of its fortified date bars through two local suppliers; this figure will increase to 100 percent of requirements starting in September 2017 with the start of the new academic school year. By scaling up local procurement, WFP has reduced the lead time and also ensures consistency with local taste preference. In parallel, the local procurement of fortified date bars has contributed to the livelihoods of 241 people who are employed by the two suppliers, of which 70 percent are women.

An additional 2,000 Syrians were employed across the supply chain, mainly in transport, warehousing and packaging functions during the reporting period.

### **6.3.1. Equipment and goods**

The UHT milk of EU origin was procured from European suppliers. Milk deliveries to schools started later than planned due to delays in the supply chain and lengthy customs clearance procedures. Syria has a strong regulatory framework related to food, which stipulates that the shelf life of UHT milk in Syria is six months and that food items such as UHT milk need to arrive in Syria with at least half of their shelf life remaining. The first batches arrived at Syria ports in October 2016, later than planned due to delays at the port of origin and consequently they had less than half of shelf life remaining. In addition, in line with Syrian regulations, before being transferred to WFP warehouses, the milk had to undergo the required testing scheme, including microbiological test that take 21 days. This required WFP to obtain an exemption from all relevant entities to be able to distribute the milk in spite of these delays. Following extensive negotiations, involving a wide range of Syrian government bodies, the milk reached WFP warehouses at the end of November, enabling the distributions in schools to start in December. However, concerns remained that due to the above-mentioned delays, combined with the perishable nature of the commodity and the winter break observed by public schools between December and January, quantities might not be fully absorbed by the schools ahead of the expiry date. This prompted the need to identify alternative options to utilise the milk quantities ahead of the expiry date, in order to minimise losses. As a result, WFP made a decision to include milk in the GFA programme rather than being forced to destroy the expiring quantities. Accordingly, WFP distributed 477 mt of UHT milk under the General Food Assistance programme, reaching approximately 160,000 children. The decision was made in consultation with the Nutrition Sector, and the milk was distributed to families with children between the ages of 5 and 12 years of age, and in areas with a high percentage of IDPs and high levels of food insecurity.

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