

Monthly Update on Milk in WFP Syria's School Meal Programme

October 2017

Background

Since August 2014, WFP Syria, in cooperation with UNICEF and the Syrian Ministry of Education, has been implementing a school meals programme aimed at encouraging enrolment and regular attendance among pre-primary and primary school children in Syria. Initially providing only fortified date bars, thanks to a generous contribution from the European Commission WFP was able to complement the daily snacks distributions with UHT milk of European Union origin during the academic year 2016-17. During that school year, WFP's school meals programme reached some 650,000 children. Of these, 584,500 children received over 4,000 mt of UHT milk of EU origin between December 2016 and May 2017. Due to operational challenges linked to the nature of the commodity as well as the challenging context in Syria, as a contingency measure part of the milk was reallocated to the General Food Assistance (GFA) programme and distributed along with the monthly family food rations, reaching some 160,000 children in early 2017. Milk distributions in assisted schools will continue over the 2017-18 school year, with reallocation to GFA maintained in place as a contingency measure.

Evidence from recent assessments and WFP monitoring supports the provision of UHT milk in Syria. The livestock sector has suffered substantially since 2011 with the loss of grazing lands, reductions in terms of herd and flock numbers (by over 40 percent for sheep and goats), lack of adequate veterinary services, high costs of inputs and difficulties in marketing the products. As a result, the average prices of livestock production (mainly milk and cheese) have progressively increased since 2011, with peaks of 600 percent compared to pre-crisis levels, depending on the area. In turn, price increases and limited availability in the market have significantly restricted access to fresh dairy products among vulnerable households. WFP programme monitoring findings confirm the low consumption of dairy products, including milk, among beneficiaries assisted by WFP, with the majority of interviewed households consuming these food items less than three days per week.

Challenges

The procurement of milk for the 2017-18 academic year was initiated in June 2017. However, it 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. In May 2017, the Syrian Arab Standards and Metrology Organization (SASMO) issued a revised version of the required specifications for sterilized milk, including UHT milk, which came into effect on 29 May 2017 (SNS 195:2016). The updated standards included a revision of some of the existing requirements and specifications:

- Alcohol precipitation test and turbidity tests are no longer required for UHT milk
- Milk solids non-fat percentage became: not less than 8.5% (instead of 8.25% in the former version)

As well as the inclusion of new requirements and quality parameters:

- Relative density at 20°C standard was revised from 1.028 to 1.036 g/ml
- The milk freezing point was decreased from -0.525°C to -0.550°C

- The filling volume must be not less than 90 percent of the container internal volume
- At all stage of the supply chain, the milk should be stored and transported at a temperature lower than 10°C
- Milk solids non-fat content need to be added to the label on the cartons

These changes impose stricter standards compared to those normally applied in the European Union and WFP's standard specifications, particularly with reference to the milk solids non-fat, the relative density and the decrease in milk freezing point. Consequently, the revision of the standards had a significant impact on the procurement process of UHT milk from EU origin under this action. In addition, the newly introduced temperature-controlled storage and transportation requirements would have hindered WFP's ability to proceed with the implementation of this project, as it is virtually impossible to ensure a full cold chain under the current operational conditions in Syria.

Compounding the revised specifications, the packaging requirements (200 ml) added an additional layer of complexity, as they further reduced the range of eligible suppliers. The combination of both packaging size requirements (200 ml) and revised Syrian specifications for the milk, dramatically restricted the pool of available suppliers able to meet both. WFP faced significant challenges in identifying suppliers in the EU able to meet the standards required by the Syrian authorities, which are stricter than those normally applied in the European Union. Only four EU suppliers able to meet the Syrian specifications could be identified. However, their production lines capacity would not enable them to supply sufficient quantities of Syrian specifications-compliant UHT milk in the 200ml packaging needed by WFP. In other words, those suppliers who were able to meet both packaging and specifications requirements could only supply limited milk quantities, but not in sufficient amounts to utilise the grant by its expiry date.

Actions and Mitigation measures

In light of the above-mentioned challenges regarding the revised Syrian standards and specifications for milk, WFP engaged in intense consultation and negotiations with the relevant counterparts at both Country Office and HQ levels.

At Country Office level, WFP held several meetings with the relevant Syrian authorities, including the Animal Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR) and SASMO, the agency in charge of issuing the Syrian standards for food specifications, to discuss the newly introduced requirements and advocate to obtain an amendment or a waiver. In particular, the negotiations revolved around the storage and transport at temperature-controlled conditions along the entire supply chain, as the enforcement of this requirement would have forced WFP to halt the entire project due to the impossibility to comply. International standard requirements were shared with the authorities, indicating that UHT milk does not necessitate such strict storage and transport conditions as it is sterilized at ultra-high temperature. Following intense negotiations, in mid-July SASMO agreed to waive the cold chain requirement for WFP, stating that the UHT milk imported for this project could be handled in ambient storage conditions.

At HQ level, the procurement team engaged in thorough consultations with the identified EU suppliers to ascertain and confirm their ability to supply UHT milk in conformity with the revised Syrian specifications. In parallel, WFP Syria worked closely with the WFP Food Safety and Quality Unit at HQ to update the WFP standard specification for UHT milk procured for Syria to be in line with the revised requirements from SASMO. An updated version of the relevant specifications document was finalized in early August and shared with the suppliers, to prevent issues along the supply chain and avoid facing any challenge importing the UHT milk into Syria.

While WFP identified EU suppliers able to conform to the Syrian specifications for sterilized milk, these suppliers were not able to provide sufficient quantities of UHT milk in the required packaging (200 ml) within the grant timeframe due to the limited production line capacity for this packaging size. In other words, those suppliers who were able to meet both packaging and specifications requirements could not supply milk in sufficient amounts to utilise the grant by the expiry date. This prompted WFP's decision to accept some quantities with different packaging sizes, namely 330 ml and 1 litre. The flexibility with the packaging size enabled WFP to expand the pool of suppliers able to provide milk conforming to the Syrian standards in sufficient quantities to fully utilize the grant within the agreed timeframe.

Implementation to date

Following the extensive negotiations and consultations detailed above, WFP was able to resume the tendering process in August. As of late October, the procurement process has been initiated for all milk quantities planned to be distributed during the 2017-18 academic year, amounting to 19,500 mt. The breakdown by packaging size is as follows:

- 4,000 mt of 1 l packaging
- 2,500 mt of 330 ml packaging
- 13,000 mt of 200 ml packaging

The first batches are expected to arrive in early November, enabling the commencement of distributions in schools by December, provided that all clearance procedures are completed in a timely manner. Subsequent batches are expected to arrive in a staggered manner through the school year with the last quantities expected to be at Syrian ports by April.

Next Steps

Distributions are expected to commence in December, pending timely completion of all clearance procedures. Distributions will take place in some 1,100 schools across ten Syrian governorates.

In line with the change in the packaging sizes, WFP plans to distribute the smaller cartons (200 ml and 330 ml) during school days, while the bigger cartons (1 L) will be given to children as take home rations. The latter measure is intended to avoid quality related issues linked with opening larger cartons that cannot be consumed over one day within the school premises, where the correct storage and refrigeration cannot be guaranteed and monitored. The geographical allocation of the different packaging sizes will be determined according to the supply chain and operational conditions requirements.

Children will either receive two small cartons of milk (200 ml or 330 ml) on a daily basis during school days, or two larger cartons (1 l) as take home ration on a weekly basis. The weekly take-home ration (2 l) will provide each child 400 ml per day over a period of five days, thus ensuring the same minimum transfer level as distributions during school-days. These quantities are within the WHO recommended milk intake for the targeted age group, set at two to four servings per day. Please click [here](#) to download the full WHO food and nutrition policy for schools (see page 37).

The envisaged changes in packaging size and distribution modalities have been communicated to the Department of Education staff and school principals. During the regular consultation sessions on planning and implementation, WFP shared appropriate messaging with the relevant counterparts to ensure that the objectives of the school meals programme are properly communicated, and that beneficiaries are duly informed that the milk is intended for children aged 5-12 years, in order to avoid any misuse of the product and unintended negative effects. Similar to the approach used for the milk reallocated to General

Food Assistance (GFA) distributions, communication and sensitization material will be produced and disseminated in the targeted schools, to be provided along with the take-home milk rations.

It should be noted that WFP's plan continues to be the prioritization of milk for distributions in schools, and resort to the reallocation to GFA as a contingency measure only. The delays encountered in the procurement process will result in distributions to start later than planned, and consequently will likely result in some quantities to be reallocated to GFA as a contingency measure. The extent and timeframe of the reallocations can only be determined at a later stage, when milk starts arriving in country and distributions in schools begin. Similarly, the packaging size that will be reallocated to GFA will depend on the operational requirements.

The milk quantities to be distributed during the 2017-18 academic year (about 18,000 mt) represent a minimal fraction of the estimated national requirements, and only about two percent of the average yearly consumption at national level between 2011 and 2014. Accordingly, the injection of milk under this project, which will be spread across ten governorates, is not expected to have any major impact on the local production and market prices