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Defining ‘high quality’ for food production

Evidence review of definitions of ‘high quality’ in the context of primary food production

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Summary

Background

- One of the main objectives in the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is the 'production of high-quality food'. However, 'high quality' is not defined in the Bill and there is a lack of consensus on how it should be defined in this context.
- The purpose of this work is to provide an evidence base of where and how 'high quality' has been used in policy and legislation in other jurisdictions.
- Researchers were asked to identify:
    - whether and how 'high quality' has been defined in the context of primary food production in the devolved nations (Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland), the UK (at a nation level), Ireland and the European Union
    - if a definition was provided, the targets and indicators used to help define it.

Methods

- An initial snowballing approach was used to review references cited within the Rural Affairs and Island Committee meeting minutes and the draft Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill for mentions of 'high quality'.
- The database FAOLEX (an online repository of global policy and legislation by the Food and Agriculture Organisation) was then searched for the term 'high quality' across the jurisdictions outlined above.
- In total, the snowballing approach and FAOLEX search yielded 116 texts which included the term 'high quality' but only 28 texts were relevant to agricultural, livestock and food and nutrition. Of these, only 18 texts pertained to food and production.

Findings

- The term 'high quality' was not clearly defined in any text across any of the jurisdictions included in the research. However, it was often referred to in the context of animal welfare, nutrition, and environmental sustainability.

1 Introduction

The Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture (Scottish Government, 2022a) states that Scotland will have "a support framework that delivers high quality food production, climate mitigation and adaption and nature restoration".

The Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill seeks to provide the enabling powers to establish this new framework of support. The Bill primarily pertains to primary agriculture products, but not marine production and food products processed in Scotland that may or may not be from ingredients of Scottish origin.

Questions over what Scottish Government considers to be 'high quality' food were raised at recent Rural Affairs and Island Committee meetings (Scottish Government, 2023a, 2023b). A further meeting highlighted different interpretations of how high quality can be defined, with links to welfare standards, nutritional quality, whether the product supports the economy and provides value to the supply chain. No consensus over the definition of high quality was reached (Scottish Government, 2023c).

The purpose of this work is to identify:

- whether and how 'high quality' has been defined in the context of primary food production in the devolved nations (Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland), the UK (at a nation level), Ireland and the European Union
- if a definition is provided, the targets and indicators used to help define it.

This work contributes to building an evidence base for the use and meaning of the term high quality food production in a Scottish context and will later inform monitoring and evaluation work for the Agricultural Reform Programme.

2 Methods

Initially, a snowballing approach to reviewing documents was taken. References cited within the Rural Affairs and Island Committee meeting minutes and the draft Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill were reviewed for mentions of 'high quality' to give a comprehensive overview of Scottish policy. In total, seven references were reviewed, further details of which can be found in the appendix.

Following this initial search, an advanced search of the FAOLEX database (FAO, 2024) was then conducted. FAOLEX is a comprehensive online repository of legal and policy documents pertaining to areas of agriculture and rural development, cultivated plants, environment, fisheries and aquaculture, livestock, food and nutrition, forestry, land and soil, mineral resources and energy, sea, water, and wild species and ecosystems.

For this review, only texts relating to agriculture and rural development, livestock, and food and nutrition were reviewed. All types of text (constitutions, polices, legislation, regulation, international agreement and miscellaneous (such as acts)), including the term ‘high quality’ for multiple jurisdictions including the devolved nations (Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland), the UK (at a nation level), Ireland, and the European Union, between 2018 and 2023, were downloaded.

Initially the terms ‘high quality production’ and ‘high quality food’ were searched for but this yielded only 11 results in total. Therefore, the term ‘high quality’ was searched for in all texts. The broader search term produced more results as it included terms such as ‘high quality data’ and ‘high quality workforce’. Thus, these documents were omitted from the review. We primarily focused on high quality food quality as it relates to agricultural outputs rather than consumer preferences. The use of ‘high quality’ beyond the farm gate was out of scope for this project.

In total, 109 documents from the FAOLEX database were reviewed, but only 28 texts pertained to agriculture and rural development (n = 9), livestock (n = 11), and food and nutrition (n = 8). Of these, only 11 texts related to high quality food and/ or production, dominated by texts within agriculture and rural development (n = 6), and food and nutrition (n = 5). The search yielded no results for Northern Ireland texts, suggesting that Northern Ireland does not refer to ‘high quality’ in legal documents or that there was no mention of it the last five years.

Through the initial snowball review, and FAOLEX database review, a total of 18 texts have been included in this analysis. Table 1 shows these broken down by jurisdiction. Further details of the texts can be found in the appendix.

Table 1. FAOLEX and snowballing overview of agriculture and rural development, livestock, and food and nutrition texts, including the term ‘high quality’ pertaining to production and food, across multiple jurisdictions, between 2018 and 2023.

Jurisdiction	Type of text	Source	Number of texts reviewed
Scotland	Legislation, policies	FAOLEX Snowballing	Agriculture and rural development = 3 Food and nutrition = 3 Unspecified = 3
United Kingdom	Consultation	Snowballing	Agriculture and rural development = 2
Ireland	Policies	FAOLEX	Food and nutrition = 1
European Union	Legislation, policies, regulation, miscellaneous	FAOLEX	Agriculture and rural development = 4 Food and nutrition = 2

3 Results

No specific definition for the term ‘high quality’ relating to food or commodity production was stated in any of the policies and legislation reviewed.

However, multiple themes in conjunction with ‘high quality’ were identified through the search. These included: animal welfare, nutrition, protecting environments/ biodiversity, food safety, social needs of communities, economics, and emission targets (Table 2).

Animal welfare, nutrition, and environmental sustainability (including protecting the environment and emission targets) were the most common themes used when referring to high quality production and food.

Table 2. Identified themes used in conjunction with high quality food and production.

Themes in conjunction with ‘high quality’	Number of texts
Animal welfare	8
Nutrition	7
Protecting environment/ biodiversity	4
Food safety	3
Social needs of communities	2
Economics	1
Emission targets	1

3.1 Scotland

In Scotland, five texts were found in the initial snowballing methodology, and four texts were found in the FAOLEX database, that related to high quality food production. However, none of these defined the term in a meaningful way.

Animal welfare is referenced to in the Scottish context. The Animal Health and Welfare in the Livestock Industry Strategy states that “high standards of animal health and welfare in the livestock industry are one of the foundation stones of Scotland’s reputation for high quality and ethical produce” (Scottish Government, 2016).

The Strategy for Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research states “high quality agricultural products …. are known for their provenance and quality”, and “[the goal is] to create resilient, sustainable, high quality crop production systems [to] support the rural economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, food security and the circular economy” (Scottish Government, 2021a). Referencing

a specific product, the Scottish Common Agricultural Policy Non IACS Support Schemes states that there are “rules for the management of a tariff quota for high-quality beef” but no clear definition is provided (Scottish Government, 2015).

The term ‘high quality’ was used in the public consultation of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill. Respondents were asked whether they “believe the new Agriculture Bill should include a mechanism to enable payments that support high quality food production”. Despite financial support being proposed, no definition was provided. In the analysis of these responses, “79% of respondents agreed that the new Agriculture Bill should include a mechanism to enable payments that support high quality food production, while 6% disagreed”. There was a consensus among responders that “high quality food production is inevitably more costly, and support is therefore more likely to be needed” (Scottish Government, 2023d).

3.2 United Kingdom

In the UK government food strategy, high quality products “support healthier diets” and result from “sustainable, nature positive and affordable food systems” (DEFRA, 2022). Additionally, the ‘Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit’ report suggests there cannot be a uniform definition as “producing high-quality food… is defined by the surrounding landscape and by investment potential” (DEFRA, 2018a).

3.3 European Union

Similarly in European policies, there was a lack of definition found within the texts. The European action plan for the development of organic production states that “high quality food [should be] produced in a way that respects the environment and ensures animal welfare” (European Commission, 2021). In the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on organic production and labelling organic products, “observance of high standards for health, the environment, and animal welfare in the production of organic products is intrinsic to the high quality of those products” (European Union, 2018).

In some instances, the factors contributing to ‘high quality’ produce were outlined. For instance, the European Farm to Fork Strategy states that “high quality [food] is the result of years of EU policymaking to protect human, animal and plant health, and of the efforts of farmers, fishers and aquaculture producers” (European Commission, 2020). Similarly, the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing rules on support for strategic plans under CAP states that “[high-quality production benefits from] a modern, competitive, resilient and diversified agricultural sector” (European Union, 2021).

4 Limitations

One limitation of the review was the narrow timeframe in which the search was completed - for instance, no legal documents containing the term ‘high quality’ were found in documents for Northern Ireland, within the search period of the search (2018 to 2023).

The UK Government may look to develop a definition for high quality food from a consumer perspective in the future as they are launching a consultation on a new food labelling scheme that will inform consumers whether they are buying high quality British produce (Scottish Government, 2024). However, this is unlikely to consider production before the farmgate, as food labels are intended for consumers.

5 Conclusions

This review found no specific definition for ‘high quality’ production across any text included. However, where the term was used, it was often referred to in the context of animal welfare, nutrition, and environmental sustainability.

6 References

DEFRA, 2022. Government food strategy.

DEFRA, 2018a. Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit.

DEFRA, 2018b. Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit. Summary of responses.

European Commission, 2021. Communication from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee, and the committee of the regions on an action plan for the development of organic production.

European Commission, 2020. Farm to Fork Strategy.

European Union, 2021. Regulation - 2021/2115.

European Union, 2018. Regulation (EU) 2018/848 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007, OJ L.

FAO, 2024. FAOLEX Database.

Government of Ireland, 2021. Food Vision 2030. A World Leader in Sustainable Food Systems.

Scottish Government, 2024. Meeting of the Parliament. Meeting date: 9 January 2024.

Scottish Government, 2023a. Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. Meeting date: 29 November 2023.

Scottish Government, 2023b. Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. Meeting date: 6 December 2023.

Scottish Government, 2023c. Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. Meeting date: 13 December 2023.

Scottish Government, 2023d. Agriculture Bill: consultation analysis.

Scottish Government, 2022a. The next step in delivering our vision for Scotland as a leader in sustainable and regenerative farming.

Scottish Government, 2022b. Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022.

Scottish Government, 2021a. Strategy for Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research 2022-2027.

Scottish Government, 2021b. National Development Plan for Crofting.

Scottish Government, 2016. Animal Health and Welfare in the Livestock Industry: Strategy 2016 to 2021.

Scottish Government, 2015. The Common Agricultural Policy Non-IACS Support Schemes (Appeals) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015.

7 Appendix: Further details of texts outlined in Table 1

Source	Jurisdiction	Type of text	Primary Subject	Title	Context
FAOLEX	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Policies	Agricultural and rural development	The National Development Plan for Crofting	"the Scottish Government completed its £3 million renovation of the stud farm facilities at Knocknagael in Inverness in April 2013. The modernised stud facility provides quality accommodation for the bulls, optimising their welfare and enabling crofters to continue to benefit from access to high quality, healthy bulls"
FAOLEX	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Policies	Agricultural and rural development	Strategy for Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research 2022-2027	"high quality agricultural products …. are known for their provenance and quality", and "[the goal is] to create resilient, sustainable, high quality crop production systems [should] support the rural economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, food security and the circular economy"
FAOLEX	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern	Policies	Food and nutrition	Government food strategy	"[high quality products] support healthier diet [and result from]

	Ireland (Scotland)				sustainable, nature positive and affordable food systems"
FAOLEX	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Legislation	Food and nutrition	Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022	"In preparing the national good food nation plan, the Scottish Ministers must have regard to— the ability of high quality, nutritious and culturally appropriate food to improve the health and physical and mental wellbeing of people"
FAOLEX	Ireland	Policies	Food and nutrition	Food Vision 2030	"[Ireland's food] strategy takes a systematic approach to addressing the challenge of ensuring that Ireland can continue to produce high quality food in a manner that protects the environment and mitigates climate change"
FAOLEX	European Union	Policies	Agricultural and rural development	Action Plan for the development of organic production	"high quality food [should be] produced in a way that respects the environment and ensures animal welfare"
FAOLEX	European Union	Legislation	Agricultural and rural development	Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under	"to improve the response of Union agriculture to societal demands on food and health, including high-quality, safe and nutritious food produced in a sustainable

				the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013	way, to reduce food waste, as well as to improve animal welfare and to combat antimicrobial resistance" and "The Union needs to foster a modern, competitive, resilient and diversified agricultural sector which reaps the benefits of high-quality production and resource-efficiency, and which ensures long-term food security as part of a competitive and productive agri-food sector while safeguarding the family farm model"
FAOLEX	European Union	Legislation	Agricultural and rural development	Regulation (EU) 2018/848 of the European Parliament and of the Council on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007	"observance of high standards for health, the environment, and animal welfare in the production of organic products is intrinsic to the high quality of those products"
FAOLEX	European Union	Policies	Agricultural and rural development	Farm to Fork Strategy	"high quality [food] is the result of years of EU policymaking to protect human, animal and plant health, and of the efforts of farmers,

					fishers and aquaculture producers"
FAOLEX	European Union	Policies	Food and nutrition	Safeguarding food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems	"Phosphate and potash are key nutrients to ensure good yields of high-quality arable crops"
FAOLEX	European Union	Regulation	Food and nutrition	Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2023/2465 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards marketing standards for eggs, and repealing Commission Regulation (EC) No 589/2008	"The quality characteristics for Class A eggs should be fixed in order to guarantee the high quality of eggs to be delivered directly to the final consumer and to set criteria that can be checked by inspection services. Such quality characteristics should be based on Standard No 42 of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE) concerning the marketing and commercial quality controls of eggs-in-shell moving in international trade between and to UN/ECE member countries"
Snowballing	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Unspecified	Agricultural and rural development	Animal Health and Welfare in the Livestock Industry Strategy	"High standards of animal health and welfare in the livestock industry are one of the foundation stones of Scotland’s reputation for high quality and ethical

					produce” and “producers need to build on Scotland’s reputation for high quality produce” and "Scotland depends on the quality of its natural environment in order to both produce and market high quality food”
Snowballing	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Unspecified	Food and nutrition	Scottish Parliament. Meeting of the Parliament. Official report	"The UK Government is going to launch a consultation on a new food labelling scheme that will ensure that consumers know what they are buying: high quality British produce, rather than imported goods that do not meet UK welfare standards"
Snowballing	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Unspecified	Unspecified	Agriculture bill: consultation analysis	"79% of respondents agreed that the new Agriculture Bill should include a mechanism to enable payments that support high quality food production"
Snowballing	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Unspecified	Unspecified	The next step in delivering our vision for Scotland as a leader in sustainable and regenerative farming - Our vision for	"develop a framework that delivers high quality food production, climate mitigation and adaptation, and nature restoration"

				Scottish Agriculture	
Snowballing	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Scotland)	Unspecified	Unspecified	The Common Agricultural Policy Non IACS Support Schemes	"Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 481/2012 laying down rules for the management of a tariff quota for high-quality beef"
Snowballing	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Consultation	Agricultural and rural development	Health and Harmony. The future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit	"British farmers have been producing high quality food, doing their best to protect the environment and keeping our rural areas economically healthy" and "Producing high-quality food, maximising environmental benefits and diversification (e.g. into energy generation, tourism and commercial forestry) are all opportunities, but we recognise that these will be defined by the surrounding landscape and by investment potential"
Snowballing	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Consultation	Agricultural and rural development	Health and Harmony. The future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit. Summary of responses	"importance of acknowledging high quality, nutritious food as a public good and its connection to animal health and welfare, emphasising the link between farming and food

					production" and "producing high quality food from a high quality environment"

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