

Book Review

Changing European Farming Systems for a Better Future: New Visions for Rural Areas, Hans Langeveld, Niels Röling (Eds.). Wageningen Academic Publishers, Wageningen, The Netherlands (2006). 480 pp., US\$107.00 Hardback, ISBN-13: 978-90-8686-002-9

The importance of the choice of title for a book cannot be overlooked. In deliberately selecting the words “Changing European Farming Systems,” and “New Visions for Rural Areas,” the editors, both outstanding and well respected researchers, seem to have deliberately shied away from the term “designing” farming systems for the future. This sets the tone for a book that brings together papers from the 7th European IFSA Symposium recently held at Wageningen, The Netherlands. Design implies engineering, and the veritable flood of publications in journals of *in silico* studies focused on subjects such as yield gap analysis, fertilization studies, nutrient management, climate-crop interactions, and the like are a tangible example of how the engineering mindset has simply transitioned from the greenhouse to the computer. The complex world that farmers and other rural inhabitants face today seems to call for different foci, new paradigms, and innovative and appropriate methodologies. From this point of view, the volume edited by Langeveld and Röling is a breath of fresh air. It surely must not have been easy to pull a comprehensible book together from a seemingly chaotic list of themes. Yet the more than interesting and useful methodologies and theoretical knowledge being created by the group of scientists and practitioners who are the authors of the book seems to have thrived precisely on the edge or in the tension field that Madison Avenue executives or the Silicon Valley tech armies appear to thrive on; controlled, chaos, brainstorming followed by thoughtful analysis and application. There seems to be an ethos of “let’s turn farming systems research on its head” running through the book that has resulted in a collection that no cutting-edge agricultural systems researcher or practitioner should be without.

The tome is divided into five sections and an afterview. These are: learning as a process, agriculture, land use, and sustainable development, the future of farming, agricultural knowledge and innovation systems, and management of natural resources. Although these divisions are necessary for organizational purposes, there are common themes throughout. These are the multifunctionality of the farm,

learning as a process, and innovation systems in transition; another process theme. In essence, although some valuable papers are included from other geographical areas, notably work from Guatemala by Wilsey, the USA by Cabrera, several papers from Australia, China, and Africa, and an Amazonian paper by Pocard-Chapus et al., the book is largely Euro-centric (and understandably so). The EU milieu is a particularly interesting one within which to work. While EU regulations insist that work must be local and participatory, the regulation itself is an example of the top-down mentality that exists at the core of much of the EU mind-set and indeed, one that is likely necessary if the EU is to not only survive, but continue in its leadership role.

At the core of this question is whether farming livelihoods can be sustained and whether they can contribute more than food and fiber on a continent largely devoid of natural areas. That is, can rural areas provide not only sustainable and culturally valid livelihoods, but also much needed environmental services. How multifunctional can the farm be and how can we learn what we need to know to inform farmers, scientists, and policy makers? Strict scientists have in the past sometimes regarded farming systems researchers as “rural practitioners” who thrive on local studies but lack theory to scale-up their excellent case studies to put them on a par with more serious work (often model or statistical-based). Christensen and Sriskandarajah in their paper “The action researcher as a reflective partner to a core group” lay that notion to rest with a brilliant take on the multiple roles of the researcher. They argue that at the proper level of involvement, farming systems researchers can produce both development of local capacities and generic knowledge for science that is replicable and transferable.

Like any collection of papers from a symposium, this edition is not necessarily an easy read. The reader should not expect to have his eyes glued to the pages into the wee hours of the morning as with some of the more popular science books that have been emerging lately. But a favorable caveat is due here. The book is meaty, dense, modern, and useful. The group of scientists who participated in the symposium is to be commended for their clear and well thought-out visions, and the editors congratulated for putting together a tome that we can learn much from and will surely be cited extensively in our future work.

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