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Book reviews

Changing European farming systems for a better future: New visions for rural areas, Eds: Hans Langeveld and Niels Raling, 2006, Wageningen Academic Publishers, 480 pages, Hardbound, ISBN: 9086860028, Euros 80 or US\$ 107

This book consists of papers prepared for the 7th European IPSA Symposium: “New visions for rural areas: Changing European farming systems for a better future”. The papers are divided into six sections.

The first section “learning as a process” describes learning in a multi-stakeholder environment. Several examples of joint learning processes are described and explained with theories about communication, multi-stakeholder participation and roles of farmers, experts and politicians. This section refers specifically to the new roles of experts and scientists. Personally I liked the contributions in which the theoretical background was related to case-studies.

The second section “Agriculture, land use and sustainable development” is a mixed section in which the connection among the different papers seems to be the different ways in which sustainable development can be approached. Several interesting cases about agriculture and its context are described, for example the case-study of the Douro-Duero valley and the contribution of small-scale production to revitalization of the local economy.

The third section “The future of farming” focuses on farm level and discusses what makes farming change at EU and national levels, describes scenarios of evolution and multifunctional farming. Several case-studies show the diversity of farmers and farming systems and the importance of paying attention to this diversity. Although

the section had a promising title it was the less innovative and interesting section of the book.

The fourth section “Agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS) in transition” shows that innovation depends nowadays on the collaboration in a network of interdependent societal actors. This “new” innovation leads to new roles for research, extension and education and new methodologies and approaches. Papers in this section describe, analyze and compare current developments in AKIS. At first the section seemed to be more specifically written for extension workers and social scientists, but several cases are relevant for all readers: researchers, industries, farmers, extension services etc.

The fifth section “Management of natural resources” describes tools with which natural resources can be managed: GIS, models etc. But all tools are developed in cooperation with local stakeholders, e.g. farmers, citizens, and interest organizations. Knowledge exchange and dissemination about natural resources, like “landscape” and “biodiversity” are key themes.

The final short section “perspectives for participative systems oriented research” could be filled with articles from other sections of this book. It confirms the applicability and usefulness of participative methods to tackle problems to multifunctional agriculture in current contexts.

In general the book gives a lot of interesting case-studies from all over the world, in which mostly multi-stakeholder processes of change in agriculture are described and or analyzed. Examples from most agricultural sectors can be found in the book, however most methods/approaches can be transferred to other agricultural sectors. A drawback of this book is that the distribution of the papers over the different sections seems to be completely illogical. To find again interesting papers you need to make good notes. It is also a book that contains all papers and posters from a conference, which makes it an inconsistent book with papers of different qualities, so a bit difficult to read. Several case-studies, however, which combine data with theory are really interesting to read for those working in multi-disciplinary teams or working in multi-stakeholder environment; in other words for those that focus on innovation and changes in agriculture. As I am a scientist educated in “technical sciences” with an interest in participative approaches and multi-stakeholder processes I learned a lot from the book.

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