Book reviews

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Europe's City-Regions Competitiveness: Growth Regulation and Peri-Urban Land Management, eds N. Bertrand & V. Kreibich, 187 pp. Assen: Royal Van Gorcum (2006). €27.50 (paperback). ISBN 90 232 4183 5 and 978 90 232 4183 6.

This book is a product of a 2000–2004 EU-funded research project (Urban Pressure on Rural Areas (NEWRUR)) 'which dealt with the changes and dynamics linked to urban pressure on rural areas within European city regions' (p. 1). The initial chapters explain the policy background, i.e. the search for a European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), and various concepts, such as 'polycentricism', 'spatial planning' (a somewhat broader profession than traditional UK-type land use planning), and 'territorial cohesion'. The specific role of city-regions in this search, and associated ideas such as 'urban–rural partnerships', 'peri-urban regions', are explored, though not always in great depth. Later chapters include four 'evaluations of the factors that contribute to city-region success or failure in achieving the kind of regulatory aims spelt out in the ESDP', in England (Cambridge and Norwich), France (Annecy and Valence), Spain (Andalusia) and Germany (Munich) respectively. A final chapter reviews the earlier material, and attempts to draw some 'lessons for the future?'

There is not much in here that is directed specifically towards (or from) agriculture, or indeed other specific land uses and economic sectors, with the exception perhaps of housing. The book is more concerned with the roles and objectives (or ambitions?) of various levels and segments of government, from the European down to the local level. Even so, relationships with the private sector and with non-governmental organizations and interest groups are not dealt with in detail, even in the four case-study chapters. Despite its presence in the book's title, 'competitiveness' – a term borrowed from economics – also receives little analysis. Although the English is generally good, the absence of an index (or even a listing of section titles) is a drawback.

Thus the book is a useful insight into the world of spatial planners, and illustrates both idealism and intellectualism at the European level. Depending on your point of view, this may be taken as a warning or an inspiration. The question mark in the title of the final chapter seems justified.

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The State of Food and Agriculture 2006: Food Aid for Food Security? Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). FAO Agriculture Series no. 37. xii + 168 pp. + mini CD-ROM. Rome: FAO (2006). US$65.00 (Paperback). ISBN 978-92-5-105600-4.

This issue of the FAO's annual 'SOFA' series, authored by a very international team, focuses on the issues and controversies surrounding international food aid. The benefits of food aid are obvious when it reaches the mouths of the hungry (if uncontaminated by dirty water), but it has been criticized as a costly and often inefficient donor-driven response that creates recipient dependency, undermines local production and trade, and weakens long-term sustainability. Over 80 pages (and 8 pages of references later on) examine the economic arguments and evidence, and cover programming (timing and management), governance (organization, e.g. Food Aid Conventions and the World Food Programme), the security of food supplies, economic and political dependency, disruption of production and commerce, and emergencies ('sudden-onset', 'slow-onset', and 'complex and protracted crises').

The report concludes that 'the available evidence regarding these issues is surprisingly thin', but it appears that considerable improvements have been achieved over recent decades in the world's food aid system. Hence the numbers of undernourished have been kept at about 850 million people (mostly in Asia) since the early 1990s, after an impressive previous fall due to improved food production (again, in Asia). Nevertheless, the recurrent crises in parts of sub-Saharan Africa are well known, and natural-disaster emergencies seem to be increasing in frequency and severity. Recommendations include better targeting, untying from donor requirements, the use of local or regional purchases, and better information systems to anticipate food shortages in time, and to avoid

belated arrivals. Risks remain from reduced availabilities of surpluses if world prices rise as a result of growing populations, rising incomes elsewhere and perhaps bio-energy cropping. Moreover, political will remains essential, both amongst potential donors, and in recipient countries.

Parts II and III of the volume contain the standard statistical FAO data – basic material for anyone wishing to monitor and assess the broad geographical and temporal patterns of global food and agriculture.

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Principles of Plant Genetics and Breeding, by G. Acquaah. xiii + 569 pp. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing (2007). £39.99 (US$84.95, AUS$132.00) Hardback.
ISBN 1 4051 3646 4.

Plant breeding is a very broad subject that takes information from a wide range of scientific disciplines. Although scientists involved with plant breeding may develop in-depth expertise in one area of science they must have good general knowledge of many areas, which, arguably, makes them better scientists. This book takes a fresh up-to-date look at the principles, concepts and practices of plant breeding and presents them in an accessible and thought-provoking way. It is aimed at upper undergraduate/early graduate students but also provides a good 'refresher' course for more experienced plant breeders. Inevitably the author tends to give a mainly North American view on some aspects of plant breeding, such as applications of biotechnology, the impact of intellectual property rights and the process of cultivar release but this does not generally reduce the book's wider relevance. For example, there tends to be more emphasis on genetic engineering rather than on marker-assisted selection (MAS), although some of the very interesting additional contributions from plant breeding professionals in the book bring MAS more into focus. These 'industry' contributions are a valuable part of the book in giving good links to breeding in practice and providing excellent examples of what plant breeding can achieve. While it is important that underlying genetic principles are included in the book there are some aspects of population genetics, quantitative genetics and selection theory that tend to lack some clarity. For example, the treatment of Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium is rather confusing; there is a statement that 'natural mutations are of little importance to practical plant breeding' (this is certainly wrong for quantitative traits); and that the selection of rare alleles is ineffective (again this is not necessarily true). Also the section on bioinformatics is somewhat disappointing and doesn't really begin to explore the potential of using information from model or investment-rich crop species to aid the development of 'orphan' crops. However the value of the book is in 'flagging-up' the wide range of topics that are relevant to modern plant breeding programmes and in providing an introduction to pertinent information. Most examples are drawn from globally important arable field crops although some of the additional 'industry' contributions pay more attention to crops specifically of value in developing countries. The book will certainly help in training badly needed new plant breeders and should be of general interest to anyone concerned with the impact of plant breeding for public good including exciting new developments in bioenergy and alternative land-use.

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