# General introduction

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## New arrangements for land use and communication

Rural areas face many challenges. They are posed by processes of trade liberalisation, globalisation, declining commodity prices and reducing support for farming, increasingly strict demands on food quality, environmental quality, and animal welfare and by climatic change. They result in increasing competition for land, space and water and require highly skilled land managers. Clearly these challenges have to be addressed not only by farmers and other land managers but also by consumers, researchers and policy makers.

Farming families, researchers and policy makers, all need to come up with solutions to help maintain and improve rural conditions. How are we to reconcile the different demands on the rural areas? What land use systems are to help realise cleaner, safer and more animal friendly food production, conserve biodiversity, or improve water management and nature development? What arrangements can be made to support decision-making and problem solving in multiple-stakeholder arenas and transform (potential) conflict into concerted action?

To answer these questions considerable efforts are required in research and management. Knowledge of and skills in technical and bio-physical processes, combined with a keen eye for economic performance of the land use systems, are no longer sufficient. In order to be able to be successful, farmers need to identify new, innovative, strategies and communicate them with stakeholders that have may have different priorities. Scientists, advisors and policy makers, on the other hand, will have to learn to collaborate with farmers and consumers, groups that are increasingly educated, informed and organised. Together, all involved need to find ways to interact efficiently in a world where information is abundant but not necessary always correct.

A clear role for research is laid out in the design of new systems and arrangements that are adapted to the changing conditions and create conditions under which stakeholders can learn and implement new ways of cooperation. Different research schools exist, be it with specific scopes and application areas. Despite the many differences, also some similarities can be identified. Various approaches have been developed that combine an integrated view, multi-disciplinarity, and systems oriented focus. In his overview of systems oriented, participative research, Norman (2002) sketches the development of major research orientations from 1960 to present day.

Over the years, participative, systems oriented research, that integrates multi-disciplinary knowledge at different scale levels, has played an increasingly important role in the design and implementations of new, alternative land use systems, as well as in the communication between the actors involved in rural development. Such research can help different stakeholders, including farmers, civilians and policy makers to participate in problem formulation and in identifying effective policies and farming practices, and can assist in the adoption of such practices.

## IFSA

Over a period of 25 years, the International Farming Systems Association (IFSA) has been at the forefront in developing strategies for rural areas in Europe and elsewhere. IFSA has its origins in Farming Systems Research, as it evolved after the Second World War, largely for the purposes of smallholder development in the tropics. Different groups of researchers from many disciplines as well as extension and development project professionals joined forces in a series of annual meetings hosted by Kansas State University in the 1980s. Together, they helped defining a systems researching approach to agricultural development.

In 1989, the Association for Farming Systems Research and Extension (AFSRE) was born, open to agricultural and rural systems researchers and developers of any discipline, hosting members from almost all geographical regions. Regions started organising themselves in the 1990s, hosting the global symposium on a rotating basis. In 1998, the name of the global association was changed to the International Farming Systems Association (IFSA in short). The European group started organising symposia in the 1990s, starting in Edinburgh (1994), followed by Granada (1996), Hohenheim (1998), Volos (2000), Florence (2002), and Vila Real (2004).

Wageningen University and Research Centre has been actively involved throughout the history of IFSA, both at the European and the global level. In 2002 it was decided that Wageningen would be invited to host the 7th European symposium in 2006. The symposium has been organised including five workshops as well as two special sessions. Workshop themes are represented as sections in this book, covering issues of natural resources management and regional development (sections 5 and 2, respectively), perspectives for farmers (section 3), and knowledge systems and learning processes in rural development and land use system innovation processes (sections 1 and 4), while a special session covers the perspectives for systems oriented, participative research approaches (final section of this book).

This book contains a unique collection of papers prepared by researchers, advisors, farmers and policy makers. Over 100 contributions have been selected, originating from over 20 countries located at six continents and ranging from one page (short communication) to a general five pages (full contribution). They refer to insights and experiences from bio-physical as well as social sciences, focus ranging from crop and animal level to landscapes and entire regions. Together, the contributions will be valuable to policy makers, farmers, advisors and all those that are involved – or feel related to – issues of land use in rural areas. Given the broad scope of the papers and diverse background of the authors and contributions, the book can be considered to present a thorough overview of thinking on land use, farming systems and communication between stakeholders involved in rural development.

## References

Norman, D.W., 2002. The Farming Systems approach: A historical Perspective. Presentation at the 17th Symposium of the International Farming Systems Association, Lake Buena Vista, Florida, November 17th-20th, 2002. http://conference.ifas.ufl.edu/ifsa/papers/invite/Norman.doc

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