

Book Review

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Reasserting the Rural Development Agenda: Lessons Learned and Emerging Challenges in Asia, edited by Arsenio M. Balisacan and Nobuhiko Fuwa. Published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA), 2007

“Understanding the nature of agriculture is fundamental to understanding development” [Gillis et al., 1987:479]. This book ably illustrates and demonstrates the truth in this assertion based on the experiences of the Asian economies in the last three decades. “The Asian experience shows how rapid agricultural and rural transformation triggered by significant improvements in farm productivity led to economic growth” (p. 8). However, as the editors point out, this Asian experience also shows that “some were more successful than others in attaining broad-based growth as well as in making the transition to a higher growth path” (p. 9).

Is differential economic performance due to market liberalization? Or is this due to active government intervention, which provides investment in infrastructure, human resources, and research and development? What about the effect of the initial conditions of the country like its agro-ecological conditions, or its state of wealth and income distribution, or the security of property rights? Do these exert an equally important influence in determining the nature of agricultural growth? Will good agricultural performance positively impact on poverty and thereby bring about rural development? These are the key questions that the papers in this book provide answers to. All papers affirm the critical role that agricultural growth and eventually economic growth have on the future of “60 percent of the world’s 1.1 billion poor who reside in Asia, a majority of whom are found in rural areas” (p. 2).

The book gathers papers presented at the November 2005 conference, which marked the beginning of the celebration of SEARCA's 40th anniversary, in November 2006. This collaboration of "acknowledged research scholars in agricultural and rural development", representing about a dozen institutions from universities to international organizations and research centers, successfully "revisits the views of agricultural development in order to draw up policy lessons from the major ideas and paradigms that have influenced academic and policy thinking in the past 30 years" (p. xi).

The papers are rich with up-to-date empirical analysis of contentious issues as well as emerging themes in the discussion of rural development. These include rural institutions, food security, poverty and vulnerability, agricultural technology, dryland agriculture, water and irrigation, extension services, and environmental concerns. How the myriad threads of ideas, explanatory schemes, and policy options are woven into a tapestry of a systematic understanding of rural development is achieved in a synthesis of the 11 papers constituting chapters 2-12 provided by the editors in chapter 1.

The following remarks on the individual chapters are meant to provide the reader with a sample of the wide range of ideas and concerns that the papers presented in this volume. These are not meant to summarize each chapter.

The task of "revisiting" ideas is undertaken by Roumasset in chapter 2 with a review of agricultural development thinking. He leads us through what he calls the "recognizable stages of fad and fancy" of the literature on economic development (p. 34). He warns us that "failing to learn of the history of development policies, we may be doomed to repeat them" (p. 36). Roumasset insists that "the tendency to socially engineer reforms instead of facilitating cooperation" or what he also refers to as the "incurable disease of topdownism whereby rules are designed and coercively imposed on the economy" (p. 49) persists not only among politicians but also among academics. In his view, an understanding of institutional choice and evolution requires an appreciation of the role of efficiency in institutional change while, at the same time, not ignoring the role of government in providing public goods in particular and facilitating cooperation in general (p. 51).

There is Hayami's exploratory study (ch. 3), which compares tribal communities of Africa and village communities of Asia in order to identify which characteristics of communities promote growth and which retard growth (p. 63). He presents an interesting hypothesis about the link of traditional social structures and norms that were molded by different resource endowments to explain the major differences in agricultural growth performances of Asia and Africa (p. 77). Drawing upon results of a completed study conducted in customary land tenure areas of Sumatra, Northern Vietnam, and Nepal, Otsuka (ch. 10) analyses the conditions under which particular land rights institutions

function better than others in terms of the efficiency of forest resource management as well as the equity of people's welfare (p. 305).

Anderson in chapter 4 tackles the global food insecurity issue. He introduces the reader not only to the vast literature on food security but also to the current efforts of many organizations dealing with the problem. The reader cannot but share his pessimism about hunger ending by 2050, or that global food insecurity will not vanish soon (p. 85).

Balisacan and Fuwa (ch. 5) discuss how and when agricultural development can lead to the reduction in the poverty and vulnerability of rural households. From macrolevel studies, they explore the connection between economic growth and poverty reduction as well as that between agricultural performance and poverty reduction. From microlevel studies, they study poverty dynamics and vulnerability by focusing directly on behavioral mechanisms leading to poverty (p. 121-122).

Improvement in agricultural technology is necessary for growth in food crop productivity. Pingali and Raney (ch. 6) state that the green revolution was responsible for the first wave of agricultural technology development while the gene revolution is what propels the second wave (p. 159). They discuss the basic issue of whether small and poor farmers will have access to the benefits of a largely private (as opposed to the public-good character of the green revolution) and market-driven (as opposed to government-driven) initiative as the gene revolution. They tackle the questions of how to make biotechnology work for poor farmers, how to provide access to the gene revolution to subsistence farmers, and how to mitigate potentially inequitable outcomes from the diffusion of the gene revolution. In chapter 7, Dar, Bantilan, Anand Babu, Anupama, Deepthi, and Padmaja summarize the challenges in achieving food security, income growth, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability for the dryland regions of Asia (p. 192). The focus on the agricultural problems of dryland areas is necessary because it is where the rural poor undertake their livelihoods. Yet, as the authors assert, dryland agriculture was neglected and bypassed by the green revolution of the 1960s (*ibid.*). The paper argues why the sustainability and future growth of dryland agriculture require a broad range of strategies that is distinct from those pursued by the green revolution.

In chapter 8, Barker and Rosegrant confront the current issues of water management. They say that "irrigation has been the *sine qua non* of the so-called Green Revolution" with irrigated agriculture in Asia using approximately 80 percent of the water resources (p. 227). However, because of the growth of Asian economies as well as the growing scarcity of water, there is an urgent need to understand how water resources can be more efficiently used without unduly harming the environment. They suggest that the significant reforms in the water sector should "empower water users to make their own decisions

regarding use of the resource, while providing the correct signals regarding the real scarcity value of water, including environmental externalities" (p. 257).

Umali-Deininger (ch. 9) presents a new perspective on how a national agricultural extension system can be improved. She describes a framework whereby the relationships between extension clients, policymakers, and providers are viewed as relationships of accountability. From this perspective, decentralization of extension services is viewed as an approach that improves accountability and thereby service delivery (p. 292).

Globalization is the increasing integration of the domestic economy with world markets (p. 349). Understanding the economic mechanisms through which globalization affects poverty and the environment and how the latter two interact (p. 337) is the subject of chapter 11 by Coxhead. Globalization is also responsible for the "supermarket revolution" in Asia as Reardon and Timmer assert in chapter 12. The rise of supermarkets changes the wholesale, processing, and farming segments of food markets. It brings in competition from national, regional, and global actors into the food system (p. 370). An implication of this transformation is that supermarkets tend to confine the ranks of preferred suppliers to the tier of small farmers who have the requisite capital (p. 388).

This book is a comprehensive reader on all the important issues in rural development. In that sense, it is an invaluable reference for any researcher in the field. But with equal importance, the book can also function excellently as a textbook in agricultural economics if not also in economic development, especially when there is focus on the experience of Asian economies. The book's intent to reassert the rural development agenda will find its needed support if today's students and researchers depart from these essays to heed the call to pursue more research on agriculture and rural development. One particular path that can be taken is to "localize" the same themes and issues covered in the volume and apply the analysis to social groups or units found at the subnational levels of Asian countries.

Reference

- Gillis, M., D. H. Perkins, M. Roemer, and D. R. Snodgrass [1987] *Economics of development*. Second Edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.