

Preface

Why does so much research not result in beneficial applications in practice? This question, sometimes referred to as the knowledge paradox, has been raised in the political arena and has resulted in developing and testing new procedures to initiate and fund innovative research on sustainable development. Classic research tends to be mono-disciplinary while literature suggests that societal questions associated with sustainable development may require an interdisciplinary approach including substantial interaction with stakeholders and policy makers. The TransForum innovation program, results of which are reported in this book, was organized in such a new way. Not through regular governmental or university channels or through the Dutch National Science Foundation, but on the basis of a special Governmental Fund filled with money originating from the sale of natural gas to customers outside the Netherlands. These funds were put aside to stimulate innovative research. In 2004, 800 million euros were dedicated to a national research program on innovation. One subgroup was to study sustainable development and TransForum – focusing on the agricultural sector – was one of the programs being funded in that category for 30 million euros, to be matched by societal partners at 50%. The scientific quality of these programs, including the one of TransForum, was judged by committees of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters and the relevance for society by the Central Planning Agency of the Netherlands. Programs were only approved when both judgments were positive. This was also a new procedure as assessments of research programs are traditionally based on peer review only.

This book is published at the end of the program period in 2010 and reflects activities of the scientific research program of TransForum consisting of 25 research projects. Their identification and set-up also followed an original, unusual approach. The overall TransForum program was characterized by demand-orientation: problems to be studied were identified and submitted to TransForum by entrepreneurs in agribusiness and various stakeholder groups. Overall, 33 so-called action experiments were identified and much time was spent in discussing and defining possible research needs when solving problems related to the experiments. Such discussions are not easy, require new abilities that go beyond those associated with classic research and take a lot of time. Understandably, some researchers are therefore less than enthusiastic to embrace this new interactive approach which is particularly relevant when studying so-called ‘wicked’ problems involving many stakeholders with widely differing goals and viewpoints, while simple solutions do not exist.

The following chapters present, therefore, the results of a continuing struggle and certainly do not offer any magic clues as to perfect procedures for future research on ‘wicked’ problems. But results should be helpful for scientists and others

struggling to develop effective research procedures that are both scientifically robust, while offering essential input in solving societal problems of the 21th century. Here emphasis is on agricultural development but results obtained are also relevant for research in general.

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Toward Sustainable Development

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