
Over the past several decades public investment in agricultural research and development has waxed and waned worldwide. The relative pace and magnitude of these changes has varied across national governments. But those responsible for carrying out the agricultural R and D agenda in most countries have faced a common challenge. They had to continually seek ways to document the impacts and benefits of public investments in agricultural R and D.

Editors Julian Alston, Phillip Pardey, and Vincent Smith, in their most recent offering, Paying for Agricultural Productivity, provide an analytical comparison of public agricultural R and D organizations, funding and strategies across five countries: The Netherlands, The United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States of America. This work draws on the authors' long-term contributions to the literature on returns of investments in agriculture research.

The book is intended for “policymakers and administrators with agricultural research and extension responsibilities.” Speaking as members of this group we appreciate their effort.

The best of the book is contained in the first three chapters. The authors provide the context for direct public involvement in agricultural research and extension. They review the economic rationale for public versus private research funding. They also provide a concise overview of the organizational structure for agricultural research as well as public funding alternatives which are, or have been, available. While most of this has been described and assessed elsewhere, it is well worth another read.

Chapters four through eight provide a more detailed assessment of agricultural research institutions, policy funding and trends for each of the subject countries. The information is interesting and well presented.

The case-study approach focusing on five countries is less useful than they might have been. By global standards the countries chosen are quite similar. All are economically advanced. All are primarily urban with relatively large but concentrated agricultural sectors. All have well-established agricultural R and D institutions.

Readers could have benefited from inclusion of a few more diverse cases. Some important questions are left unanswered. For example, how do agricultural research investments and institutions in, say, India or Argentina or China compare to investments and institutions in the advanced western countries? What might we expect from these countries in the future?

The final “synthesis” chapter summarizes what a reader should have concluded on her/ his own. Still, it does compare and contrast key elements of agricultural research policy and outcomes among and between the subject countries and it does so in readable fashion.

Alston, Pardey, and Smith are part of a group of colleagues who have significantly increased our understanding of returns to agricultural research. While this book draws on previous work, it does make a useful addition to that understanding.

The big criticism one might level about this book is that it is too timid. The authors who contributed to this book are among the most informed on issues of public funding of agricultural research. As a research administrator, I urge them to take their work the next step and specifically recommend changes in the organization, focus and funding allocations for agriculture research. For those of us in the United States, the authors could and should
suggest modifications in practices or approaches we might adopt or adapt from others. It's time to engage in a serious discussion about how to fundamentally reposition public agricultural R and D particularly in light of private proprietary work in biotechnology and the ever-changing structure of global agribusiness. Alston, Pardey, and Smith, among others, can and should lead this discussion.

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