

*Monika Kwiecińska-Zdrenka*

**Central and Eastern European Countryside  
from an international perspective  
(IRSA Congress in Lisbon, 2012)**

The XIII World Congress of Rural Sociology, entitled 'The New Rural World: from crises to opportunities' took place in Lisbon (29.07–4.08.2012). It included a plenary session, two symposiums ('Food Security and the Environmental Crisis' and 'Agrifood Alternative Movements') and almost a thousand papers in over 70 working groups.

The 'crisis' in the title was identified with the problem of food security and growing social inequalities regarding access to food. Solutions to these problems were sought in agrifood alternative movements or global counter-social movements such as Slow Food, Food Sovereignty and Fair Trade. These problems were discussed during the plenary session and at symposiums on 30th July 2012.

The food security debate was opened by a presentation by José Graziano da Silva, the head of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), who accentuated that food problems are more significant, fundamental to say the least, than the problems of agriculture. Da Silva stated that approximately 15% of all people were constantly undernourished in the years 2010–2012 and this problem is growing at a faster rate than had been predicted 15–20 years earlier. Economic growth is supposed to combat hunger but he pointed out that that cannot be the only means of solving the problem of undernourishment. Da Silva underlined the indispensability of a change in food distribution policy as well as considering the problem of nutrition when planning economic and agricultural development

(increasing the opportunities for access to a varied diet, hygiene, health care, distributed supplements, social care) and empowerment of socially and financially marginalized groups (women, the poor, small farmers). This is a request for sustained, long-term economic development focussed at evening out social differences.

Susanne Friedberg presented a somewhat different perspective in her paper, (The political metrics of food footprints) while generally sharing the FAO perspective. She demonstrated examples of activities which, on the one hand, demand greater rigour regarding food security and, on the other, lead to the emergence of new inequalities. Friedberg outlined the development of the system of food quality evaluation by means of defining the certification (place of origin and freshness) of products. Recent years have seen the introduction of various measures facilitating this: labels showing the number of kilometres food has travelled – its place of origin and how it was transported; the climate in which it came into being and how that influenced its growth; an introduction – so far only in France – of a scale providing the evaluation of the quality of the product and also how its production influences the Sustainable Product Index, rather like the index we use when evaluating fridges, washing machines etc. which influence the environment or make use of valuable resources (electricity, water). These are solutions required by western consumers while provoking unfavourable social phenomena, broader than mere commodity fetishism. The main partners or initiators of such change are private corporations and chain stores, this no longer being the domain of government policy. The repercussions are felt mainly by small food producers who neither meet the excessive standards nor can they afford expensive tests which could provide them with the relevant quality certificates. Creating a sales network referring to these measures has social consequences (the author did not indicate the differences in access to nutrition which is of a different level of safety/quality). Despite a certain benefit of activities, the intention of which is to raise food security (the introduction of regulations concerning fertilisation, genetic modification etc.) they do not fulfil their basic role – i.e. according to Friedberg, we still know little about the origin of the products, we do not have access to information regarding the full production cycle (this is often simply knowledge about the distance between the processing plant and the sales network), nor is this conducive to sustained development. Despite its limited usefulness, food safety or food security categories are

applied by many organizations, the role of sociologists perhaps being to give them a new dimension and substance.

Similar incentives to pursue engaged sociology, unveiling unfavourable social processes also appeared in other presentations, which the congress participants could listen to at a symposium devoted to food security and the environmental crisis.

During that symposium the following speakers had the floor: Terry Marsden (Solving the problem of sustainability. Exploring the new disorder), Elizabeth Ronsom and Carmen Bain (Included and excluded: An analysis of International Agricultural Development. Assistance Focus on Marginalized Population 1978–2008), Patricia Allen (Social Movement and food security: Axes of engagement), Tim Lang (Food Security and sustainability – different or the same policy discovery) and Phillip McMichael (Food Security and Environmentalist's paradox: feast, famine or food sovereignty). Almost all those presentations pointed to the problem of food security being a considerable political, social and even research challenge.

Researchers, all representing western universities, pointed out the contrast between the image of a well-fed western world (where obesity is a problem) and the prevalence of famine outside that world. According to that diagnosis, the problem lies with food distribution not its production (Tim Lang). Awareness of those economic and social contrasts as well as their source does not, however, lead to an easy consensus and trying to work one out disturbs compromises concerning other areas of economic development (according to Tim Lang that is 'like a bull in a china shop'). Introducing permanent solutions would require a change in the development paradigm from one which is neo-productive, expressing itself as sustainable intensification aimed at ecological modernization, to a sustainable food paradigm, based on reflective management, a change in orientation connected with ownership rights, taking into account social differences and including the time perspective to spatial policy (Terry Marsden).

An important factor which may enforce a change in the development paradigm and as a result of thinking about the food distribution policy may be social movements which have focussed their attention on food or agriculture. Patricia Allen drew attention to the fact that these movements have different backgrounds – those concentrating on agriculture have different goals (primarily interested in farmers, the producers of food)

to those who are sensitive as regards food, concentrating on fair food distribution, consumers' rights, food security, type of consumption. From that perspective, solutions to queries determining the direction of involvement are important: who are those movements fighting for, on whose behalf are they speaking, are they assuming a local or a global perspective, are they concentrating on the security of food or of the environment, or perhaps on the access to food and fair distribution, do they take into consideration the position of the most vulnerable (women, farmers' wives, small farmers)? Similar issues were raised in the second symposium, by speakers Javier Sánchez, Beatriz Gascó and Jerónimo Pruijn representing various alternative social movements regarding food and agriculture on a global level (Beatriz Gascó – International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, Jerónimo Pruijn – Fair Trade Small Producers Symbol) or an international level, focussing on a chosen area (Via Campesina concentrating on the problems of agriculture and its sovereignty in Europe).

Both the plenary sessions and the symposiums included a very distinct and frequently articulated appeal to the researchers – rural sociologists, to carry out thorough research, useful for both local communities, which the surveys are concerned with but also providing epistemological and ideological foundations for the further development of food and agriculture throughout the world.

The debates of 76 working groups were a focal point of the congress. The papers of 5 of them were organised or co-organised by central European researchers (i.e. coming from the countries of Central or Eastern Europe or who concentrate their research on that region), the majority of whom also write for EEC:

- David L. Brown, Majda Černič Istenič (WG 14: Population and Rural Society),
- Karl Bruckmeier, Imre Kovách, Hilary Tovey (WG 32: Rural Sustainability, Food Production and Global Environmental Change),
- Chris High, Gusztáv Nemes, Frank Vanclay, Aine Macken Walsch (WG 60: Applied Rural Sociology),
- Christine Katz, Anja Thiem, Daniela Gottschlich, Tanja Mölders (WG 61: Sustainable Land Use: Gender Perspective),
- Ildiko Asztalos Morell (WG 65: Multiple Marginalized Groups in Rural Areas).

Almost 50 researchers represented Central and Eastern Europe. They were concentrated in a few subject groups<sup>1</sup>; individual presentations were also made in other subject groups<sup>2</sup>.

A cursory overview of the presentations by researchers from the countries of Eastern and Central Europe clearly shows a low interest in the main issue of the congress (food security), although in the dominant themes – sustained development, the potential of rural areas, demographic phenomena as well as social and economic inequalities – we find numerous traces of socially engaged research.

The first of those themes (sustained development) was viewed from an economic and social perspective, the role of social economy, ownership rights (sustained forestry management from the ownership point of view), pro-ecological behaviour (recycling).

Sustained development was understood by the researchers as suggested by K. Gorlach, Z. Drag and P. Nowak (WG 32) as a type of balance between economic requirements, the natural environment and the social world.

---

<sup>1</sup> First of all: WG 3: Facilitating Change and Innovation (3), WG 14: Population and Rural Society (5), WG 32: Rural Sustainability, Food Production and Global Environmental Change (4), WG 56: New Communication Technology, Social Networks and Rural Development (3), WG 60: Applied Rural Sociology (2), WG 65: Multiple Marginalized Groups in Rural Areas (5), WG 67: Farm Diversification and Rural Sustainability (2), WG 70: Financial Crisis and Rural Resilience in the Global North (3), WG 76: Open Streams (3)

<sup>2</sup> In: WG 1: Territories, Rural Development and Social Actors, WG 2: Globalization of Agri-Food and Labour, WG 8: Local Food Products and Conflicts around Quality Construction, WG 11: From New Country-to-City Linkages to “Archipelago Models”, WG 16: Ruralities – Between Virtual Discourses, Social Imaginaries and Urban Consumptions (2), WG 18: Breaking through Disciplinary Boundaries to address Complex Rural Dynamics, WG 19: Quality of Work, Job Satisfaction and Well-being among Women in Rural Areas, WG 27: Societal Transformation through Organic Agriculture and Food Systems (OAFS), WG 28: Development Disputes and Diversity in Mining-affected Rural Communities, WG 31: Youth in Rural Territories, WG 34: Civil Society Participation in Sustainable Territorial Development Approaches, WG 38: Response Strategies of Social Economy and the Contribution of Social Organizations of the Rural World, WG 43: Consuming the Rural: Food, Nature and Space, WG 53: Human Dimensions of Livestock Farming Systems, WG 62: Forest Ownership and Challenges for Forest Policies and Management of Forestry, WG 64: New Forms of Consumer-Producer Cooperation within Food Networks: Comparing Experiences in the North and South, WG 71: The Social Organization of Agrobiodiversity, WG 73: Work Horse to Hobby Horse.

However, those authors pointed out that the perception of that kind of thinking about development can be different for various actors of rural life and hence important goals of research of the rural environment can be (as in the case of that team) a re-creation of that category and a reply to questions regarding the role of economic rationality, ecological awareness and social relations in farmers' decision-making processes.

The importance of such research was also underlined by J. Zivanovic Milijkovic, in the context of large development differences in the rural areas of Serbia, connected with intense urban and industrial processes, which brought about the departure of the rural population to towns, which with the ageing of the population, fragmentation of farms, geographically difficult terrain, brings about a considerable weakening of the socio-economic and cultural fabric of the countryside.

The problem of sustained development was also discussed in relation to narrower issues, e.g. the perception of climate change (B. Megyesi). Megyesi's analysis was based on Ostrom's theory about nested institutions, according to which different participants of social reality are interconnected and their decisions and actions nested within them. Such a perception of rural space allows for the understanding of how both formal and informal institutions shape their reactions regarding the challenge of climate change. This is in some measure a development of the problem raised by Gorlach and his team.

The sustained development of rural areas was also analysed in the context of the conflict between environmental needs and socio-economic needs using the example of a gold mine and forestry management. The Romanian researcher, T. Capota showed how the implementation of the idea of sustained development frequently has little in common with responsible development but rather with how influential are those who try to convince others about their way of understanding functional development for their own community. Similar reasons can be found in the discussion concerning forestry management in Estonia (P. Põllumäe, H. Korjus).

The presentation of D. O'Brien and V. Patsiorkovsky was a continuation of this discussion in that they concentrated their analyses on the life strategies of rural inhabitants. The authors portrayed the relationship between changes at the macro-economic and macro-social level and that of the concept of sustained development. O'Brien and Patsiorkovsky are convinced that it was the stability of financial institutions in the first decade

of the 21st century which influenced rural inhabitants to have such a vision of development: a transition from a survival strategy to a development strategy.

The second problem presented by those researchers focussed on the possibilities of endogenous development and an analysis of the development potential of rural areas. There was a discussion about the problem of programmes of development realized by local action groups (D. Miloslav), the inhabitants' social and civic involvement (A. Sitek), the influence of selected groups of inhabitants on the development direction of rural areas (women entrepreneurs – O. Gergely, youth – M. Kwiecińska-Zdrenka), the effects of farm diversification, the innovation of implemented solutions (e.g. social enterprises in the Romanian countryside – C. Petrescu, I. Petrescu) as well as the sources of supporting that potential (the role of researchers, research in action, practical applications of academic solutions). In that context there was also a discussion about the role of modern technologies in supporting local development and levelling the differences in access to education and knowledge (A. Pluskota, A. Pokorska, S. Doneddu).

The third group of problems concerned demographic phenomena observed in rural communities: the ageing countryside, gender disproportion, rural depopulation and the increased mobility of inhabitants.

Negative demographic tendencies and consequently economic ones in the countryside were demonstrated using the example of villages in Croatia (D. Zutinic), Slovenia (M. Černič Istenič, S. Knežević Hočevar), Lithuania (A. Zobena, A. Benga, I. Lace), Hungary (L. Kulcsár, C. Obádovics) and Germany (S. Stedfeldt, S. Kühntopf). The main negative tendencies lie with the ageing and depopulation of the countryside (Croatia) and gender disproportions (Germany). Demographic problems vary according to the location of the rural areas – they are least experienced in suburban villages. This is different in areas which are at a distance from towns but which also have a slower level of growth – that is where migration is higher and often affects select groups (e.g. 18–29 year-old women – S. Stedfeldt, S. Kühntopf). A significant factor intensifying the negative demographic tendencies is also the size of the village – that was pointed out by the Hungarian researchers (L. Kulcsár, C. Obádovics), who noticed a link between the size of a rural settlement and the possibilities of social and financial development.

Demographic processes lead not only to the further economic regression of an area but also to the further weakening of vitality of institutions such as schools or health care centres and other social services, the maintenance of which becomes more and more expensive in relation to the number of people using them (these processes were analysed by A. Zobena, A. Benga, I. Lace). The researchers from Slovenia concentrated on the problems of inheritance procedures of family farms in the light of a growing aversion of the young generation for such a career path<sup>3</sup>.

A final issue discussed by researchers from this part of Europe were social inequalities in the countryside, referring to certain groups of inhabitants: connected with ethnic background (limited access to education of Roma youth in Hungarian schools) and gender, but also to the countryside as a whole (limited access to European resources, the widening development gap between town and countryside). Those presentations were mainly about Hungarian villages (I.A. Morell, M. Draganova, K. Kovács, J. Szalai), Romanian (A. T. Szabó, L. Peti) and Bosnian (M. Vittuari, S. Berjan, H. Bilali, A. Despotovic). Of particular interest to the researchers were those groups which experience multiple forms of marginalization, e.g. (the Roma) ethnic background, age and gender (which determines access to the labour market but also their role in the family). Indeed some of the researchers (Szabó did point to certain systemic solutions which are intended to prevent instances of marginalization and discrimination (a practice of inclusion into the education system) but those solutions proved to be ineffective, in fact bringing opposite consequences (Szalai), i.e. further segregation of a ghetto-like nature. Apart from revealing the processes of growing inequalities and a diagnosis of the level of marginalization, the authors also tried to solve questions about whether marginalized people/groups respond actively to discrimination processes or are rather the passive recipients of aid (I. Morell).

The subject matter of the congress is only seemingly alien to researchers from Central and Eastern Europe – however, we perceive the problem of unequal access to socially desirable goods, including the basic ones (a varied diet, hygiene, health care, social care) and the empowerment

---

<sup>3</sup> See the text on this subject in the current issue of EEC (M. Černič Istenič, Duška Knežević Hočevar, Intergenerational Assistance on Family Farms in Slovenia: Expectations and Practices).



of socially and financially marginalized groups. Although the problem of food security was not heard in the presentations of researchers from this part of the world, it is also an inspiring course for discussion in our region because it is connected with the claim for a balanced, long-term economic development aimed at balancing social differences.

