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## 20<sup>TH</sup> BIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR RURAL SOCIOLOGY

The European Society for Rural Sociology arranged the 20<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference from 18 to 22 August 2003 in Sligo, on the North-West coast of Ireland. Sligo, with a population of approximately 20,000 was recently identified as one of Ireland's development 'gateways' and is most famously associated with the Nobel Prize winning poet W.B. Yeats. The conference topic was *Work, leisure and development in rural Europe today*. The plenary sessions included ten presentations and two hundred papers were presented in working groups.

I would like to focus my attention on the researchers and issues related to the Central – Eastern European countryside.

Two afternoons were dedicated to the plenary sessions. The first "evergreen" topic – *Science and practice in rural development* included presentations by M. Mormont, K. Bruckmeier, N. Long, R. Almas and J. Portela. The second topic, *The enlargement of the EU* was discussed from different points of view by representatives of old EU members and new ones: H. Tovey, P. Lowe, M. Shucksmith, J. Reis and I. Kovach. Kovach's presentation reflected the transformation in the rural economy and society of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe with respect to EU enlargement. He characterised the "new actors" and their role in the new situation as well as stressing the importance of three reforms: administrative structures in the EU, application of national rural development policies and cultural factors (the paper reflected the theoretical concept of H. Tovey, Ch. Ray and others).

The conference programme had five basic sections focusing on the following topics: *1. Farming and food; 2. Heritage, globalisation, leisure and tourism, 3. Environment and rural geography, 4. Rural society, social structures and development and 5. Development policies*. Everyone was divided into several working groups, differentiated not only by topics, but also by numbers of presented papers and participants from different continents (Europeans, Americans, Australians, Africans).

The first section concerning farms was divided into five working groups. The first one, *Farm family transitions: responses to modernity and changing agricultural conditions* discussed research and theoretical development in that area and A.L. Small from Canada presented a paper which reflected the role of the family in agrarian changes in Bulgaria and Southern Russia. The second working group, *Food consumption and farming*, focused on how food habits in present European societies influence the transformation of agricultural practices and the development of rural areas. The third, largest working group (17 papers were presented): *The wider impacts of the organic movement on rural society* explored the degree to which the organic food movement has influenced the change in the broader structures of rural society. The better understanding of the role and significance of small speciality food producers within the rural economy was the aim of the fourth working group: *Alternative food networks in rural development*. The last working group of the first section was entitled: *Labour, skills and training for multidimensional agricultures*. The group concentrated on papers analysing how the skills, training and labour regulation issues play a decisive role in the export of agricultural products of less developed countries. The papers presented an analysis on three levels: the farm level (new requirements to knowledge-based strategies of farmers and farmer groups); the territorial level (new forms of collective action by farmers and non-farmers involving rural development advisers) and the sectoral level (new negotiations between agricultural producers and official training providers). The third level was represented by a paper: Innovative vocational training for Romanian rural inhabitants (Ion, V. et al.).

The second section (including six working groups) *Heritage, globalisation, leisure and tourism* was represented by papers referring to the problems in our region. In the first working group, *Rural history and rural development in the 20th century*, there was a majority of Hungarian sociologists and historians (M. Štambuk, K. Jávör, J. Molnár, E. P. Mihai, Z. Volgyesi, T. Valuch). They discussed changes in European rural society in the last century with the purpose of understanding contemporary rural problems. The issues related to the *Cultural representation of European rurality* were discussed in the second working group. Different dimensions of the cultural representations of European rurality existing within the context of the processes and directions of both rural and societal change in Europe. In her paper: *Cultural heritage of rurality as a part of the rural development in Hungary*, the Hungarian sociologist, I. Kalamász Nagy analysed the renewal of cultural rural tradition in the case of dance houses. Papers presented in the third working group: *Globalisation and counter-globalisation: Social individualisation in rural areas*, convened by K. Gorlach and P.H. Mooney, concentrated on particular phenomena and processes in various countries focusing on the issues of social individualisation in order to explain the nature of the process of European integration. In the frame of next working group (*Leisure and heritage*

*in rural areas*) participants focused on the question of how leisure in rural areas will possibly favour environmental and lifestyle preservation and natural and cultural heritage re-valorisation. The Hungarian sociologist B. Csurgó in the paper: *Urban pressure and cultural tourism in Hungary: The Valley of Arts case*, focused on the intervention of urban dwellers in rural cultural life. (We have printed the article based on this paper on page 155). The fifth working group (*Rural tourism and rural development*) concentrated on tourism in rural areas and the papers explored, described and discussed different dimensions of rural tourism within the context of rural development (i.e.: eco-, agro-tourism as new forms of tourism in rural areas; new ideas for rural tourism, small-scale vs. mass tourism); theoretical issues which contribute to the sociology of rural tourism; the role of social, cultural and human capital in the development of rural tourism; and development patterns and impacts of developing tourism in rural areas (integrated vs. sectoral tourism development; individual vs. collective/participatory actions; national, regional and local case studies on rural tourism development including LEADER and SAPARD experiences).

Polish and Czech sociologists made presentations in the last working group – *Recreating local rural development in the era of globalisation*. W. Idziak presented empirical case studies concerning an alternative (inspired by the Hobbit story) consumption of social space. E. Kučerová presented an empirical study: *Rural anticipation of the welfare state – the Czech Republic in comparison to post-socialist Europe*.

Four working groups included in the third section focused on the *Environment and rural geography*. The crucial question convenor of the first working group, J. Frows, raised the issue of *Environment-induced rural restructuring*. The presumption of this group is that the environment is considered a key concept in the redefinition of farming and its implications for the countryside. Generally, papers referred to the environmental regulation process; rural identities and landscape management, ecological agriculture, rural planning discourses, environmental regulation and new models of rural governance. Wider views on landscape were put into practice in the working group *Social natures in the European countryside* exploring how such re-positioning and re-connections are influencing our understanding of past, contemporary and future natures in European rural spaces. Nine participants examined how differing cultural and community processes influence the understanding of rural nature and most of them presented case studies from Nordic and West European countries. Agro-food consumption was discussed in the working group *Rural areas – new sites of consumption?* A. Pilichowski from Poland convened a working group to discuss rural consumption in analysing rural areas, i.e. rural areas as a means of consumption of space, landscape, sustainable environment, the tourist attraction, safe food etc. in the framework of recent post-structuralist and post-modern social theories. Consumption was observed,

as was proclaimed in the Budapest Declaration, *in the context of new, often urban-based, demands on rural resources and rural space*. The last working group in this section: *Geographies of work and employment in rural Europe* brought together geographers and sociologists working on issues relating to work and employment in the rural sphere. The aim was to explore critical approaches to the impact of recent changes in rural Europe in the context within which people live and work. Eight papers were presented on different aspects of work and employment ranging from the household to the international labour market. The working group brought together research from six different European countries (Russia, the UK, Hungary, Ireland, Norway and Germany). The group also involved two papers by Hungarian researchers – J. Timár and E. Fékete, both from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. J. Timár discussed the relationship between changing rural household strategies and gendered work in the context of regional inequalities in Hungary, attempting to bridge the gap between geographical research, which focuses on the region, and sociological research, which tends to focus on the household. É. Fékete's paper focused on attitudes to employment among the rural population in a region of high unemployment in Hungary. In her research, she found a gap between job creation strategies, which emphasise alternatives to conventional types of employment, and the dominant desire among the rural population for more conventional 'urban' types of employment.

The fourth section *Rural society, social structures and development* had the highest number of working groups – eight. Nine papers were presented in the first working group: *Demographic change and rural restructuring*. The papers reflected general agreement that the links between demographic change and rural restructuring merit research attention. K. Kovács presented a joint paper (with B. Koós and M. Váradi) on: The interdependence between social and demographic change in the Hungarian rural space. She identified the most important driving forces behind recent social and economic change in rural areas as being transition-related, such as the uneven pace and consequences of the collapse of the economy and its regeneration, intervention policies implemented and the ability of post-socialist governments to balance the effects of market forces. The paper provided empirical results showing that urban middle-class aspirations have resulted in a marked suburbanisation around larger towns, whilst hopes towards a better livelihood have motivated the urban poor to move to more rural areas. The convenors of working group *Migration, labour relations and socio-economic integration in rural Europe* reflected on many important topics relating to migration – various aspects of migrant labour and labour relations in rural areas, the implications of migrant employment on the operation of the farm, the "new" division of labour and farm household strategies, living conditions of migrants etc. They also wanted to stress migration problems connected with the collapse of regimes: the expected massive exodus of some populations, and the influx from

Third World countries. The working group included only three papers and co-operated with participants of the third working group, entitled *Networks, communities and social identities in rural areas: Moving frontiers?*, focusing on the ongoing changes in the structuring of social ties among inhabitants of rural areas. All contributions stressed the importance of networks in the construction of rural societies. The types of networks (their density, closeness/openness, bonding/bridging properties, etc.) were related to the professional and territorial identities. P. Starosta and O. Stanek, Polish and Czech researchers based their paper on common empirical research and their discussion encompassed some theoretical issues connected with the concepts of network and community. They constructed a typology of personal networks in 21 communities selected in Bulgaria, Poland, Russia and Quebec and examined its relevance to the understanding of different levels of territorial identification, social participation and the changing patterns of the social structure of villages. J. Čmejrek spoke about political identification in the Czech rural area, which is different from the national (parliamentary) level of political life. He discussed the peculiarity of the electoral behaviour of small communities in the Czech Republic.

The working group entitled *New realities of gender relations* comprised 15 papers. Papers focused on gender as one of the central dimensions of power, taking into account the intersection with other dimensions (like ethnicity, class and age). Papers mainly reflected gender equality and the future of farming, gender equality versus tradition in rural areas, gender and rural politics, gendered conditions of employment in rural areas. V. Majerová presented a paper focusing on the gendered conditions of employment in rural areas. She reported on the different employment opportunities transition offers to younger and older rural women in Czech Republic.

The next four working groups were focused on specific topics. British scholars convened a working group *Social exclusion, housing and homelessness in the European countryside* to discuss housing problems in the European countryside within broader discourses of social exclusion. The broad question of the next working group *Rural NGOs, civic associations and rural civil society* discussed the question of whether civil organisations are capable of constituting a major social force in rural society. Sociologists from Poland and the Czech Republic contributed to the general discussion about perspectives on civil society: the Polish peasants' protest under post-communism (G. Foryś) and the influence of civil society in the case of the Czech Republic (B. Hašová). The working group: *ICT in rural development – is the net working?* brought together researchers interested in the sociological and socio-economic implications of the rise of the Information Society for, and within, rural areas. I. Vrana from the Czech Republic described a way of successful accomplishment of education (the easier and more economic way of using ICT) in the Czech University of Agriculture in Prague (CUA). Czech

sociologists, economists and political scientists dominated the group *Teaching of social sciences for rural development*. V. Majerová presented a proposal for an international project entitled Rural Bridges, which has brought together rural sociologists from European and other countries and is based on the exchange of videotapes for the purpose of teaching rural sociology. B. Hašová and L. Kocmánková presented a paper discussing their experience from the teaching of rural sociology and J. Čmejrek contributed his experiences with teaching of political science.

The last section of the ESRS conference – *Development policies* – was divided into four working groups. The first, *Evaluation issues: the role of sociologists in the evaluation of rural development and other quality-of-life initiatives* raised the question about the role of sociologists in the evaluation of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life (economic, socio-cultural, health, education, etc.) in the ailing or vulnerable rural areas of Europe. The second working group: *Impacts of European integration process on the rural development and agricultural sectors of accession countries* was convened by Hungarian scientists and analysed consequent multiple effects of accession on the rural sector of our region; and innovative ideas respecting the EU rhetoric (integrated rural development, local participation, agri-environment, etc). Papers presented those and foreseeable effects in the agri-food industry, rural development, the institutional system and in general rural policy problems. In the third working group: *Changing policies of food, agriculture and the environment* 13 papers were presented. Two introductory papers reflected on contemporary issues and theoretical approaches to studying the politics and policies of agriculture, food and the environment. The remaining presentations focussed specifically on rich research material addressing novel and emerging policy agendas, changing policy arenas, decision-making in international systems and the issues of food and rural governance and risk communication. The Czech scientists presented a paper addressing the crucial problems in the implementation process of the SAPARD programme and reflected (possible) winners and losers connected with the implementation process. The last working group, dominated by French scientists, *Science, policy and practice in agricultural and rural development* analysed how different types of scientific knowledge have been successively used in the definition and implementation of agricultural and rural development policies, and how this politicised knowledge has been disputed in public arenas jointly with the consequences of these policies.