

## Opening Address

by

Emeritus Professor Geoffrey Lawrence

President, International Rural Sociology Association (2012-2016)

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Distinguished guests, delegates, colleagues and friends.

Welcome to the 14<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Rural Sociology. This conference is concerned with sustainable and socially just rural transitions - with ensuring that rural change occurs in a democratic, fair and equitable manner throughout the world. This is important, given strong and growing evidence of deteriorating conditions faced by rural communities, the threat to rural livelihoods, and continuing resource depletion and environmental degradation.

The first World Congress of Rural Sociology was held in Dijon, France, in 1964. Participants were largely drawn from two bodies existing at that time - the North American-based Rural Sociological Association and the European Society for Rural Sociology. The Congress was organised by the Committee for International Cooperation in Rural Sociology, a precursor to the International Rural Sociology Association – or IRSA. IRSA was formally launched in 1976 and has seen growing regional representation, first from Latin America and more recently from Asia, Australia and Oceania. At this Congress we have many African delegates and it is hoped that a society for African rural sociology will be the outcome of discussions during this conference.

The purposes of IRSA are threefold. These are: to foster the development of rural sociology; to provide a mechanism for sociologists to interact and exchange ideas; and, to apply sociological enquiry and insights to improve the quality of rural life.

These are important and noble aims. Yet, as a sub-discipline of sociology, rural sociology has been criticised on many fronts. It is said that the term 'rural' is problematic (how is rural defined? What is to be included and excluded?) It is also argued that the tendency to study rural society as an object in its own

right often ignores the broader, external, forces and social relations that strongly influence changes at the local level. Rural sociology has been criticised for its empiricist tendencies, for having a narrow conceptual and theoretical base, and for a lack of critical scholarship.

Finally, and perhaps most damningly, rural sociology has been condemned for its irrelevance in a world of urbanisation and globalisation. Then there's the slow deterioration of undergraduate enrolments in rural sociology courses – and, indeed, the disappearance of the very departments running those courses.

Who would be a rural sociologist?

Well, the answer is the majority of scholars in this room, the majority of delegates at this Congress, and many thousands of researchers and practitioners throughout the world. What drives our interest and commitment? There are at least five primary reasons for rural sociology's continuing relevance as an academic sub-discipline.

First, many of the most pressing problems faced by the planet – from food insecurity, to resource depletion, to climate change, to forced migration - occur in spaces that are away from cities and urban settings. They are occurring in *rural* spaces and researchers must engage with those spaces, and the people and communities that inhabit those spaces, to explain what is occurring and why. We join geographers, anthropologists and economists in seeking answers to complex and pressing questions. But we do so by bringing the latest theories, concepts and methodologies from sociology to create new insights.

Second, the industrialisation of agriculture is being promoted as the future of the global agri-food system. But Industrial agriculture has been implicated in the ill-health of farmworkers, poor animal welfare outcomes, and planetary pollution. Industrial agriculture is lauded by many for its ability to create cost-efficiencies and to deliver cheap food to a burgeoning global population. Yet, its sustainability credentials are questionable. Critical rural sociology has been exposing the reductionist paradigm that promotes 'high tech' solutions to the issue of global food security.

Third, there are many national governments and global governing bodies that foster neoliberal globalisation. The deregulation, privatisation, trade liberalisation and fiscal discipline - that are part-and-parcel of neoliberal

globalisation - are transforming rural regions throughout the world. Some of the outcomes are positive, but many are negative. Rural sociologists are at the forefront in tracing the causes and consequences of social exclusion, the health and ageing of rural populations, de-peasantisation and – more generally - the impacts of neoliberal settings upon local communities.

Fourth, rural sociologists are ever-mindful of social agency. Changes occurring in rural space impact upon people and communities – and, in turn, people and communities mobilise to defend their rights and livelihoods. Rural sociologists have been studying the composition, tactics and effectiveness of oppositional groups like La via Campesina, the slow food movement, rural labour movements, and alternative food networks. Along with resistance comes social innovation and positive action. Rural sociologists understand that genuine social progress goes hand-in-hand with civic engagement, inclusiveness and enhanced social justice.

Fifth and finally, rural sociology has a strong and growing policy impact. Governments, state agencies, regulatory bodies and NGOs are incorporating the findings and insights of sociologists into their planning regimes. In the just-released *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies*, edited by our well-known colleagues Mark Shucksmith and David L Brown, it is argued that the reflexive rural researcher – as an advocate and knowledge broker – can play an important role in challenging the dominant ideologies and policy settings that give rise to social inequality in the regions.

In other words, the contemporary relevance of its subject matter, along with its capacity to inform policy, are major strengths of rural sociology.

Looking through the Congress program I am impressed by the pertinence and breadth of topics being discussed. I am also impressed with the geographical spread of participants and the presence of younger scholars. There are over 100 regular sessions, panels, keynote speakers, breakfast sessions and special events, with over 800 delegates and guests in attendance over the four days of the Congress.

This 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Association has been organised by Ryerson University. Ryerson deserves our appreciation and praise. It has endorsed and nurtured the Congress, providing considerable financial and logistical support, along with a wonderful venue. Congratulations must also go to the Chairs of the Local Arrangements Committee Mustafa Koç and Patrizia Albanese, and to

the Chairs of the Program Committee Phil Mount and Clare Hinrichs, and to the many members of those two committees who have put in such a sterling effort over the last four years to ensure that we have a successful and memorable Congress.

It was agreed at our Council meeting yesterday that the Australian tropical city of Cairns, in northern Queensland, will be the venue for the 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress in 2020. An overview of the next Congress will be presented to the General Assembly which will be held this coming Saturday from 11am. The meeting will also discuss many issues of importance to the global development of rural sociology, so please join us for the presentation and deliberations.

This 14<sup>th</sup> World Congress has been designed to provoke our thinking about contemporary rural issues and to provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas, for critical reflection, and for the promotion of international research collaboration. I wish you a safe, fulfilling and inspiring time in Toronto.

On behalf of the Executive and Council of IRSA and the conference organisers, I declare open the 14<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Rural Sociology.

Thank you.

*Toronto, 10 August 2016*