

---

## Congress on Nordic Rural Research on Crises and Resilience

Countryside and rural studies have always played an important part in ethnology and also in ethnological seminars. However, thus far there has not been an ethnological conference devoted especially to presenting rural research findings; instead, a series of multidisciplinary conferences, Nordic Ruralities, have been organised in the last few years, which focus on rural issues. The fourth conference on Nordic Ruralities took place in Akureyri, Iceland, 23.-24.5.2016, under the theme of crises and resilience. The beautiful landscape and nature offered a spectacular setting for presenting the latest findings in rural research. Nearly 250 scholars from different disciplines attended the conference, and during two very intensive conference days there were 244 presentations in 56 sessions. The location, conference theme and/or high quality of Nordic rural research even attracted several participants from outside the Nordic countries.

The keynote speakers at the congress also represented multi-disciplinary perspectives. Three of them were from Nordic countries, and one was from the UK. An economist and the headmaster of the University of Akureyri, Eyjólfur Gudmundsson, emphasised in his presentation *'The Impact of Higher Education on Regional Development'*, the importance of higher education for regional development and its role in assisting regions to adapt to changes. He also talked about the increasing role of e-learning as a means of preparing students for global competition in the field of education. According to him, higher education is an effective tool for adapting to changes.

Hanne Tanvig's (University of Copenhagen) talk had the title *'Between place and space – new perspectives for rural entrepreneurship and local governance in the era of globalization and neoliberalism'*. She spoke about rurality, 'rural' survival and rural development, while leaning, e.g. on a neo-endogenous approach, but at the same time stressing the importance of local entrepreneurship and local strategic capacity on rural development.

Mark Shucksmith (University of Newcastle), in his presentation *'Reimagining the rural: from "rural idyll" to "good" countryside'*, urged us to move from looking back to an idyllic rural past and start instead to think about and define what exactly we mean by a good countryside. To do this, Shucksmith suggested using the concept of utopia as a method, instead of a goal, as it has been conventionally understood. The task, then, would be to imagine a world otherwise, and Shucksmith sees also a role for academics in the public debate on how to create and sustain a good countryside. His paper was merely full of ideas, not based on proper research, but it evoked much thought.

In her keynote, *'Far from the centers: rethinking the meaning of locality, marginality and distance'*, Laura Assmuth (University of Eastern Finland) analysed what it means to live far from urban centres. Peripheries always exist in relation to centres, but they are constructed in opposition to the centres, and the definitions tend to be negative. The meanings of locality, marginality and distance shift in different contexts and with different people. She also took into account people's voices and experiences.

Quite a few papers directly discussed the everyday life of rural people and focused on their viewpoints. Papers concerning voices from the

micro level were in the minority during this particular congress, and for this reason we (Kirsi Sonck-Rautio and Helena Ruotsala) offered a workshop on 'cultural transformations of rural areas: community transformation and adaptation'. There were eight papers representing multiple voices on communities in sparsely populated areas. The papers dealt with local aspects affecting, e.g. closing shops and hospitals, both of which result in mobility and emigration from rural areas or to increased levels of resilience. Other papers focused on the new occupational opportunities that rurality can offer. Although these papers represented different disciplines, they all offered a common perspective on rural people's everyday lives.

One interesting detail of the conference was the opportunity to learn more about Icelandic rural research, as there were numerous participants from the host country. Iceland and islandic issues were reflected in the conference programme, with several working groups dealing with topics that are important in Iceland: fishing and the so-called blue economy and tourism. Also, the sparse population and small communities seem to be popular research themes in Iceland, with emphasis on the fall and rise of small places, and the effect and role of tourism in keeping them inhabited and vital. Already when landing at Keflavik and travelling through the capital, a visitor can witness how the stopover-traffic between Europe and North America has made Iceland very profitable. There were enormous traffic jams on this small island of only about 320 000 people. The Golden Circle, which shows the most important nature sights and also World Heritage Site of Þingvellir (Thingvellir), was full of tourists already in May. In many papers during the congress, the presenters estimated that in this year tourism will be the most important source of livelihood in Iceland.

Many papers concerning Iceland moved on either a mezzo or macro level. That is why it was very interesting to listen to, e.g. a paper on local film and television production. Especially on the day before departure, participants had the opportunity to participate in the conference dinner in Siglufjörður, where the interesting series *Trapped*

(in Icelandic *Ofærd*) was filmed. Actually, the congress dinner was held at the same hotel where a murder had been committed.

In addition to papers concerning Iceland, there were workshops on, e.g. controversies in tourism and place and identity. The problems and benefits of the tourism industry seem to be similar in different places in the northern hemisphere. For instance, one person's 'pleasure periphery' is another person's home, or the profits and/or disadvantages of tourism do not go hand in hand for the same person. Another popular theme in the papers was that of multiculturalism, or refugees, and the possibilities they offer for rural areas. The impacts of immigration seem to be the same in different countries. One very touching paper discussed the impact of parental emigration, which is very common now in the Baltic countries, where parents emigrate and leave their children behind with grandparents or sisters. Skype functions as a surrogate parent in these cases, having changed also the communication patterns of refugees.

In addition to the presentations in workshops, there was an open discussion in the programme on the future of the Nordic Ruralities network, including a suggestion for a new *Nordic Journal of Rural Research*. The idea of a common journal was supported by those in attendance, as it would offer a good alternative to mainstream rural research and an opportunity to present high-quality Nordic rural research. But who is going to work for it and where will interested parties find the money? That question has yet to be answered. Also, a Facebook group on Nordic rural research has now been established. Its topics include the possible formation of a network and/or journal for Nordic rural research.

All in all, the conference presented the state of affairs in Nordic rural research. The multidisciplinary nature of the Nordic Ruralities conferences offered an opportunity to step outside one's own comfort zone in choosing which working groups to attend. It offered a chance to learn how rural issues and the countryside are being studied in disciplines other than one's own. The conference was organised in an extremely efficient manner; during both days, 7–8 parallel sessions took place. The conference main themes, 'crisis

and resilience', were dealt with in some presentations and from different viewpoints, but for someone interested in hearing more deeply about the widely, but often uncritically, used concept of resilience, there was maybe not so much on offer.

The organisers had some difficulties in attending to the practical matters of the conference, with several mix-ups and shortcomings in some small but important details. The programme was too heavy and tight, so it was very hard to listen to other papers if you had your own panel or wanted to discuss rural issues in more depth. The breaks were too short, which did not make it easy to net-

work with other people. The overall performance of the organisers remained positive, however. The University of Akureyri offered an excellent venue and facilities for the conference, and the overall atmosphere was relaxed and cosy. The next Nordic Ruralities conference will take place in Denmark in 2018. Welcome!

For a closer look at the themes and topics of the conference, *The Book of Abstracts* is available at <http://ruralities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Book-of-abstracts-2.pdf>.

*Helena Ruotsala & Eeva Uusitalo*

---