

## **BALANCING HERITAGE AND INNOVATION : PATHWAYS TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL SYSTEMS AN INTRODUCTION**

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The Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems, established in 1993, is the natural heritor of the previous Study Group of IGU (International Geographical Union) with the same denomination. Along its 24 years of existence the Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems has contributed to the knowledge of the rural areas as well as of the rural systems some still prevailing in the urban peripheries.

The book by two previous chairs of the Commission, Ian Bowler, Chris Bryant and also C. Cocklin, entitled “The Sustainability of Rural Systems: Geographical interpretations”, published in 2002, portrays some of the most common problematics in Western rural areas at the time as being rural depopulation and repopulation (counterurbanisation), globalization, social and economic transformations, environmental variabilities and change. In 2016 Guy Robinson re-edited the book “Sustainable Rural Systems: sustainable agriculture and rural communities”, first published in 2008, where the majority of the chapters depict the papers presented originally in the Conference held in Glasgow, in 2004, and where the negative impacts of productivism still prevailing in the EU, Australia and the United States are analyzed.

In a globalized world a myriad of constraints and potentialities challenge our capacity to find out strategies in order to shape the territory with inspiration and creativity. According to the geographical location and political regime thus the solutions and trends that are adopted, although globalization has brought much homogeneity to sensitive territories that would have demanded much more respect for their heterogeneity. The rural response to globalization is thus an important topic tackled by many studies, which try to understand the resilience observed in so many rural areas where transition movements are looking for responses to a changing society.

Many members of the Commission have published in the conference proceedings or in other publications, sound research findings aiming at a better understanding of what sustainability means and at a better knowledge of the rural areas, identifying dynamics and potentialities where some only see lethargy.

In more recent years climate change has offered an interesting floor for those questioning the sustainability of the present food systems and energy production giving examples of good practices or questioning the sustainability of some policies. In general, the themes that have dominated in the last conferences are in line with the guidelines proposed by the European Union, namely in the framework of Europe 2020 Strategy: Smart Growth, based on knowledge and innovation; Sustainable Growth, towards a greener and more competitive economy using resources more efficiently; Inclusive Growth, to boost employment and reach social and territorial cohesion.

The participants in the events organized by the Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems are from all over the world, which constitutes an excellent opportunity to learn about different realities and visions, representing other dimensions of the rural systems. However Africa and South America (exception for Brazil) and Eastern European countries are notoriously underrepresented. Thus it has been a concern of the Commission to sponsor young participants from some of these areas, in order to promote their participation. Besides, the fact that a conference is organized in a country with less representatives in the Commission, has offered the possibility to meet researchers interested in our topics and exchange ideas with them, as it was the case, in 2015, with the joint session with the Commission on the Mediterranean Basin, in Russia.

In July 2016, the conference was organized in Belgium by Serge Schmitz and his team, and once more the participants were offered the opportunity to know a small country but great food, its people, landscapes and heritage. On the other hand participants from different countries shared with us their knowledge. A great combination that is now available to the reader in the following pages, where it will be possible to find out how heritage and innovation may be a perfect marriage.

Roy Jones and Amma Buckley in “From the Horse and Cart to the Internet: a Century of Rural Connectivity Change in Rural Western Australia”, show how to fill the gap in terms of internet communications, allowing an inclusive growth with social and territorial cohesion implications.

Luisa Spagnoli and Luigi Mundula, in “The Family Farming : a Traditionnal Model to Foster the Agriculture Innovation” discuss the resilience of an old family farm, which knew how to adapt to the new challenges, having landscape as the main resource.

Paulina Tobiasz-Lis and Marcin Wójcik offer us, in “Representations of Rural Settlements in the Debate of Multifunctional Countryside. Example of Poland”, the interpretation of the countryside as it is remembered in the consciousness of inhabitants and reproduced in a form of freehand sketches.

In “Balancing Heritage and Innovation – the Landscape Perspectives”, Marc Antrop identifies some of the driving forces (human and physical) which may put at risk the sustainability of the ecosystems, endangering landscapes that are a benchmark of the regions.

Mary Cawley in “Approach to Protecting the Sustainability of a Natural Heritage and Tourism Ressource : the River Moy, Ireland”, analyses the factors that contribute to the role played by a specific Irish salmon fishery to a holistic touristic development strategy.

Alice Giulia Dal Borgo and Giuseppe Gambazza present us in “From abandoned Village to Ecovillage: a Sustainable Tourism Experience by the Community of Torri Superiore”, an example of the transition movement, which seeks alternative solutions and strategies, that can be an added value to the heritage.

Finally, in “Tensions sur le devenir des campagnes wallonnes. Notes de terrain”, Serge Schmitz and Charline Dubois analyze seven case studies in Wallonia and conclude that a balance between heritage and innovation is necessary in order to pursuit a sustainable development.

## References

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