

Call for working groups

Those who are interested in organizing a working group should upload their proposal (not longer than 600 words) by **1 November 2012** on the conference website:

www.florenceesrs2013.com

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Rural resilience and
vulnerability: the
rural as locus of
solidarity and
conflict in times of
crisis

A chance for reorientation

The economic crisis has Europe in its hold. This crisis clearly affects its economic basis but goes far beyond that to touch upon the very substance of the European way of life. Yet, the crisis also presents us with the chance to rebuild our society, to create something better, more valuable and more sustainable. Resilience is often used to describe this capacity for successful adaptation, i.e. the ability to learn and change, to make use of emerging opportunities. But there are also risks as the crisis increases inequalities and internal tensions, at different levels (such as regions or nations). The opportunities and risks associated with the crisis are played out in rural as well as urban places. Rural places and rural issues may assume a specific meaning in times of crisis, reflecting resilience as well as vulnerability. This conference aims at increasing our knowledge of the effects of the crisis in the different regions of Europe and beyond, and to add to our understanding of the processes that contribute to vulnerability and resilience of people and places.

The increasing attention to sustainability issues, to 'green' production and consumption is one example of the opportunities that the crisis has to offer. Step by step, norms such as frugality and moral appeals to restrict ourselves enter the dominant discourse. Calls for social, political and moral reorientation are getting louder and attracting a wider audience. They question the on-going economization of public life and seek support for other than economic values; they question remorseless competition and encourage cooperation. Citizens have begun to demand that politicians demonstrate personal integrity, absence of self-interest and ability to limit the power of the greedy global economy and rebuild

a cohesive society. The reorientation of the EU 2020 agenda from sustainability toward resource efficiency and social innovation may be seen as confirming this trend.

The risks involved

But there are also big social as well as political risks. The retrenchment in public expenditures has a profound effect on many citizens, and especially social groups with small and insecure incomes, or other vulnerable groups such as the young, the sick and the elderly. These groups are the most dependent on direct public support (for example child allowances and study grants), and they are most affected by cut backs in the budgets of (semi)public institutions such as in education, health care and social welfare. As a result social inequalities within countries are increasing.

Similarly, social and economic inequalities between countries are growing, and the widespread nature of these inequalities threatens European social cohesion. The crisis importantly affects our feelings of solidarity, increasing rivalry and conflict. Whereas previously united as equal Member States in the prosperous European Union, cultural differences become emphasized again with a focus on the darker sides of each other's presumed identity. It may even be argued that the European Union itself is at stake. This leads to accusations between countries of immoral behaviour and unfaithfulness, to the resurgence of old (national) prejudices and resentments.

The rural as locus of both vulnerability and resilience

The above mentioned dynamics influence the rural. Indeed, the rural is one of the places where cutbacks in spending are felt most severely. Rural poverty

increases when it increases elsewhere. We may also expect the situation to be most difficult for the already poor, remote rural areas where people lack resources to fall back on. In the course of the crisis, more rural regions may become impoverished causing more people to leave rural areas, reinforcing existing migration trends in what becomes a downward cycle. Given the difficult situation in southern Europe, migration routes may become redirected towards the northern and western Member States. This would add to the already existing tensions, reinforcing political unwillingness to accommodate inner-European migration.

However, 'the rural' is also a locus for social innovation and resilience, building on social capital and values such as thriftiness and solidarity. Indeed, urban citizens are moving to the countryside searching for a higher quality of life, a way of life that values time and places less emphasis on consumption. Young people are once more interested in agriculture and farming. The increasing outreach of urban food movements offers new, creative opportunities. They promote sustainable food production and consumption, while emphasizing issues such as social justice and food sovereignty. Overall, a wide range of innovative arrangements are being experimented with, testifying to the resourcefulness of rural actors, to their creativity and to their ability to recognize the opportunities that emerge from the crisis.

On behalf of the ESRS Scientific Committee,

Bettina Bock