

Regional Studies Travel Award

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ESRS Congress, Vaasa, Finland, 17th – 22nd August

The European Society of Rural Sociology encompasses rural development with studies of society in rural areas. This was of enormous interest to me as I am researching economic development in a peripheral rural part of the UK (Cornwall), from a perspective that could be described as political sociology. There were other things too that excited me about this conference. Quite apart from that it was likely to be huge (there were nearly 500 participants), and the ESRS only have a congress once every two years, I have found myself using the ESRS journal, *Sociologia Ruralis*, very heavily over the course of my PhD research. A lot of the debates are complimentary to those found within Regional Studies, and I have been particularly interested in an emphasis on valuing existing local knowledge within the knowledge economy, rather than assuming an 'add knowledge and stir' approach. The final determining factor in deciding to attend was that the working group that I wanted to participate in was organised by some academics that I have been reading ever since I was an undergraduate.

However, I found myself in something of a quandary. On the one hand, I am very well aware of the perception of rural areas as remote, and so was delighted that the Congress was to be held in an area of Finland that was well off the beaten track, but on the other hand, it meant that travel was expensive. Consequently, I am very grateful to the RSA for their award of a travel grant.

The conference was fantastic, and I met some interesting people and have come away with many ideas. Perhaps one of the biggest surprises was what people mean when they talk about rural. For example, the Scandinavian idea of a 'small village' is very different to what we experience in the UK. 'Small' meant *really* small, often with only 150 permanent inhabitants or less. It also became clear that whilst many areas throughout Europe share similar issues, there was much emphasis on understanding the particular context of each individual region. Frequently, the policy responses which worked best were the most tailored to each area, whilst those that ran into problems followed a 'top down' approach, not appreciating the heterogeneity of local identities.

I was also able to talk a lot about the RSA, mentioning the organisation's support in my presentation and taking some information about the Association for the conference display. The association often came up in conversation, as we discussed activities and experiences with new friends. Interestingly too, several people that I met had also been at some of the Regional Studies events that I have attended, although, this is not surprising given the complimentary nature of the fields.

It was a very beneficial conference, full of interesting ideas and information, with plenty of opportunity to meet and chat with others working on similar problems, and I would like to thank the RSA for their support in helping me to attend.