

Rural sociology in dialogue with food studies: Opportunities and challenges for renewing the field

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EDN: IAXUMP

In July 2026, Brazil hosted the 16th World Congress of Rural Sociology. This was only the third time in the sixty-year history of the International Rural Sociology Association (IRSA) that the event was held in Latin America, and the second time in Brazil. The Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Porto Alegre) welcomed more than 1,400 researchers, professors, students, public officials and representatives of social organizations from 42 countries to discuss “Policies for Nature, Food and Nutrition in Times of Uncertainty and Climate Change.” In addition to plenary lectures, panels, and sessions organized by working groups, the program included field visits to sites of initiatives pursuing sustainable transitions in food systems and direct participation of farmers, traditional communities and indigenous peoples.

In 2018, when we submitted Porto Alegre’s proposal to host the Congress, one of our main objectives was to bring rural sociology into closer dialogue with the interdisciplinary field of food studies (Albala, 2013). This objective reflected ideas of research groups that later organized the Congress: although contemporary debates on agriculture and rural areas cannot be reduced to food dynamics, they increasingly require an understanding of transformations in food systems. Since these transformations are deeply intertwined with urban dynamics, rural sociology cannot confine itself to farmers or rural areas. On the contrary, it needs to understand the dynamics of what Mendras (1976) called “*société englobante*” — wider society in which rural social relations are embedded.

One difficulty in pursuing this agenda is that, despite important advances in the past two decades, sociology remains strongly shaped by conventional disciplinary divisions. This feature is particularly evident in rural sociology due to both its specific institutional origins in land-grant colleges and its historical importance as one of the constitutive fields of sociology in many countries, which is why rural soci-

ology has its own institutional space, organizations, and congresses. However, it also became relatively self-contained, at times struggling to engage even with other specialized fields of sociology (Bell, 2007).

From the beginning, the local organizing committee sought to demonstrate that broader dialogue with other fields is not only necessary for understanding complex problems but can also strengthen rural sociology. A major step in this direction was the decision to hold the 16th World Congress of Rural Sociology jointly with the 64th Congress of the Brazilian Society of Rural Economics, Management and Sociology (SOBER). The same arrangement proved successful in 2000, when two congresses were held together in Rio de Janeiro and substantially expanded dialogue in rural social sciences.

Even so, as Smith and Lawrence (2022) argue, the theoretical renewal of rural sociology requires a broader interdisciplinary effort. Given the Congress theme, it was important to consider nutrition, ecology, public health, urban planning and such interdisciplinary fields as science and technology studies. At the same time rural sociology can offer interpretations often overlooked in these areas, for example, analyses of multiple rationalities that guide family farmers' productive investments; insights about processes that reshape rural social dynamics, such as changes in farmers' eating habits and the ways these changes can affect agricultural production.

It should be noted that, at least in Brazil, this dialogue of sociology with other sciences has advanced more rapidly in public policy and social organizations than in academia; therefore, it was essential to bring those actors to the Congress. Agrarian social movements, such as La Vía Campesina which participated in the Congress, have increasingly placed food at the center of struggles for land (Coca, Oliveira, 2026). Food has become a cultural and political mediator in the dialogue these movements seek to establish with urban populations to broaden social support for their claims (Niederle et al, 2026). This involves not only competing narratives about healthy and sustainable food but also new nested markets (Van der Ploeg, 2015). Consistent with this approach, the Congress hosted a direct-sales food fair organized by the Brazilian Federation of Family Farming Workers (FETRAF) and a handicraft fair with the participation of two indigenous communities — Kaingang and Guarani.

In public policy, the food agenda has contributed to the growing coordination among ministries and government departments that until recently have operated largely in isolation. Although the Ministry of Agrarian Development and Family Farming and the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock — two Brazilian federal ministries responsible for rural policies — were important partners of the Congress, the most substantial collaboration — both in funding and activities — was with the National Secretariat for Food and Nutrition Security (SESAN), part of the Ministry of Development and Social Assistance, Family and Fight against Hunger (MDS). Com-

pared with other institutional partners, this Secretariat has a particularly strong presence of professionals trained in nutrition and public health. Its participation strengthened such issues as urban agriculture, urban food policies, public food procurement, international cooperation against hunger, and public-health challenges associated with unhealthy diets, especially the growing consumption of ultra-processed foods.

This institutional cooperation was not developed for the Congress but rather reflected a longer-term consolidation through numerous partnerships, projects and policies. Since the early 2000s, studies within rural sociology have shown that some of the most innovative public policies have involved procurement programs linking the family farmers' supply to the concentrated urban demand from schools, hospitals, universities, armed forces, popular restaurants, and other facilities serving populations in food insecurity (Grisa et al, 2011). These programs proved that rural development can be supported by policies that also seek to reshape urban food practices (Gaitán-Cremaschi et al, 2022) and revealed a broader potential for food-system transformation than that associated with such traditional agricultural-policy instruments as rural credit, because they connect support for family farming with marketization, food security, sustainability and changes in consumption patterns (Grisa, Schneider 2014).

In 2024, discussions about how the Congress would connect agriculture and rurality with the food agenda acquired a new dimension. In May, Porto Alegre suffered the worst flood in its history. The disaster displaced thousands of people and destroyed homes and public infrastructure; the city's international airport remained closed for six months while its runway was rebuilt. Hunger became a reality for many families who lost everything. Government agencies and social movements had to create mechanisms to respond immediately to climate and food challenges, proving that such issues have to be addressed together, particularly in Brazil, where agriculture and livestock production are both major sources of greenhouse-gas emissions and sectors most exposed to climate change.

As climate change combines with and intensifies other global crises — energy, geopolitical and economic — uncertainty becomes more acute, which explains the theme that structured the Congress — “Policies for Nature, Food and Nutrition in Times of Uncertainty and Climate Change”. These issues cannot be discussed without recognizing the centrality of rural populations and agricultural activities, but neither can they be confined to them — there is increasingly close relationship between rural sociology, sociology of food and environmental sociology, and the context of “polycrisis” (Mark et al, 2025) requires a wider dialogue with other scientific fields and even other forms of knowledge production and circulation. This was one reason why the Congress program included representatives of traditional communities and indigenous peoples.

The Congress plenary sessions show how these dialogues were organized¹. In the opening lecture “Uncertainties Everywhere: What Future for Food Systems?”, *Jennifer Clapp* (University of Waterloo, Canada) considered recent transformations in global food systems, emphasizing the interaction between structural features consolidated since the 1980s — greater integration of international markets, economic concentration and technological dependence — and newer sources of instability associated with geopolitical and trade conflicts, climate change and weakening multilateral institutions. Clapp showed how these uncertainties increase food-system vulnerability, particularly in countries and among social groups that are highly dependent on international markets. She also highlighted the role of financialization and corporate concentration in the unequal distribution of costs and benefits under crises, which explains the renewed interest of many governments in strengthening domestic production, strategic food reserves and reduced external dependence; however, these initiatives can either reproduce concentrated input-intensive models or support more territorialized, diversified and sustainable food systems.

The next plenary “Transitions in a Fragmented and Unstable Agri-Food System” brought together different perspectives on economic, political and institutional factors of contemporary food-system transformations. *Madelaine Fairbairn* (University of California, USA) considered the growing financialization of agriculture, focusing on both the expansion of institutional investment in farmland and the rise of venture capital in agri-food technologies. She argued that, although these processes are often justified in terms of innovation and sustainability, they have reinforced a rentier logic of capitalism, contributing to land appreciation and concentration, intensification of production, corporate steering of innovation, and deepening inequalities. As a counterpoint, Fairbairn called for policies that democratize access to land and support collective initiatives.

Ye Jingzhong (China Agricultural University) reconstructed the transformation of China’s agrarian structure and food system — from the 1949 land reform through collectivization and the Household Responsibility System, emphasizing the decisive role of the state in safeguarding food security and showing how China combined changes in agricultural organization with strict protection of cultivated land, public investment and long-term planning. These policies accompanied the expansion and diversification of agricultural production, modernization of supply chains and changes in consumption patterns. Current policies focus on food security is a strategic priority, combining national productive capacity, increased grain production, dietary diversification, alternative proteins and stronger public governance.

Allison Loconto (French National Research Institute for Agricul-

1. The plenary sessions are available on the SOBER YouTube channel: URL: www.youtube.com/@sober_org_br.

ture, Food and Environment — INRAE) considered transitions toward sustainable food systems as social and political processes that cannot be reduced to the adoption of new technologies or production practices. Drawing on French and European experiences, she emphasized that structural change depends on recognizing actors' interdependencies, building cooperative networks, articulating different forms of knowledge and creating durable spaces for experiments and collective learning. Initiatives such as living labs and platforms for dialogue among science, public policy and society exemplify forms of governance capable of accompanying such changes.

Three presentations showed that food-system transitions involve disputes over who controls resources and innovation, the role of the state, and the ways different actors and forms of knowledge are brought together to construct new trajectories.

Moderated by the IRSA President Sally Shortall, the third plenary "Agriculture and Food through the Lenses of Gender, Race and Generation: Confronting Inequalities and Injustice" focused on food and agriculture through dimensions of inequality. *Cecilia Díaz Méndez* (University of Oviedo, Spain) discussed the contribution of sociology of food, arguing that food should be understood as a social fact that connects biological, cultural and social dimensions. Drawing on the concept of the food model and research conducted in Spain, she showed that food inequalities cannot be explained simply by differences in nutritional knowledge; they are rooted in structural conditions, cultural practices and relations of care. Díaz Méndez emphasized gender inequalities in home food work and argued that food-security policies should consider not only nutritional quality but also the relations of sociability, solidarity and care that sustain everyday food practices.

China Sajadian (Vassar College, USA), analyzed contemporary agrarian transformations from the perspectives of feminist anthropology and agrarian political economy, drawing on the research data on the displaced rural populations in Lebanon and Syria. Her presentation showed how armed conflicts, economic crises, environmental degradation and changes in agrarian structures combine to produce displacement, precarious labor and loss of livelihoods. The study of Syrian refugee families highlighted how these vulnerabilities are structured by gender inequalities and depend heavily on women's unpaid labor to secure food, care and household reproduction. From this perspective, Sajadian proposed understanding resistance without romanticization — as the everyday capacity to sustain life in extreme conditions. Her analysis also drew attention to broader processes that expel rural populations from their territories and increase dependence on low-paid migrant labor.

Kota Mulanji (national coordinator of the Brazilian Forum for Food and Nutrition Security of Peoples of African Ancestry) extended this discussion by addressing food sovereignty, racism and territoriality. She argued that the right to adequate food is inseparable

from territorial rights, historical reparation, recognition of ancestral knowledge and the political participation of black populations. By presenting agroecology and traditional food systems as forms of knowledge historically produced by African and indigenous peoples, Mulanji also emphasized women's central role in preserving and transmitting such practices.

Three presentations showed that food inequalities cannot be understood only through income or access to food. They are produced and reproduced through gender relations, territorial dispossession, racism, migrations, divisions of labor and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, which requires food policies capable of addressing different dimensions of injustice simultaneously.

The final plenary "Food and Nutrition Security in a Scenario of Conflicts and Uncertainties" brought together different perspectives on the transformation of food systems under converging social, environmental, economic and geopolitical crises. *Fabrice De Clerck* (Science Director at the EAT, Senior Scientist at the Bioversity International and CIAT of the CGIAR) presented findings of the EAT-Lancet 2.0, calling for systemic transformation around three interdependent objectives: healthy diets, social justice, and respect for planetary boundaries. He highlighted the difficulty billions of people face in healthy diets, the coexistence of hunger, obesity and diet-related chronic diseases, and the substantial environmental impacts of food production. From this perspective, transition requires coordinated changes in production and consumption, recognition of diverse food cultures and contexts, and participatory processes that treat social justice as a condition of sustainability.

Mustafa Koç (Turkish sociologist, Professor Emeritus and former director of the Centre for Studies in Food Security at the Toronto Metropolitan University) examined these transformations through the interaction of multiple crises in the early twenty-first century. He argued that food insecurity should be understood as a structural and multidimensional phenomenon: economic crises, armed conflicts, climate change, pandemics and supply-chain disruptions interact with social inequalities and economic concentration, increasing food vulnerability. He described this context as depending on three interconnected crises — of accumulation, of geopolitical hegemony, and of legitimacy of global governance institutions. Koç defined food sovereignty and agroecology as political and social responses to the limitations of the neoliberal model. For food systems characterized by corporate concentration, environmental degradation and persistent hunger, he called for combining critical analysis with collective capacity to provide alternatives.

Brazil's Secretary for Food and Nutrition Security *Lilian Rahal* presented the Brazilian trajectory of public policies for food and nutrition security, emphasizing the gradual recognition of food as a right and hunger as an outcome of inequality and political choices

which consolidated an intersectoral approach connecting social protection, family farming, food supply, school meals and social participation. Recently, this institutional framework has increasingly incorporated climate challenges and food-system transformation through initiatives related to climate resilience, healthy diets, urban food systems and sociobiodiversity.

Three presenters agreed that contemporary food insecurity cannot be addressed through isolated interventions in food production or access and requires systemic policies capable of connecting health, social justice, environmental sustainability, reduction of inequalities, intersectoral coordination and democratic governance.

These issues were further discussed at ten panels, thirty sessions organized by associations and research networks, and more than 1,500 abstracts and papers presented at 316 sessions by the Congress's 53 working groups. Two panels were particularly relevant to the dialogue on global food-system transformations. The panel "*Financialization, Agricultural Frontiers, and Agribusiness*", moderated by Valdemar João Wesz Junior (Federal University for Latin American Integration, Brazil), brought together Alexander Nikulin (Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Russia), Carla Gras (National Scientific and Technical Research Council, Argentina) and Giuliano Martiniello (International University of Rabat, Morocco) to discuss transformations in agribusiness and agricultural frontiers under the growing presence of financial capital in agriculture. The panel considered these dynamics in different agrarian contexts and trajectories, with particular attention to the relationship between the territorial expansion of agribusiness, changing forms of control over land and natural resources, and new strategies of accumulation. The discussion highlighted how financialization has reshaped relations about land, production and capital as farmland and other resources are increasingly treated as financial assets and incorporated into corporate and investor strategies. The discussion also drew attention to the diversification of agribusiness expansion, combining land acquisition and leasing, networked corporate structures, financial instruments and new forms of territorial control.

The panel "*Agri-Food Policies, Movements and Strategies in a Comparative Perspective*" brought together Sergio Sauer (University of Brasília, Brazil), John Wilkinson (Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), Sofia Boza Martinez (University of Chile) and Terry Marsden (Cardiff University, United Kingdom) to discuss recent changes in agri-food policies and strategies of governments, markets and social movements in response to contemporary food-system challenges, emphasizing the need to move beyond narrow sectoral approaches to agricultural policy by incorporating food security and sovereignty, sustainability, climate change, health, inequality and territorial development. The range of national and regional experiences revealed both the specificity of food-system transformation trajec-

ries and shared challenges related to economic concentration, market change, disputes over production and consumption models, and construction of more sustainable provisioning systems. The discussion also emphasized the role of social movements and civil-society organizations in formulating alternatives and contesting public agendas, showing that agri-food transitions emerge from interactions and conflicts among actors, institutions and political projects. The panel stressed the importance of integrated and territorially contextualized agri-food policies capable of connecting production and consumption and combining public regulation, social participation and institutional innovation in the construction of more sustainable, resilient and socially just food systems.

Among the sessions, two were especially relevant to institutional debates on the renewal of rural sociology. The first, “*Rural Sociology in Times of Uncertainty: An Institutional Dialogue*,” was coordinated by the incoming IRSA president Sergio Schneider (UFRGS, Brazil) and brought together researchers extensively involved in the IRSA and the International Sociological Association (ISA), particularly in Research Committee 40 on Sociology of Agriculture and Food. The session discussed contemporary challenges and future directions for rural sociology under growing social, economic, political and environmental uncertainty. Drawing on different academic directions and institutional experiences, participants considered how climate change, food crises, geopolitical conflicts, technological and production transformations, and deepening inequalities have reshaped both the rural world and the field research agenda. The dialogue emphasized the need for a rural sociology capable of renewing its objects and approaches by strengthening connections with food systems, sustainability, agroecological transitions, rural-urban relations and new forms of agricultural organization, while retaining long-standing concerns about land, labor, inequality and agrarian change. The session also placed different national and institutional traditions in a comparative perspective, underscoring the importance of international cooperation, interdisciplinary dialogue, and training new generations of researchers, reaffirmed rural sociology’s relevance for interpreting contemporary crises and uncertainties, and highlighted the need to strengthen international networks and institutions, renew the field’s intellectual agenda, and expand its capacity to engage other areas of knowledge and social actors involved in constructing more sustainable and socially just rural and food futures.

The special session “*Editor’s Dialogue: Journals and Editorial Practices in Rural Sociology*” brought together editors of the leading journals in the field: Carla Gras (*Journal of Agrarian Change*), Sergio Sauer (*Journal of Peasant Studies*), Allison Loconto (*International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*) and Alexander Nikulin (*Russian Peasant Studies*). The session considered the role of academic journals and editorial practices in the production,

circulation and internationalization of knowledge in rural sociology. Drawing on editorial experiences from different national and regional contexts, participants discussed recent changes in academic publishing, including internationalization of journals, growing importance of bibliometric indicators, peer review, open access and inequalities in the global circulation of knowledge. Particular attention was paid to the difficulties faced by researchers and journals from outside the main centers of academic production, including linguistic barriers and asymmetries in resources and visibility. The session emphasized that academic journals are not merely vehicles for disseminating research findings; they are institutions that help define research agendas, establish criteria of quality and recognition, and structure the conditions in which different academic communities participate in international debates. This perspective reinforced the importance of more inclusive editorial practices and stronger dialogue among different traditions of rural sociology.

These activities contributed to rural sociology's formation and strengthening of new international research networks. Particularly significant were the initiatives around the BRICS+, which opened new possibilities for collaboration of scholars studying agrarian change, food systems, rural development, and public policies in regions that have often remained peripheral to the dominant circuits of academic exchange. In this regard, the participation of researchers from China was especially noteworthy, both in the main conferences and in working groups and other sessions, contributing to a broader dialogue between Chinese and Latin-American research traditions. These achievements are particularly significant given the uncertainty in months before the event. Ongoing geopolitical conflicts determined concerns about international mobility, while the sharp and unexpected rise in airfares imposed additional constraints on participation, especially for researchers travelling long distances and from institutions with limited funding. However, the Congress succeeded in bringing together a geographically diverse academic community and in creating conditions for new forms of South–South and BRICS+ cooperation that would contribute to a more plural and internationally connected agenda for rural sociology.

The renewal of rural sociology depends less on abandoning its historical concerns than on repositioning them within broader transformations affecting food systems, environments, territories and social inequalities. Issues of land, labor, agrarian change and rural livelihoods remain central, but they are increasingly intertwined with debates on food and nutrition security, climate change, public health, urban dynamics, technological change, finance and new forms of governance. This requires rural sociology to strengthen its dialogue with food studies and other interdisciplinary fields while preserving its distinctive capacity to analyze power relations, social differentiation, territorial dynamics and political economy of agrarian change. The Con-

gress showed that such renewal is already underway through new research agendas, institutional partnerships, policy debates and international networks. Rather than signaling the dilution of rural sociology into a broader interdisciplinary field, these developments point to the possibility of a more open, connected and analytically ambitious discipline, capable of interpreting rural transformations as part of the wider and increasingly uncertain processes reshaping contemporary food systems and societies.

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Сельская социология в диалоге с исследованиями продовольственных систем: возможности и вызовы для обновления дисциплины

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