



Opening Plenary: **Farming systems facing global challenges: Capacities and strategies**

Keynote: The Arc of History

Janice Jiggins

Wageningen University and Research Centre
janice.jiggins@inter.nl.net

In 1994 the participants to the IFSA conference held in Montpellier, organised together with our French colleagues, suggested that we pay more attention to the informal and formal institutions in which farming systems are embedded, and to how they constrain innovation or are transformed (by design or otherwise) to support systemic innovation. Twenty years' on, certain institutional forces have become dominant in forcing the pace of change – notably, regional trade treaties, intellectual property rights, the extreme concentration of control over commodity trade, commercial seed development and sales, agro-chemicals, processing and food product retailing. Production, and farmers' interests, have become a small and relatively powerless part of the value chain. It is said that these trends are the 'inevitable' consequence of competitive markets – as if markets and the rules within which they function, were not also institutions created by conscious or casual decisions. It is said also that these institutional developments are necessary to feed an expanding global population, that is increasingly urbanised, and to satisfy increased consumer demand for meat and dairy products. However, they are forcing farming system development along a trajectory that calls into question the sustainability of soils, water availability and quality, agro-biodiversity, and reliance on carbon energy and phosphorous – and hence also the sustainability of food provisioning. Business as usual calls into question also the survival of broad-based knowledge, capacity and skills in farming and food systems. Is this a sensible, resilient pathway? Climate change throws into the mix a number of wild cards. Mitigation already seems a lost cause. Less well recognised is that since it is impossible to determine the parameter values of change, in time frames and location-specificity that are useful for farm decision-making, adaptation – that implies planned responses to known parameters of change – also seems an insufficient response. What has and can the IFSA movement offer to guide, in societal terms, rapid systemic transition toward resilient farming and food systems? In this address I review and assess a number of emergent lessons from IFSA's experience over the last decades, that might offer some comfort and hope in meeting these challenges.