

Cocktail Speech – SANORD Conference “Knowledge Economies in a Changing World”

Lauritz B. Holm-Nielsen, Aarhus University, Wednesday 13th August 2025,

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, and friends,

Good afternoon, and **welcome to Aarhus University — and to its world-renowned campus, set in the heart of one of Europe’s most vibrant university cities.** We’re proud of our **bustling international study and research environment**, where students, scholars, and scientists from around the world come together to ask big questions and seek meaningful answers.

It’s a great pleasure to be here with all of you — scholars, leaders, and changemakers — as we gather under the banner of SANORD, a network that continues to grow in both reach and relevance.

Only by living in a society one will learn to understand it - though as a scientist and policy expert I have only visited many African countries from east to west and north to south – I am humbled being among you, **you represent the insight and expertise**, you are the knowledgeable people we so badly need during this century. I say we on behalf of the world (not so humbled).

Tonight feels especially meaningful for me. During my tenure as rector, **Aarhus University had the honour of being a founding member of SANORD.** And standing here now, witnessing how far this partnership has come — it’s deeply rewarding. SANORD is more than just a network; it is a living testament to what can be achieved when we commit to collaboration across continents, grounded in mutual respect and shared vision.

As we raise our glasses tonight, let’s take a moment to reflect on the world around us — and particularly, the remarkable demographic transformation underway in **Africa.**

For the first time in recorded history, Africa’s population has surpassed that of both China and India. With over **1.5 billion people** today, projections show this number rising to **2.5 billion by 2050** — making up nearly **25% of the global population.**

This shift tells us something fundamental: **The second half of the 21st century will be Africa’s.**

But population growth alone is not destiny. It demands infrastructure, jobs, innovation — and most critically — **education.** We will all have to understand **migratory patterns** in the human population, migration across cultural and political boundaries and indeed between continents.

As the continent rapidly urbanizes, we are seeing the need for robust, inclusive, and resilient **knowledge societies** — places where research, learning, and creativity form the foundation of progress. Yet this transition also brings with it deep challenges: **how to integrate rich cultural traditions into the evolving fabric of modern African societies**, and how to navigate the profound shift from a predominantly **agrarian population to one increasingly concentrated in urban areas.**

These are not small questions. They go to the heart of identity, cohesion, and the social contract. And once again, **education and research institutions have a central role to play** — not only in equipping people with skills, but in helping societies think critically, preserve heritage, and adapt with purpose.

The formation of **advanced human capital** — scientists, engineers, educators, healthcare professionals, artists, leaders — must be central to any sustainable development strategy. And these people don't just emerge on their own. They are cultivated through partnerships, mobility, shared curricula, co-authored research, and joint ambition.

Yes, we hear often about "brain drain," but SANORD allows us to embrace a more hopeful and dynamic vision: **brain circulation**. The free flow of knowledge, talent, and collaboration across borders — building not just individuals, but resilient ecosystems.

This is why SANORD matters.

And this is why I'm so proud that Aarhus University helped to lay its foundations — and continues to play an active role in its future.

So let us toast —

To Africa's century.

To the power of universities.

To meaningful partnerships.

And to the work we share in building a more inclusive, connected, and knowledgeable world.

Good luck to all of you!

Skål – Cheers!

Short c.v.

Lauritz B. Holm-Nielsen (Denmark), is an internationally experienced leader in higher education, research and innovation. He became dean of the faculty of sciences and head of biology department in 1975; from 1978 to 1981 he was professor of botany at P. Universidad Catolica in Quito, Ecuador. He has had critical key roles in Denmark's reform efforts since initiating the reform of doctoral training 1986. He worked in more than 50 countries, chaired Poland's excellence program IDUB, 2018-25, and was/is member of EU/PSF expert panels for Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria.

He was managing director Sino-Danish University Center, Beijing 2013-18, rector of Aarhus University 2005–13, the World Bank's Global Lead Specialist for higher education, Washington 1993–2005; and active in international organisations as president of EuroScience, Strasburg 2012-18, vice-president of the European University Association, Bruxelles 2012–15, board chair International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, Rome 1992-94 and Centro Internacional para Agricultura Tropical, Cali 1997-2003, and founding chair of Nordic Academy for Advanced Study, now NordForsk (Oslo) 1986-93.