

Preface

In the year marking the 100th anniversary of Ester Boserup's birthday, the international scientific conference "A Centennial Tribute—Long-Term Trajectories in Population, Gender Relations, Land Use, and the Environment" was held at the Institute of Social Ecology in Vienna, Austria. The main objective of this event was to commemorate Boserup's scientific and political achievements and to explore the importance of her thoughts for the current scientific discourse. Following this call, 120 participants from 21 different countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and Oceania gathered in Vienna. The diversity of fields in which Boserup's work has found resonance resulted in the conference becoming a platform of truly interdisciplinary discourse. Participants came from a wide range of academic backgrounds, such as agricultural sciences, biology, geography, history, ecology, landscape planning, physics, sociology, environmental sciences, and economics. The contributions, a selection of which are included in this book, paid tribute to Boserup's agenda as she herself described it:

My own research focused on the interplay of economic and non-economic factors in the process of social change, both today and in the past, viewing human societies as dynamic relationships between natural, economic, cultural, and political structures, instead of trying to explain them within the framework of one or a few disciplines. (Boserup 1999)

The need to adequately address the complexity of sustainability issues from the vantage point of different disciplines as described by Boserup continues to hold true today. Boserup was not only a scientist but also a diplomat. She spent much of her lifetime on making her scientific insights bear fruits in international policies: Across many years, she was consultant and delegate to the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Many traces of her work are buried in the archives of these organizations. Her keen interest in understanding the interrelations between population growth, gender issues, rural development, agriculture, and environmental problems was driven both by academic curiosity and practical concern and allowed her to question development issues with a persistency that continues to impact current discourses.

This book is the fourth volume in the human-environment interactions series which provides a broad scope of the research on the pervasive impact that human

activities have on the earth system. Within this series, the book at hand has a unique focus as it proposes a re-evaluation of Ester Boserup's pioneering work in the field of sustainability science by tracing her impact on current research.

Boserup's theories on the role of women in development, first published in 1965 and followed by a second book in 1970, and on the interplay between population dynamics, agricultural growth and the environment, as outlined in her most comprehensive book in 1981, continue to resonate in many fields of research and in the current discourse on sustainability. The conference was organized into three larger interrelated thematic areas all of which are also represented by the contributions in this book:

1. Long-Term Socio-Ecological Change
2. Agriculture, Land Use, and Development
3. Gender, Population, and Economy

In interpreting society as a coupled social and biophysical system, Boserup was one of the pioneers of a holistic investigation of Long-Term Socio-Ecological Change. This issue was a focus of both the conference and this book. Boserup conceptualized human societies—in their present-day form and in their historical development—as dynamic relationships between natural, economic, cultural, and political structures. She maintained that such dynamics also characterize subsistence agriculture societies which the development theories of Boserup's time considered to be static and “backward”. Boserup's analysis in this regard is reinforced by a number of contributions to this book. At the same time, other contributions show that in her insistence on the gradualism of development, Boserup underestimated the huge impact that the use of fossil fuels would have on agriculture, developing societies, and on the overexploitation of resources worldwide.

A second focal point for the conference and this book was agricultural production and land use, viewed in the context of complex interrelations between societal development and factors such as population dynamics, gender relations, and education. Ester Boserup contradicted the theses put forth by the British Reverend and scholar Thomas Malthus. He postulated that population growth would invariably lead to poverty because agricultural production would not be able to keep up with the increasing demand for food. Boserup responded by documenting the ability of rural societies to innovate. But she not only suggested that it was possible for agricultural production to keep pace with a growing population, she also indicated that some of the innovation required in the process depended on a certain population density, i.e. was driven by population growth, rather than being hindered by it. In the 1970s, Boserup had thus positioned herself in opposition to the mainstream theories and policies of development.

Boserup played a pioneering role in making the relevance of gender relations for societal development visible. This work forms the third focus of the conference and this book. Boserup pointed out that neglecting the work performed by women results in an incomplete picture of the overall labour force and division of labour on which a society is based at a given stage in its development. It is noteworthy that her

perspective seems to influence the composition of the research community significantly: Contrary to the normally observed gender balance at scientific conferences, more than half of the participants at the Boserup Conference in Vienna were female scholars. Moreover, two thirds of the chapters in this book have female lead authors

Finally, the conference was enriched by presentations of scholars personally acquainted with Ester Boserup and able to give insights into issues especially important to her.

Hence, a broad spectrum of Boserup's ideas is covered by the chapters in this book. The first three chapters are a comprehensive review of her political and scientific work. Section 2 focuses on the applicability of Boserup's reflections on land use, technology, and agriculture by drawing from a wide range of case studies on different temporal and spatial scales. Section 3 emphasizes the key role of women and gender relations for agriculture and development. All together, the 16 chapters in this volume symbiotically illustrate how the main strands of Boserup's theories are reflected in contemporary research.

The interdisciplinary systemic perspective and the manner in which Boserup positioned herself at the interface between academia and politics form integral parts of her intellectual legacy. From the variety of academic backgrounds and agendas to the countries from which the scholars come: It is the diversity of the contributions to the conference and also of the chapters in this book that best reflect the continuing impact that Ester Boserup's work has on scientific research today.

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Orientations for Contemporary Research

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