

The new Lisbon international airport: the history of a decision-making process

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Abstract

The Lisbon airport has been operating in its current location since 1942. Built on the city outskirts, the airport was rapidly engulfed by urban expansion. The relocation of this infrastructure has been considered since 1969. With the first oil crisis and the Portuguese revolution of the 70's the process was put on hold. The issue was re-opened in 1982 and in 1999, the most adequate location was identified at a site called Ota, considered to meet both environmental and economic objectives. Since then, a national debate started mainly because of the high costs of construction at Ota. Nevertheless, the decision was made by the government in 2005 to build the airport at Ota. The detailed project design continued and the EIA was started.

In the first semester of 2007, everything changed. A study sponsored by the Confederation of the Portuguese Industry and developed by IDAD identified a new site – Alcochete - which avoided many of the problems of Ota. The government commissioned the National Laboratory of Civil Engineering (LNEC) to develop a strategic comparative assessment between Ota and Alcochete. This study identified Alcochete as the preferred location. This indication was adopted by the government leading to a radical change in decision.

This paper discusses the change in decision from a social and political context highlighting the relevance of the strategic assessment followed by the two studies that allowed this new political decision.

Introduction

This paper is about the history of a decision-making process on a major transport infra-structure. It could have happened in many countries around the world. As a matter of fact, many major infra-structure projects of the early and mid 20th century show similar performances – the harbour bridge in Sydney is just one example that also lasted from the late 19th century, with the inception of the idea, until it was finally opened in the mid 20th century. The particular story of the Lisbon new international airport is that after 40 years final decision had been made, but it was suddenly changed because of a strategic insight into the location choices considered for the project. It was that discussion, and the studies conducted, which finally engaged Strategic Environmental Assessment, that profoundly changed the arguments and the reasons consolidated over the years, and which makes this story worth to share.

The paper starts by describing the early evolution of the project and its alternative locations, and then addressed the two studies that within the last year have significantly contributed to changing the whole process. A more detailed paper will be prepared for publication in an international refereed journal.

The history of the airport of Lisbon

The Lisbon airport has been operating at Portela-Lisbon since 1942. At the time of its construction Portela was located in the northern outskirts of the capital of Portugal, Lisbon. During the following two decades this site was engulfed by the urban expansion of Lisbon, which prevented any possibility for the expansion of the airport at the same site. The relocation of this major infrastructure has been considered by the national government since 1969. At that time 5 alternative sites were identified, all located in the south bank of the Tagus River. This initial study was completed in 1971, selecting an area of over 6500 ha in Rio Frio, where a 4 parallel runway airport would be constructed. The economic and political context in Portugal however changed significantly in 1974, following the first oil crisis and the Portuguese revolution. The airport was not a national priority anymore especially after the disruption of the political ties with the African colonies.

In 1982 the location for the new international airport of Lisbon was the object of a comprehensive study that analysed 12 alternative locations. The study concluded on a new better location at Ota, 40 km North from Lisbon central area, on the right bank of the Tagus river. Ota is opposite to Rio Frio, which was earlier identified and located on the left side of the river. The issue was only reopened in 1990 after the integration of Portugal in the European Community. During the following 8 years, several studies were developed for these 2 sites concerning the economical and operational feasibility. Some studies included the analysis of a third option on the left bank of the river, the nearby air force base of Montijo across the river from Lisbon. Finally, in 1998-99 environmental impact assessment studies looked separately at Ota and Rio Frio locations. After a complex process Ota was selected as the site for the construction of the new airport of Lisbon. Government decision arguments were based on the natural sensitivity of the Rio Frio site, which would involve the destruction of more than 50,000 cork trees, a protected species and habitat in Portugal, and the fact that Rio Frio occupies an ecological corridor that spans between the Tagus and Sado rivers.

Since then, a national debate has been happening mainly because of the high costs of locating the airport at Ota, partly due to the hydrological and topographical complexity of the site. Nevertheless, a final decision was made by the government in 2005 to build the airport at Ota, the detailed design of the project layout continued and a thorough EIA was started.

The IDAD study

In March 2007, the Confederation of the Portuguese Industry (CIP), unhappy with the selected location, announced that they would sponsor a new study for the

identification of another site for the construction of the new airport of Lisbon. Following this announcement the national government expressed their extreme reluctance in accepting any other locations for the airport, stating that it would never change their decision and that it would be impossible to find a feasible alternative to Ota. The fact is that 3 months later a short report prepared by the Institute of Environment and Development (IDAD, 2007) based on the study was personally delivered by CIP to the prime-minister. This study indicated that a better site for the construction of the airport had been identified in the eastern part of the Alcochete shooting range, a military facility that had never been considered in previous studies. A week later the Minister of Public Works (MOPTC) announced in parliament the suspension of the Ota decision and that a comparative study between Ota and Alcochete would be conducted. This fact came as a shocking surprise to the entire Portuguese society. How was it possible that a 96 page report could reverse the earlier political decision?

During this process, negotiations occurred at the top level which included the President of Republic, Prime-Minister and the Portuguese Air Force. Part of the success results from the methodology in the technical report presented by CIP. Some of its characteristics deserve detailed analysis:

- **Confidentiality:** The IDAD study was developed in a 100% confidential environment. Neither the media nor the authorities knew who was developing the study. The technical staff involved 16 people, but in fact, the global overview of the study was limited to a core team of 4 people. Information was provided to CIP (the client) only at the last moment, avoiding leakage to the press and preventing additional political pressures;
- **Focused:** most reports of this nature have hundreds or thousands of pages and are difficult to read for the general public. This report was extremely focused on the critical environmental factors that supported the previous decision. The language used was accessible and the methodology used avoided complex models and was based on simple technical approaches.
- **GIS-based:** the methodology was based in a Geographical Information System based on publicly available databases. With this system it was possible to create quantitative indicators to compare the alternatives under study. The objectiveness of the indicators was very important for the positive outcome. Without GIS it would have been impossible to develop such a study even with a longer temporal framework.
- **“Non-aggressive” approach:** the authors of the study avoided any confrontation and *qui pro quo* with the previous decision-making process. The objective was to show that it was possible to identify new feasible sites, applying the same assumptions with new technological tools and recent environmental data. The study did not pretend to discuss if the previous decision was right or wrong.
- **Open access:** after the public announcement of the postponement of the decision by the MOPTC, the study was uploaded on the internet and easily accessed by everyone.

Following the IDAD study, the National Laboratory of Civil Engineering (LNEC) was mandated by MOPTC to undertake a comparative assessment of the two locations, Ota and Alcochete, for the new airport of Lisbon.

The LNEC Study

The LNEC adopted a strategic assessment methodology (LNEC, 2007) which were constrained by the following facts: 1) there was only 6 months to develop the study; 2) there were no details on the project for the second location at Alcochete; 3) the intention of the government was only to get the necessary information that could support a strategic decision that could change ten years of the previously made decision and development efforts.

The methodology adopted by the LNEC study considered seven critical factors for decision-making (CFD) (based on Partidário, 2007): Safety for air navigation and transportation, Natural resources and risks, Biodiversity and Nature Conservation, Accessibility, Spatial Planning, Social and Economic Competitiveness and Financial Feasibility. Each of these CFD adopted environmental, social and economic assessment criteria and indicators that ensured the consideration of the key decision factors. The strategic assessment also included a cost-benefit analysis, that ultimately concluded on the equivalence of both locations from an economic standpoint. Multiple meetings were convened involving the whole team as one group, as well as in thematic groups. Much interaction was enabled across the team through these meetings and the final result was reasonably integrated.

But the study conducted by LNEC was not easy. While well integrated and quite robust in its conclusions, it dealt with multiple scales and a wide range of perspectives. It engaged strategic-based studies as well as site specific studies, which generated much confusion as to the expected outcomes. In addition it generated insufficiencies regarding the consideration of certain aspects that required broader scales, while it added too much information on detailed aspects that would make better sense at a project scale. These multiple scales and details, however, generated another problem – the different expectations and misunderstanding amongst the public and institutions as to what was really the scale and scope of the analysis. The pressure created by the media exacerbated the public reactions and generated a number of expectations, stories and false alarms that created a vicious perception against the robustness of the study and the legitimacy of its conclusions. Ultimately it created the idea that this was no more than a social and political construction and diversion created by the government, which is entirely absurd, particularly considering the earlier resistance of the government to accept a new location for the airport.

Conclusions

Despite the whole conflicting debate that was created, surprisingly, the majority of the public, following the public consultation results, considers the new location to be better, namely due to the safety aspects, one of the critical factors considered in the

study. But the advocates of Ota who, for economic or political reasons persist in maintaining their preference for the initial location, have generated reasons to support their arguments that are far from being a demonstration of civic maturity. For example, based on the legislation adopted in Portugal that transposes the European directive on the assessment of plans and programmes on the environment, there is one article that identifies “decisions on the location of major infrastructures” as requiring such environmental assessment. The same article says that these decisions are, for the purpose of the legislation, considered sectoral plans. From thereafter, the legislation describes what a sectoral plan should contain, which applies to real sectoral plans. In this particular case, there is only a strategic decision, but yet no plan. This is currently being legally argued that, therefore, there is no object of assessment and the strategic assessment should have not been done, without a plan!

One could ask: why do a plan for an option before that option is assessed as strategically viable? And, should environmental assessment be used only when it is legally required? These are paradoxes that support the question others are raising (e.g. Elling, 2007): is environmental politics paying a good service to the environment?

This case stands as a significant case-study of the success of strategic approaches in environmental assessment. While not deliberately articulated, both IDAD and LNEC studies followed strategic approaches that complemented each other very well, concluding on the robustness of their findings, while engaging stakeholders in permeating their findings. It also shows the importance of adopting communicative capacities closer to the politicians and less concerned with the analytical and technocratic forms of environmental assessment. It is by adjusting the speech and forwarding the right messages in a short period, in a very precise and consistent way that one succeeds in hitting the core of decision-making.

References

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