



The Lisbon new international airport: The story of a decision-making process and the role of Strategic Environmental Assessment

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 July 2010

Received in revised form 29 November 2010

Accepted 2 December 2010

Available online 14 January 2011

Keywords:

Decision making

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Sustainability

Political processes

Major development projects

ABSTRACT

This is the brief story of a decision process and the role of Strategic Environmental Assessment in government political decision-making. Following a prolonged, and agitated, decision process, initiated in the 1960s, the Government of Portugal in 2005 took the final decision to build the new international airport of Lisbon at the controversial location of Ota, 40 km north of Lisbon. The detailed project design and EIA were started. However this decision would change in 2007 due to the challenge raised by a private sponsored study that identified an alternative location for the airport at Campo de Tiro de Alcochete (CTA). This new site, which had never been considered as an option before, appeared to avoid many of the problems that caused public controversy at the Ota site. The Government, pressured by this challenge, promoted a strategic comparative assessment between the two sites. The result of this study was the choice of CTA as the preferred location. This paper discusses this radical change in the decision from a socio-political perspective. It will highlight the relevance of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), and the strategic and constructive approach it enables in mega-project decision-making.

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1. Introduction

This paper describes the story of a decision-making process for the location of a major transport infrastructure in Portugal. It could have happened in other countries around the world. Major infrastructure projects, some in the early and mid 20th century, others more recently, require rather lengthy decision-making processes. The harbour bridge in Sydney, Australia, is one early example. The Mackenzie Gas Project in Canada's Northwest Territories is a more recent case. Earlier approaches to major projects generally did not incorporate environmental or social issues, and decisions were driven basically by economic and engineering concerns. Yet, they took a long time to complete. This suggests that delays are not necessarily determined by environmental assessment procedures, as is often claimed. On the other hand recent cases of new projects, or expansion of existing projects, often show an increasing incorporation of sustainability and strategic approaches, revealing decisions with a sounder basis upon which to be taken.

The particular story of the decision-making process for the Lisbon new international airport provides a good example of the capability of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to strategically influence

decision-making. SEA enabled a sound and sustainability based justification to support the decision for the airport location. Following almost 40 years of economic and engineering driven studies, difficult debate and many non-decisions, the choice of the Ota site was made. But within one year strategic insights into relevant, long-term, strategic issues that had not been considered before in a systematic and transparent way, cause government decision to suddenly change. A private organization, unhappy with the Government's decision, proposed a more holistic approach to screen alternative locations. This led to a new candidate site, revealing a possible better option that had never been considered before. It was that discussion, and the strategic comparative assessment studies conducted subsequently by the government, that profoundly changed arguments and reasons consolidated over the years. It was this step back, with a look at "the big picture" of the problem that enabled a sound decision to be made. It also makes this a story worth sharing.

The paper will set this case into an international context to demonstrate that the evolution of the decision-making process for the Lisbon new international airport is not unique in itself. Many major projects require a lengthy, and often controversial, decision-making processes. Four cases will be used to illustrate the extent to which environment and sustainability issues were considered imperative, or not, in final decision, and how does that relate to the duration of the decision-making process. The paper will then describe the two broad, strategic studies undertaken for the Lisbon new international airport that, in less than one year, contributed

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significantly to changing the mind-set that had been in place for decades. Finally an analysis of the case will be made and lessons outlined.

2. The history of a new airport for Lisbon

The Lisbon airport has been operating at Portela-Lisbon since 1942. At the time of its construction Portela was outside Lisbon, in its northeast outskirts (Fig. 1). During the following two decades this area was engulfed by the urban expansion of Lisbon, which impeded the expansion of the airport at this location. The relocation of this major infrastructure has been considered by successive national governments since 1969.

In the 1960s Portugal had a growing population and economy, with an overseas outreach anchored in the African colonies. The average GDP growth was 6.9% per year (1960–1973) (Rocha, 1984). Based on these conditions, the decision was made to expand the capacity of the existing airport. A new site was needed to be able to accommodate the expansion of the airport to four runways and to accommodate 100 million passengers a year. An initial study completed in 1971 identified five alternative sites. All these sites were located on the south bank of the Tagus River. This region offered the largest, closest and more easily accessible plain areas in the surroundings of Lisbon. The opening of the new bridge that linked the two banks of the Tagus River in 1966 encouraged the location of the airport on the South Bank.

Based on that purely engineering and economic oriented study, an area of over 6500 ha in Rio Frio was selected (Fig. 2). This proposed site could accommodate the planned airport with four parallel

runways. However, the first oil crisis of the early 1970s, along with the changes in the economic and political context in Portugal in 1974, put the airport project on hold. A new airport for Portugal was not a national priority anymore. This was especially true after the disruption of the political ties with the African colonies and the overall political instability in the country. Taken together, these two factors severely affected the economic conditions in Portugal.

In 1982 the issue of a new Lisbon international airport was re-considered. A larger comprehensive study that analysed 12 alternative locations was undertaken. However environmental issues were marginal to this study, if they were considered at all, in the identification and selection of these sites. Locations identified included existing military and air force installations, small airports, and four of the five previously identified locations. The study concluded that Ota, 40 km North of Lisbon, on the right bank of the Tagus River, would be the best choice amongst the 12 options. The reasons for choosing Ota were based on the fact that a military installation was already in place, offering a large, government owned area (173 ha). In addition, this area was strategically located between Lisbon and Porto, the two major cities in Portugal, where the most potential demand existed. However, once again the project did not proceed due to lack of funding.

The issue was reopened again in 1990 after the integration of Portugal in the European Community. During the following eight years, several economic and operational studies were developed for the two locations chosen in previous studies: Ota and Rio Frio (Fig. 2). A third alternative site was still briefly considered on the left bank of the river, but soon after abandoned. It wasn't until 1998–99 that environmental issues are formally brought into the picture. Since

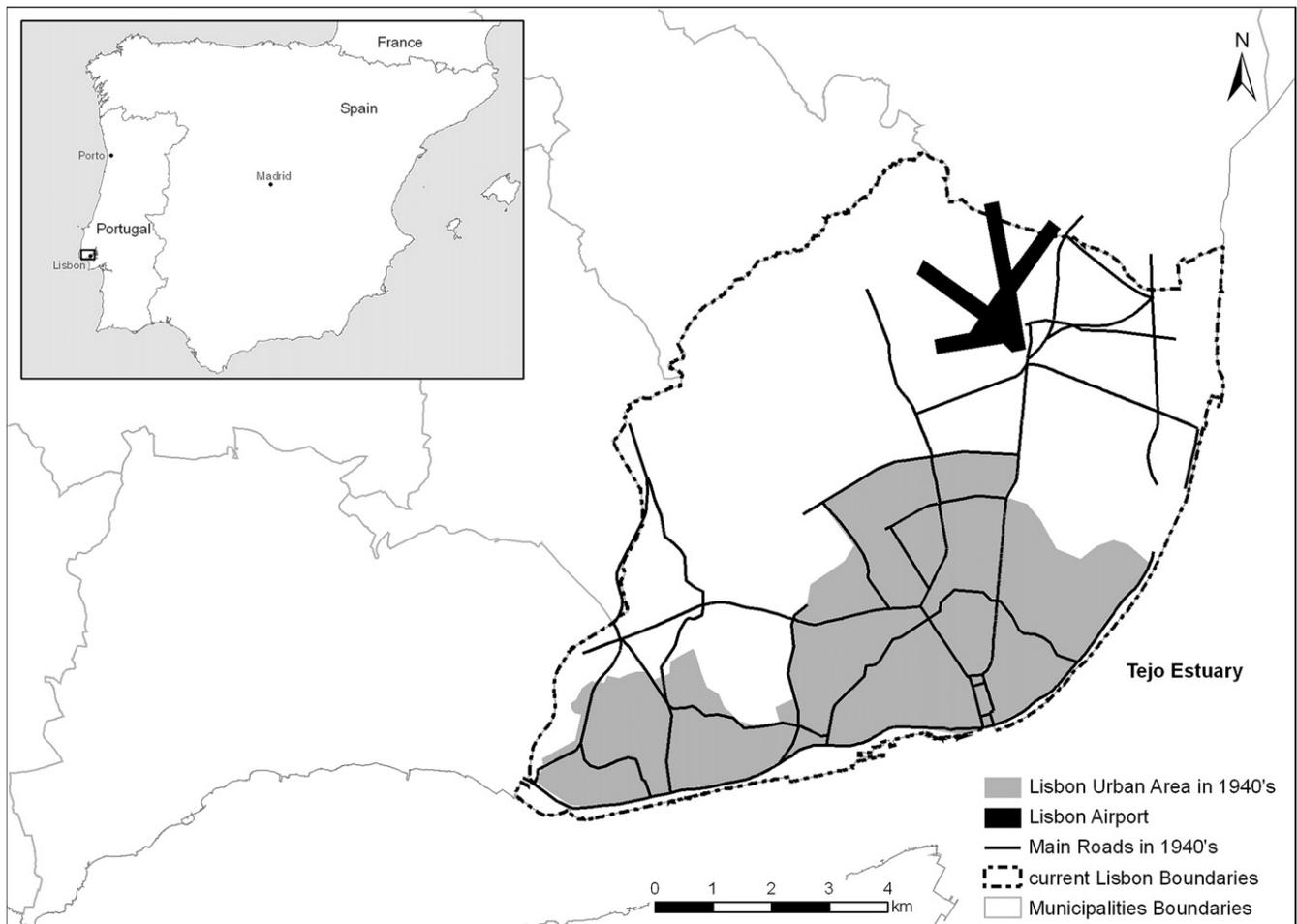


Fig. 1. The Lisbon airport location in 1940, currently within the city boundaries.

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