5.
RED LINE FOR AIRPORTS: MORATORIA ON NEW INFRASTRUCTURE AND SCALING DOWN OF AIRPORTS

Hundreds of new airports or airport expansions are planned to fuel the skyrocketing growth of aviation. Putting a moratorium on these infrastructure projects—delaying or suspending them—directly decreases aviation's capacity to grow. While a few examples of moratoria on airport projects exist, fighting airport projects could also lead to healthier neighbourhoods, and to safeguarding precious farmland or biodiversity.

The rapid growth of aviation demands new infrastructure. Simultaneously, new or bigger airports demand an increase in flights. There are 550 new airports or runways planned or being built around the world, plus runway expansions, new terminals etc, totalling more than 1200 infrastructure projects.[1] Most of them involve new land acquisition, the destruction of ecosystems, displacement of people and local pollution and health issues (noise/traffic/particles/etc.). More and more airports, especially in the Global South, are becoming 'Aerotropolis', or Airport Cities, surrounded by commercial and industrial development, hotels, shopping cities, logistic centres, roads, or connected to Special Economic Zones.[2] Airports represent a main infrastructure for the globalised capitalist economy, needed for the just-in-time production and trade of goods, work travel, the tourism business, as well as the deportation of unwanted 'travellers': illegalised migrants.[3]

Effective resistance against airport projects can prevent the negative effects and counter a lock-in to an emissions-intensive, destructive form of mobility for decades into the future. Resistance also allows abstract issues like emissions to become more tangible. Networks connecting different local struggles through shared experiences and joined forces can build strong pressure, making it easier to tackle the root causes of aviation growth and climate change.

By definition, a moratorium is an officially ordered delay or suspension of an activity or law. There have been quite successful moratoria in the past, such as the atomic moratorium in Germany,[4] the coal moratorium in the United States[5] and the international whaling moratorium.[6] An 'airport moratorium' is a building moratorium that halts the construction of a project or projects. It can be imposed by cities, towns and courts, and for a variety of reasons. Further, it can be short-term or indefinite, depending on the project and the area where it is located.[7]

Currently, there are no countries to our knowledge that have introduced moratoria on a national scale, prohibit-

ing the construction of any new airport infrastructure. However, judicial processes for establishing a moratorium against special airports on a regional scale do exist. Some examples include:

- **Munich Airport, Germany**: In a 2012-referendum, most of Munich's population voted against the construction of a new runway at the city airport. The expansion would have meant an increase from 90 to 120 departures and landings per hour. During its campaign in the Bavarian regional election, the new government promised to stop any airport expansion, and once in power it agreed on the limited-time moratorium. The Bavarian government established a five-year moratorium in 2018. Whether the moratorium will have a long-term effect or not is still uncertain.[8]

- **Vienna International Airport, Austria**: In February 2017, an Austrian administrative court blocked the construction of a third runway at Vienna's Airport because it would go against the country's commitments to the Paris Agreement, and because it would destroy too much agricultural land.[9] The court considered climate protection more important than jobs or better aviation infrastructure.[10] The airport company appealed. A few months later, the decision was ruled "unconstitutional" by the Higher Constitutional Court, and in 2018, the Federal Administrative Court permitted the expansion of the airport with a few requirements: the airport must now become carbon-neutral. This requirement, however, only covers the on-ground operations of the airport and does not include the core business of the airport—the flights. Furthermore, it includes the use of problematic offsetting (see **Info Box 5**).[11] At the time of this report there were still appeals pending against the permission to construct the runway on the European level.

- A new airport on farmland in **Notre-Dame-des-Landes, in Western France** was cancelled in 2018 following opposition since the project was first proposed in the 1970s. The resistance over many years gave rise to a new term, *Zone à Defendre* (ZAD), referring to the community living on the site. It resisted the airport project and formed a space for ecological and social experimentation.[12]

- **Idaho Falls, USA:** There was a moratorium on developing the land areas surrounding the Idaho Falls Regional Airport, but it lasted for only six months.[13]

- **New Mexico City International Airport, Mexico:** The project of a new airport in Mexico City in the dry lake bed of Texcoco was launched at the beginning of this century, but has been cancelled twice because of local indigenous and nation-wide opposition. Recently, the plans were officially cancelled for a third time after a referendum. However, on-site tests for the project continue.[14]

- In **Bangladesh**, a plan for a major airport and associated 'satellite city' in the **Arial Beel** wetlands was cancelled following protests by farmers and fisher folks concerned over the loss of their livelihoods.[15]

- In **Thailand**, provincial and forestry authorities intervened to halt construction of an airport on **Koh Phangan**, a mountainous, beach-fringed island, when it was discovered that land clearance had encroached on forest land in Than Sadet National Park.[16]

- The expansion of **Marseille Provence Airport** was stalled in 2019 by the French environmental authority who requested to revisit the Environmental Impact Assessment. The argument was that the benefits of expansion are overstated whilst the environmental impact is understated. In addition, the assessment did not demonstrate the project's compatibility with France's target to reach carbon neutrality in 2050.[17]

Given that the current climate warming produced by aviation is already too high, it is not enough to halt the construction of new airports: it is also necessary to scale down airports, especially in the Global North. If combined with the measure of reducing short-haul flights (see **chapter 4**), most of the regional airports would become unnecessary. There is an on going debate concerning whether it would be preferable to have the few remaining airports situated in the countryside, instead of in densely populated cities, where noise and particles affect more people's health and well-being.[18]

WHY TARGET AIRPORTS?

If measures like higher taxes on flights and bans of short-haul flights led to a reduction in flights, airport expansion would no longer be profitable. But we are still a long way from the implementation of such measures. Increasing public awareness, campaigns, and media attention will be necessary to reach a reduction in flights. Therefore, targeting airport infrastructure can be a very effective way to raise attention, and to halt local expansion of aviation and greenhouse gas emissions.

Local airport resistance is often organised around issues of noise and air pollution. Halting airport expansion will limit noise and air pollution for nearby residents. This accounts not only for negative health effects due to the exposure itself, but also for the health effects due to the worries about the expansion situation. The so called 'change effect' is a well-known phenomenon in noise impact research. It describes the increase of long-term noise annoyance in areas where airport expansions will be carried out. This negative health effect cannot be accounted for by the increase in noise exposure levels.[19]

In the case of moratoria, the imminent aim to stop the construction of a new runway can become a shared goal for climate activists and health-affected residents alike.

Also, affected farmers and conservationists can become allies when fighting such a project. It might be easy to get wide citizen support for questioning such harmful projects since they are usually financed through public money. Since flight routes are often led above city districts with poorer population, it is necessary to include those residents in the campaign. If done in a sensitive way, different tactics can be combined in the struggle—from judicial appeals (e.g. to meet noise limits) to civil disobedience.

Moratoria mean a direct change to a local situation, and do not necessarily involve extensive national or international legislative processes in order to be established. In this way they are practically very feasible. Furthermore, if moratoria beyond the regional level are considered, and there was e.g. an EU-wide implementation, they might lead to a decrease in competition and aspiration to expansion among European Airports. Finally, moratoria are expected to be a means that is met with less opposition from passengers using air travel.

**OBSTACLES AND DISADVANTAGES
OF TARGETING AIRPORTS**

Despite the feasibility of moratoria on new airport infrastructure projects, there are potential barriers to consider. These involve the difficulty in accomplishing moratoria on a single airport scale due to economic competition between airports. Airport boards and the industry at large typically argue: 'if we don't expand here, another airport will expand'. This can even lead to competition between airport opponents, with some proposing the expansion of an airport elsewhere. This would be a typical 'Not in my backyard' approach. Such issues also led to the founding of the Stay Grounded network: By connecting the numerous struggles against airports, it is possible to show that airport projects should not take place—'not here, not anywhere!'.

Often, airports also try to counter critique and opposition by greenwashing their image. Hundreds of airports participate in an Airport Carbon Accreditation programme, in which they can be labelled a carbon-neutral airport without reducing a single flight.[20] The measures only target the few greenhouse gas emissions emitted on the ground, and rely extensively on offsetting emissions (see **Info Box 5**). Offsetting the affected land and biodiversity is a common strategy, albeit numerous studies show that it is impossible to compensate and create the same sort of biodiversity somewhere else.[21]

A difficult obstacle to airport moratoria or to reducing the number of airports is the opposition by workers and trade unions. Usually, alternative plans for new jobs are lacking, which is a real problem, since the structural changes needed for a climate just economy should not fall on the shoulders of the people still working in fossil economy sectors. Still, the need for jobs cannot be accepted as an argument, because in the long run, there are no jobs on a dead planet.

Opposing airports can also be quite dangerous, especially in authoritarian states, where resistance is often violently oppressed. Many airport projects in the Global South not only lead to noise and climate issues, but actually threaten livelihoods. Resistance therefore is often much more fierce, involving blockades and hunger strikes, and not counting on financial resources or media attention.

Finally, since airports are such an important infrastructure for the current economic system, it is basically impossible to reduce airports without also changing our economy towards a more regionalised economy (see **chapter 6**). This does not mean that we need to wait for systemic changes until airports can be targeted; on the contrary, airport moratoria and a reduction of airports can be an important step in the much needed social-ecological transformation process.

STRATEGIES TO LIMIT AIRPORTS

As shown above, construction of new airports or runways is happening all the time. To support the existing oppositions, we can learn from older struggles against expansions, and share experiences about communication strategies, possible allies, legal means, and action forms. Solidarity between the struggles is important, especially if affected people or activists are facing repression and criminalisation. Social media attention, investigative journalism, tracking the money flows, writing solidarity letters, or targeting decision makers with letters are some of the possible ways to do this.

In addition to the global scale, airport opposition at the local level can be an effective means to connect a variety of struggles and movements. While a moratorium can limit the CO_2 emissions of a given airport, it also relieves the residents from additional noise exposure and air pollution, and can save farmland or biodiversity from being sealed. This shared goal is an important chance to create synergies and solidarity.

Moreover, considering environment and health policies in relation to noise and air pollution can be a leverage to accomplish the implementation of moratoria. Noise abatement policies, including stronger regulations to limit aviation noise, can be an indirect approach to limit aviation. Aircraft noise is typically a common and intense issue regarding operations at existing airports and the planning, permission and construction of new airports. Imposing strict noise limitations, night flight bans or operation restrictions can limit the amount of flights.[22] The new and progressive noise guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO) could also be of help in working to limit airport noise. Advocating for the implementation of the WHO guideline levels for average noise exposure due to aircraft noise would lead to a radical reduction in the

Diagram 3:
Aviation Related Conflicts

The EnvJustice project of the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology at Autonomous University of Barcelona (ICTA-UAB) and the Stay Grounded network have registered more than 300 socio-environmental conflicts related to the expansion or creation of new airports or aerotropolis (airports surrounded by industrial and commercial zones). 60 of these have been analyzed in-depth. The remainder consists of airports under construction or proposed, planned, operational or cancelled airport projects that merit further investigation. The information gathered has been provided by organizations, local collectives and academics, and coordinated by Rose Bridger (Stay Grounded & GAAM - Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement) and Sara Mingorria (ICTA-UAB).

● Investigated airport conflicts

▲ Airport cases that merit further investigation

amount of flights. If these guidelines became the standard there would no longer be flights at night.

Citizen science is a new approach which can be used in support of noise limitation. The organisation Schiphol Watch has developed a free app with which residents can register and document aviation noise. All results are collected in a database and are being evaluated by universities. In the Netherlands, residents already approach their local and regional politicians and press members with the data.[23]

Working together with trade unions and universities in order to research alternative plans for jobs can also be important. It is a bizarre conflict to have workers' interests stand against residents' interests, when they are often the same group of people. Trying to create alliances and find commonalities (like the fight for justice, against pollution, and for better train connections) can be important steps. There are few trade unions that are progressively looking for alternative pathways—one positive example is the Public & Commercial Services Union PCS in the UK, opposing the third runway in Heathrow.[24]

Attracting media attention and motivating people to organise collectively against an airport expansion can be achieved by organising different actions. Bike demonstrations to the airport, rallies at the airport, flash mobs and creative actions including disguise or papier-mâché planes can be very effective and suitable for the very sensitive territory of an airport. Examples are people in red suits creating a 'red line for aviation growth'; 'die-ins', where people simultaneously fall on the floor and represent the violence of the climate crisis and the injustice of flying; people in penguin costumes have also appeared at airports, with penguins gradually becoming memes or mascots of the anti-flying movement, since "the coolest birds stay on the ground".

Additionally, actions of civil disobedience have taken place at airports, although there is a higher risk for criminalisation than at less sensitive infrastructures. In London, runways have been blockaded several times;[25] in Sweden, activists blocked the fuel train to disrupt the delivery of kerosene to the airport;[26] and the group Extinction Rebellion had plans to close an airport by driving drones close by[27] and targeted London City Airport, blocking the entrance with their bodies. In addition, one person climbed onto a plane. Another person refused to sit down inside a plane whilst giving a lecture on the climate crisis, delaying takeoff for two hours. In the Global South, street blockades and strikes have taken place. In India in August 2019, small-scale farmers staged a sit-in for over a month in front of the district's planning administration, continuing their year-long protest to counter the expansion of Karad airport in Maharashtra State.

FURTHER READING

News on airport struggles can be found on the website of Stay Grounded and of the Global Anti Aerotropolis Movement, as well as their facebook accounts:
https://stay-grounded.org
https://www.facebook.com/StayGroundedNetwork
https://antiaero.org
https://www.facebook.com/GAAMovement

Bridger, R. (2015). *What is an Aerotropolis, and Why Must These Developments Be Stopped?* https://antiaero.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/gaam-whats-an-aerotropolis2.pdf

Noise Data from citizens & App to measure aircraft noise:
https://reports.explane.org

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[1] Stay Grounded (2017: 2-3)
[2] Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement (n.d.)
[3] Herrero (2019)
[4] Spiegel (2011)
[5] Davenport (2019)
[6] Wikipedia (n.d.)
[7] Bankrate (n.d.)
[8] Süddeutsche Zeitung (2018)
[9] Reuters (2017)
[10] Global 2000 (2019)
[11] Klimareporter (2019)
[12] Environmental Justice Atlas (2018b)
[13] Keleher (2019)
[14] Stay Grounded (2019b)
[15] Environmental Justice Atlas (2018a)
[16] Environmental Justice Atlas (2019)
[17] Climate Change News (2019)
[18] BUND (2015)
[19] van Kamp and Brown (2013)
[20] ACA (2017)
[21] Stay Grounded (2017: 2-3)
[22] WHO (2018)
[23] Explane (n.d.)
[24] Airport Watch (2018)
[25] The Guardian (2016)
[26] Stay Grounded (2019a)
[27] BBC News (2019)