

The “Aerotropolis” phenomenon – high risk development thwarting SDGs

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With increased global economic integration, a new form of airport-centric commercial development has emerged and is spreading rapidly worldwide. As nodes in global production systems offering speed and connectivity, ‘city airports’ are being transformed into ‘airport cities’, or so-called ‘aerotropolises’. Like other cities, the aerotropolis consists of a central core with rings of development permeating outwards. But its core is an airport, and all surrounding development supports and is, in turn, supported by the airport industry.

Promoters hail this new urban form as economically efficient, globally competitive, attractive and sustainable.¹ They point to the promise of creating powerful engines of local economic development, attracting tourism-related industries, generating jobs for locals and added value for neighbouring communities.

But in fact, the aerotropolis profoundly subverts the goal of building inclusive, equitable and sustainable cities. It is not a city

designed to enhance the lives and livelihoods of urban dwellers and to provide public space to nurture participatory democracy and civic empowerment. It is a city driven by a combination of private business imperatives and State control, with the high levels of security and controls that go with airports. It constitutes a super-centre of conspicuous consumption with facilities and services primarily catering to privileged and wealthy upper-class air passengers with hyper-mobile and luxurious lifestyles, and to transnational corporations that are keen to get their products swiftly to customers around the world.

Apart from the airport, aerotropolis developments usually feature hotels; shopping and entertainment facilities; retail, convention, trade and exhibition complexes; golf courses; as well as manufacturing and warehouse areas. These projects are often given preferential treatment, such as relaxed regulations and tax breaks, and are sometimes integrated with larger Special Economic Zones (SEZs), where supportive infrastructure, such as transportation links, energy and water is provided.

Those who benefit most from such projects are not local communities but international investors and corporations such as construction firms, airlines and other transport companies, hotel chains, real estate companies, insurance and security equipment companies, retail businesses as well as manufacturing companies with an export orientation.

The proliferation of aerotropolis schemes needs to be seen in the context of the global trend to financialize infrastructure. Airport-related projects are being coveted by the financial sector and transformed into assets through which private investors are guaranteed high returns. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are on the rise in the airport industry. However, the expanded use of public money – for example, taxes, pension funds and aid - to offset the risks involved in these massive projects is of special concern, particularly in developing countries struggling with poverty, ailing economies and high debts. PPPs tend to externalize the high costs onto the backs of people(s) and the biosphere.

¹ See e.g., John D. Kasarda, President and CEO of Aerotropolis Business Concepts (www.aerotropolisbusinessconcepts.aero).

Aerotropolis schemes devour huge tracts of land, sometimes more than 100 square kilometres. Major impacts include land conflicts, forced evictions, loss of biodiversity and farmland, environmental degradation, air, water and noise pollution, and lack of transparency and accountability. Given their petroleum-intensive infrastructure, aerotropolis developments are perpetuating the global fossil fuel-based economy that drives runaway climate change.

For all these reasons, resistance against aerotropolis ventures has been growing worldwide – from the UK and Turkey in Europe; to Tanzania in Africa; Indonesia, India and Taiwan in Asia; to Mexico in Latin America. In 2015, an alliance of civic groups formed the Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement (GAAM)² in order to research and monitor developments and support local struggles against socially and environmentally destructive projects.

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² <https://antiaero.org/>.