

Another runway towards the climate crisis?

Insights from Multicriteria Mapping and Qualitative Content Analysis at the airport Vienna conflict

Abstract

In February 2017, the Austrian Federal Administrative Court forbid the construction of a third runway on the Vienna airport. Its argument: Austria would not meet its carbon dioxide (CO₂) targets as party to the Paris Agreement about keeping the rise in global temperature at 1.5°C before 2100. A heated public debate began, about new jobs, Austria's economic location, noise for the residents, and global climate justice. Conflicts between economic growth and the environment emerged. Airport expansion is a global trend, and aviation is projected to grow and contribute massively to global anthropogenic emissions in the next decades. Against the background of the immense challenges and uncertainties of climate change, the research question arises: What are the conditions for airport expansion to be possible in the context of human induced climate change?

This research aims at contributing to the academic field of social ecological economics, as well as to a fruitful dialogue in the Austrian discussion – to build, or not to build the third runway. It analyses the case of the third runway at the Vienna airport from the meta-theoretical perspective of critical realism. The theoretical framework of critical institutional economics aims to filter out the underlying norms of the actors involved in a conflict. The methodology is a mixed-methods approach, combining a multicriteria mapping process with a qualitative content analysis. Twelve interviews were conducted, representing academia, the aviation industry, civil society and the government. This probed into respondents' understanding of how expanding the airport in Vienna could be made 'sustainable'.

The investigation shows, that all actors involved agree to take action against climate change, by reducing CO₂ emissions. However, strategies differ: The aviation industry is trapped in an economic structural dynamic of international competition, and trusts in technological innovation for Green Growth. On the contrary, civil society participants relate this local conflict to a social, structural and ethical issues relating to global climate justice; they are sceptical of technological solutions for aviation, and call for an expansion of the train system and structural changes instead. This reveals a fundamental conflict of values about the structural conditions for a case in respect to social ecological transformation under conditions of climate change.