

International Airport Project for the South: Context, Perceptions and Perspectives

Executive Summary

Construction of an international airport in Costa Rica's southern region, conceptualized by previous governments, is moving forward under the administration of current President Laura Chinchilla. A decree of public interest has been signed, and the related environmental impact study is under way.

Many residents have high expectations for the changes that the airport could bring to the southern region. They see the project as a motor of development and jobs in an impoverished region, an opportunity for the expansion of export industries and a regional gateway for international tourists. Some groups, however, are concerned about the airport for its potential impact on the environment and the region's tourism model. This study aims to provide stakeholders with access to additional information, allowing them to better understand the impact that the airport could have on their lives.

This case study begins with a summary of the proposed airport project, its origin and current status. It continues with a presentation of different perspectives on its construction. The study aims to verify which expectations or concerns can be substantiated. The study finds, for example, that expectations of increased agricultural exports cannot be supported.

The study then analyzes the area's current and potential tourism market, comparing it with the Guanacaste region in northern Costa Rica. This analysis is important because a common regional argument holds that people want an international airport for the southern zone, but not tourism development similar to Guanacaste's.

The analysis also includes practical considerations such as international airlines' interest and the alternative of investing in existing regional airports.

The study provides a summary of the virtues of the southern zone's predominant tourism model – high-value eco-tourism that attracts educated nature lovers and generally involves services provided by micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses. This model has benefited local people, is supported by national policies, and is reflected in the national and regional sustainable tourism plans produced by the Costa Rican Tourism Institute. The study looks at the feasibility of maintaining this model with an increased number of tourists arriving directly to the region.

Next, the study proposed four scenarios based on collected information including technical studies, news articles and interviews with key informants. These scenarios are dependent on decisions made by interested parties.

The first scenario warns that the airport's operation would lead to a decline in the number of high value tourists, an increase in the number of "light" ecotourists and a decline in local residents' incomes. Increased tourism demand could lead to construction of large hotels and second homes. Of course, Costa Rica could take actions designed to improve

the land-use planning process, better promote the southern zone and Osa as nature destinations, increase the number of businesses participating in the Costa Rican Tourism Institute's Sustainable Tourism Certification program and invest in training local people to take advantage of new opportunities. However, Guanacaste's experience shows that these efforts don't necessarily facilitate the creation of a tourism sector that benefits local communities.

The second scenario considers the possibility that the airport might not attract international airlines, hotel chains or real estate investors, in part because international economic markets are not very promising in the short- or medium-term. Although this scenario would avoid development similar to Guanacaste that many fear, the \$42 million investment would have only a small impact on the local economy.

The third scenario considers the possible impact of expanding the airport in Chiriquí, Panama to become an international airport.

The final scenario considers a future in which resources that might have gone toward building the airport are instead invested in improvement of regional airports and roads to create regional development poles. This scenario could produce a moderate growth in tourism, distributed in the whole southern zone, and maintain the area's characterization as a destination for high-value tourism. That outcome would depend on active branding and strengthening of sustainability efforts to position the region as a nature destination.

Next the study analyzes the possible impacts of extreme weather events, regional environmental characteristics that should be considered and the archaeological significance of the region.

How can adequate tourism growth that benefits regional communities be accomplished? To answer this question, decision-makers and interested actors should analyze the airport project carefully to determine if it is a good investment in the context of the vision for the region.