

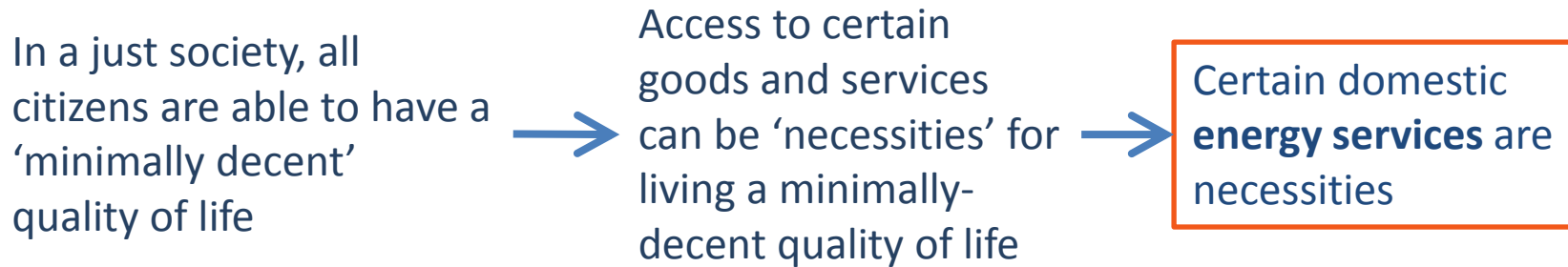
## RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 2014

# Fuel poverty and necessary energy services: What's essential for a decent life?

**Neil Simcock** (Lancaster University)  
**Rosie Day** (University of Birmingham)  
**Gordon Walker** (Lancaster University)

**The DEMAND Centre (Dynamics of Energy, Mobility and Demand) -**  
[www.demand.ac.uk](http://www.demand.ac.uk)

## ***Fuel poverty as an issue of social justice:***



Fuel poverty can be understood as an inability for people to meet their 'basic energy needs' (Roberts, 2008)

- Current official UK definition mentions “required” (i.e. ‘needed’) fuel costs
- *“Fuel poverty is a term that refers to households that have to spend over 10 percent of their income on **energy services necessary to meet basic needs**” (Sovacool et al., 2014, p.91 [emphasis added])*

***This leads us to a number of questions:***

## **1) What are these ‘basic needs’? Which energy services are necessities (in the UK context)?**

- In the UK, the fuel poverty *discourse* emphasises heating as an ‘essential’ energy service (Hills, 2011; O’Brien, 2011; Energy UK, 2014)
- But literature argues fuel poverty is more than only heating
- Material necessities are ***relative*** to the prevailing standards, norms and customs of a society (Townsend, 1979; Sen, 2009)

## **2) On what moral grounds should they be considered ‘necessities’?**

- Should support normative claims with careful and explicit reasoning (Olson and Sayer, 2009)

## **3) Who decides what energy services are ‘necessities’?**

## To address these questions, we use secondary data from the '**Minimum Income Standards**' (MIS) research

- UK research led by Loughborough Uni and Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Studies the **items** and **activities** UK citizens need for a minimum-acceptable standard of living
- Uses a **consensual method** to decide which goods and services constitute necessities
- *i.e. The **public decide** through a 'democratic' process*
  - 42 focus groups of 6-8 participants
  - Different groups for different household types
  - Range of socio-economic circumstances

# What energy consuming items did the public consider to be necessities? (a snapshot)

Items in 2008 MIS	NEW items in 2014 MIS
<p><b>Every household</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Gas central heating</li><li>- Main lights, side lights, nightlights</li><li>- Landline and mobile telephones</li><li>- TV, CD player, DVD player</li><li>- Fridge freezer, cooker, kettle, toaster</li><li>- Vacuum; iron; washing machine</li><li>- Public transport + taxis</li></ul>	<p><b>Every household</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Home access to PC and internet</li><li>- 32-inch television</li></ul>
<p><b>Particular households</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Computer, printer, broadband internet</li><li>- Steamer; microwave</li><li>- Hairdryer; Hair straighteners</li></ul>	<p><b>Particular households</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Extra laptop (<i>more than one school-aged child</i>)</li><li>- Slow-cooker (<i>partnered pensioners</i>)</li><li>- Tumble dryer (<i>family with over three children</i>)</li><li>- Car (<i>families with children</i>)</li></ul>

# What were the participants' justifications for deeming some energy-consuming items 'essential'?

## More than merely what's 'normal'

### Similar to understandings of 'need' found in moral and political philosophy:

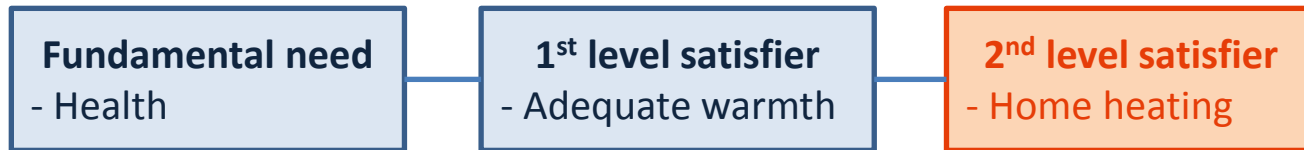
- The avoidance of harm
- No alternative – the harm can't be avoided through some other means

### But the 'necessities' were *instrumentally*, not *intrinsically*, important. They were pre-requisites for more fundamental ends or goals.

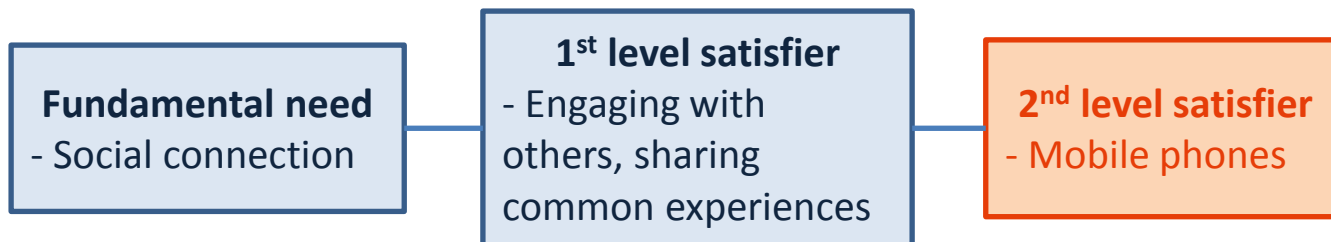
- Resonates with concepts of '**fundamental human needs**' (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Alkire, 2002) - dimensions of a decent life
- Material items, services, social practices are 'satisfiers' of these fundamental needs
- Some satisfiers can themselves become 'necessities' if there are is a lack of alternative ways to achieve the fundamental need

A couple of examples:

## Home heating



## Mobile phones for teenagers



# Summary

## Which energy services are necessities?

- A wide range of energy services (and associated technologies) are considered 'necessities' by the UK public
- Supports argument that energy needs (and so fuel poverty) involve more than only heating; and also that energy needs are *relative* in character

## On what moral grounds should they be considered 'necessities'?

- Necessary for the satisfaction of more fundamental 'ends' that make up a decent life. Fundamental human needs a useful concept here?

## Who should decide what energy services are essential?

- Consensual method one potentially valuable approach.
- But in certain areas 'expert' judgements still important?



# Concluding thoughts

Is this practical in terms of policy implications, or input into fuel poverty definitions?

Useful for those 'on the ground' in terms of making judgements if someone is in need or not?

A tension between achieving justice (in these terms) and reducing or limiting energy demand?

- Could have a constantly escalating situation, in which 'minimum standards' continually rise until they are unsustainable?
- Thinking in terms of fundamental needs idea can be helpful here?

# Thanks for listening.

Neil Simcock: [n.simcock@outlook.com](mailto:n.simcock@outlook.com)

Rosie Day: [r.j.day@bham.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.day@bham.ac.uk)

Gordon Walker: [g.p.walker@lancs.ac.uk](mailto:g.p.walker@lancs.ac.uk)

DEMAND website: [www.demand.ac.uk](http://www.demand.ac.uk)