

‘Justice, Governance and Energy Services’ workshop
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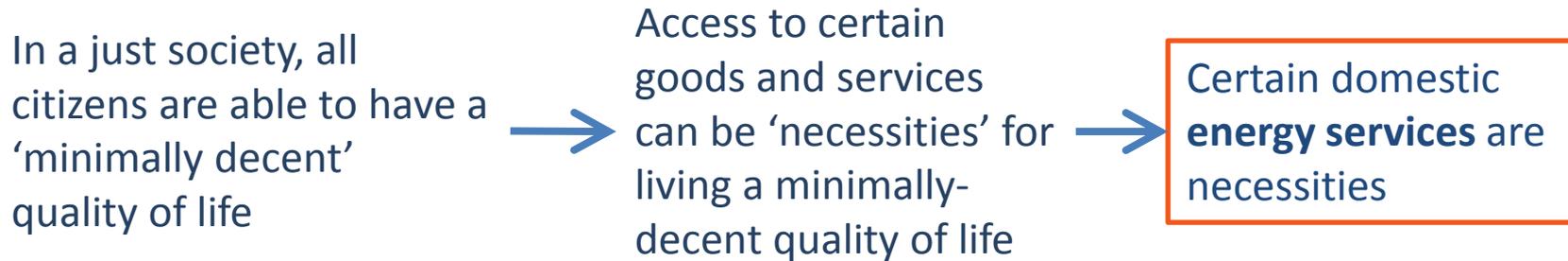
Fuel poverty and necessary energy services: What’s essential for a decent life?

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Fuel poverty as an issue of social justice:



Fuel poverty 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:

Substantive: **1) Which energy services are necessities?**

- 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, 1993)

Normative: **2) On what moral grounds should they be considered necessities?**

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

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

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

Not because items were 'positional goods'

Pre-requisites for more fundamental ends or goals

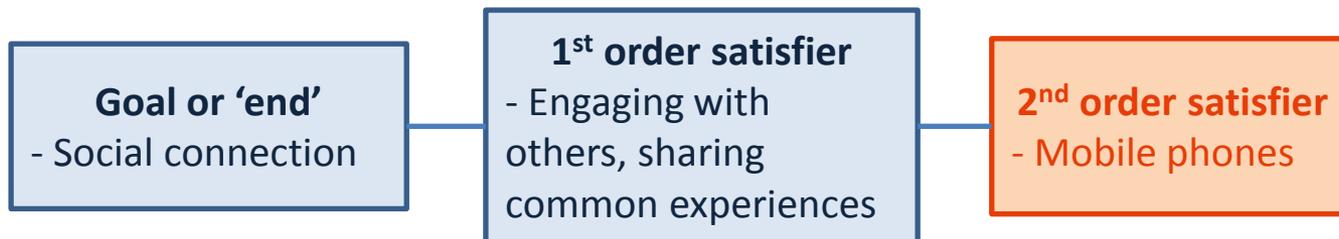
- Resonates with concept of capabilities
- Material items, services, social practices are instrumental in enabling people to have important capabilities, achieve valued functionings
 - Explains why items varied between groups
- Material items become 'necessities' if there are a lack of alternative ways to have the capabilities

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. Capabilities framework a useful heuristic here.

Who should decide what energy services are essential?

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

Thanks for listening.

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