

ASPO-Australia

Australian Association for the Study of Peak Oil & Gas

www.ASPO-Australia.org.au

Social Services Sector Working Group

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The ASPO–Australia Social Services Sector Working Group believes that significant planning and action should be undertaken to deal with the increased vulnerability of disadvantaged Australians to disruptions to fuel supplies and/or significant increases in fuel costs.

Unfortunately, the supply of cheap or "conventional" fuel is finite; it will come to an end, and with its demise will come the end of our oil-sponsored lifestyles. There is currently a debate about when the end of cheap oil will occur, but we can expect it to be preceded by significant price rises and occasional (rising to frequent) interruptions to supply.

Most analysts and writers on "energy transition" see a very different world emerging over the coming decades, one in which we will see:

- a move from globalisation to local production and distribution;
- a move from personal motorised transport to public and "active" transport;
- a move to sustainable energy sources – solar and wind – or electricity production;
- potential for loss of the community values that currently support notions of equity and systems of voluntary and shared community support;
- a re-valuing of traditional trades (carpentry, plumbing, gardening, etc) and community development based on systems of "self-help" and "sweat equity";
- a reduction in the importance of the "service" industry.

Some of the future scenarios of a world without access to cheap petroleum-based energy make interesting, indeed alarming, reading. One of the observations in all of the literature is that people who are wealthy will do much better during the inevitably rocky processes of "transition" than people who are in debt or have little property. As a result, the working group believes there will be a significant number of additional issues for Australians who are disadvantaged. These will occur at two levels: the first is the personal level, where disadvantaged people living in poor suburbs and dependent on cheap fuel in every part of their lives will be very badly affected; the second relates to the dependence of service organisations on fuel in the provision of their services.

In the event of disruptions to fuel supplies and increased costs:

- Staff may not be able to get to work to support clients, nor clients to access services.
- People with intellectual disability may not be able to get to day activities.
- There may be a failure of food supplies for clients and of contracted services.
- These pressures may create a significant additional demand for accommodation.
- Increasing fuel costs would have a significant effect on disadvantaged Australians.
- Some services based on heavy use of transport would become prohibitively expensive.
- There would be difficulty communicating issues to disadvantaged groups, and perhaps greater demand for case management.

It is not difficult to see how dependent our services are on fuel when we look at such excellent volunteer-based services as Meals on Wheels. A lack of fuel would mean there

would be complete disruption to many of our domiciliary services, and in the case of Meals on Wheels, to the provision of such basic necessities as food. *Volunteering Australia* in a media release on December 5, 2005 highlighted the impact of rising petrol prices on Australians volunteering to help their fellow Australians:

Coinciding with International Volunteer Day, Volunteering Australia, the national peak body for volunteering, has found that a staggering 52 per cent of surveyed organisations say their volunteers plan to stop or reduce their participation, including 11 per cent who have already stopped or changed volunteering, because of increased petrol costs.

The survey, completed in November [2005] and representing the experiences of nearly 400,000 volunteers, found that 84 per cent of respondents felt rising fuel prices will make it harder to volunteer....

<http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/documents/PetrolcostscostvolunteersIVD05.doc>

In a similar fashion, a survey conducted in 2004 by the WA Council of Social Services (WACOSS) confirmed that almost 40% of their participating community organisations had decreased their services to WA's low income recipients due to the impact of increased fuel prices (http://stcwa.org.au/BO2/OLW_WACOSS.ppt).

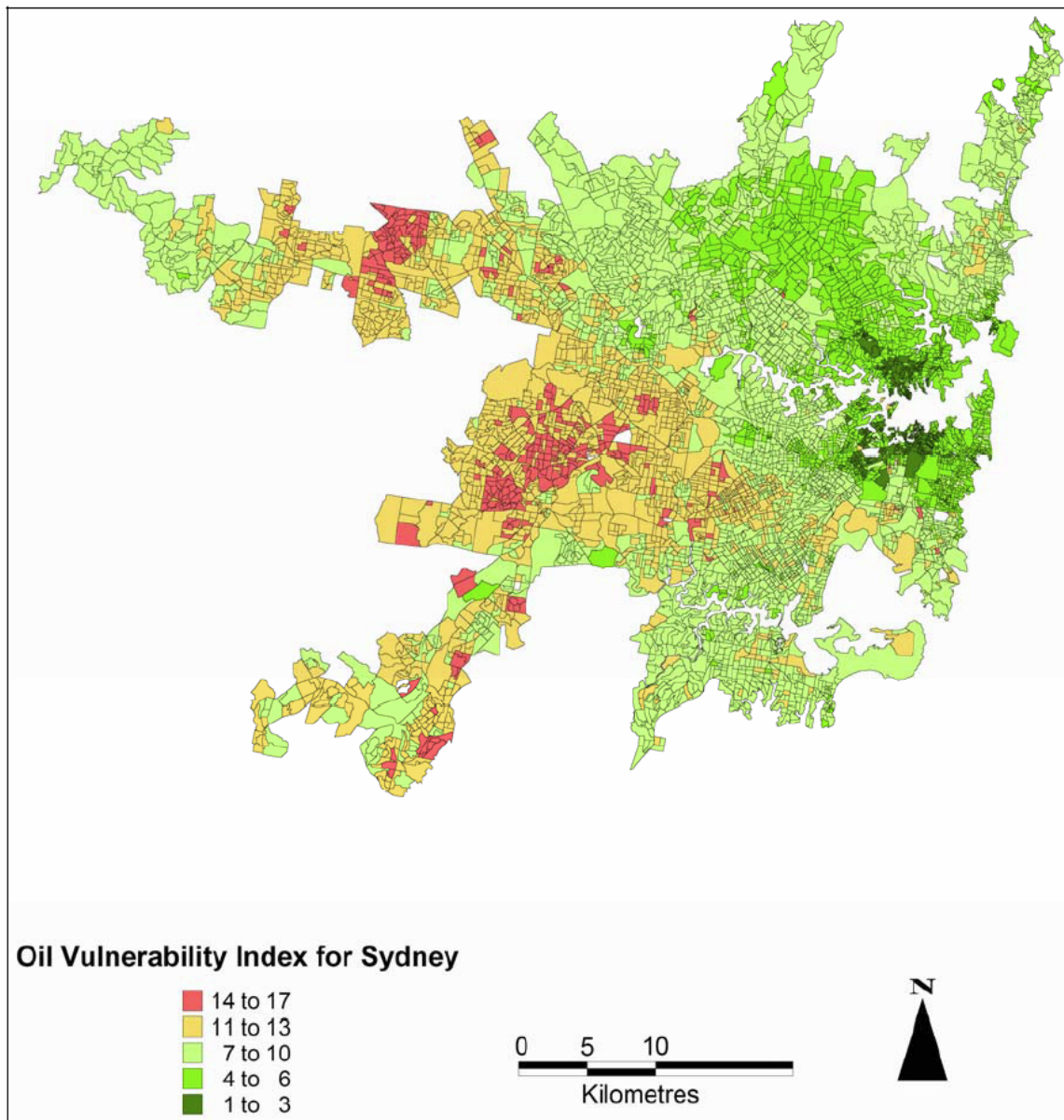
One promising concept the Committee might want to explore is that of "fuel poverty". This idea has been developed in the United Kingdom and the British Government published its Fuel Poverty Policy in November 2001 (http://www.dti.gov.uk/energy/consumers/fuel_poverty/index.shtml). Its intent is to improve (or prevent the diminution of) the living standards of households that have a combination of relatively low incomes and relatively large fuel needs. It does this with regular monitoring and an annual report to the UK Parliament. This unique policy process was based on the 1996 Scottish House Condition Survey which was the primary source of information about the prevalence of fuel poverty in Scotland (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/environment/sfps-05.asp>).

In a similar vein, a new Griffith University report has found poorer outer suburbs in Australian cities are likely to be most affected by rising petrol costs because of their dependence on motor vehicles and limited access to public transport. This contrasts sharply with wealthy inner suburbs, which are less vulnerable to high bowser prices because of their higher incomes and better access to public transport. The report, entitled *Oil Vulnerability in Australian Cities*, was produced by Griffith University's Urban Research Program and co-authored by Dr Jago Dodson and Dr Neil Sipe. It is believed to be the first study of its kind in the world to identify oil vulnerability at the neighbourhood level.

"The reason why rising fuel costs will impact on lower socio-economic groups in the outer suburbs is twofold. First, these households are already at a greater risk of adverse impacts from any socio-economic change," Dr Dodson said. "Secondly, these households are more dependent on cars for travel. This dependence means residents who rely on cheap petrol to drive to work or the shops are highly vulnerable to increased fuel costs. This may be compounded by the lack of alternative modes of transport, such as public transport, walking or cycling."

Dr Sipe said governments need to start understanding how rising oil prices will affect Australian suburbs and start planning to limit the impacts on car dependent neighbourhoods through provision of better public transport services. "The humble local suburban bus stop is likely to become a more important part of community infrastructure

as fuel prices increase, than any cross-harbour, cross-river or cross-city road tunnel," Dr Sipe said.



The report found Brisbane's outer growth corridors were most vulnerable to rising petrol prices. These areas included the suburbs of Beenleigh, Caboolture and Ipswich. In Sydney, Liverpool, Cabramatta and Penrith fared the worst. In Melbourne the Brimbank, Whittlesea and Dandenong areas were most vulnerable. The full report can be viewed at: http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/urp/URP_RP6_OilVulnerability_Final.pdf

Recommended actions by government

Our group looked at some of the things we could do. Some of these are already being developed and perhaps could be developed further by central government.

- Develop oil vulnerability indices for all of Australia.
- Develop a better understanding of the dependence on cheap fuel by such diverse groups as people with disabilities and disadvantaged communities.
- Provide services locally and hire staff locally to minimise the demands and costs of home-to-work travel.

- Connect services to local communities much more to derive more support and resiliency from localised institutions and services.
- Undertake significantly more research in the area of efficient fuel usage.
- Develop more efficient use of technology, including mobile information technology, organising office space around flexible use of "hot desks" etc.
- Examine the feasibility of working from home.
- Make some significant gestures toward transport alternatives – all services should be "bicycle-friendly" and should support the development of bicycle user groups not only amongst staff but also clients.
- Develop "urban farms", local co-operatives and links with permaculture, and ensure all group homes have gardens, rainwater supplies and solar hot water systems.
- Continue to move towards energy efficient offices and houses, experimenting with such applications as the Sun Ball Solar Appliance and other "off-grid" energy systems.
- Encourage permaculture-type activities amongst disadvantaged groups as a way of enabling them to be involved in activities that would make them more self-sufficient in respect to fuel (including composting, gardening and use of home or community-based wood ovens etc).
- Support carpooling, co-ordinating service visits to clients.
- Ensure that people are "energy literate" and understand the need for efficiency in fuel usage.
- Develop baseline data on our dependency on energy.
- Have rewards systems for good practice, e.g. bus tickets.
- Give energy issues a high profile amongst disadvantaged groups.
- Encourage and reward modesty in use of energy.
- Promote and reward physical activity.
- Support "sweat equity" and skill development programs.
- Encourage the use of public transport tickets rather than taxi vouchers.

Conclusion

As yet, we do not have a clear picture of the additional stress that declining fuel supplies and increasing fuels costs would have on disadvantaged groups within our society. We do know that when petrol prices recently reached \$1.30 per litre, this became a serious issue resulting in some charities providing petrol money or vouchers. One can only speculate on the effects of significant price increases on this population. This needs attention as a matter of urgency.