Children and Peak Oil: An Opportunity in Crisis

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1. Introduction

Major social upheavals and crises are notorious as catalysts for the re-evaluation of values and the erosion or augmentation of human rights. In the contemporary global setting, scarcely any issue causes more anxiety, either directly or indirectly, than the production and consumption of the world's energy resources. From the war in Iraq, to rising fuel prices, to global warming attributed to the burning of fossil fuels, energy consumption has been a central theme. This paper argues that the current concern about energy resources, particularly oil, provides an opportunity for a re-evaluation of our conceptualisation of children and children's rights.

Despite the transition from industrialism to post-industrialism, western societies are no less dependent on fossil fuels. Whilst post-industrialism usually indicates a decline in the manufacturing sector and a rise in the quaternary sector, underpinning post-industrial societies is the global movement of goods and services. Globalisation has assumed, and has been made possible by, a new dependency on transport networks, which are in turn dependent on cheap fuel. However, as the most casual observer may have noticed, when filling up their car at the petrol station, cheap fuel is no longer something that we can take for granted.

In this paper, we explore the concept of peak oil. Peak oil is the term used to describe the peak of oil production on a global scale. When this peak occurs, the global demand for oil will exceed our capacity to extract it. Some experts believe that oil has already peaked globally, while others believe it will peak soon (Campbell and Laherrere, 1998; Deffeyes, 2005; Goldie, Douglas, and Furnass, 2005; Roberts, 2004; Rutledge, 2005). Although there is no consensus on when the peak will occur, even the conservative International Energy Agency (IEA) now believes that the peak could occur as early as 2013 (Vidal, 2005), and few expert analysts expect the peak to occur after 2020. There are currently no alternative
sources of energy or raw materials that can take the place of oil to allow people in developed societies to continue to live as they are currently living.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of cheap oil on modern western lifestyles. Not only is it vital to transport, it also affects almost every facet of our lives. Peak oil will affect our ability to move people and goods, grow food and other crops, heat and cool homes, provide health care, build housing, as well as to produce plastics, medicines, synthetic fabrics, computers and toys. However, the effects of cheap oil are often more subtle, but no less totalizing and significant. The reliance on cheap oil can be linked to increased individualistic and privatized lifestyles. One example of this is the use of remote-controlled garage doors, which presupposes private car transport, and which enable residents to move from home to work and other activities with minimal interaction with their environment. This results in community relations where it is very easy not to know one’s neighbours, where streetscapes become deserted, and where suburban activity retreats from the public to the private realm (Gleeson, 2004).

Very little academic discussion has centred on the implications of peak oil for children, but these implications may be profound. For example, peak oil may have implications for the ability of societies to meet human rights obligations for children in terms of “protection”, “provision” and “participation”, three broad categories of rights now enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). If peak oil leads to global economic collapse and declining ability to produce food, then even children’s right to sustenance (and hence to life)–“provision rights”–may be violated. This may put pressure on children’s rights to “protection”, as poverty can lead to a lack of recognition of “so-called ‘universal’ human rights” (Freeman, 2002, 345). For example, as Feliciati (2005, 414) argues in the case of Brazil, “poverty is ‘compelling’ parents to sell their children to bonded labour, prostitution or for the purpose of taking their organs”. Thus poverty and hunger not only violate “provision” rights, but they can also impinge on “protection” rights. Thus in Feliciati’s (2005, 414) words, hunger is “not only a violation of children’s rights . . . but it is also at the core of numerous human rights abuses suffered by them.”

Although Freeman argues that the “case for children’s participation has now been made”, including in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (Freeman, 2005, 1), little progress has been made in the advancement of children’s active participation. Children have been given little voice in decisions about themselves. However, peak oil may provide opportunities for children to become more active “participants” in society. Despite some of the dire predictions associated with peak oil, the concept of peak oil provides us with an opportunity to re-evaluate some fundamental social values and activities. A particular area of this re-evaluation concerns our relations with children and their participation within society. An inability to rely on oil will necessitate new social and economic