

Food for Thought

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PETROL AND DIESEL SUBSIDY IS REMOVED PERIODICALLY, WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES FOR CONSUMERS?

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 03, 2014 | Comments(0)

02 OCTOBER 2014 - LETTER TO EDITOR

PETROL AND DIESEL SUBSIDY IS REMOVED PERIODICALLY, WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES FOR CONSUMERS?

Subsidy removal will always have a mixed reaction from all levels of stakeholder. Association of Water and Energy Research Malaysia (AWER) would like to keep issues related to cost aside. Let's look at reality, what are the alternatives that are or can be made available to the people and businesses when subsidy removal is implemented? Are the government and its agencies moving anywhere close to these solutions?

Let's look at some statistics. In 2012, transportation sector in Malaysia used 17,180 kilo tonne oil equivalent of energy according to Malaysia Energy Statistics Handbook 2014. It is 36.78% of the final energy use. Transport sector has superseded industry sector's energy use since 2008. Based on International Energy Agency (IEA), Malaysia emitted 1,494 kg CO₂ (carbon dioxide) per capita for transportation sector in 2010 and AWER's projected emission from transportation sector under Business as Usual (BAU) scenario in 2030 is about 2272.83 kg CO₂ per capita.

Now, how do we reduce emission from transportation sector? Reducing carbon emission also means we will be able to reduce the cost associated to energy use in transportation sector.

Public Transportation

When AWER refers to public transport, we do not include taxis. Public transport must be able to carry a large group of people from one location to another.

Based on AWER's latest national level survey study, we found interesting facts on public transportation. 4.17% of Malaysians are daily users of public transportation, 24.75% of Malaysians use it few times in a week, 51.64% Malaysians rarely use public transport and 19.43% of Malaysians do not use public transport at all. Based on this data, we can observe that there is tendency to use public transportation but why it is not optimised?

When we asked what is the main problem for public transportation in their area, 41.18% of them replied that the public transport is always full during peak hours. Another 36.16% replied that the public transport does not follow schedule and 14.54% replied that the public transportation service is far away from their housing areas. Another 7.92% complained that there is no public transportation system in their area.

When we asked will they be taking public transportation more frequently if public transportation services are improved to be more effective, 52.78% of them said they will switch to public transportation. At the moment, the modal share for Klang Valley is planned at 20% public transportation and 80% private vehicles. There is huge potential to improve it to 50% public transportation use. Will the government go all out for a better public transportation system?

The MRT and additional LRT line are focused on Klang Valley. Pockets of public transport measures do not solve the actual public transport services needed by the Malaysian population. If the outreach is low, people tend to drive to their desired destination. Connectivity between cities, towns and rural areas and states are vital to increase public transport users. How efficient is the current and proposed public transport systems in bringing consumers to their desired location?

Furthermore, in the case of MRT and LRT, where are the traffic impact assessment reports? I have received a number of feedbacks from readers in my blog on MRT issue. Is it really necessary to place a MRT or LRT station in a packed and crowded location? Are the project proponents afraid that people will not take public transport if the stations are located slightly faraway location with better parking facility and bus connectivity? By placing such stations in already crowded locations, the traffic flow to the location will worsen. This will deter the use of public transport because it is not an easy route to take even with busses. This goes back to the problems people face with public transportation as highlighted by our survey findings.

Road Design that Causes Massive Traffic Congestions

Lebuhraya Damansara-Puchong's (LDP) Sunway Toll booth heading to Petaling Jaya is a classic example of hideous traffic design. The cash booth and SmartTag booths are located at two opposite sides separated by 'Touch and Go' booths. This causes traffic flow to cut across to take either way to exit to Sunway or head towards Petaling Jaya. Such cut across patterns delay traffic flow. In Malaysia, highways are basically designed to remove high vehicle flow from one location and dump it in another location. How the traffic flows out from there is secondary

question. How many traffic impact assessments have been done to ensure highways actually function to reduce congestions? How many projects actually deliver the results to reduce traffic congestions?

Creating too many U-turns and "alternative" routes are also another problem that affects traffic flow. Maintenance of roads is also another real problem that causes unwanted congestions. Failure in road designs actually worsens traffic congestion and wastes fuel. Why these problems are not addressed holistically?

One may also say that if you do not want to pay toll, you can take alternative roads. But, when the non-tolled road is converted to tolled highway, there is no alternative. Even if there is an alternative, it is too far to travel and waste fuel as the alternative road is also congested due to many reasons. So, are road users given alternatives?

Minimum Energy Performance Standard (MEPS) and Energy Efficiency Labelling for Vehicles

What about getting more energy efficient vehicles (EEV)? That sounds like a wonderful idea because we can be environmentally friendly and reduce our fuel cost. AWER has raised this issue many times to ensure MEPS (fuel efficiency and emission criteria) is implemented for vehicles (including commercial vehicles) that are sold in Malaysia. Through MEPS, a private or a commercial vehicle owner will be rest assured that they will be buying a vehicle that travels longer distance with lesser fuel consumption.

This situation is similar to the introduction of better fuel type. We are now using EURO2 type fuel but many new vehicle models are designed for EURO4 type fuel. EURO4 reduces impact of green house gas emission in transportation sector substantially. Tuning certain vehicles down to use EURO2 also increases maintenance cost of the vehicle. Implementation of EURO4 type fuel needs to be sped up. This will assist the government to reduce carbon intensity substantially and will also assist to reduce maintenance cost of vehicles. Couple this move using EEV with MEPS, it's a good blend of policy that will assist Malaysians to cope with subsidy reduction for fuel. This is the fastest alternative that can be offered at the moment.

Beware of Electric Vehicle "Zero" Emission or Environmentally Friendly Claims

There are a group of people portraying that electric vehicles has "zero" emission and much more environmentally friendly. This is not a scientifically correct statement. Battery production for electric vehicles has its series of environmental impact. The environmental impacts from battery production coupled with environmental impact from electricity generation sector, the electric vehicles do not qualify as a real solution to reduce green house gas (GHG) emissions. Increase in usage of coal for power generation as well as older power plants that are extended with lower generation efficiency increases GHG emission for electricity. In total, usage of electric vehicle will contribute more GHG emission compared to conventional cars or busses. Some of the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) studies reviewed by AWER also conclude similarly.

Is the government placing the right policy when there is already serious issue in the electricity generation fuel mix? While some may argue that electric vehicles can reduce emission in congested locations, putting electric vehicles on the road does not reduce traffic congestions.

Increasing public transport usage in densely populated areas can out beat "zero" emission claims by electric vehicles anytime. We believe the government needs to prioritise and implement effective measures and not the non proven "zero emission" claims by electric vehicles.

Conclusion

There are five elements that can reduce our energy dependence from transportation sector, namely effective public transportation, road design (traffic design), EURO4 Type Fuel, EEV and MEPS for vehicles. The implementation of EURO4 Type Fuel, EEV and MEPS for vehicles must be sped up as these are short term solutions with immediate results. Public transport should be the midterm solution and a total overhaul of our road design (traffic design) as a long term solution.

Now, why would anyone make a big fuss when government wants to reduce fuel subsidy if alternatives are given to Malaysians? Think about it. Right policies and implementations are just few steps ahead.

Will I be writing this sort of comments again when there is a fuel price hike the next time round? I hope not!

Towards a low carbon lifestyle in an efficient and cost effective way!

Piarapakaran S.

President

Association of Water and Energy Research Malaysia (AWER)

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