

Managing the 'Demographic Drift' to a New Society

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The Gerontological Society's Annual Scientific Conference on Ageing (ASCA2014) was held on 27 March, with the theme of "Successful Ageing in Asia Pacific". Papers were presented on topics ranging from financial independence and ageing in place to comparative perspectives on health and social policies for ageing populations.

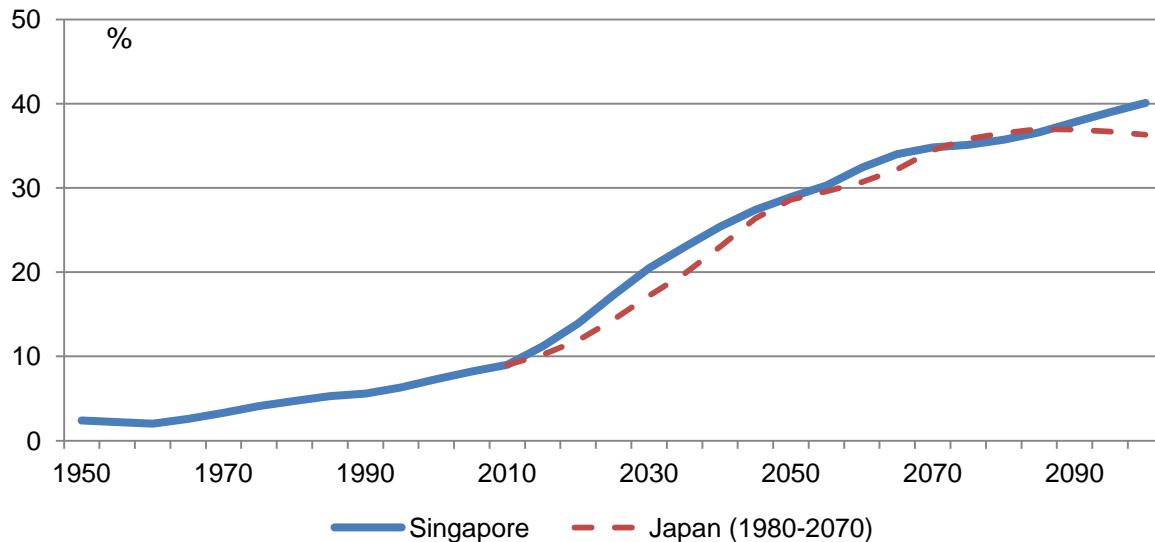
The rapid rise in the number and proportion of older persons in the region as well as the increasing rate of ageing require urgent attention from governments, communities, families and individuals — to prepare for old age and, in the light of extended life expectancy, to adopt positive practices for active ageing. As described by Professor Toshihiko Hasegawa from the National Institute of Science Technology and Education Policy of Japan, many Asian countries (Singapore amongst them) will follow the path of Japan into what he calls a period of "demographic drift", where the majority of the population is aged 50 years and over, and society is in a post-productive and post-reproductive age. This would result in an entirely new society never before seen in human history. What would such a society look like, and what are the major societal practices needed to ensure the sustainability and survival of such a society?

Professor Hasegawa highlighted some positive and negative lessons from Japan in dealing with the rapidly ageing process. For one, he pointed out that the Japanese healthcare delivery system is an outlier with the longest length of stays in hospitals, and with the highest number of beds and hospitals per capita in the world, due to insufficient differentiation between hospital and nursing home functions. In addition, expansion in homecare services has not kept pace with the rate of ageing, resulting in many older patients receiving long-term care in hospitals.

It is worthwhile noting here that Singapore is projected to become a super-aged¹ society by 2030 according to the United Nations Population Division's *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision*. Singapore's pace of ageing is set to outstrip that of Japan, which had moved from a proportion of 9% of population aged 65 and above in 1980 to above 20% in 20 years (see Figure 1). Given this adverse trend, Singapore therefore needs to move quickly to address these issues of broadening access to step-down and homecare.

¹ A super-aged society is one where 20% or more of the population is aged 65 years and above.

Figure 1. Percentage of population aged 65 years and above: Singapore (1950–2100) and Japan (1980–2070)



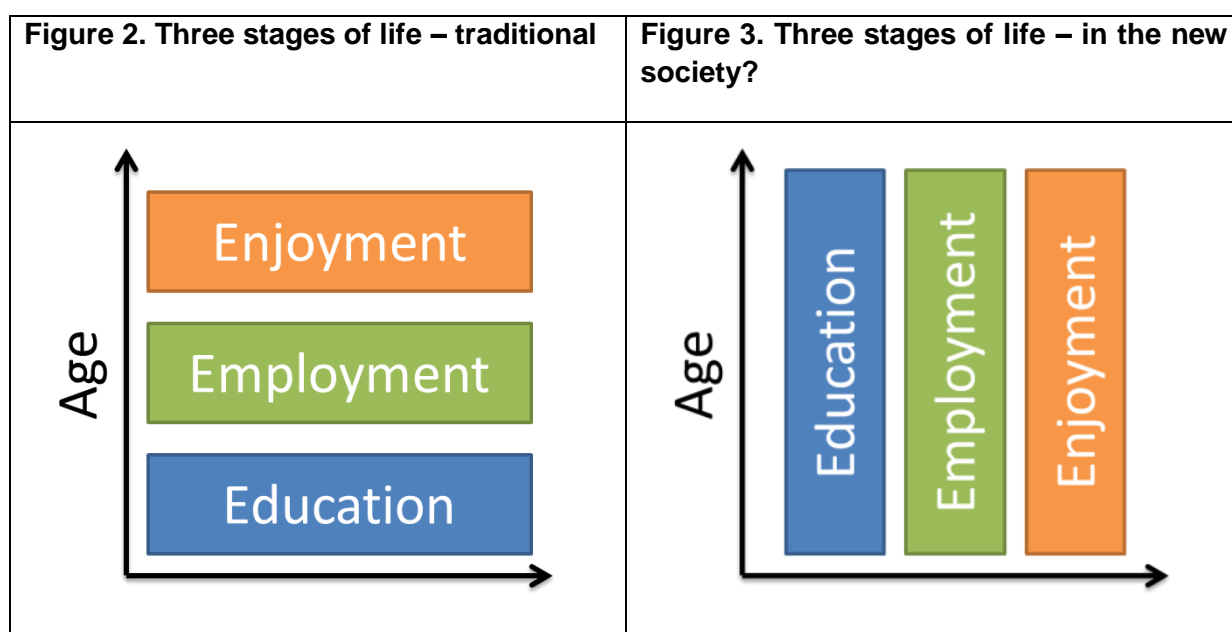
Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision*, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm>

On the positive side, Japan has extensive national health and disability risk-pooling mechanisms, having introduced workers' health insurance in 1927 and extended universal health coverage in 1961 and long-term care (LTC) insurance in 2000. Other presenters at the conference from Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea also highlighted initiatives from their countries on LTC and LTC insurance. While Singapore has a national long-term disability insurance scheme in ElderShield, the coverage remains limited and is not protected against inflation (see our article "[Caring for Singaporeans in the Long Term](#)", *IPS Update*, March 2014).

In Singapore, social policy initiatives to encourage and support people in making healthy lifestyle choices and maintaining active lives as they age were emphasised in a presentation by the Training and Research Academy at Jurong Point (The TaRA@JP) Project on Active Ageing. The project conducted a study of elderly persons in the Jurong area in western Singapore with subsyndromal anxiety and depression. Dr Rathi Mahendran, the principal investigator of the project said that participation in interventional activities such as music appreciation and *tai chi* exercises over a six-month period led to statistically significant responses, with decreases in subsyndromal anxiety and depression scores amongst test participants. These results also support the active-ageing recommendations by other presenters to build age-friendly communities, through improved accessibility in the physical environment as well as the development of reciprocal communities where older persons can

support one another not only within the family but also within the neighbourhood and various service providers.

Several of the presenters also promoted the idea that ageing is not restricted to the elderly, and that an actively ageing population will need to adopt lifelong practices that support healthy ageing at all ages. Indeed, to cope with the transition to a post-productive, post-reproductive society (as described by Professor Hasegawa), current age-specific or age-defined activities during one's life course — from education, employment, to retirement or enjoyment (see Figure 2) — may need to become less confined by age and more flexibly undertaken throughout one's life (see Figure 3).



Source: Presentation by Professor Kathryn Braun, University of Hawaii and President of the Active Ageing Consortium Asia Pacific at ASCA2014, 27 March 2014, referencing Matilda White Riley and John W. Riley Jr, 2000, *The Gerontologist* 40 (3), 266–270.

In practice, this will mean policies to promote lifelong learning and the opening of multiple pathways and entry and exit points in the education system; the removal of age-specific policies such as mandatory retirement ages; and policies to prevent age discrimination (at either ends of the working age spectrum), amongst others.

As Asia Pacific countries (Singapore included) transit into new societal forms, change will have to be made at all levels — individual, community and national. The way we live, work and play needs to evolve to suit the changing demographics. The government can be the catalyst in this change by directing and promoting these positive changes, but ultimately it will have to be a whole-of-society effort in embracing and adapting to these necessary changes.

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