Foreigners needed to boost population
Resident fertility rate at record low: Wong Kan Seng

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(SINGAPORE) Tighter immigration policies more than halved the number of new permanent residents (PRs) last year. But foreigners are still needed to augment the local population as Singapore's fertility rate sinks further, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng said yesterday.

Discussing population policies and inclusive growth at the Singapore Perspectives 2011 conference, he said preliminary estimates show that the resident fertility rate (the average number of babies born to a woman in her lifetime) sank to 1.16 last year, from the previous record low of 1.22 in 2009. This is significantly below the natural replacement rate of 2.1 babies.

Mr Wong said Singapore must 'accept that boosting fertility will take time' and that immigration is still needed to boost the population, support economic growth and mitigate ageing, for the foreseeable future.

Rising unease from Singaporeans over the influx of foreigners in recent years has led to tighter immigration policies. Only 29,265 PR passes were granted last year, a sharp dip from 59,460 in 2009. There has been 'an improvement in the quality of new PRs' too, he said.

As for new citizens, 18,758 were sworn in last year, slightly lower than 19,928 in 2009. Again, calibre matters and Singapore 'still attracts new citizens of good quality', said Mr Wong.

He said he empathises with citizens uncomfortable with the pace of change - some attribute congestion and inflation to there being many foreigners and others are concerned that being more cosmopolitan erodes the Singaporean identity.

Being a 'global city' is not merely an aspiration but a prerequisite for Singapore's survival, he said. But 'our city is also our country and our home', so the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) which he heads will have to formulate and review government-wide policies relating to population.

NPTD will have to balance a global city's need for a sizeable population, a 'critical mass to attract investors and grow domestic markets', against liveability and the space constraints here.

There is also the tension of change, with such cities seeing constant flows of people, technology and ideas. 'We want to retain the vibrancy and dynamism of a city on the move, without eroding the sense of belonging and pride in our shared heritage,' Mr Wong said.
NPTD aims to do this by preserving a strong citizen core and stable ethnic mix, ensuring that growth and change benefit Singaporeans, and being nimble and ready to refine population policies, Mr Wong said.

Some speakers at a panel session following Mr Wong's keynote address think that erosion has already begun. Non-Constituency Member of Parliament and Workers Party chairman Sylvia Lim said that the speed of change has left a 'palpable sense of loss of identity and nationhood' among Singaporeans.

Ms Lim proposed that the government empower citizens by retreating from spheres like sports and consumer associations, to allow more organic leadership.

Singaporeans also need confidence that they will be cared for at home, she said, citing emigrants who say they feel better taken care of as PRs in another country than as citizens in their own. Compared to other global cities, how far can Singapore go as a global hub for creativity and innovation, given its 'illiberal climate', she also asked.

At that same session socio-political commentator Derek da Cunha said he thinks the negative social impact of the integrated resorts 'exceeds the most pessimistic estimates' and entrenches wider social divisions, despite giving Singapore a 'sheen of excitement and vibrancy' and positive economic spillover.

'The global city project as pursued by Singapore has been at a massive cost to the nation-building project,' said Mr da Cunha, who thinks the upcoming general election will indicate where voter sentiment on this issue lies.