

Economic growth versus higher fertility

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IN THE recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Integration Conference, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing was asked if the Government had given up on correcting the ultra-low total fertility rate (TFR) in Singapore.



While it was encouraging to hear that the Government was committed to addressing the problem, Mr Chan did not seem overly optimistic about seeing substantial change. With the introduction of the Baby Bonus scheme and enhanced maternity packages, schemes which cost billions of dollars, policymakers are still waiting for the storks to arrive. However, inclement conditions might have kept them away, resulting in the steady drop in the TFR.

While the impact of policies can sometimes be quickly apparent, fertility policies are not of this order. Technically, it takes only nine months to evaluate the success of fertility policies. But fertility decisions are much more complicated in reality. A range of factors, including state policy, determine intentions to marry and have children. These include the ease of housing, couples wanting to settle down, the availability of quality childcare, perceptions of the social and physical environment and how it affects future children, and the willingness of men to be involved partners in child rearing.

At the recent Civil Service College-IPS Roundtable on the Population Conundrum, NUS sociologist Paulin Straughan called for bold and robust policy changes to correct the TFR. Instead of calling for greater subsidies, her wish list included scrapping both the performance appraisal systems commonly used in many organisations and the exacting Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

While Professor Straughan's suggestions may seem idealistic to some who insist on Singapore's economic competitiveness, her suggestions deal with the heart of the matter - current models of competition are not sustainable if increasing fertility is a priority. As demographer Gavin Jones noted in his paper, 'there is a great irony in the apparent fact that the very pressures to prioritise economic growth and the human capital factors that can contribute to it - long hours of work, involvement of women in the workforce on much the same terms as men, strong pressure on children to perform outstandingly in school, and the extra tuition and coaching that is considered indispensable for reaching this goal - contain the seeds of an inability of the population to replace itself'.

Research from countries attempting to address low fertility rates have found that reducing the incompatibility of parenting roles and work is probably the most crucial if the environment is to be conducive for child rearing. It is obvious that long working hours, fuelled by the fear of performance appraisals, leading to the apprehension associated with leaving work on time, will hamper fertility decisions. A labour market where exiting the workforce temporarily for child rearing is heavily penalised, where

managements incentivise staff who can commit 24/7 to their jobs, and where there is little to encourage flexible work arrangements is antithetical to a family-friendly climate.

All this then calls for a massive relook at how we have been pursuing competitiveness. Managerial techniques to achieve unfettered growth, which overlook the brutal effects it can have on the population's replacement level, should be flagged. Education systems which unnecessarily stress and strain the young to achieve competitive advantage rather than motivating them on a quest for knowledge should be questioned. Our competitive ratings have already dropped slightly, but this should not be remedied by pushing a population to relentless work. As a society, this may mean accepting that achieving high levels of growth may not be tenable. We have to develop new norms of contentment that prioritise the family alongside work.

It is difficult for a state discourse that has helped create anxiety about constant global competition to sing a radically different tune. Enforcing work and family-friendly policies does not sit easily with businesses pursuing the greatest profit margins. However, the Government's stated commitment to address our fundamental problem of population replacement should aid them as they push for change.

Local surveys indicate that the Singaporean population still upholds the ideals of marriage and parenthood. Demographers point out that there is a window of opportunity for population growth if this value remains intact. After a while, as has been observed in some world cities, such values will be lost as a population becomes accustomed to life without children. By then, it will be too late. Nothing less than radical and bold solutions, including the prospect of slaughtering sacred cows as described above, will do now.

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