

Reactions to Parenthood Package; Baby boost: Joining the dots

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Raising the birth rate ultimately falls on all Singaporeans, despite hurdles like time and money.

THE Singapore Government has again enhanced its suite of measures to promote marriage and childbearing among Singaporeans. This is the third enhancement since 2001 of what is known as the Marriage and Parenthood package - or fourth, if one also takes into consideration the package of measures introduced in 1987 when the "Stop at two" policy was changed to "Three or more if you can afford it".

Why does it do so, even in the face of seeming failure to produce results, that is raise the total fertility rate (TFR)? How does the current attempt differ from past ones? Is it likely to work this time and push the TFR towards 1.4 or 1.5 births per woman as mentioned by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who is also in charge of population matters?

I can think of at least three reasons. First, survey after survey show that Singaporeans want to marry and have children. They have not turned against family formation. At the same time, they have also identified obstacles to fulfilling their desire. In this regard, the package of measures is a means of supporting Singaporeans' family goals.

Second, the family remains an important institution for Singaporeans, not just the Government. When asked if they would have children out of wedlock, the answer was a resounding "no". Various studies show Singaporeans value their families.

Third, at current TFR levels, the number of Singaporeans would diminish quickly and the society age quickly, with all its social, economic and political implications. Therefore, at both the personal micro level and the national macro level, it is worthwhile continuing the effort.

But it should not just be the responsibility of the state. Individuals, families, businesses (both as an economic unit and employers) and the wider community should all play a part as they will all be beneficiaries of a successful marriage and parenthood campaign.

How does the current package differ from those of the past? At one level, the current package seems to be mere extensions of past packages. But there are also major shifts in several areas, in response to public feedback. These include legislated, government-funded week-long paternity leave and shared maternity leave; legislated government-paid adoption leave; and a \$3,000 Medisave grant and automatic MediShield coverage for newborns, including those with congenital and neo-natal conditions.

More importantly, however, one should look beyond the package to the other measures. Some, like higher childcare subsidies for lower- and middle-income families, and financial aid for children with major illnesses, are already announced, and others yet to be announced, which the Government said would address Singaporeans' job aspirations and the quality of the living environment. This is perhaps the first time the Government has gone beyond the immediate concerns of having and raising children to holistically address the total context right across the country.

Is a resident TFR of 1.4 or 1.5 achievable? My back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that, to achieve this target, there will have to be a rise in the number of babies born to 42,000 to 45,000, from the current 36,000 or so. These numbers approximate the numbers born over the period of 1997 to 2000, before the economically volatile decade of the 2000s.

It will not be possible to cocoon Singaporeans and protect them from the vagaries of these externally driven events and this could always throw a spanner in the works. We should also give the package and the related policy developments mentioned above some time to work for it needs to be understood, internalised and, hopefully, acted on by the intended audience.

It may also require policymakers to join all the dots and communicate what is essentially a complex set of policies holistically to their intended audience.