

5 Burning Questions

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ACADEMICS posed numerous questions about how many foreigners and new citizens Singapore should take in each year, and what kind of population growth it should aim for. These are the key questions:

How many people should Singapore house in 2050?

In their discussion on what optimal population Singapore should aim for, experts covered the potential impact of a large population on the environment.

Urban planning expert Malone-Lee Lai Choo noted that with limited land, more open spaces would need to be converted for high-density residential use. But some argued that it was possible to squeeze people into high-rise buildings, leaving the other areas intact. Nevertheless, the academics raised concerns over the congestion that would result in MRT trains, in malls and in housing estates.

Statistician Paul Cheung noted that the MRT network was overcrowded because it had not been designed for the current population. So, he argued, Singapore should plan for 8 million in the future. 'Allow for higher, but settle for lower,' he said.

How can we make more babies?

A discussion of Singapore's low Total Fertility Rate (TFR) drew a lively response, with experts tossing up ideas on how it could be raised. Several cited examples of how Scandinavian nations had managed to turn their low birth rates around, and asked: 'Why can't Singapore do the same?'

Some said affordable housing, health care and social security were needed.

Agreeing, economist Tilak Abeysinghe cited a study showing that housing affordability could affect TFR. 'When homes are expensive, couples may delay marrying, buying a home and starting a family,' he explained later.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan blamed Singaporeans' excessive focus on work, which left little time for singles to date, and for couples to consider having children.

The competitive education system, she added, made it more stressful for parents. Her radical solutions: Get rid of PSLE and streaming, and abolish performance bonuses so people wouldn't feel pressured to spend long hours at work.

Will Singaporeans be willing to live with fewer foreign workers?

Experts repeatedly warned about the trade-offs that Singaporeans would face if they wanted to reduce the inflow of foreigners.

As Singapore's population aged, they pointed out, they would rely more on foreign workers to maintain their high quality of life.

'Which foreigner would you want to eliminate?' asked IPS director Janadas Devan. 'The maid who cleans your house and helps look after your children? The nurse who looks after your aged parents in a hospital or nursing home? The construction workers building the flats, train lines and hospitals you want built?'

But some, like the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Kishore Mahbubani, noted that many developed countries managed to sustain high female work participation rates - and high fertility too. They suggested that eldercare services be improved to support households better.

How much growth do we really need?

Should Singapore strive for high economic growth to compete with Asian giants like India and China? Or should it carve out its own niche and compete to be 'liveable' as a city, rather than try to be a bigger economy?

Such questions were raised during the exchange on economic growth goals.

Some suggested that higher population growth was needed to support higher economic growth. But others suggested that Singapore, being a developed country, should accept a lower long-term economic growth rate.

'It makes more sense to grow at 3 per cent rather than 6 per cent, than try to be something we're not,' said economist Yeoh Lam Keong. 'We are refusing to grow up as a developed city. The sooner we grow up, the better.'

Some suggested that the authorities be more selective about the type of people they let in. Taking in more skilled workers and less unskilled ones, they noted, would enable Singapore to maintain productive growth - and hence economic growth - with smaller numbers of foreign workers.

Can Singaporeans accept foreigners into their communities?

During a discussion of the social aspects of a rising immigrant population, some observed that Singaporeans had become less accepting of outsiders in recent years.

Labour economist Hui Weng Tat said the tension between locals and foreigners has risen because the influx of new citizens and foreign workers was seen as having depressed local wages. Others pointed to competition for space in housing estates and MRT trains.

'The change comes from the fact that suddenly, the competition became too intense. The Government was too slow in dealing with this,' said statistician Paul Cheung.

Experts noted, however, that integration can take a long time.

Sociologist Lai Ah Eng said she remained hopeful that better integration will happen among the young. 'The second generation and subsequent generations, that's when socialisation will happen,' she said.