

## Why can't Singaporeans have more babies?

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*Participants at seminar on population projections question basic assumptions*

A SEMINAR held to discuss population projections yesterday ended up with academics posing questions which they said Singapore must answer before deciding on population and immigration policies.

Among other things, they asked: Why can't Singaporeans have more babies? What quality of life do they want in the future? And, what trade-offs are they willing to accept if they want fewer foreigners?

The questions came after the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) released projections of how Singapore's populace might look like between now and 2050.

It found that even if the share of foreigners went up from the current one-quarter to a third of total population, the nation's proportion of working-age citizens would eventually shrink, and its elderly population grow.

The think-tank's study came a week after the Government's National Population and Talent Division released its own projections on the number of new citizens needed to halt population decline.

Bringing in foreigners to supplement the local workforce will push population figures up. Architect Liu Thai Ker, one of the speakers at the seminar, urged Singapore to take a pragmatic approach.

'Population growth is like a flood, you can't stop it,' he observed. 'Rather than talk about stopping the growth, we should talk about how to deal with it.'

The issue of how many foreign workers and new citizens to take in is a politically sensitive one that has dominated public debate in past months. Many Singaporeans are unhappy with the Government over what they see as a liberal immigration policy, saying that migrants do not fit in well, compete for their jobs and drive wages down.

Their concerns were echoed by many of the 40-plus academics gathered at the seminar at Orchard Hotel yesterday, as they looked at the implications of a growing population for the economy, the environment and social integration.

But while much of the debate has centred on immigration policies, the academics went back to the basics and questioned some of the basic assumptions - such as, why Singapore appeared to have given up trying to raise its Total Fertility Rate.

This is the average number of children a woman gives birth to in her lifetime. Singapore's has dropped to 1.2, well below the 2.1 it needs to keep its population from shrinking.

Academics blamed this on changing lifestyles and inadequate childcare facilities, and called on the Government to do more to help couples raise families.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan said the problem lay even deeper: stress at work, big focus on careers and high expectations of marriage were delaying young people from tying the knot and having children.

'Even before you can encourage baby-making, you have to encourage courtship and marriage,' she said.

What made yesterday's discussion especially lively was the varied backgrounds of the participants.

Representing several disciplines, they included familiar names such as IPS special adviser Tommy Koh, IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh, architect Liu Thai Ker, statistician Paul Cheung and economists from both universities and the private sector.

On the whole, most appeared to favour slower population growth and a smaller intake of foreigners, although they acknowledged that foreign workers would always be needed.

Economist Yeoh Lam Keong asked if Singapore really needed to keep growing its labour force at a high rate, and suggested that Singapore accept a lower economic growth rate in the long term, like other developed countries.

Others suggested that raising productivity more aggressively and bringing in only skilled workers could sustain economic growth without requiring a large army of foreign workers. Some noted that a smaller population would ensure a better quality of life, as congestion in housing estates and on public transport would be less.

Others warned about the impact of a growing population on social tensions between locals and foreigners, and discussed ideas about how to get new citizens to integrate into Singapore society.

Psychology professor David Chan posed a more philosophical question, saying Singapore had to decide what kind of society it wanted before trying to arrive at hard numbers.

'This is about consequences and outcomes, not about optimal population figures,' he said. 'We have to define the outcomes we want... what people think about Singapore as a country.'