

Singapore's fertility rate drops to record low

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DPM Wong Kan Seng outlined Singapore's strategy for managing population growth on Monday (AFP file photo).

Singapore's Total Fertility Rate has plunged to a record low of 1.16, down from 1.22 — already a record low — the previous year, said Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Wong Kan Seng on Monday, citing preliminary estimates.

He also revealed, a total of 29,265 foreigners were granted permanent residency last year, compared to 59,460 given in 2009.

Speaking at the keynote address of Singapore Perspectives 2011, DPM Wong — who also heads the newly formed National Population and Talent Division — announced the latest figures as he mapped out Singapore's long-term strategy for managing sustainable population growth.

The annual conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, sought to assess the challenges and solutions facing Singapore today, as it seeks to be an inclusive society.

The main thrust of his speech? How can Singapore grow as a global city and yet remain a “distinctive and endearing home” to its citizens.

To do so, he acknowledged tensions arising from the Republic's growing size and from rapid, constant change will have to be resolved, adding that “not all Singaporeans are comfortable with the pace of change and developments.”

He said, the government was aware some Singaporeans feel the pace of life has picked up too fast and that problems like congestion and increased prices are the result of having too

many foreigners, while other Singaporeans are more worried about the potential erosion of the Singaporean identity.

However, he contrasted those problems by laying out the bare facts: that Singaporeans are simply not having enough babies.

“The key hurdle to achieving a sustainable population lies in our weak local fertility rate. For more than thirty years, we have not been having enough babies to replace ourselves. Preliminary estimates indicate that our resident total fertility rate has fallen to 1.16 in 2010, even lower than the 1.22 recorded in 2009. The going is hard, but we have not given up.”

Adding to the complexity of the problem is Singapore’s multi-racial, multi-cultural population.

DPM said, most global cities such as New York, Hong Kong and Tokyo have “sizeable populations” to attract investors and grow domestic markets.

“Singapore, however, is a compact city state and any growth in population size must be balanced against the need to maintain a liveable environment and a harmonious ambience.” Global cities are also “centres of change” that remake themselves from time to time and implement bold initiatives. But too much change, and “we risk losing the essence of home,” acknowledged DPM Wong.

“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,” he said.

To tackle these challenges, the NPTD and other government agencies will be guided by three key principles, said DPM Wong.

First, the government will “preserve and uphold what is distinctive and unique about Singapore.”

To DPM Wong, this boils down to two aspects: Singapore’s national character, which ranges from being hardworking and thrifty to having a “humour that is folksy and unpretentious”, and Singapore’s multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society.

“In managing our population, we will always be guided by the need to preserve a strong citizen core and to maintain stability in our ethnic mix,” he said.

Second, the government will “ensure that growth and change benefit Singaporeans.” This includes ensuring sufficient manpower by taking in foreigners for economic growth, and mitigating the impact of ageing.

DPM Wong cited how job opportunities, choices and options will grow as Singapore’s economy grows. For instance, up to 10 years ago, the local food and beverage scene was “significantly less vibrant” without the likes of Dempsey Hill.

Third, the government will “remain nimble and be prepared to make adjustments along the way.”

For instance, the immigration framework was tightened to better manage the inflow and quality of new immigrants in the last quarter of 2009. This resulted in half the number of new PRs in 2010, compared to the year before. New citizens have remained fairly steady at 18,758 in 2010, from 19,928 in 2009.

“Whatever we do, we will ensure that Singaporeans will benefit from growth and change. The benefits will be concrete,” assured DPM Wong.

He said, “We will not leave behind those who need more help. The surpluses we have set aside in good times can be tapped on to look after the needs of the old and poor. We will continue to enjoy quality education, healthcare, transport and other social infrastructure.”