

S'pore must up fertility rate now, or else

Solutions the experts proposed revolve around making housing affordable and having a more unvarying education system. -myp

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Singapore must increase its total fertility rate between now and 2015, or the country's labour force will shrink to the point that it becomes very difficult to support the growing ageing population here, population experts warned yesterday.

Speaking at a roundtable discussion on demographic challenges, organised by the Civil Service College and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), they added that a low fertility rate could also make sustaining strong economic growth a problem.

The day-long event was held at Orchard Hotel.

Mr Yeoh Lam Keong, an IPS adjunct senior research fellow, said that it would take 15 to 20 years before the next generation can make an impact on Singapore's economy.

While Singapore cannot afford to stop attracting migrants, it should place priority on developing concrete ways to tackle the dwindling birth rate, many experts said.

This, Mr Yeoh said, boils down to making Singapore a liveable city with social compactness, and not just a world-class city that attracts talent.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said: "On population issues, we need to go beyond the rational dimensions.

"People do not have babies for rational reasons (alone), but emotional ones (as well). So what is this big emotional deficit in Singapore that leads to fewer babies? These are much, much harder to discover."

Solutions the experts proposed revolve around ensuring adequate social security for citizens, making housing affordable and having a more egalitarian education system.

Dr Toh Mun Heng, an associate professor with the Department of Strategy and Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School, said that policymakers need to be more mindful of issues involving internal competitiveness within Singapore.

Mr Yeoh stressed the need for better social protection and stronger social-safety nets to ensure that the well-being of the average Singapore citizen is taken care of.

"Singapore, in 30 to 50 years' time, is not going to be competing on cost...the whole centre of gravity of global economic growth is in our neighbourhood," said Mr Yeoh, referring to rapidly growing economies like India and China.

"Our challenge is to find our niche based on what we have. That comparative - not competitive - advantage is going to be based on the talent we can draw here on the basis of our liveability." Another topic discussed was Singapore's need to invest in forging a more definite national identity as the country takes in more migrants.

Prof Mahbubani noted that Singaporeans do not have a common set of answers when asked by foreigners about their identity as citizens. He said: "And then the foreigners will say to you, that if you can't agree on what your Singapore identity is, what is it you are asking of me?"

An IPS study released yesterday showed that Singapore's annual average labour-force growth rate of about 3.6 per cent over the last decade will plummet, even with more foreigners flocking to the country.

It highlighted an increasing burden on the young as the country's total population size declines. This is because they would have to fork out more taxes to support the elderly.

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