

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT OUTLINES PLANS TO TACKLE POPULATION PROBLEM

S Ramesh, CNA, 23 Aug 2006

Singapore: Singapore is embarking on a 3-pronged approach to tackle its declining birth rate.

This by encouraging marriage and parenthood, engaging and bonding with overseas Singaporeans through the Overseas Singaporean Unit (under the Prime Minister's Office) and attracting foreigners to become Permanent Residents (PRs) or Singapore citizens.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, who oversees population issues, says the problem is real and imminent.

He says based on a target of 2.1 babies per woman to replace and maintain Singapore's current population size, the country will need 60,000 babies a year.

And the move to attract more immigrants into Singapore to help make up the shortfall is not a decision made overnight.

Singapore had been under-replacing its population for the last 30 years although there were some positive results since the baby bonus package was introduced two years ago.

"Even with all these measures, it is not going to deal with our problem of (declining) birth rates. So the next important strategy is migration - in other words, attract more foreigners to come here. Not just any foreigner but foreigners who can make a contribution to our economy," says DPM and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kang Seng. He is also chairman of the National Population Committee.

"And hopefully they will become a Permanent Resident and with a positive experience they have in interacting with their neighbours and with their work experience, as in the way their careers are growing, we hope they will also become citizens," adds Mr Wong.

So the government will enhance its outreach efforts to potential PRs and Singapore citizens.

It will tailor programmes to cater to specific needs and provide them help to settle down.

Mr Wong believes this would go some way towards helping them better understand life in Singapore.

"Unless Singaporeans feel that these foreigners are here to make a contribution to Singapore's economy, and in the process benefit them (Singaporeans), and if the foreigner has a positive experience in Singapore, then they would have no reason to be here. It is precisely that we have Singaporeans' interest at heart, that's why we are taking this subject so seriously," says Mr Wong.

He adds: "It is not something that we decide just overnight, that we want to have more foreigners. No. We have been thinking hard on this for many years and we now have to tell our people that this is a population problem, and is a serious one for us.

"If we don't solve it together, we will never solve it and the problem will get worse. All these policies and changes are made with the interests of Singaporeans in mind.

"We have made it a lot easier to understand the process of how to become a PR or a citizen. If they go the website today, they can do a scoring to see whether they meet the minimum that we have set in order to become a PR. We will also do the same thing for them, i.e a self assessment, to see if they qualify to become a citizen.

"Over the next year or so, there will be other efforts as well. We will go out and talk to PRs today to help them to convert to citizens. And for that, we need not just government officials.

"Getting foreigners to come here, making them PRs and eventually citizens, is not a zero sum game for Singaporeans. Because if we don't have enough of our own Singaporeans to do the jobs that companies want or even to bring in new investments, then such jobs will not be available anyway.

"It is because we are willing to employ foreigners, that's why companies come here or remain here, and Singaporeans will get the jobs. If companies decide to move because they can't find a Singaporean, then a particular group of Singaporeans will be unemployed.

"Or when you have new investments coming in and they can't find Singaporeans to do the job, they'll go to another country and Singaporeans will lose the job.

"It's not a zero sum game for Singaporeans if foreigners come to work here. That's at the national level. For the individual who has lost his job, those who are retrenched or unemployed, we'll find ways to help them get a new job. But as a nation, we have to deal with a problem that we are going to face in the years to come."

Mr Wong says the new citizens came predominantly from Southeast Asia, South and East Asia.

But he adds that while the number of new citizens has increased significantly in the past one and a half years, this does not mean that the uptrend can be sustained without efforts on the government's part.

So the authorities must continuously explore ways to make Singapore an attractive choice for those seeking to transfer their skills and knowledge, and to eventually to relocate their home.

The government is also streamlining some of its immigration processes.

To retain suitable foreigners, the Manpower Ministry intends to introduce a new personalised employment pass which is tied to the person rather than the employer.

This would provide greater flexibility for foreigners to stay and work in Singapore.

Also, the Home Affairs Ministry will review its criteria to allow foreign graduates and adults to stay longer in order to look for a job.

The government says its message to its citizens is a simple one - diversity does not have to be divisive, it can also be a strength.

It adds that the new immigrants who decide to sink their roots in Singapore are here to help the country grow a bigger economic pie and make for a more vibrant and livelier Singapore society.

DPM Wong says: "If we do not make any further efforts to grow our population, we would reach a point where it would have serious consequences on Singapore. We would age rapidly and eventually, be like some developed countries such as Japan where population growth would stagnate and subsequently shrink.

"We must not let this happen. My simple message to Singaporeans is this - build families and have more babies, stay connected wherever you are and welcome those who wish to make Singapore their home as you would do to your friends and relatives."

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