

Speech by Minister Grace Fu, at the launch of NUS Centre for Family and Population Research (CFPR)

New Centre to further understanding and discourse on Singapore's demographic challenges

Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, National University of Singapore

Professor Brenda Yeoh
Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Professor Jean Yeung
Director, Centre for Family and Population Research
Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

A good morning to all of you. It is my pleasure to be here at the official opening of the Centre for Family and Population Research at NUS ("the Centre").

The set-up of such a centre this year is significant – in a year when NUS celebrates its 110th anniversary, and Singapore, its 50th birthday. This is an important juncture for us as a nation - to reflect on and learn from our past, while looking and planning ahead for our next 50 years.

Population and demography underpin our history, and the journey we took as a country that defied the odds. And they will continue to drive important trends and strategies, as we look ahead to the next 50 years.

Rapid Demographic Changes in 50 years

Singapore's demography has changed quickly. At our independence in 1965, life expectancy at birth was 64.5 years. Today it is 82.5 years,¹ one of the highest in the world. Over the same period, infant mortality plunged from 26 per 1000 to just 1.8 per 1000. The average household size has fallen from about 5 persons per household in 1980 to about 3 persons today. The median age at first marriage has increased – from 26.7 years in 1980 to 30.2 years today for grooms, and from 23.6 years to 28.1 years for brides.² The total fertility rate (TFR) has fallen from 4.66 in 1965 to 1.25 last year. We are not short of demographic statistics that have shown dramatic shifts. It is a reflection of the significant changes in our society over the last 5 decades.

Priorities

The Government has been keeping an eye on the demographic trends and is planning for the long term. A key priority for NPTD is to reverse the trend of declining birth rates. Our TFR fell to a low of 1.15 in 2010, but improved to 1.25 last year. We have been strengthening support for young couples in many ways - from helping them with housing, to facilitating their marriage and parenthood journeys. We strive to keep our policies relevant in the context of shifting social norms and family needs. For instance, we are interested in people's attitudes towards marriage and parenthood and how they have shifted over time. Many are deciding to get married later, after they have achieved financial security and career stability. A fast paced work environment and demanding careers cause young married couples to further delay the decision to have children. These are sensible decisions at a personal level. But collectively, they have major impact on our population growth and economic sustainability in the long run. Supporting parenthood aspirations is a national priority.

Family support, child care options and flexible work arrangements become critical in the decision to have children. Women also expect their spouses to take up a greater share of child-care and housework. Research into these shifting social attitudes and needs, as well as the policies that could address these changes, are of significant practical value. The findings will inform policy-making to support citizens in their marriage and parenthood journeys, in the most relevant and impactful way.

Another key priority for the Government is our ageing population. Singapore is ageing faster than many other countries. France, for instance, took over 100 years to transit from an ageing to an aged society. Sweden took 85 years. Japan, which is known for its rapidly greying population, took 26 years. Singapore's population will age faster than Japan's, taking just 18 years to make the same transition from an ageing to aged society.³ This means our society will have less time than others in preparing our people, our infrastructure, healthcare manpower, financing, and so on, for an ageing population.

Research into ageing issues is thus crucial in making a successful transition. Studies in active ageing, the social and emotional wellbeing of the elderly, and intergenerational support between the young and old would be particularly relevant.

Relevant research for an Asian context

These demographic shifts are not unique to Singapore. Many other developed Asian societies face the same challenges of low fertility, ageing population, and shifting family profiles. In this regard, the Centre for Family and Population Research can serve as a hub for exchanges between researchers from across Asia. A wide exchange of knowledge will improve our understanding and better inform us of population dynamics in the Asian context.

For instance, Asian societies that are influenced by Confucian values have commonalities such as strong family values, structured hierarchies in the work place and at home, and an emphasis on academic achievement. A recent survey found that over 80% of professionals in Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan work longer hours than contractually required.⁴ HR consultants have noted that in Asia, it is taboo to mention the words "work-life balance" at a job interview.⁵ In places like Japan and Korea, the corporate culture for long hours and late night bonding sessions with colleagues make it a challenge for women with young children to remain in the workforce. And in many of these societies, the burden of housework and child care falls disproportionately or sometimes even solely on women.

These cultural norms continue to influence perceptions towards flexible working arrangements, gender diversity in the workplace, and shared parental responsibility. However, norms are changing and an Asian-oriented study into the changes will give useful inputs on policy solutions in an Asian context.

Migration is another area where an Asian perspective is important. Economically vibrant cities attract talent. Japan is cautiously moving away from its longstanding policy against immigration, and is very carefully opening its doors toward foreign workers.⁶ People migrate for non-economic reasons as well. In Singapore, unions between citizens and non-citizens comprise almost 40% of all marriages involving Singaporeans.⁷

Migration meets important economic and social needs. We need to remain open to migration and continue to retain a high quality of life, strong cultural heritage and a sense of identity.

Collaborative, crosscountry research can deepen our shared understanding of the interrelations between migration, societal resilience and cohesion, as well as the benefits of human capital flows.

Holistic insights from a multi-disciplinary approach

I am glad to observe that the team at the Centre is an interdisciplinary one, comprising experienced researchers from varied fields such as sociology, economics, psychology and geography.

As demographic issues are complex and multi-faceted, no single discipline can provide all the solutions. Take ageing for instance. With better health care, life expectancy is increasing. Employers can benefit from the experience and skills of mature workers. How should the work place adapt to their physical needs? How should the pay structure adjust to the needs of both employees and employers? We need to understand economics and wage models. For the elderly to remain mobile and socially active, our built environment must be adapted to support these goals. We need to understand urban planning and social studies on communities. What about the need for retirement financing, physical care and mental well-being? Studies on family structures, intergenerational support and health care systems are needed. Therefore, to holistically understand and properly plan for an ageing population, it is important to have a wide range of crossdisciplinary expertise.

We can also benefit from deeper knowledge on the use of statistical research methodology in the study of population. Quantitative analysis can help us identify numerical trends and model family dynamics in population projections. Longitudinal studies can allow us to better understand complex, causal relationships between factors, such as how family dynamics and attitudes change over an extended period of time. The Centre will help build capability over time, thereby strengthening the rigor of our studies and yielding better policy results.

Maximising impact through collaboration with multiple stakeholders

The Centre and its researchers can also contribute to the public discourse on population and demographic matters. Evidence based research provides the most objective basis for this purpose.

For greater impact, researchers should promote the understanding of these subjects by engaging stakeholders and communicating research findings widely. I would like to encourage conversations between researchers, policy-makers and the public, to understand policy challenges, conduct relevant research, and distil key implications that make an impact on people's lives. Complex issues have to be explained simply, in a manner that is understandable and relatable. This will facilitate informed decision-making and help shape positive outcomes for our society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, population and family are pressing issues for Singapore and for many other countries in the region. Researchers can make an impact by examining demographic issues which are particularly relevant for our Asian context, by undertaking multidisciplinary research to find holistic solutions, and by adopting collaborative approaches with policy makers and the public, to translate academic insights into tangible outcomes for society.

Let me end by looking ahead to Singapore's future. At a fertility rate of 1.2 and without any immigration, our citizen population will start to shrink from around 2025 (SG60). By 2060, the citizen population could fall to around the same size as in the early 1990s. But its composition will be very different from the past. More than one-third of citizens will be aged 65 and above. There would be fewer than 1.5 working age citizens to each senior citizen, compared to a ratio of around 10-to-1 in 1990. Things will look very much better if we raise our birth rates, remain open to

immigration at a calibrated pace, and enable seniors to make continued contributions to our society. With our uniquely Singaporean resolve and whole-of-society effort, we can accomplish this. We have seen remarkable demographic shifts in the last 50 years, and I believe that we can make similar changes to meet the challenges of the next 50.

As we witness today the opening of the Centre for Family and Population Research, I believe the Centre's work will help us navigate towards a better future, and make a positive impact on future generations. I look forward to your fruitful and insightful contributions in the years ahead.

Thank you very much and congratulations.

¹ Figure as at 2013 (latest available).

² Figures are for 1980 and 2013 (latest available) respectively.

³ US Census Bureau (2009) International Population Reports, P95/09-1, *An Aging World: 2008*. The definitions of an ageing and aged society are where 7% and 14%, respectively, of the population is aged 65 and above.

⁴ MorganMckinley, (2014), *Long working hours leads to a poor work-life balance for Singapore's professionals*, retrieved <http://www.morganmckinley.com.sg/article/press-release-long-working-hours-leads-poor-work-lifebalance-singapore%E2%80%99s-professionals>

⁵ Efinancialcareers (2014), *Finance professionals in Asia fear "slacker" tag if they ask about work-life balance at interviews*, retrieved from <http://news.efinancialcareers.com/sg-en/183254/finance-professionals-asia-fearslacker-tag-ask-work-life-balance-interviews/>

⁶ *The Economist* (31 May 2014), retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21603076-first-timeproper-debate-starting-about-immigration-incredible-shrinking-country>

⁷ Figures as at 2013. Source: *Population in Brief*, 2014