

As Singapore's demographics change, so too must mindsets

The Republic's population trajectory calls for a relook at our ideas about what it means to be a vibrant society, to be Singaporean, and to have a good job.

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Singapore's Population In Brief report, released last month, revealed a record 4.1 per cent fall in total population. Foreigners accounted for much of this fall, as the Covid-19 pandemic exerted a toll on foreign employment.

The resident population also dipped for the first time. Travel curbs kept residents away from Singapore, while fewer citizenships and permanent residencies were granted.

The data also underscored longer-term trends that preceded the pandemic, namely declining fertility and a rapidly ageing population. These have been in the making for decades. But despite all that has been said about Singapore's demographic transition, its implications may not have fully sunk in.

Singapore's population trajectory necessitates a re-evaluation of deeply ingrained mindsets – in particular, what it means to be Singaporean, and what it means to have a good job.

A VIBRANT, AGED SOCIETY

Mention a "vibrant society", and my mind conjures up images of young people engaged in sports and cultural activities, rather than of seniors who are in fact omnipresent in our workplaces and neighbourhoods. Such perceptions, especially if widely held, need revision.

Singapore may be a relatively young nation, but it no longer has a relatively youthful population. Gone are the days when reports extolling the efficiency of the Republic's healthcare spending were obliged to highlight the country's demographic advantage. Singapore's median citizen age of 42.5 is now above those of France, Australia, China and the US.

Singapore aspires towards economic and social vibrancy, but this can no longer be defined in terms of youthfulness: we must become a vibrant, aged society.

Over the past decade, the proportion of citizens aged 65 and above has jumped from 10.4 per cent in 2011 to 17.6 per cent this year, and is expected to climb to nearly one in four (23.8 per cent) by 2030.

The number of senior citizens is projected to increase from slightly over 600,000 in 2021 to around 900,000 in 2030. This makes Singapore among the fastest ageing nations in the world, behind only South Korea.

The seniors of today, however, are on average better educated and in better health than their counterparts of yesteryear. They are also more likely to be actively engaged in ways that are meaningful to them, whether at the workplace, at home or in the community. "Productive longevity" is key to sustained economic and societal vibrancy even as the population greys.

Seniors who wish to continue working should be given fair opportunities to do so. Various efforts, on top of re-employment legislation, are needed: redesigning jobs to make them senior friendly, making available options for part-time and flexible work, and combating age discrimination in the job market.

Retirees could stay active by volunteering, pursuing hobbies or spending time with friends and family.

Infrastructure and skills are key in enabling seniors' participation in society: age-friendly buildings and public transport are critical for physical accessibility, while digital literacy is necessary for online accessibility. Lifestyle products and services catering to the silver market are significant enablers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has put a damper on social activities, especially among older people who are at greater risk of serious illness. Once the disease is under control, however, one must hope that our seniors will be fully plugged into the community, where their participation, informed by abundant life experiences, can enrich communal life.

The passion, drive and innovation of the burgeoning silver generation can make the difference between a society brimming with verve and vitality, and one that drifts into a comfortable but listless existence.

To unleash this potential, the mental compartments separating an aged society from a vibrant one must give way, so that we can collectively reimagine Singapore as a vibrant, aged society.

A DIVERSE CITIZENRY

It is often said that one can quite easily identify a Singaporean overseas – appearance and accent are among the telltale signs. This will not be as easy going forward. Naturalised citizens will form a growing share of the Singaporean population; absent the Singlish inflections in their speech, they may take a reference to local names or places to give away their identity.

The reality is that there will be an ever-shrinking share of local-born citizens in Singapore. Efforts to attract overseas Singaporeans back to Singapore can mitigate this, but only to an extent.

Even if the rate of immigration is held steady, and foreign worker inflows are carefully calibrated, the share of naturalised citizens,

permanent residents and work pass holders in the total population will continue to rise.

Singaporeans must adapt to living and working among people who do not appear local, even if they hold pink identity cards. The alternative is for Singapore's population to be in continual decline, which would diminish Singapore's economic dynamism and opportunities, and would be far outside the currently envisaged population trajectory.

With an increasingly diverse Singapore tribe, the Singaporean identity can no longer be narrowly defined by the common experience of growing up here.

Instead, it must be based on a shared commitment to make this island-nation a home and contribute to its success. National identity and heritage will remain the threads that stitch together the social fabric, but this fabric will acquire new blends as immigrant cultures are gradually woven in.

Culture is never static in any global city; it is continually reshaped by successive waves of immigration. Singapore, unlike states with a near-monolithic culture, is already a potpourri of ethnicities and cultures.

Since 1965, the national policy has been to affirm rather than efface the country's constituent ethnic identities. This ought to make it easier to assimilate newcomers, to add new condiments to the proverbial melting pot. At a measured pace, this will adjust and enhance without overwhelming the base.

The gradual integration and assimilation of new citizens is therefore a priority. Among the children of naturalised citizens,

many will grow up here, make local customs their own and contribute in their own way to the collective experience of being Singaporean.

A BROADER RANGE OF 'GOOD JOBS'

A good job in the traditional Asian, or Singaporean, paradigm, is invariably a white-collar one – usually in one of the established professions, a multinational corporation or the public service. Too few aspire to be in technical or domestic services roles – even as nurses, plumbers or technicians, much less as cleaners, security officers or construction workers.

This poses a supply-demand conundrum. More locals are needed in essential roles that are not easily automated, so as to reduce our reliance on foreign manpower. This is for reasons of land and population constraints, national resilience, as well as to facilitate wage growth in these occupations.

Conversely, there may be too many Singaporeans hankering after a limited supply of white-collar jobs. With many more pursuing tertiary education today compared with a generation ago, the risk of underemployment is significant.

The solution must be to encourage more Singaporeans to take up jobs in the essential domestic sector. This may take more than just raising pay – work conditions and job image have to be upgraded in tandem. Firms will need to redesign jobs to make them more attractive to Singaporeans, while increasing the jobs' skills content and scope.

For instance, a security officer's

work can be made easier and more productive through the use of technology, while traditional retail jobs may be expanded to include online marketing responsibilities.

As Monetary Authority of Singapore managing director Ravi Menon recently suggested, every job ought to be professionalised, a convenient label for higher-skilled occupations, managers and executives" (PMEs), eventually produce a new equilibrium. It may take a coordinated effort across industry, Government, unions and educators, to change the perception of what constitutes a quality job in Singapore.

There is urgency in this effort. The risk is that the demand-supply mismatch may grow in the near term, even if market forces eventually produce a new equilibrium. It may take a coordinated effort across industry, Government, unions and educators, to change the perception of what constitutes a quality job in Singapore.

Singapore's demographic trajectory is well-known, and its implications have been evident for some time now. Still, prevailing mental models about society, citizenship and jobs are hard to shake off. The more prepared citizens are to make the mental transition, the more easily Singapore as a nation can navigate the demographic transition.

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