

Tackling population challenges? Be bolder, says Ho Kwon Ping

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Population change should be treated as seriously as other global challenges – such as climate change – and academics must be bolder in drawing connections and presenting solutions, businessman Ho Kwon Ping said on Thursday.

“If increasing our total fertility rate (TFR) is an existential imperative and on the same scale of strategic importance as national defence, then there needs to be a mental paradigm shift by not only the Government, but by industry, by households, to do something much more drastic,” he said.

The SR Nathan Fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings and Laguna Resorts was speaking at a conference on population matters at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Singapore’s recent doubling of paternity leave to four weeks may be too insignificant to make any real difference in a couple’s decision to have children, he said.

He noted that the Nordic countries’ fertility rate went up only when they increased paternity leave – up to 18 months – that could not be swapped with maternity leave.

“It is, in fact, the overwhelming imbalance of infant rearing in the initial years in families that makes

probably a lot of mothers not actually wanting to bear children... Having men being forced in a way by societal pressure... did actually move the needle,” he said.

Mr Ho was one of the keynote speakers at the two-day conference by the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences’ Centre for Family and Population Research and Population Association of Singapore.

In an opening speech, Ms Indraneel Rajah, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), said that Singapore’s TFR reached a new historic low of 1.04 in 2022, lower than the previous preliminary estimate of 1.05.

Resident workforce growth has also been slowing down. Around 18 per cent of Singapore citizens are aged 65 and above, compared with 13 per cent of Singa-

pore’s overall population, which includes PRs and foreigners.

Mr Ho suggested that Singapore’s large transient community of foreign workers could be a future source of permanent residency or even citizenship through a selective pathway for high performers who have been here for many years.

“They may well lack wealth and education, but they certainly embrace the core values that are common to all tenacious immigrants in history,” he said. “Their children could well be even more loyal and successful Singaporeans than the children of super privileged foreigners who then get Singapore citizenship.”

An interdisciplinary approach

instead of working in silos is needed to address demographic change set against complex global challenges, said Mr Ho.

Ms Indraneel, who oversees the National Population and Talent Division in the Strategy Group in the PMO, said two specific strategies of the Government are aimed at addressing the low fertility rate and ageing population.

Marriage and parenthood aspirations remain strong among Singaporeans, she said, with about 24,800 citizen marriages in 2022, up from 23,400 in 2021.

The Government is reviewing ways to extend more help to those caring for infants, and will continue to create more pre-school places, she said.

Employers need to invest time and effort to redesign jobs and processes to fully reap the benefits of flexible work arrangements, she said, and focus more on outcomes rather than the amount of time spent at work.

Ageing should be thought of in terms of longevity and the benefits it can bring, rather than the health-care and caregiving costs arising from the growing number of seniors, said Ms Indraneel.

“There is much more that we can and must do, as a society, to be longevity-ready, and to make the most of the additional years of life that have been given to us,” she said.

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POTENTIAL CITIZENSHIP SOURCE

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BUSINESSMAN HO KWON PING (above), suggesting that Singapore’s large transient community of foreign workers could be a future source of permanent residency or even citizenship.



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