

Fertility rate hasn't stabilised, citizen core will shrink without action: DPM

Declining citizen population will affect S'pore's ability to stay competitive, says DPM Gan

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Many think that Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) has stabilised after it held steady in 2024, but it has not, and if nothing is done, the country's core of citizens will begin to shrink, said Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong.

A declining citizen population will result in Singapore losing dynamism and affect its ability to remain competitive, he said.

The 2024 TFR was boosted by the Year of the Dragon, and the Government is still working on the latest data for 2025, said DPM Gan at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) annual Singapore Perspectives conference.

"But I must say, I'm not likely to give good news on the TFR front," DPM Gan said in a dialogue with IPS director Janadas Devan closing this year's conference, themed "Fraternity", which was held on Jan 26 at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

The 2024 TFR, which refers to the average number of babies each woman would have during her reproductive years, was 0.97 – holding steady from 2023. But Dragon years – seen as auspicious years in the Chinese zodiac for children to

be born – usually result in an increase in Singapore's birth rate, DPM Gan noted.

The 2024 TFR remaining unchanged from 2023 therefore means that the "base has come down further" rather than that it has stabilised, he said.

The figure was 1.04 in 2022 and 1.12 in 2021, below the replacement rate of 2.1 – which is the level of fertility at which the population replaces itself from one generation to the next.

Despite this, Singapore should not give up raising its TFR, and the country can do more to support parenthood and families, said DPM Gan, adding that falling fertility is a global phenomenon.

He noted that over the last 10 years, the growth rate of the number of Singapore citizens has slowed despite immigration.

He was responding to a question from Mr Janadas, who asked how the Government intends to manage social cohesion between citizens and foreigners, given Singapore's low birth rate necessitating more immigration.

DPM Gan, who is also Minister for Trade and Industry, said Singapore may not be able to grow its number of citizens very quickly, but it should have "at least a moderate growth rate over a period of



Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong and Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) director Janadas Devan at a dialogue at IPS' annual Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 26. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

time".

The country has to be mindful to make sure it continues to have a strong core of citizens and a "dynamic population" and society, DPM Gan said to an audience of about 1,200, including policymakers, students and academics.

The key question then is how to integrate foreigners and ensure that Singaporeans are able to work side by side with them.

The Government has to continue focusing on measures which support social integration, especially for new citizens, which is different from managing workers who are here on a temporary basis, he noted.

Singapore has already implemented citizenship journeys – mandatory programmes for new citizens – to help them better understand Singapore's culture, values and practices, as well as a similar programme for permanent residents.

While the Government will continue to refine these programmes, it is important for Singaporeans to acknowledge as a starting point that new citizens are different, Mr Gan said.

"They have spent a good part of their life in a different culture, have different practices, maybe hold different values; but the fact (is) that they have decided to become

Singapore citizens, they have decided that there is something common between Singapore and them, and they want to become part of this bigger fraternity."

The challenge is to recognise these differences while expanding the common space between new citizens and existing Singaporeans, DPM Gan said.

More can be done to help new citizens assimilate into Singapore's values and systems and also to encourage Singaporeans to accept and embrace them, he said.

There should also be more spaces for them to interact – and there are community programmes for them to do so.

"This is the actual task... it's ongoing, always in progress – because with every generation of new immigrants, the challenges are different, and we need to continue to change our programmes, but we must continue to seek to integrate them better into the society."

The better Singapore can integrate new citizens and build trust between newcomers and existing Singaporeans, the better its capacity will be to absorb them, he added. "And this way, the whole of Singapore will be better off."

The global environment has shifted over the past few decades – with more countries producing high quality goods at low costs – and Singapore has to move to maintain its "place at the table", said DPM Gan.

But it is important to recognise that "the real competition" does not come from within Singapore but from other countries, he said.

"I do accept that sometimes, Singaporeans feel they are facing a lot of competition at their workplaces from their fellow Singaporeans, from foreigners who work side by side, and also even from new citizens who are no longer foreigners," he added.

But this is something that Singaporeans must accept if they are to compete with the rest of the world, he said.

What is important is to ensure that despite the competition, workplaces continue to be fair and equitable, DPM Gan said.

Competition must also have purpose, he added, and this can come from family ties and relationships which form an "anchor" to allow Singaporeans to compete at their day jobs. "If we just compete for the purpose of competing, at the end, you are not sure what you're competing for."

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