

Lunch Forum
**“Population Planning in a Low Fertility, High Migration,
Rapidly Ageing Demographic Regime”**

by Professor Paul Cheung, Director of the UN Statistics Division

13 January 2009

The National Population Secretariat and the Civil Service College jointly organised this lecture by Professor Paul Cheung, former Chief Statistician of the Department of Statistics (DOS) and currently the Director of the UN Statistics Division. In his lecture on “Population Planning in a Low Fertility, High Migration, Rapidly Ageing Demographic Regime”, Prof Cheung shared his insight on population planning with about 250 participants at the lecture.

Prof Cheung began his lecture by defining “demographic regime” as a system dependent on the patterns of demographic attributes and “population planning” as the use of policies to maintain the population demand and supply.

Prof Cheung highlighted the three main characteristics of our population: (a) lowest-low (i.e. below 1.25) total fertility rate (TFR); (b) heavy infiltration of foreigners and permanent residents (PRs) into Singapore; and (c) an ageing population, all of which had an impact on Singapore’s population structure.

Marriage and Parenthood

Prof Cheung opined that the TFR, an indicator widely used by demographers, was not a suitable tool for population planning. He explained that even with a TFR of 2.1, a country’s population would be unable to replace itself unless the TFR was maintained at 2.1 over a long period of time. A more accurate measure would be to look at the number of births by birth cohorts and to study inter-cohort changes. Given that completed family size remained high at least for the older cohorts, the key challenge for Singapore’s fertility was in marriage; couples were delaying marriages or not marrying.

Prof Cheung observed that the proportion of marriages where both the bride and the groom were citizens had declined to just over half, while marriages where only the groom was a citizen had increased to nearly a third. He commented that these trends reflected increased opportunities for interaction with non-citizens and the need for less educated men to seek foreign wives in order to have a family.

Ageing Population and Immigration

Although our current age structure was still ideal for economic development due to the presence of a large number of foreigners in the working age groups, Prof Cheung observed that the momentum of ageing in Singapore had been creeping up. He projected that by 2020, the number of persons aged 60 and above in Singapore would almost double to about 20% of the resident population.

Singapore's Demographic Future

Prof Cheung emphasised that demographic structures must adapt to changes in order to accommodate a growing economy. With low fertility levels and an ageing population, Singapore would need to rely on a well-built triple-decker population structure made up of citizens, PRs and foreigners to ensure continued economic growth. Such a triple-decker would see an increasing number of PRs and foreigners in the working ages.

Notes courtesy of the National Population Secretariat
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