

REACTION TO POPULATION WHITE PAPER

Population priorities and perceptions

By DAVID CHAN
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THE strong public reactions to the Population White Paper and the Land Use Plan should be understood in terms of Singaporeans' current experience of the quality of their lives. As we discuss the population roadmap, we must address fundamental issues relating to the purpose, priorities and perceptions of population policies. These issues include effects of land use, social integration, sustainability and well-being.

Strategies to accommodate a bigger population while still offering a good quality of life are discussed in the land use report. Quality of life is multidimensional, with economic, social, psychological and environmental aspects. Ensuring good quality living is going to depend on how the land use strategies are implemented. Policymakers and planners will need to consider diverse views and adapt effectively along the way.

Not every land use issue has to be a zero-sum trade-off situation. For example, safeguarding heritage and green areas need not be in-

consistent with urban redevelopment. A historic cemetery could be converted to a publicly accessible heritage park that contributes directly to urban redevelopment. This is feasible with intensification of land use in other areas and effective transport planning.

A holistic approach is more than a technical issue of coordinating between agencies. Each policy needs to be designed and evaluated in terms of multiple goals that together contribute to Singaporeans' quality of life, as opposed to solutions to singular problems. While the latter policy mindset may create unintended negative consequences, the former is likely to effectively achieve more and diverse goals with fewer resources and obstacles.

An example is the intensification of land use. Developing mixed-use clusters of buildings which increase quality living and hence their attractiveness will require us to be sensitive to rising housing prices and office rentals in and near these areas. We should guard against producing and reproducing economic, spatial and social inequalities.

We should think holistically about the diverse aspects of quality of life and the integrative func-

tions of a policy. So instead of letting prices and costs freely rise as part of market conditions, we could adopt policies that would reduce such rises and enhance social goals. For example, there could be policies that lower the cost for residents taking up job opportunities in their neighbourhood. This serves integrative functions because work-home proximity enhances part-time work, flexible work hours and work-life balance, eases the strain on the public transport system, encourages women to enter the workforce and the elderly to remain economically and socially active, contributes to the sense of community in the neighbourhood, encourages entrepreneurship and innovation in business, and creates value-added jobs for various segments of the population.

The population discussion should pay much more attention to social integration, which is not a "nice-to-have" - it is critical and foundational. Without reasonable integration, large population size and high-density living will pose security, social and political challenges that make diversity a liability when it could be an asset for Singapore.

Social integration takes time to

develop and once damaged is difficult to restore. The degree of social integration and the pace of its development is not as predictable as building houses or MRT tracks, and not as controllable as the number of foreigners to take in. Citizen well-being and the state of social integration should be key factors when deciding the number and type of foreigners to take in each year.

Large numbers of foreigners create threats to cohesion from crowding, clustering, competition, comparisons and conflict. We need to be more effective managing integration by being more citizen-centric, develop opportunities for contributions by locals and foreigners, invest in community development, be more sensitive in our communications, and better manage conflicts and crises.

According to the White Paper, the ultimate goal is to build a strong Singaporean core. But what is fundamental is citizen well-being, which contributes to national identity, commitment to Singapore and rootedness to the country. These are critical in developing a strong core, which is not only about jobs and wages.

The Government's purpose and society's goal should be about en-

hancing citizen well-being. So the question should be: "What is the desired composition profile of the population to enhance citizen well-being?" It is about the outcomes and consequences of various profiles, not about a magical number representing the optimal population size to target.

We should work out a desirable and sustainable profile of the population, establishing realistic projected population ranges for city planning and economy structuring. Both the profile and ranges are dynamic and may change over time in response to unexpected shocks and interrupted growth in the population trajectory. Population policy decisions should be made not only based on economic considerations but also the extent to which our society can remain cohesive and resilient.

Well-being is affected by issues of physical space involving land use and social space involving interactions among people. But well-being is also affected by psychological space involving how we think and feel about being Singaporean as we see how population policy decisions are made, experience their impact, compare the outcomes for different segments of the population, and lo-

cate ourselves in relation to the nation.

How then to discuss the population roadmap?

First, we need to understand and address citizens' concerns and aspirations.

Second, a strong Singaporean core is more than jobs, wages and taxes. We need to focus on national identity, commitment and rootedness to the country. At the centre is citizen well-being. We need to ensure that the population increase and intensification of land use are translated into outcomes that benefit citizens and contribute to our well-being.

Finally, we need to develop valid social indicators of citizen well-being and liveability. We need to measure and track changes in what citizens think and feel as they experience different domains of their lives. We can then use these results as inputs to policy formulation and revision relating to population numbers and profiles. The multiple dimensions and changes in citizen well-being should be the key impact and outcome indicators for Singapore.

The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and professor of psychology at Singapore Management University.