Fertility and eugenics: Singapore’s population policies

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Abstract. Singapore, after serving for two decades as a model for Third World birth control and economic development programs, is now abandoning its earlier population policies in favor of encouraging dramatic population growth. The initial eugenics-based program introduced in 1984 sought increased fertility for university-educated women and provided major subsidies for the voluntary sterilization of poor and uneducated parents. These much publicized and internationally discussed programs have now been abandoned in favor of new population programs seeking to encourage fertility in lower as well as better educated groups. A forty percent population increase is being set as a goal. To accomplish this the effective Singapore Family Planning and Population Board has been abolished and Housing Development Board policies are in the process of being reversed to encourage rather than discourage fertility.

Introduction

Arguably, the Third World country having had the greatest success in integrating resources and population into its national development program is the city-state of Singapore (Bellows, 1983; Crosette, 1984; U.S. News, 1984). Since independence in 1965 Singapore has become a country economically, politically and socially transformed. Where twenty-five years ago, one-third of the population resided in slums or shanties, today over three-quarters of Singapore’s 2.5 million population has been resettled in government-built housing estates, the bulk of which are high-rise buildings (Housing and Development Board, 1985). Today Singapore’s skyline is dominated by mile after mile of public high-rise housing, commercial buildings, and new hotels.

This national transformation from poverty to middle-class status has occurred in spite of a virtual total absence of natural resources – even much of the sand for construction and landfill has to be imported – and a population density ten times that of Europe’s most densely populated nation, the Netherlands. Today Singapore’s per capita GNP is the second highest in Asia, behind only that of Japan. Until its 1985 downturn, the economy of Singapore had sustained one of the highest growth rates in the world – officially an average annual rate of 7.4 percent from 1965 through 1983 (Straits Times, Nov. 21,
1983). Singapore is also a healthy place to live. Epidemic diseases such as malaria have been eradicated, and the infant mortality rate of 10.8 per 1,000 and crude death rate of 5.2 are lower than those in the United States. Population growth is under control, largely due to a government's campaign to encourage parents to 'stop at two'. In brief, Singapore's economic and demographic successes in many ways serve as a model of what other Third World Nations with modest natural resources seek to accomplish.

**Birth control**

At time of independence in 1965, the island nation of Singapore found itself with a population of 1,887,000 and a growth rate of 2.5 percent a year. To bring population growth under control, the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB) was established in 1966. To meet the goal of a two-child family norm and zero growth by 2030, government-sponsored mass media campaigns stressed family limitation and population education was introduced in the schools (Saw, 1980). To further reduce birth rates, the government in 1970 introduced legislation to encourage virtually cost-free abortion and sterilization.

Equally important, the government in 1969 introduced fertility disincentives. These disincentives were increased in 1972. The disincentives included: (1) escalating maternity delivery fees by parity; (2) paid maternity leave for only the first two confinements; (3) income tax deductions only for the first three children; (4) lower priority in choice of primary school for third and higher birth order children; and (5) no priority for larger families in allocation of government housing. The last can represent a substantial penalty since, as of 1985, 77 percent of the population, and virtually all low and middle income Singaporeans, lived in government-built and -managed Housing Development Board (HDB) flats (HDB, 1985). Studies differ on the precise effect of the disincentive program (Wong and Salaff, 1979; Tan et al., 1979). Nonetheless, following the program's implementation, birth rates plummeted, and by 1983, Singapore's 2.5 million people had a birth rate of 17.1 and 1.2 percent growth rate (Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, 1983; Salaff, 1985).

**Eugenic concerns**

However, 1983 marked the beginning of a radical shift in Singapore's population policies. In his National Day Rally speech of August 14, 1983, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore since its independence, warned that the eugenic quality of the nation was declining due to the fact that less-