



'Go for two, stop at three' child policy

ECONOMISTS should meet up with climate scientists and authorities of the six major religions in our country to hammer out a family planning strategy that will sustain economic growth without further damaging the climate.

Malaysia is facing a dilemma: have too few children and the economy will splutter; have too many children and the planet will heat up further.

Temperatures on some days in May have gone to 34°C, and by July the thermometer will likely hit a scorching 36°C or higher.

As recorded by the **Statistics Department**, the population stood at 32.4 million in 2020, with an average annual growth rate of 1.7% over the preceding eight years.

A few sociologists have pushed the panic button, offering suggestions on how to incentivise women to have large families.

The fear that national development will stall unless there is a huge surge in births is well overblown.

In 2010 when the population was 27.4 million, the total fertility rate (TPR) was a benchmark 2.1 children. In 2012 it was still 2.1 children.

This is the international standard replacement rate, taking into account that not all children live to adulthood. After 2012 the birth rate declined to an average of 1.7% annually.

The population should have stabilised but it grew by another five million over eight years.

The five million included a count of 2.7 million non-citizens. Did most foreign workers also bring along non-working spouses and children?

Sociologists worry about downsized local manpower, but the cry of employers is for more foreign workers because locals are shunning jobs in restaurants, hotels, construction sites, farms, plantations, and the domestic sector. The manpower shortage is self-induced.

Sociologists who are panicking want the government to revisit the year 1970 when the TPR was a shocking 4.9 births per woman.

During the reckless 1950s-70s it was a common sight to behold families with as many as eight children, surely a planet warmer.

It has become fashionable to blame the rich nations or large countries for climate change, but every person emits carbon dioxide just by staying alive and eating food.

And is there any poor guy who doesn't aspire to a more comfortable life, and that means a bigger carbon footprint?

In 1970, the global population was only 3.7 billion. Now it is 7.9 billion with a projection that it will hit 10 billion.

Along with the rising population we have rising sea levels, rising heat, rising floods, and prolonged droughts.

Four key climate change indicators, including greenhouse gas concentrations and sea level rise, all set new record highs last year.

Pro-natal policies that incentivise mothers with generous tax reliefs and large cash handouts for every newborn without limit to the number also have the support of a few economists, who see booming consumer demand with rising population.

But other economists see a downside. Who is going to finance these monetary incentives?

It will be another factor pushing the nation into deficit.

Malaysia is classified as an ageing society because more than 7% of people are aged 65 and above, and this figure will rise to 20% by 2056. These are old fruits of the 1950s-70s baby boom.

Reverting to that era of high birth rates will mean that 70 years from today, the nation will face another dependency problem of having too many old people for the young to take care of.

To bump up the population and yet maintain a low dependency ratio, we will need to keep birth rates high as a permanent policy.

The correct public policy is to set three children per woman as a legal limit without exemptions for rich or poor, tycoon or pauper.

The law should be revised so that the eligibility for tax reliefs and cash handouts stop at three children.

Mothers should be incentivised to give away their fourth newborn for adoption by well-to-do childless couples anywhere in the world.

Better still don't have that fourth baby, as surplus births will push humanity over the cliff edge of climate doom.

Religion being the most powerful social influencer, there is a need to pull the six leading religions in Malaysia into a discussion over population management.

Religions have traditionally set the baby game rules and runaway births in the 1950s-70s were largely due to encouragement by the major religions to have limitless numbers of children.

It is time for religion to play the baby game again, but with a new preaching: Go for two, stop at three. This jingle should be the car sticker of the year.

One of the key focal points for all religions should be the quality of family life.

The reason that many couples stick to one is the high cost of child upbringing, as parents know that quality is compromised by quantity.

The more children they have, the lower the quality of upbringing and the less capable their children will be in the struggle for economic survival.

From the national perspective, the rates of unemployment, juvenile delinquency and crime will skyrocket with high birth rates.

However, a birthrate lower than 2.1 is an indictment of the social system.

It means that the nation does not have adequate supportive processes and structures to manage population growth, with primary focus on the quality of child rearing. It is unnatural for parents to bear sole responsibility.

Scientific observations of higher animals endowed with social brains have shown that the community chips in to help protect and raise children. Spend time in a safari and you will be impressed.

What is the core or heart of family life? The core is a set of values perhaps best embodied in the word “caring” as it encompasses being affectionate, thoughtful, sensitive, kind, considerate, compassionate, concerned, supportive, involved, helpful and expressive.

Caring implies spending quality time with and providing for children’s physical, emotional, intellectual, and social needs.

These values have to operate within a framework of authority, stability, safety and financial ability.

Without community involvement in child upbringing, parents will be less capable in delivering these core values if they are managing entirely on their own.

But when the national focus is on high baby production rather than quality of upbringing, families become dysfunctional and such families not only damage their children but they also damage society.

We can see this happening in the Philippines, an Asean country that occupies the fifth last position in the Order and Security Index ranking across the Asia Pacific region.

The Filipino birth rate was a stupendous six children per woman in the 1960s.

Could this be a primary factor in the prevalence of illegal drug use and trafficking?

The country had four million drug users in 2016, prompting a tough nationwide drug crackdown launched by President Rodrigo Duterte.

Malaysia is doing well just below China in the security index ranking. Let’s not slip downwards through reckless pro-natal policies.

<https://www.thesundaily.my/opinion/go-for-two-stop-at-three-child-policy-DA9244948>