

Nation must accept population trend

TAIWAN'S POPULATION STARTED to naturally decline in 2020, and its birthrate has been low for many years.

Mainstream policy discourse in the governmental and non-governmental sectors calls for the government to step up its efforts to "promote childbirth."

Together with financial support such as one-time subsidies, social insurance payments and monthly childcare allowances, it also calls for more maternity-friendly workplaces and work arrangements, in the hope of making people of childbearing age more willing to have children.

The thinking behind such calls views fertility and population from an instrumental perspective. Its advocates worry that the continued aging and decline of the population would have a negative impact on the economy, social security system and education, as well as the supply of long-term carers, so the population needs to be increased as soon as possible.

However, analyses predicted today's "demographic crisis" decades ago, so it is not a sudden

YEH
MING-JUI

葉明敏

challenge, and any attempt to respond to it with fertility policies is too little, too late.

Faced with the demographic changes in Taiwan, population-related policy options could be discussed in terms of the following perspectives and ideas.

First, population decline is a good thing, as it can help reduce pressure on the environment, maintain a balanced and sustainable relationship between humans and the environment, and improve the quality of human life. Most discussions about ethics and sustainable development say that humans have a duty to curb their population explosion, and that this can be Taiwan's contribution to the overpopulated planet.

Second, the social values and cultural beliefs of Taiwan and most developed countries have changed. Barring huge and unpredictable changes such as the two world wars of the past century, Taiwan is unlikely to see further

population growth in the foreseeable future.

The economic, educational, social security and long-term care sectors need to adjust and accept that the population is to continue falling, and propose new modes of operation to address these conditions.

Third, bearing and raising children should not be seen as a way of reducing the challenges faced by those sectors as they face the challenges of population change. Policies should protect the right to have children in the first place. No matter how the population changes, policies should aim to protect people's willingness to have children and provide the conditions for doing so.

Policies that support adjustments to economic and workplace conditions, and new work arrangements should continue to be implemented, without the precondition that they promote childbirth.

Fourth, to make safeguards of the right to have children work in practice, social policies should be less fixed on the family being the basic unit.

Support policies and fertility

technology should be made available to individuals who want to have children, without requiring the existence of a family or marriage relationship.

Fifth, openly attracting immigrants is an effective policy to boost the labor force in a timely manner, for example by relaxing the conditions for international students to seek employment in Taiwan, and those for working foreigners to obtain permanent residency and even naturalization. The migrant worker retention program and the alien permanent resident certificate program for migrant workers, which were implemented in April, are a step in the right direction.

Although attitudes are hard to change, the trend of demographic change is a harsh reality. Apart from looking to the next election, democratic politics should also look toward a future that is to last far longer than any politician's term in office.

Yeh Ming-jui is an assistant professor at National Taiwan University's Institute of Health Policy and Management.

TRANSLATED BY JULIAN CLEGG