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National Resilience: A Demographic Snapshot

By Yeap Su Yin

Synopsis

The Population in Brief 2014 report highlights interesting but unsurprising demographic trends for Singapore. What does this mean for efforts to strengthen national resilience?

Commentary

THE LATEST Population in Brief (PIB) 2014 report issued by the National Population and Talent Division highlighted a number of interesting but unsurprising demographic trends for Singapore. Presenting changes from June 2013 to June 2014, three issues received attention: Singapore's fast ageing population, low total fertility rates (TFR) and a slow-down in the growth of what remains a large foreign population. In view of its importance, how do these demographic patterns affect Singapore's efforts to strengthen national resilience?

Having adopted a whole-of-society approach to building and sustaining national resilience, there is an inevitable need to better appreciate current and future demographic patterns of the country. Learning to adapt to these trends will enable policy-makers to better enhance strengths while managing vulnerabilities inherent in the Singaporean society.

Resilience: Troubling demographic numbers?

Building Singapore's national resilience has been high on the government's agenda in the recent past. Incidents such as the discovery of the Jemaah Islamiyah plot to bomb several key areas in Singapore in December 2001, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 and the trans-boundary haze episode in 2013 are examples of the diverse and complex nature of threats the city-state has had to deal with. Future threats are likely to be just as unexpected and complex in nature. Hence, effort has not been confined to preventing or mitigating the effects of threats, but also towards ensuring that the country is resilient enough to recover quickly and emerge stronger.

The endeavour to be resilient necessitates a whole-of-society effort, something seemingly obvious but difficult to manage. As with any other society, Singapore comes replete with its own unique characteristics and vulnerabilities, which presents particular challenges for national resilience.

The PIB 2014 tells a familiar demographic tale, that is, the three issues of an ageing population, a TFR below replacement levels and a high foreigner population. Each of these presents their own set of challenges for national resilience.

First, the citizen population has continued to age, with 12.4 percent aged 65 and above compared to 11.7 percent in 2013. As a result, there are now 5.2 citizens in the working age band for each citizen aged 65 and above, a decline from 7.6 in 2004. An ageing population is often viewed negatively, with the older segment of society seen as needing more support, posing challenges to healthcare and social welfare systems. They are regarded as being less able to contribute to society and hence, not a resource when it comes to national resilience.

Second, the country's TFR, which has remained persistently below the replacement rate of 2.1 for the past 30 years. This has been a grave concern for policy-makers, who see a danger of a shrinking population without a critical mass to support economic development. Beyond this however, a persistently low TFR is also regarded as a national security issue. A "Singaporean core" is necessary to maintain key functions in sensitive areas within the government and military. Further, a country's entrepreneurial spirit and vibrancy is sustained through the efforts of its people, especially the youth. Hence, a declining number of citizens being born would prove challenging for recovery prospects should Singapore face any future adversity.

Thirdly, although the growth rate has slowed to 2.9 percent from 4.0 percent last year, there is still a large foreign population in the country, at 1.6 million. Without a common history and heritage, a perennial question has always been whether Singapore can afford to depend on foreigners to stay and help in times of crises.

How should Singapore adapt to build resilience?

The process of building resilience necessitates an appreciation of adaptive capacities in order to manage the crisis and recover from it. In this regard, how should Singapore adapt to the prevailing demographic patterns to strengthen national resilience?

The low TFR poses perhaps the most challenging issue, where a shrinking population and fewer people in the working age bracket of 15 to 64 years means lesser societal resources for resilience. This perhaps invites a re-evaluation of the other two "problematic" segments and how they should be viewed in terms of their capacity to contribute to national resilience.

Those above the age of 65, while no longer youthful, possess stores of experience in diverse areas which can be tapped on where there is need. As the World Health Organisation noted in a report titled *Older persons in emergencies: An active ageing perspective*, "their years of experience can make them models of personal resilience and sources of inspiration and practical knowledge". As such, instead of being regarded as a group that requires assistance, those with specific experience or expertise should be maintained and called upon should the need arise.

Similarly, foreigners may not share a common background but could nonetheless be an important component for resilience. London has often been held up as an example of a resilient city in the way in which it recovered from the July 7, 2005 bombings. Londoners, regardless of nationality, continued about their daily lives, defiantly not caving in to fear of further terrorist attacks.

This reaction was aptly captured in the tagline "7 million Londoners, 1 London". Closer to home, in the aftermath of the SARS outbreak former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made it a point to thank not only Singaporean but also foreign healthcare workers for staying on in the country, noting that "they could have simply returned home. But they stayed on and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with us".

Resilience of the whole society

A basic premise of societal resilience is the fact that whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The demographic patterns in the PIB go further than highlighting the landscape of the Singaporean society. It draws a picture of society that guides the country's means of managing future threats, by revealing vulnerabilities and allowing for the leveraging of available societal strengths and resources.

In many instances, a resilient nation is one that relies on a whole-of-society approach - not just the resilience of the fittest and youngest - but the entire society working together in facing and recovering from adversity.

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