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Saw Swee-Hock

Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore
Second Edition

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE
## Contents

**List of Tables**  
x

**List of Figures**  
xxiii

**Foreword**  
xv

**Preface**  
xxvii

1. **Background**  
1

2. **A Private Programme**  
5  
Formation of the Family Planning Association (FPA)  
5  
Objectives  
6  
Organization  
7  
Clinics, Acceptors, and Attendances  
11  
Characteristics of New Acceptors  
15  
Targets and Achievements  
18  
The Re-establishment of the FPA  
19

3. **The Government Programme**  
23  
Formation of the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB)  
23  
Objectives  
24  
Organization  
25  
Clinical Services  
30  
Characteristics of New Acceptors  
32  
Targets and Achievements  
35
4. **Induced Abortion**
   Move Towards Legal Abortion
   The Abortion Debate
   Legal Abortion
   Abortion on Demand
   Characteristics of Abortees
   Incidence of Abortion

5. **Voluntary Sterilization**
   Move Towards Legal Sterilization
   Legal Sterilization
   Further Liberalization of the Sterilization Laws
   Sterilization on Demand
   Characteristics of Sterilized Persons
   Incidence of Sterilization

6. **Incentives and Disincentives**
   Overview
   Maternity Leave
   Accouchement Fee
   Personal Income Tax
   Public Housing
   Primary School Registration
   Work Permit

7. **Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice**
   Family Planning
   Abortion
   Sterilization
   Government Population Policies

8. **Rapid Fertility Decline**
   Long-term General Trends
   Effect of the Changing Age Composition
   Changes by Age
   Changes among Married Women
   Changes by Parity
   Changes by Race
   Causes of Fertility Changes
   Future Trends
## 9. Uplifting Fertility of Better-Educated Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Marriage Matchmaking</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced Child Relief</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School Registration</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sterilization Cash Incentives</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital Accouchement Fees</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 10. Relaxing Antinatalist Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for Policy Changes</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion and Sterilization</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medisave for Childbirth</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Tax Child Relief</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary One Registration</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Child Maternity Leave</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 11. Limited Pronatalist Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave for Public Sector Employees</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time Work for Working Mothers</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare and Infant Care Subsidy</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Tax Rebates</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Bonus</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 12. Reinforcing Previous Pronatalist Incentives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for Further Change</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medisave Use for Childbirth</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity Leave</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare and Infant Care Subsidy</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Maid Levy</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Bonus for First and Fourth Child</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood Tax Rebate</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Mother’s Child Relief</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPF Top-up Grant for HDB Apartments</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. Latest Pronatalist Incentives 197
   Childcare Leave 197
   Grandparent Caregiver Relief 198
   Five-day Working Week 199
   Medical Benefits for Married Women 202
   Work-Life Works! Fund 203
   Paternity Leave 204
   Public Housing 205
   Conclusion 207

14. Prolonged Below-Replacement Fertility 209
   Introduction 209
   Overall Fertility Trends 210
   Fertility Trend of the Three Main Races 213
   Birth Shortfall Below Replacement Level 218
   Future Fertility Trends 220

15. Immigration Policies and Programmes 223
   Need for Immigration 223
   Immigration Laws 225
   Employment Pass 227
   Citizenship Laws 231
   Permanent Residence Programmes 237
   Wooing Overseas Singaporeans 240
   Stricter Control of Foreigners 242

16. Demographic Trends and Consequences 245
   Introduction 245
   Demographic Trends 246
   Migration Trends 249
   Population Management 251
   Population Issues and Challenges 253

17. Epilogue 258
   Appendix A  Talent For The Future 263
   Appendix B  When Couples Have Fewer Than Two 271
   Appendix C  Who Is Having Too Few Babies? 276
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D The Second Long March</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's New Year Message on 1 January 2012</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F Babies</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

2.1 Annual Government Grants to the Family Planning Association 8
2.2 Annual Number of Clinics, Acceptors, and Visits, 1949–68 13
2.3 Distribution of Old Acceptors Attending in 1963 by Year of First Registration 15
2.4 Per Cent Distribution of New Acceptors by Monthly Family Income, 1954–59 16
2.5 Per Cent Distribution of New Acceptors by Source of Referral, 1959–65 17
2.6 Per Cent Distribution of New Acceptors by Method Chosen, 1959–65 18
3.1 Singapore Family Planning and Population Board Annual Expenditure 27
3.2 Per Cent Distribution of New Acceptors by Selected Characteristics, 1968–77 33
3.3 Rate of Acceptance, 1966–77 34
3.4 Targeted and Actual New Acceptors within the National Programme, 1966–77 35
4.1 Per Cent Distribution of Legal Abortion by Age Group and Number of Living Children, 1970–77 54
4.2 Number of Abortions, Abortion Ratio, and Abortion Rate, 1965–77 56
5.1 Per Cent Distribution of Sterilized Women by Race, Age, and Number of Living Children, 1970–77 72
5.2 Per Cent Distribution of Sterilized Women by Education and Combined Income, 1970–76 74
5.3 Number of Male and Female Sterilizations, 1965–77 76
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Accouchement Fees with Effect from 1 August 1973</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Accouchement Fees Revised on 18 July 1975</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Proportion of Married Women Who Had Heard of and Who Knew How to Use at Least One Contraceptive Method by Race, Age, and Education, 1973</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Proportion of Married Women Who Approved of Family Planning and Average Ideal Number of Children by Race, Age, and Education, 1973</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Percentage of Married Women Who Knew Abortion was Legal and Who Knew Where to Obtain Legal Abortion, 1973</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Percentage of Married Women Who Approved of Induced Abortion and Who Were Willing to Undergo Abortion, 1973</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Percentage of Married Women Who Had Heard of Male Sterilization and Female Sterilization and Who Knew Where to Obtain Male Sterilization and Female Sterilization, 1973</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Percentage of Married Women Who Had Heard of Female and Male Sterilization and Who Approved of Sterilization and Who Were Willing to Undergo Sterilization, 1973</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>Percentage of Married Women Who Were Aware of the Two-Child Family Recommended by Government and Who Agreed That Two Was Just Right, 1973</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>Percentage of Married Women Who Thought Government Population Policies Had Affected or Would Affect Their Own or Other People’s Family Size, 1973</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Births, Crude Birth Rate, and Total Fertility Rate, 1947–77</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Age-Specific Fertility Rates, 1947–77</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Relative Contribution of Each Age Group to Gross Total Fertility, 1947–77</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Proportion of Women Aged 15–49, 1969–77</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Crude Birth Rate, Standardized Birth Rate, and Total Fertility Rate, 1969–77</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Age-Specific Fertility Rates, 1969–77</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Age-Specific Marital Fertility Rates, 1969–77</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.8 Gross Total Fertility Rates by Birth Order, 1969–77 132
8.9 Total Fertility Rates for the Three Main Races, 1969–77 135
9.1 Old and New Systems of Primary One Registration 148
9.2 Changes in Accouchement Fees (SGD) in Government Hospitals with Effect from 1 March 1985 154
10.1 Amendment to the Primary School Registration, 1987 165
11.1 Baby Bonus Scheme for the Second Child and the Third Child 177
12.1 Infant Care Monthly Subsidy Rates 186
12.2 Additional Subsidies for Childcare and Infant Care 187
12.3 Cash Gift Schedule 189
12.4 Government Matching in Co-Savings Schedule 190
12.5 Comparison of Rebates Under the Old and New Schemes 192
13.1 Percentage Distribution of Full-Time Employees by Type of Work, Week Pattern, and Industry, 2002 201
13.2 Pattern of Working Hours for Five-Day Week 202
14.1 Annual Births and Total Fertility Rate, 1975–2014 211
14.2 Total Fertility Rates for the Three Main Races, 1975–2014 214
14.3 Annual Births According to Actual Fertility and Replacement Fertility, 1974–2014 219
14.4 Total Fertility Rate of Selected Countries, 1970–2002 220
15.1 New Citizenship Granted, 2001–14 233
15.2 New Permanent Residency Granted, 2005–14 240
16.2 Components of Population Growth, 1957–2015 250

Appendix A.1 Comparative Education Levels of Spouses 269
Appendix B.1 How Population Will Grow (in thousands) 274
Appendix B.2 Number of Children Under 15 (in thousands) 274
Appendix B.3 Percentage of Old People Over 59 275
Appendix C.1 Average Number of Daughters Born to Women Over the Years 281
Appendix C.2 How Birth Patterns Differ from the Population Distribution 281
Appendix D.1 Education and Fertility 294
Appendix D.2 Population by Age (in thousands) 294
Appendix D.3 Old Dependency Ratio (%) 294
List of Figures

3.1 Singapore Family Planning and Population Board Organization Chart 28
8.1 Births and Crude Birth Rates, 1947–77 117
8.2 Age-Specific Fertility Rates, 1947–77 122
8.3 Gross Total Fertility Rates by Birth Order, 1967–77 131
14.1 Annual Births and Total Fertility Rate, 1970–2003 213
14.2 Annual Fertility Rates for the Three Main Races, 1975–2003 216

Appendix A.1 Number of Children of Women (Aged below 40) by Education 270
Appendix C.1 How Far Off Target Our Baby Output Has Been 282
Appendix C.2 Fertility Among the Three Ethnic Groups 283
Appendix D.1 Educational Profile of Older Singles 295
Appendix D.2 Who Will Remain Unmarried Each Year in Future 295
Appendix D.3 Distribution of Population by Age and Sex 296
Appendix D.4 The Ageing Labour Force 298
Foreword

All countries are shaped by demography. Few, however, are as aware in which demography shapes their destiny as Singapore has been at every phase of its independent existence. Initially, Singapore’s leaders focused on reducing fertility as a key element in its development strategy. A comprehensive population control programme was introduced and effectively administered, as described in the second edition of the authoritative book on Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore, by Saw Swee-Hock. Indeed, so effective was the population control effort that within a few decades, Singapore switched to being concerned about low fertility and began to introduce some of the world’s strongest pronatalist policies.

Few, if any, other countries have moved as rapidly from efforts to limit fertility to pronatalism. That Singapore did so is testimony not only to the success of its early efforts, but also to the success of economic development itself. For family size and fertility behaviour change not only in response to policy but also to economic conditions. And fertility behaviour becomes a part of the broader culture and social structures. This is one of the reasons Singapore has found it harder to increase fertility in recent years than it did to reduce it earlier. Singapore achieved very positive increase in gender equality that affected everything from marriage patterns to women’s work. It developed a culture of conscious choice about fertility and of high investments seeking high achievements from small numbers of offspring.

All this is especially interesting because Singapore was among the global pioneers in integrating family planning into the pursuit of
economic growth. It became a model for the later, larger-scale and more draconian policies of the People’s Republic of China.

In this book, Professor Saw reproduces a 1986 speech from Goh Chok Tong that uses the metaphor of a “long march” drawn from modern Chinese history. Singapore has seen two long marches. The first began with a struggle for survival and became a struggle for prosperity as an independent nation. The second was to determine what kind of “mature” country Singapore wanted to be, shifting gears from managing the challenges of pure necessity to making choices based on values. When Goh gave his speech, the second long march was prospective; Singapore was twenty-one years old and just embarking on re-assessment of its policies as it entered a stage of greater maturity. But now, after Singapore’s recent magnificent fiftieth anniversary, we can see that the second long march becomes a continuing series of policy re-evaluations and social change.

As Professor Saw shows in this book, family planning and population dynamics more generally have been central to every phase of Singapore’s history. Successful family planning was key to Singapore’s remarkable growth during the first long march. A shift from limiting to supporting fertility was basic to the next long march. But this has not ended history! It has given Singapore still more choices to make.

The choices before Singapore are not just about numbers of people, fertility, or age structure. Singapore has a new and different relationship to migration, to cultural diversity, and to investing in the education of its peoples. But to understand each of these, as well as the continued basic question of prosperity, understanding population patterns and dynamics remain crucial. And that understanding is not just technical to be found in statistical analysis of current data. It is also necessarily informed by an understanding of Singapore’s history, including the history of its population policies. Professor Saw has provided an independent guide to that history, and to making informed choices for the future.

Professor Craig Calhoun  
Director  
London School of Economics  
May 2016
Preface

Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore is a vastly expanded version of my earlier book published some twenty-five years ago by Oxford University Press under the old title of Population Control for Zero Growth in Singapore. This revised edition of the book has been divided into two distinct sections — Part One: Anti-natalist Period and Part Two: Pronatalist Period. The former deals with the period when the main concern was the need to lower the high and above-replacement fertility in the early years, and the latter covers the more recent period when the focus of attention was centred on preventing fertility from continuing to move forward at a level too low below-replacement fertility. The chapters included in Part One have been reproduced, with some revisions, from my earlier book, while Part Two contains the new chapters and appendices.

The enlarged book has therefore been structured in such a manner as to present a comprehensive account of the initiatives undertaken by the government to influence the course of fertility, and hence the rate of population growth, in the island state of Singapore during the last four decades or so. The book may be viewed as a case study of the public policy of a country in the area of population with regard to fertility and population growth. Hopefully, the book will enable the people of Singapore to comprehend the fundamental population issue of the day and to recognize the rather low below-replacement fertility, coupled with its adverse consequences, that will persist during their whole lifetime. More specifically, the book will be useful to married couples with children or planning to have babies since it constitutes a convenient source of detailed information on all the existing pronatalist incentives, financial or otherwise, that they are entitled to claim.
In the preparation of the two editions of the book, I was fortunate to receive the valuable assistance of many organizations and individuals. My thanks go to the Government Statistics Department, the then Family Planning and Population Board, and the Family Planning Association for supplying me with statistical data and other relevant materials. My research has been enormously facilitated by the conducive facilities offered at the London School of Economics Library, the National University of Singapore Library, and ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. I wish to thank Mr K. Kesavapany, Director of ISEAS, for his generous hospitality and for providing me with a research assistant, Mr Benjamin Loh, while I was deeply immersed in writing the latest edition of the book. My thanks are also due to Mrs Triena Ong, Managing Editor of ISEAS Publications Unit, for her tireless effort in bringing out this book so expeditiously. Finally, I am indebted to my wife, Cheng Siok Hwa, for reading and commenting on the manuscripts of both editions. Needless to say, any opinions and shortcomings in the book are entirely my own.

Saw Swee-Hock
February 2005

The second edition of the book has been brought out to incorporate the new developments in population policies and programmes that have taken place in Singapore since the original version was published some twelve years ago. Seventeen chapters have been included in this edition, with fourteen updated chapters and three new chapters. The new ones are Chapter 15 Immigration Policies and Programmes, Chapter 16 Demographic Trends and Consequences, and Chapter 17 Epilogue. A Foreword by Craig Calhoun has also been included.

I would like to thank Tan Chin Tiong, Director of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute for his support and hospitality, and Ng Kok Kiong, Head of Publications Unit at the Institute, for overseeing the publication of the book. To Craig Calhoun, Director of the London School of Economics, my grateful thanks for penning the foreword.

Saw Swee-Hock
April 2016