

 This article enables students to:

1. understand important issues facing their own society, country and the world;
2. apply critical thinking skills and adopt multiple perspectives in making decisions and judgments regarding social issues and problems.

Dealing with 'Double-Nos'

Instead of tackling low birth-rates and a decreasing workforce, mainland children with the right of abode have put a strain on services and resources in Hong Kong. Can limiting school quotas and raising the retirement age provide a short term solution?

THERE have been trends of families downsizing in Hong Kong, a **shrinking** fertility rate and a very possible reduction in the young labour pool. A worrying figure from the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong indicated that Hong Kong has one of the world's lowest birth rates of only 0.9 births per woman – far below the replacement rate of 2.1. It is estimated that 26.8 percent of the population will be aged 65 or over in 2033. With the population getting older, there is a pressing need for workforce expansion.

Meanwhile, an uncontrollable increase of babies born in Hong

Kong to mainland mothers whose husbands are not Hong Kong permanent residents – officially known as Type II births and colloquially described as ‘double no’ – has raised fears. Since the Court of Final Appeal ruled in July 2001 that babies born in Hong Kong to Chinese nationals have the right of abode in Hong Kong, expectant mainland mothers have been **flocking** to Hong Kong for better medical care, education and other benefits.

These issues are the focus of the Progress Report 2012 released by The Steering Committee on Population Policy (SCPP) of Hong Kong. The taskforce has put forward a number of suggestions in response to the **controversial** issues.

A set retirement age

AT the same time as an increase in Type II births, there are also fewer local children being born here. Hong Kong's workforce will shrink to 3.49 million in 2029 from a projected 3.58 million in 2020. This potential decline may "reduce the standard of living, weaken competitiveness and undermine the economic **vitality** of Hong Kong society," said the working group in the Progress Report.

A number of suggestions were made in response to this issue. They want to encourage local women to give birth. Also, they believe importing talent can retain competitiveness. Therefore, **expatriate** workers should be actively supported. The report also states that Hong Kong should reconsider the absence of a statutory retirement age. Post-retirement protection enhancement was also part of the discussion, although concrete measures are yet to be put forward.

Deferring retirement age is the most controversial of the suggestions. It seems to be an effective response, but it raises the issue of the impact on youth career development. Additionally, the lack of an all-round retirement protection system will not go away. In reality, what we need is a healthy and natural replenishment of fresh labour, instead of relying mainly on an older workforce.

The recommendations put forth by the task force have addressed some of the immediate concerns. Using school quotas as a limiting device and suggesting a statutory retirement age will have some positive effects. However, the government should consider the reasons behind some families' decision not to raise children in Hong Kong, and how to keep and attract new talent. ●

Key ideas

The number of Type II births and the fall in workers are two increasingly prominent issues in Hong Kong. Both problems may severely affect the living standards of Hong Kong people in the future. The SCPP task force has attempted to address these problems in the Progress Report 2012.

Did you know?

The SCPP was set up in 2007. It is led by the Chief Secretary for Administration to co-ordinate efforts by the relevant policy bureaux and departments in reviewing policy measures, taking into account the latest demographic data and forecasts.

Critical questions

1. How do you think Type II births could affect the allocation of resources?
2. Do you find the suggestions made by SCPP are practical? Why or why not?

References

<http://www.admwing.gov.hk/eng/publications/reports.htm>

Reactions

"The total number of deliveries in Hong Kong has to be set at a certain limit so that we can maintain the professional standards and also the quality of care" – Former Secretary for Food and Health Dr York Chow Yat-ngok agrees to hospitals – working within a quota.

"With or without babies born in Hong Kong, these people are de-facto talents that we should absorb" – Paul Yip Siu-fai, professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the HKU, sees Type II children as talents who can add value to Hong Kong.

"Deferring the retirement age is a temporary expedient. A worrying factor will be its adverse impact on the development of creative industries with an ageing workforce" – Lui Tai-lok, professor in HKU's Department of Sociology, on the possible impact of an older retirement age.

"The lack of an all-round retirement protection system and the defective MPF scheme are in fact the crux of the problem" – *Sing Tao Daily* columnist Audrey Eu Yuet-mee doubts the benefits of a later retirement age.

Limiting school places

CHILDREN born in Hong Kong to mainlanders are entitled to the same 12 years of free education as local children. The number of cross-boundary students has doubled and continued to grow over the past five years. This has created a burden on the education system.

The Chief Executive has recently made his position known. He said that the booking of delivery places at hospitals by non-local women whose **spouses** are not Hong Kong permanent residents should be suspended in 2013. But before that, the government is taking steps to deal with the existing number of children born to mainland women who are crossing the border on a daily basis for school.

Since many of these children study in North District and Yuen Long, the Education Bureau will expand the capacity of six primary schools there. Meanwhile, Stephen Lam Sui-lung, a former secretary for constitutional and mainland affairs, said there are no plans to allow further intakes of any students

from North District or Yuen Long. Lam believes that school **quotas** would be the best limitation on Type II students.

However, this could bring other problems, according to Dr Law Chi-kwong, Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong. Dr Law said that limiting school places like this will **undermine** the education opportunities in Hong Kong for cross-border students, children whose mother or father is a Hong Kong resident, and even local children.

A balance is needed so that an increase in students will not burden our education system but will benefit the population in the long run. The government's top priority should be ensuring the quality of education for local students.