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WHEN I'M 64: THE AGING OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Family structures in Southeast Asia are changing, presaging a need for sound policies to cover its rapidly aging citizenry.

Once upon a time in traditional Asian countries, families were large. There was a logical explanation for this. There was a need to make financial provision for the family unit from birth until the end of life, with each family member occupying a defined position. While the job description may have been informal, the family structure itself was as unyielding as an old style corporation. But increasing prosperity and lifestyle changes have wrought change to the traditional family model.

Perspectives@SMU caught up recently with Professor Gavin Jones from the Global Asia Institute at the National University of Singapore during the SMU Forum on Ageing and Wellbeing of Older Persons in ASEAN Countries. Jones had been invited to comment on the relevance to Singapore policy of a recently completed study focused on the impact of aging populations in Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

While there are significant differences between Singapore, which is 100 per cent urban, and Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam, which are predominantly rural, he says there are still many points of reference and convergence.

But he provides an unsettling scenario in which 20 years from now, many of the elderly of the four countries will not have had any children because they never married. "And those who do have children will not necessarily be able to rely on them for care, because most will only have from one to three children," he says. Further, these children may well be living elsewhere or be part of the full-time workforce and thus unavailable to care intensively for their parents.

"Actually," he adds, "it is more the next cohort, those currently aged in their 50s, who will soon be moving into the elderly ages, and even more those currently in their 40s, who will face the impact of declining family size and, for quite a few, of not having any children of their own."

AGING DEMOGRAPHICS

The impact of an aging population has had the attention of the developed world for many years. But in Asia, where old traditions of family and filial loyalty have passed through many generations, policy makers have come late to the table. However, emphasises Jones, Singapore is well ahead of even Thailand in its aging policies and processes, and has gone further in preparing for it.

The rise in the aging demographic is something Singapore shares with Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam. By 2020, says Jones, 15 percent of Singapore's population will be aged over 65, while in Thailand it will be 12 percent, Myanmar seven percent, and Vietnam eight percent. By 2030, these figures are expected to rise to 23 percent in Singapore, 18 percent (Thailand), 10 percent (Myanmar) and 13 percent (Vietnam).

Interestingly, the "State of the Elderly in Singapore 2008/2009 Report" conducted by the Ministry of Social and Family Development reveals that the number of centenarians in Singapore rose from 230 in 2000 to 500 in 2007.

Jones' research findings reveal a surprising convergence between Singapore and the three countries. For example, gender matters. There are differences in the marital status of the elderly, with men far more likely to be married and women, widowed. In Vietnam, women's health may be poorer, but they live longer than men, which is similar to the situation in Singapore, says Jones.

One key issue cuts across national borders, he says of the concern over the adequacy of financial support in old age. Health care is another.

Childlessness is also a shared trend. In Thailand, 10 percent of those in their 50s are childless, while in Singapore, 17.5 percent are childless. However the childless also tend to be better educated, and have a higher income.

So what of the future?

VENTURING INTO THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Dr. John E. Knodel, who also spoke at the forum, is research professor emeritus at the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan, and an acknowledged authority on the impact of aging, especially in Southeast Asia. When it comes to policy development, Dr Knodel poses the following questions for strategists to consider:

- Will fewer but better educated adult children with increased incomes compensate for their smaller numbers?
- Will having fewer (or no) children permit future elderly to accumulate greater wealth for own support in old age?
- Will increasing retirement and welfare benefits of future elderly discourage children from giving material support?
- Will the improving health of older persons enable them to work and support themselves longer?
- How can families, communities and the state deal with the increased probability that no adult children are nearby when long-term personal care is needed?

In the "Elderly in Singapore" report mentioned earlier, 60 percent of the survey respondents disagreed with the proposition that aging is a very depressing stage of life. Interestingly, 18.2 percent of respondents agreed. Meanwhile on the lifestyle question, "As I grow older, I feel less stressed and worry less," 56.2 percent agreed, but 23.9 percent disagreed.

Possible signposts on the road well travelled, they indicate that strategists will always need to factor in a holistic approach to a country's aging citizenry.