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Whither our children of the future?

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The country's population is barely growing, and here is why it matters

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PETALING JAYA: Population loss in some districts and a slow rise in the number of residents in many states have put the brakes on the country's population growth.

According to the Statistics Department, Malaysia's population in 2020 stood at 32.4 million compared to 27.4 million in 2010, with an average annual growth of 1.7%, the lowest recorded since 1970.

The department's figures show Sarawak with the smallest rise in average annual population growth at 0.2%, followed by Perak (0.8%) and Sabah (0.9%).

Chief Statistician Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin said the country's population growth was being affected by a substantial decline in birth rates, higher death rates and slower growth in the number of non-citizens in most states, which declined from 6.3% in 2010 to 1.8% in 2020 due to the closure of international borders during the pandemic.

"The number of live births in 2020 dropped 0.4% from 491,239 in 2010 to 470,195 in 2020, the lowest number in a decade," he added.

Mohd Uzir said falling births have led to a decline in the country's overall Total Fertility Rate (TFR), a demographic indicator used to estimate

the average number of children a woman should give birth to during her reproductive period. (15-49 years).

Over the past decade, the TFR declined from 2.1 children in 2010 to 1.7 children in 2020.

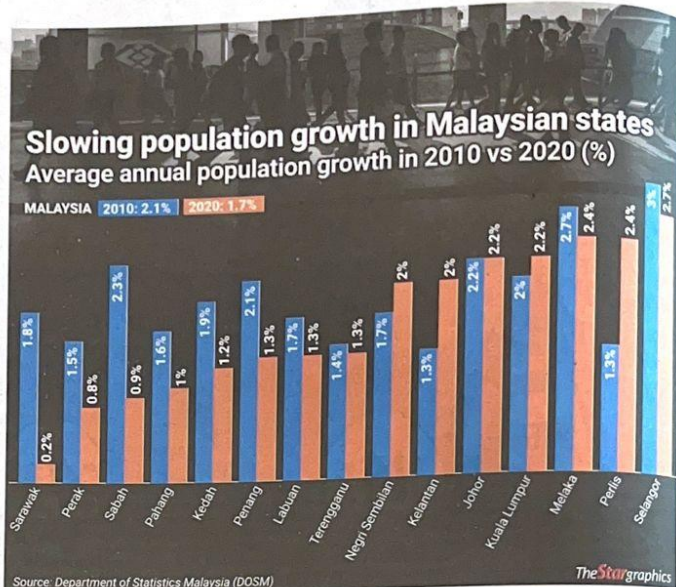
Mohd Uzir said the decline in the total fertility rate has occurred in every region of the world and is a result of a process known as demographic transition.

A demographic transition refers to the historical shift from high birth rates and high death rates in societies with minimal technology, education (especially of women) and economic development, to low birth rates and low death rates in societies with advanced technology, education and economic development.

"In order to maintain its population, ignoring migration, a country requires a minimum fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman," he said, noting that the number is slightly greater than 2 because not all children live to adulthood.

"Low fertility rates that cause long-term population decline can also lead to population ageing, an imbalance in the population age structure," he added.

Mohd Uzir said that women, among other reasons, have a tendency of having fewer children due to better access to education,



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which broadens their job prospects.

He added that the marriage age, which is also an important factor in controlling the population, has increased in recent years due to the change in attitudes towards economic issues such as rising living costs, housing, unemployment, and marriage.

He also said lower population growth at the state level has a direct impact on development, as the population size is used as a measure for distributing public funds and providing facilities at state, district, par-

liament and state-assembly constituency level.

"Education programmes, health-care, law enforcement and highways are apportioned based on an area's population, income, age, and other factors," he said, adding that equitably distributing the billions of ringgits of public money will be based on the latest population number.

Several districts in Sarawak, Perak, Sabah, Terengganu and Pahang are meanwhile, seeing declining populations.

The Sarawak district Song recorded the sharpest drop of -50.5% (-10,144 persons) population growth from 2010 to 2020, followed by Belaga (-36.2% or -12,745 persons) and Maradong (-29.3% or

-8,414 persons).

Overall, 18 out of 30 regrouped administrative districts in Sarawak recorded a lower population in 2020 compared to 2010, as well as nine districts in Sabah, three districts in Perak and one district each in Terengganu and Pahang.

Mohd Uzir said that the government needs to maintain the liveability of areas where the population is shrinking or where declines are forecast.

"The provincial and municipal authorities, with support from the central government, hold primary responsibility for tackling the consequences of population decline and demographic ageing," he added.

He urged state and federal authorities to work with housing associations, care institutions, active members of the community as well as businesses to tackle the problem.