

VIEWS



China and the World Roundtable | Three-Child Policy

Editor's Note: China is set to amend the Law on Population and Family Planning with the aim of making the three-child policy a success, and improve public services, particularly those related to childcare and eldercare, in order to ease the financial burden of couples and encourage them to have more children. Three experts share their views on the issue with China Daily:

Mu Guangzong

The importance of three-child policy

On July 20, the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council, China's Cabinet, issued a document announcing their decision to improve the family planning policy with the aim of balancing the country's population development in the long run.

The document proposed to amend the Law on Population and Family Planning to help make the new family planning policy, which allows all couples to have three children, a success. The amendment will include replacing the advice for couples to marry and have a child "at a later time" with the advice to marry and have a child "at the appropriate time".

The aim of the amendment is also to encourage couples to have three children, because the earlier a couple have the first child the more time they will get to prepare to have a second and a third child.

Statistics show that people are getting married (for the first time) and having their first child at an increasingly later age. In 2018, the median ages of first marriage and first child for women were 26.3 and 27.5 years, 4.7 years and 3.7 years later respectively compared with those in 1990. And they have been progressively postponing the age of marriage and childbirth thereby accelerating the decline in the fertility rate even without any external interventions.

This is a universal trend, though. But the trend needs to be reversed to ensure the



The author is a professor at the Institute of Population Research, Peking University.

balanced development of the population.

The document also says efforts will be made to develop a new marriage and childbearing culture that is conducive to promoting childbirth. It also emphasizes that people get married and have children at the appropriate time — that is between 20 to 34 years.

The later a couple marry the fewer children they will have — normally not more than one child. Which is much lower than the replacement level fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman, a rate at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next, without migration.

Yet couples have the right to decide the number of children they want to have. The State can only help ease their burden by providing them all the support it can.

At the same time, it is important that

the authorities take measures to help raise the ultra-low fertility rate up to the replacement level. And to overcome the aging population problem and maintain China's demographic dividends, the government needs to take special measures to encourage couples to have three children. Hence the government's key role in increasing the birth rate.

It is also important that the government discourage the "double-income, no-kid" trend, that is, both couples gainfully employed and yet deciding to not have any children. To help increase the fertility rate, therefore, access to abortion should be largely restricted, and care services improved. There is also a need to popularize sex education in schools, and encourage families to pass down such knowledge to their children.

Children can bring happiness to a family and support their aging parents when they grow up while contributing to the country's workforce and demographic dividend.

Given the low fertility rate in China, it is

the shared responsibility of families, the State and society to bear the costs of raising and educating children. Also, parents should encourage their grown-up children to get married and have children at the appropriate time, and the government should help them by taking supporting measures and subsidies, for example, by reducing the cost of educating and raising kids. It would also help to provide more day nurseries for new parents, extend the maternity leave, and eliminate gender discrimination in the workplace.

A healthy and young population is critical to the well-being of a society and the driving force of social development. Population is one of the three key elements that constitute a civilization, and a healthy fertility rate will facilitate healthy population development that in turn will help us realize the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Qiao Xinsheng

Amended law will help boost fertility rate

China is set to formulate laws to encourage all childbearing age couples to have three children. A draft amendment to the Law on Population and Family Planning will be submitted to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, later this month.

The seventh census results show the Chinese mainland's population has reached 1.41 billion, up 5.38 percent from 2010. Which means China still has the world's largest population. Official data also show Chinese people's education level continues to improve.

Although China still enjoys some demographic dividends thanks to its abundant labor force, its population is aging while the working age population and the numbers of newborns and women of childbearing age are declining. So it is imperative that China take measures to address the aging population problem. And the NPC's move to upgrade the population and family planning policy is part of such measures.

To begin with, China has stopped imposing fines on couples who have more than one child. In fact, the local government in Panzhihua has even decided to provide 500 yuan (\$77) each for families with local *hukou* (house registration) who have a second and third child till the children reach the age of three. The policy applies to babies born after June 12.

The city is the first in China to announce "baby bonus" following the further easing of the family planning policy on May 31 by the central government.

Probably, more cities will follow Panzhihua's example and offer some sort of allowance or subsidy to couples to have more children. To be sure, local governments will adopt more policies to boost the fertility rate in accordance with the amendment to the Law on Population and Family Planning.

The NPC is set to amend the law because the labor force, which plays a vital role in the country's development and urbanization, is declining. But one should remember that fertility rates tend to fall as a country becomes more economically developed — a phenomenon seen across developed countries. As such, the amended law needs to take into consideration ways to reduce the child-rearing costs, in a bid to raise the fertility rate.

The draft amendment will further stress the importance of improving prenatal and postnatal care services, guaranteeing pregnant women more social and employment benefits, and extended maternity leave to new mothers, which may encourage them to have three children.

The central government should also adopt a demographic policy that would make education, both academic and vocational, and training more affordable, in order to encourage couples to have more than one child. In fact, China will amend the laws on compulsory, vocational and higher education in a bid to reduce the education cost and thus ensure all children can have access to better education.

China is also likely to formulate policies to promote preschool education, for which it may ask local governments to build more kindergartens. In July, China decided to ban private tutoring institutes from providing for-profit tutoring for students and asked primary and middle schools to offer special after-school classes and activities, including helping kids to complete homework, and attend arts and reading classes and sports programs.

Besides, China will provide free maternity care, and use technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data to boost the development of maternity and child health services. It will also strengthen the legal system to better protect the rights of women and children, while formulating other policies in accordance with the amended family planning law.

Some say the raising of the fertility rate will increase the already heavy insurance burden on the government. But without a replacement level fertility rate, China will continue to see a decline in the size of its labor force. And since labor is a key factor of production, a declining labor force could affect its productivity.

A country such as China can create more wealth by raising the fertility rate and ensuring all children have equal access to good education. It is wrong to think that the scarcity of natural resources can be counterbalanced by controlling population growth, because a country can more efficiently allocate resources by improving education quality and innovation capacity.

Surely, the NPC will consider all these factors and seek different opinions before amending the family planning law to make it more comprehensive in line with demands of the times.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



The author is a professor at the law school at the Zhongnan University of Economics and Law.

Stuart Gietel-Basten

More than money needed to help families grow

When people think about Panzhihua in Sichuan province, the first thing that springs to mind is mining, iron and steel. Yet the city made headlines for a very different reason recently: it became one of the very first places in China to offer "baby bonuses" to couples that have a second or a third child.

The local government has offered parents of a newly born second (and third) child a monthly allowance of 500 yuan (\$77) per child up to the age of three. The only condition is that the parents should have local house registration (*hukou*). Over three years, the amount would add up to 18,000 yuan per child. Families would also be able to access free maternity care in local hospitals, and State-owned enterprises have been urged to improve and expand their childcare services.

The central government and other local governments will be eagerly watching Panzhihua to see if the policy has had any positive effect. Perhaps the number of births will increase, prompting the authorities to replicate the baby bonus policy elsewhere. But caution needs to be taken.

When trying to evaluate policies designed to encourage childbirths, demographers consider two factors — what we call "quantum" and "tempo". Quantum means the total number of children born while tempo means when they are born. Policies, such as those introduced in Panzhihua, aim to change the quantum. In other words, they try to con-

vince people with one or two children to have another, thus increasing the total number of babies born.

However, when we look at other places around the world where such baby bonuses have been introduced (such as in Russia), we find that the majority of couples who had children after the policy was announced were planning to have them anyway. All the policy did was change the tempo. In this sense, the policies do not really affect the total number of children born.

So why don't baby bonus policies around the world make a difference to quantum? Partly because of the relatively small contribution of such bonuses to the real cost of running a family, more precisely, raising a child. The high costs of housing, especially in the context of a challenging job market, are a key issue in "starting out in life".

The direct costs associated with child-bearing and child-rearing are also critical. One factor which is regularly cited is the financial, and psychological, burden of providing the "best" education for children, which often means enrolling the child in after-school tutoring classes and other extra-curricular activities.

In 2018, the Chinese Society of Education estimated that Chinese parents spend an average of 120,000 yuan a year on after-school tutoring for their children. Compare the figure to the amount offered as a baby bonus by the Panzhihua local government. To take it to an extreme, one-on-one one-hour-a-day



The author is a professor of social science and public policy at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

tutoring classes in Beijing could cost 3,000 yuan a month. In other words, six months of the baby bonus would "buy" private tutoring for just one subject for just one month.

That's why the recent clamping down on private tutoring announced by the central government may be a more significant factor in shaping family formation in the future than any baby bonus.

But money is not the only factor in influencing couples' decision to have children. It is widely known that there are multiple barriers to starting a family, let alone adding another member to the family in China, or elsewhere. As a result of the huge changes in society in recent years, younger people in China have very different expectations from their parents in terms of how they want to live their lives and, importantly, to capitalize on the very high level of education they have received.

However, as women are still expected to shoulder the majority of the domestic, childcare as well as eldercare

responsibilities (elderly parents and in-laws), they are disproportionately penalized both in the workplace and at home. Employers remain largely indifferent to the challenges of being working parents and, in the worst cases, persist with their discriminatory practices. This means the potential damage to desired lifestyles and career trajectories — what economists refer to as the "opportunity cost" of childbearing — has never been higher.

Countries around the world which have recognized individual aspirations, and sought to help families overcome the associated challenges, have been rewarded with not only more favorable demographic characteristics, but also happier, more contented citizens and families.

So many younger Chinese women (and men) are finding the whole "marriage and family package" less appealing, and reasonably limiting the "damage" by having fewer and fewer children. Despite this, surveys continuously tell us that they have not given up on the idea of getting married and having children.

Under these conditions, policies which simply aim to "increase fertility rates" without recognizing and addressing the underlying reasons for couples' hesitation may be destined to fail, or, at most, be an expensive means of simply changing the tempo of childbearing.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.