

Fewer babies no cause for panic

Regarding the April 17 editorial, “Japan’s depopulation time bomb”: So much fuss has been made in the news media about the declining birthrate that it would be easy to mistake it for an impending disaster. Despite the pressure on an overburdened pension system, perhaps Japan should be looking further into the future. In a country that does not even produce enough food domestically to support its own population, could fewer babies really be so bad?

A local axiom is that “Japan is a small country.” This is demonstrably untrue. It is much larger than most European, Central American and African nations. At 127 million, Japan boasts the tenth-largest population in the world. Yet Japan must import much of its food, fuel and other commodities.

Estimates have the population dropping to under 100 million in the next 30 years. A smaller population in such a crowded space means more resources to go around. Japan will not have too few people in the future — it has too many today.

Yet septuagenarian politicians continue to scratch their gray heads and ask how to boost the birthrate. When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging. Yes, there will be painful days ahead, but it may be time to look at ways to achieve a more equitable balance. Bonuses and allowances are being cut, making it hard enough for the average worker to make ends meet, let alone to bear and raise the much-needed children of the future or pay for the growing army of retirees.

Moreover, millions of housewives over the years have paid taxes and insurance out of their husband’s salaries, but haven’t worked themselves. With incentives to keep talented women in the workforce during and after child-rearing, the country can capitalize on its human potential in a way it has not done to date.

Making better use of the people available can be just as good as making more people.

Changing demographics can benefit the nation in other ways. The tragic tsunami of 2011 destroyed whole villages and towns along a large stretch of coastline. Many of these communities will never be rebuilt. Instead they may have to be amalgamated into larger regional centers and see the land turned over to agriculture or industry. This is an opportunity to rethink future models for environmental, economic and social reform — models that could be transplanted to other ailing areas of the country.

In other words, there's no need to panic. Declining birthrates are a natural progression in developed, wealthy nations. Japan needs to think now about how to manage its human resources not just to cope with the coming change but also to capitalize on it.

It is impossible to go back to the "good old days" of high birthrates and stay-at-home moms. Leaders must plan for Japan's actual future instead of dwelling on a romantic vision of the past.

The opinions expressed in this letter to the editor are the writer's own and do not necessarily reflect the policies of The Japan Times.

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