Malaysia’s initiatives for sustainable family development

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The Malaysian 2010 Population and Housing Census shows that the multi-ethnic population of Malaysia was approximately 28.3 million as compared to 23.3 million in 2000, growing at an average of 2 per cent per year for the period 2000-2010. Changing demographic trends have led to major changes in family structure and size.

The number of households/families has been increasing steadily over the last two decades. It is estimated that there were 6.4 million households/families in Malaysia in 2010, compared to 3.5 million in 1991 and 4.8 million in 2000. Extended families have become progressively less common. In contrast, the proportion of nuclear families has increased from 60 to 65 per cent during the same period and is estimated to be 70 per cent in 2010. The average family size also declined from 4.92 in 1991 to 4.62 in 2000, and further declined to 4.31 in 2010. This decline is partly due to the lowering of the total fertility rate as a result of delayed marriage and the increased participation of women in the labour force.

In the 1990s and the early years of the millennium, Malaysia experienced rapid industrialization, urbanization and economic development. Family well-being in Malaysia has been affected, positively or negatively, by development. Currently, Malaysian families face many challenges as a consequence of the changes in their structure and dynamics, the increase in the proportion of nuclear families, the need to balance family and career, family relationships and changing lifestyles. Adaptations will have to be made in areas such as childcare and care of the elderly and the infirm, so as not to lose the family support system.

As such, a strong family unit inculcated with positive family values, shared responsibility among family members and a strong marriage institution will continue to be the priority of the Government’s development agenda. Under the Tenth Malaysia Plan period (2011-2015), parenting knowledge and skills will be strengthened to support the needs of young couples and ensure an optimum work-life balance environment for Malaysian working parents.

Various initiatives to strengthen the family institution have been undertaken by the Government of Malaysia through the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFC). Through its agency, the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB), the MWFC has formulated, developed and implemented policies and programmes such as the National Family Policy, 1Malaysia Family First (1MF1st) and 1Malaysia Youth Empowerment and Support (1MYes) programmes, One-Stop Family Centres, and family education programmes such as the Strengthening of Marriage Institution (SmartStart pre-marriage programme), Parenting@Work, Smart Belanja@Lppkn (family financial management programme), KASHI Parenting Modules and counselling services.

To ensure sustainable family development, the National Family Policy (NFP) and its accompanying plan of action was launched in March 2011 and implemented by the NPFDB in partnership with other ministries, departments and related non-government organizations (NGOs). The aim of this explicit policy is to develop prosperous, healthy and resilient families to ensure social stability. The NFP is a key policy that focuses on aspects of family well-being.
and development, providing direction for the development of family-friendly programmes and services for nurturing healthy and resilient families in line with the aspirations of Vision 2020. The policy advocates the concept of family well-being and work-life balance based on family values such as caring, honesty, respect, commitment, responsibility, justice and equity regardless of status, gender and age. The implementation of the NFP is based on the following three strategic thrusts and will be undertaken by all stakeholders to ensure the development of strong, resilient families and quality human capital imbued with exemplary values:

- increase the commitment and involvement of various stakeholders to prioritize 'family perspectives' in all socioeconomic development efforts
- ensure that laws, policies, procedures and the enforcement of laws and regulations prioritize family perspectives
- ensure that programmes, services and family-friendly facilities are accessible.

The Government of Malaysia has adopted innovative and creative strategies through the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS) initiative, which is the brainchild of Malaysia’s Prime Minister, Dato’ Sri Mohd. Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, to enhance public sector services and programme delivery. Through this strategy, it encourages the participation of the public, private and people (3Ps) in ensuring national development. The 3Ps approach involves the partnership of multiple stakeholders such as the government, civil society and civil society organizations in ensuring that the present and future generation is more peaceful, secure, tolerant, prosperous and sustainable. This collaboration and commitment will lead to high impact achievement, low cost and rapid execution of government programmes and services which cut across boundaries and silos and emphasizes the ‘People First, Performance Now’ concept.

Among the initiatives under NBOS, the 1MF1st and 1MYes movements have been implemented under the ambit of the NFP, in recognition of the integral role the family plays in nation-building and development and to further ensure work-family life balance. In order to ensure accessibility to family services and to support young couples in early family life, family and marriage counselling services have been expanded in government service centres such as 1Malaysia Family Centres, Urban Transformation Centres and Rural Transformation Centres.

In 2012, the Prime Minister declared November as National Family Month, underlining the nation’s commitment towards the important role of the family and its recognition that the family is the pillar of society. Among the incentives given under Family Month is 100 per cent tax exemption to any company for expenditure incurred in organizing family activities for employees.

Another initiative under NBOS is the Mobile Community Transformation Centre (CTC) aimed at bringing basic government services such as family health services to rural and remote communities. This is in line with the Government’s aspiration to enhance the quality of life and family well-being of its peoples. These basic services are fundamental in bringing social transformation to rural areas, as well as inculcating a sense of well-being and togetherness in the nation-building process among people.
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who live far away from mainstream development. The Mobile CTC focuses on the cooperation and collaboration of various agencies by consolidating government resources from various departments and agencies in one concerted effort for the people, especially those living in rural areas.

Family education programmes aimed at building stable, healthy, happy and harmonious families have been implemented since the early 1990s. The KASH Family Development Module Package consists of five key modules based on the family life cycle. It focuses on enhancing knowledge and skills for marriage preparation and developing a strong foundation for marriage; enhancing the parenting skills of fathers in shaping their children’s development; parenting of young children; parenting of adolescents and adolescent development.

Recognizing the increasing participation of women in the labour force and the increase in dual career families, concrete steps have been taken to create awareness and provide knowledge and skills to parents on the importance as well as the need to balance work and family. Therefore the Parenting@Work programme, conducted at the workplace, was launched in 2007 to provide guidance on parenting skills, ensure stable and resilient family units and to equip families to face modern-day challenges and work-life balance issues. Since its implementation, more than 500 workshops have been conducted with the involvement of over 20,000 participants. The programme was conducted at the workplace to increase male participation in family and parenting programmes.

The institution of marriage is the core and foundation for the formation of strong families in Malaysia. Strengthening the family unit from the early stages can provide a strong and solid foundation for the development of human capital among the younger generation. Realizing this, in 2006 Malaysia developed a SmartStart Package (a guide for newlyweds) as part of its efforts to help newlyweds successfully deal with the trials and tribulations of married life, as well as to strengthen and improve their relationships. This
package serves as a roadmap to a lasting and happy marriage. It contains valuable information, tips and advice for young couples in seven key areas: marriage preparation; marriage; family health; pregnancy and childbirth; parenthood; managing family resources; and managing stress and conflict.

Skills and knowledge on financial and expenditure management are important in order to achieve financial stability and harmonious family life. Realizing this, the NPFDB introduced a family financial management programme called SMARTBelanja@LPPKN in 2009. This programme is implemented in collaboration with the Credit Management and Counselling Agency (an agency under the Central Bank of Malaysia) and NGOs as one of the strategies to help families plan their expenditure wisely. Since its inception, 37 programmes have been implemented benefitting more than 1,490 participants.

The introduction of the National Policy on Reproductive Health and Social Education and its Action Plan in November 2009 has paved the way for increased access to reproductive health education, information and services for adolescents and youth, stressing religious and ethical values as well as responsible behaviours. A major milestone under this policy has been the integration of reproductive health and social education in the National Service Training curriculum in 2011, which covers more than 100,000 school leavers each year.

Fifty-eight One-Stop Family Centres have been established throughout the country to offer family support services and programmes such as counselling, therapy, reproductive health services, adolescent psychosexual development, and family education and training.

Another significant development by the MWFCD is the 1 AZAM programme (AZAM is an acronym for ending poverty). This is an initiative to lift low-income households out of poverty. Since it was launched in 2010, more than 63,000 households have been provided with various forms of assistance such as jobs, life skills training and entrepreneur guidance.

One of the best ways to ensure balance and harmony between work and family is through the implementation of family-friendly workplace policies and practices. To assist and support working families, the Government of Malaysia has encouraged ministries and government departments as well as the private sector to establish childcare centres at workplaces that will provide support to working parents and enable them to advance further in their careers. A one-off RM200,000 launching grant incentive is given to government agencies to establish childcare centres at the workplace. For the private sector, a 10 per cent tax exemption is given on the cost of building the childcare centres for a period of 10 years. Further, a monthly subsidy of RM180 for each child sent to these childcare centres is given to civil servants with a monthly total household income of less than RM5,000.

Pregnancy and early childcare are challenging times for working women and their families. In order to strike a balance between work and family, female government employees are given the flexibility of 60-90 days of maternity leave, subject to a maximum of 300 days throughout their service. Male employees in the public sector are given seven-day paternity leave to take care of their wife and newborn child, compared to the three days previously given. This is one of the initiatives to increase male involvement in family matters. As for the private sector, a number of multinational companies have started providing 90-day maternity leave for their female employees. This initiative was also implemented by locally-owned banks with the signing of a collective agreement between the banks and the National Union of Bank Employees in 2010.

Families constantly face new pressures and challenges due to rapid industrialization, modernization and globalization. Realizing that the well-being of the family is the primary goal in the development of the country, the MWFCD, through the NPFDB, has pioneered the development of the Malaysian Family Well-being Index. Developed in 2010, the index comprises seven domains that cover key family well-being components, namely family relationships, family economy, family health, family and community, family religion, family and safety, and housing and environment. The index measures the subjective well-being of families. Currently, the Malaysian Family Well-being Index score is 7.55 out of 10, indicating that Malaysian families have a relatively high level of well-being and are able to manage the challenges of development. Data for the index will be collected every three to five years, to enable the monitoring of the well-being of families and to suggest or provide directions for the development of family-friendly policies, programmes and services.

The MWFCD, through the NPFDB, has implemented numerous programmes and services to ensure sustainable family development and strong, stable families. Through these key initiatives, it is envisaged that the realization of a caring society, quality population and progressive Malaysian nation will be realized.

![Malaysia's Family Well-being Index, 2010](image-url)