

‘We must think beyond Korean Peninsula to solve population problem’



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Even though the government has spent nearly 280 trillion won over the past 18 years, the result has still been a disastrous fertility rate of 0.74. On July 1, 2024, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety announced the establishment of the Ministry of Population Strategy and Planning as a control tower that encompasses all population policies, including not only low birth rates but also responses to an aging society and labor force and immigration (Korea Policy Briefing (www.korea.kr)). The ministry also announced it would change the Premier of Social Affairs from the Ministry of Education to the Minister of Population Strategy and Planning so that they can oversee all planning, budget allocation and evaluation of implementation. However, the current state of national emergency has rendered these plans opaque.

In fact, governments have repeatedly attempted to address social issues and national crises with control towers and reactive policies that “lock the barn door after the horse is out,” with little success. Such crises are more likely to be successfully solved if they are included as priorities in the national agenda and reorganization plan when a new government takes office.

Unfortunately, the issue of the low birth rate and local demographic decline has been largely neglected in the midst of the climate crisis, ideological conflicts and rapid social transitions. Of course, it is also obvious that when 300 trillion won of the budget has been spent, the issue has not exactly been neglected. So what exactly is the problem?

The biggest culprits are the nonprofessionals, careerists and cronies who appear on committees after every regime change. This is the talent pool of special presidential committees, ministerial committees, local government committees, etc., that are filled with cronies. These people are absolutely loyal to the president and those who appointed them. They have no expertise, no convictions,

no knowledge of social justice or global trends, and no desire to know either. They are there for the high salaries, the ceremony and the foreign trips.

If the control tower is properly equipped in the future, I propose it should look at policies for the 7.5 million overseas Koreans as a possible breakthrough to the current problems of the low birth rate and local depopulation. In fact, overseas Koreans are people who have made a life for themselves through competition in their respective countries and are active in various fields and integrated into mainstream society. In addition, the human resources associated with the Korean diaspora are directly or indirectly involved in issues, such as connections with their countries' local populations, multicultural families and multinational businesses.

In fact, it is the compatriots who provide the right information abroad and play a crucial role in settlement and local business. In addition, these human assets can always return to their home country at any time and create positive synergies through economic activities. If compatriots are economically active in Korea, it will help improve the government's financial situation through tax revenues, health insurance premiums and income taxes. In addition, lowering the age for multiple citizenship from the current 65 years old to 40 years old will ease the burden of military service for young Koreans, as military service obligations under the Military Service Act end at 40 years old and can be a powerful motivator for economic activity in their homeland.

Korea is a country where people are important. Therefore, we need to increase the incentives for talented people scattered around the world to return to Korea. Regulatory reforms must be carried out in parallel to ensure that overseas Korean talent has an incentive to return to Korea. As it is now, overseas talents will not come if there are many unnecessary regulations and high tax burdens that scare away overseas investors.

I hope the Overseas Koreans Agency, which was launched in June 2023, will play such a role. However, as an agency in charge of enforcement at the vice-ministerial level, it has limitations. But it could play an important role in solving the population problem if it were to become the main agency of a control tower, such as the Population Strategy and Planning Division, in charge of immigration and compatriot-related projects and tasks.

Now is a great time for K-pop, K-culture and other Korean trends to be recognized and spread around the world. As the descendants of Goguryeo, which ruled over the vast Northeast Asia with great skill and ambition, the global K-community has the world as its home and stage of activity. Big thinking and bold challenges are urgently needed. 🇰🇷

* The contributor's claims or opinions may differ from the position of the Overseas Koreans Agency.