

FOR the Rukun Tetangga scheme to be effective, there must be greater interaction among the various ministries, according to a researcher.

Universiti Putra Malaysia social anthropologist Dr Sarjit S. Gill said the National Unity and Integration Department, which oversees the RT programme, should be upgraded into a ministry.

Sarjit, who did a study on the effectiveness of RTs in promoting unity and neighbourliness among city folk, said there was little evidence of interaction among the ministries in promoting the aims of the RT programme.

"RTs should work closely with the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, Youth and Sports Ministry, Education Ministry, to name just a few.

"And these ministries should collaborate with each other to make RT more effective."

The main problem, he said, was red tape at the ministries.

More often than not, officials only focus on executing duties in areas they see as their prerogative.

There have been many instances where they shrug their shoulders and point to other ministries, departments or agencies, saying the problem at hand is not under their scope of duty.

"Of course there are always exceptions. There are still those who

Lost in a maze of red tape

would go out of their way to help people," said Sarjit.

For the RT programme to achieve its objectives, among which is to safeguard the interests of the community it serves and promote unity, he said the government needed to give more power to the National Unity and Integration Department. This includes turning it into a ministry.

He feels the concept of RT is crippled because it has been politicised.

"It is controlled by a group of politicians from a particular party. When you have politicians as leaders, the result is that it alienates others from the scheme.

"There is a need to set a demarcation line between politics and RT. It should be inclusive, not exclusive."

He said to know what was really happening on the ground, the government should approach the RTs

instead of academicians.

"RT mem-

bers live in the area, they know more about what is going on, they have a clearer picture. The department cannot depend on the academics. The academics would only spend a few days in the area and conduct random surveys, they don't have the in-depth story."

He said members of the RT should be empowered to conduct research.

"The RT can help in setting up a database, and the ministry can use the database to identify the racial hotspots nationwide."

(The high-risk areas currently stands at 218).

"Members of Parliament should work hand-in-hand with the RTs."

The importance of understanding each other's culture is vital in promoting unity. The lack of awareness of each other's cultural beliefs among Malaysian politicians, for instance, has led to gaffes being highlighted in the media.

"If the politicians really understand each other's beliefs, they would not do things which offend others."

RTs also need to attract more young members.

"When you have an RT chairman who has served in that position for 15 years, that's too long.. They should set a limit, say, three or five years. They can have a rotation system to give others a chance," said Sarjit.

He feels the younger generation should be given a chance to take charge.

"This is where the Mat Rempits and youth problems occur, because they are not given the chance to prove their worth.

"If we don't give them the chance now, when is the right time?"

There are currently 3,974 RT bases nationwide, with 1,246 voluntary patrol schemes comprising over 100,000 members.

"The question is, do we need that many RTs? Is it a good thing or is that an indication that we are in trouble?"

"Does it show that we are not paying enough attention to securing the safety of our people? In my opinion, the numbers show that there is a problem with regards to safety and race relations," Sarjit said.

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*Dr Sarjit Gill,
social anthropologist*

