

Helping self-help groups

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THE Government's decision to increase its matching grant to the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), the Eurasian Association (EA) and the Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda) reveals the self-help groups' continuing importance in complementing official efforts to ensure that no ethnic community falls behind on the national road to progress. Malay self-help groups Yayasan Mendaki and the Association of Muslim Professionals and other Malay-Muslim organisations were not cited in the latest move because the matching grant for them was raised earlier this year.

Matching grants play a crucial role in furthering the work of all these groups. The Government's intervention helps to redress the imbalance caused by the different sizes of the communities. Recognising that smaller communities face greater constraints in raising funds, it correspondingly is more generous in the funding approach which it adopts and in the quantum of the help that it provides.

The move by the CDAC, the EA and Sinda to revise individual monthly contribution rates to their funds thus should be seen in the light of a national imperative that requires the support of citizens as much as the State to sustain valuable programmes even as the groups' outreach expands.

Some Singaporeans greeted the inauguration of the self-help-group scheme with dismay because it appeared to underscore the racial aspect of community needs instead of focusing on educational and other needs across the races. There were also concerns that the scheme might encourage Singaporeans to think along racial lines because it called on members of each community to help the disadvantaged within that community.

However, the scheme has earned its keep because it is realistic. Members of a community are more likely than others outside it to know the specific kinds of problems besetting the community. Likewise, leaders involved with the self-help groups are more likely to appreciate the cultural resources they can draw on, and be aware of the cultural sensitivities within which they must work. And the work of the groups should not necessarily sharpen racial consciousness because of the overall effort to reinforce the national consciousness of being Singaporean.

Today, the self-help groups have become household names whose records are judged not by the old concerns but by new expectations of how well they look after the most vulnerable segments of the community. The individual contributions under the revised rates will help improve the reach and depth of schemes that have proved their worth. At the end of the day, rising tides in every community will raise the Singapore boat as a whole.