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Give the National Social Service a chance to prove its worth

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AFTER much debate over the need and advantages of having a national service programme, the National Social Service project was launched last Monday by Youth and Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

With the primary aim of combating social ills among youths, the programme kicked off with a month-long nationwide pilot project involving 1,000 post-Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia students randomly selected by State Education Departments.

They have been assembled at 20 designated centres, including State youth and sports complexes, and training centres of government departments and agencies in all States and Labuan.

A total of 80 specially-trained instructors will conduct courses of skills and management training, talent building, adventure, recreation, and career guidance.

At the end of each course, the trainers are required to submit reports to the ministry on the participants' response to the programme. The ministry will also collect feedback from parents on the behaviour of their children after the course.

Although the number of participants is small and the project is costing the Government some RM1.5 million, it will serve as a test for the NSS concept and provide the ministry with a clearer perspective before it is fully implemented later.

At the pilot project's launching at the Kampung Pandan Youth and Sports Complex, Muhyiddin said the reason for having a "test run" was to identify weaknesses in the programme and rectify them before full implementation.

He said the programme had to be studied carefully because it involved complicated issues such as huge costs and logistic problems.

For that reason, the ministry had set up a committee to monitor the progress of the programme and make recommendations for improvements.

The programme's initial objective is to include youths who are waiting for the SPM results in character development activities. About 300,000 to 400,000 students complete their Form Five each year.

This would occupy the youths during their spare time and keep them busy so that they will not indulge in socially unhealthy activities.

The NSS programme was proposed in February last year by the ministry after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed concern over the social ills pervading our youths.

Dr Mahathir also spoke about the possibility of introducing programmes similar to the national service for school-leavers.

With the number of youth-related criminal cases of rape, murder, drug trafficking, vandalism, prostitution and abandoning of babies on the increase, the Government sees a need to conduct special development courses to keep the youths on the right track.

Yet the announcement on the setting up of the NSS was not without scepticism. Uncertain initially of the programme's content and dynamics, some people doubted the effectiveness of the programme to curb social ills.

When it was earlier believed that the programme would be made compulsory to all school leavers, critics pointed out that compulsory national service might aggravate the shortage of workers.

It was suggested that the programme should include stints in local companies to equip youths with technical skills which will prepare them

for the job market.

Some even commented that the programme would be a waste of taxpayers' money.

In April last year, Johor Baru MP Mohd Khaled Nordin said the problem of discipline among school-leavers was not severe enough to warrant such a programme.

Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang said last year it was inappropriate to address social problems after youths had left school since the most suitable time "to deal with the root cause of social ills was during character-building in schools".

Furthermore, questions were raised about how the programme would operate vis-a-vis the much publicised Rakan Muda programme.

Given the altruistic aims of the NSS and the supposed failures of previous youth programmes, it would seem that the criticisms and scepticism are justified.

Yet the NSS should be given a chance to develop and try to achieve those aims.

Muhyiddin said to ensure its success the NSS would be expanded gradually.

He said the ministry would assess the pilot project and consider expanding the intake next year to between 5,000 and 10,000.

But even if it succeeds to cater for all school-leavers in the country, the NSS should not be seen as the answer to all the social ills affecting the youths.

Real success depends on the ability of the NSS to fit into a more comprehensive effort to eradicate social ills at all levels through education and counselling.

It must also be noted that the root cause of most socially destructive behaviour is the breakdown in the family system.

Thus, before any age-specific problem-remedial programmes could function effectively, the family structure should be saved first.

Should these efforts on a general scale fail, the NSS would only prove ineffective and add to the long list of failed social programmes.

But the writer must put on record that unlike other hasty quick-fix youth programmes which were introduced in the past but only to be scrapped later, the ministry had planned the NSS quite well.

Last Friday, Muhyiddin announced that a task force chaired by the ministry's youth director-general, Raja Roslan Raja Samah, had been set up to improve the programme in the future.

Given time, effort and proper planning, the NSS should be able to achieve its objectives.

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