

03/09/2000

Forging a better deal for youths

Rosihan Zain

IN Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein's office, there is a picture of two youths who seem to look every bit like the skateboarders you see pounding the street corners of Kuala Lumpur every weekend with their wheels.

One of them sports a bright yellow jersey and wears the badge of today's counterculture look - a neatly trimmed goatee.

The other, however, has a face that is remarkably familiar to the public. It is Hishammuddin himself, looking comfortable in a loose windbreaker and a cap turned back-to-front for good effect.

"The skateboarders are some of the people who tell me they feel neglected," said the 39-year old minister whose meeting with the city's skateboarders was just one of the many missions he has undertaken to meet youths from all walks of life.

"Yet, I was informed by visiting American skateboarders that our boys are very skilful. So what do we do now?"

What Hishammuddin did was to immediately get in touch with the City Hall Datuk Bandar Tan Sri Kamaruzzaman Shariff and both are now in the look-out for a suitable site to provide city kids with a safe and well-built facility on which they can practise their soaring 360 flips and ollies.

Since coming into office in November last year, Hishammuddin and his team have been busy revamping the Ministry's flagship youth programme - Rakan Muda. The task was to ensure that the RM11.5 million Rakan Muda fund, established since 1994, was effectively used to address the needs of today's youths.

Now, with the unveiling of the revamped Rakan Muda due this September, the Ministry expects to fund ideas and activities which are fresh and contemporary, encompassing every sphere of youth interest such as sports, music, arts, volunteerism or new technologies.

Yet, Hishammuddin understands the need to keep up with the rapid changes affecting the youth's world and is widening the Ministry doors for youths themselves to step forward with their own proposals.

"Nothing should be misconcieved as taboo, and nothing will be pre-judged as negative in the Rakan Muda we are promoting," said Hishammuddin.

"Provided, of course, the youths can prove to me that what they want is a positive development."

Like an attentive suburban dad, the Ministry is getting to grips with youth interest which has grown beyond traditional sporting activities to comparatively newer phenomenon like in-line skating, BMX-riding, street soccer, and street hockey.

While giving city youths their street sports, the Ministry has not forgotten those in rural outskirts such as the many living in Felda settlements across the country. The ideal solution for those in the outback: motorsports events.

As Hishammuddin plainly puts it: "In the Felda scheme, every young man has access to a motorcycle. There should be more motorsports activities rather than let them ride around without helmets heading nowhere, and for lack of activities turn to unhealthy activities like drugs or falling prey to hate."

Hate. An ugly word that the Government has been struggling to understand with the recent rise of political consciousness across the country. At the time of the interview, the Al-Maunah crackdown was still fresh, and the Ministry was made even more aware of the political minefield youths are

being drawn into.

For a Ministry largely entrusted to be responsible of youth development, it is by no means an easy task producing a healthy environment for youth activities to flourish. Especially, considering that latest figures show there are 9.8 million youths in the country (defined as those between the ages of 15 and 40).

"I have to admit candidly, for the first time ever to a national newspaper, that this ministry is considered very junior. But today, the perception is changing," said Hishammuddin.

"Never in the history of this country that so much focus has been given to youth development and problems associated with the youth. Unfortunately, I am the one appointed to be in-charge!" he said, breaking into cheerful laughter.

The problem of providing a suitable environment to develop youths, however, has been made more difficult with the inactive state of youth movements in the country.

Two months ago, while addressing the annual general meeting of the Malaysian Youth Council, Hishammuddin made a startling revelation that only 39 per cent of over 8,000 youth groups in Malaysia were active.

This translates into a membership of 415,956 - a dismal figure, when set against the total 9.8 million youths. The Ministry has ascertained that there are some 4.7 million youths who have yet to register with any youth group, active or otherwise.

The 4.7 million figure now represents the target group the Ministry hopes it can attract into youth organisations.

In the case of the inactive youth groups, several problems identified with as its cause include weak leadership, unappealing activities, lack of funds and even the lacklustre image youth groups have in the eyes of the public.

Hishammuddin's calls for an empowerment of the youth movement, has led the MYC president Saifudin Abdullah to introduce a nine-pointer plan known as MYC Focus aimed at achieving a strategic and workable plan to address the short-term problems of inactive youth groups.

Among others, the MYC Focus seeks to review present approaches and mechanisms to ensure the voice and needs of youths are better heard - a contentious issue for the many youths who feel estranged from the existing framework.

Also called for is the setting up of research and development work and initiatives for to establish education and development schemes for youths.

"We are looking at ways to beef up the Ministry, and find new ways to cope with public expectations. One such initiative, which has gained the support of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is the setting up of a Cabinet committee to look into youth-related problems," Hishammuddin added.

The Cabinet committee would also include representatives from the various ministries working with youths such as the Education, Entrepreneur Development, Rural Development and also National Unity and Social Development ministries.

The seriousness of the Government at tackling youth issues has also prompted the reactivation of the National Youth Consultative Council, which was dormant for the past two years.

Changes to the revived council includes an ammended constitution to enable the participation of non-governmental organisations, particularly non-Muslim and women-based organisations, and even opposition political parties.

The council's main task now would be to draw up a better framework and policies towards longer-term objectives. This could also possibly lead to

a restudy of the current National Youth Development Policy, which was last reviewed in 1997. It is believed that the MYC has since submitted a 63 point recommendation on the national youth policy.

* The stigma of politics and youth: Page 25

(END)