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NGOs need public funds for their programmes

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THE Budget 2003 unveiled by Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Parliament on Sept 20 has generally been well received by all Malaysians although some would have expected more from it.

It is in many ways a generous and caring budget with proposals to help students of poor families, single mothers, women and family development, senior citizens, the sick and the disabled, as well as the small- and medium industry operators.

The Budget focuses on increasing domestic investment, developing small and medium-scale industries, reducing the cost of doing business and giving special rewards to the best national exporters.

The lowering of corporate tax from 28 per cent to 20 per cent for only SMIs would help to promote domestic-led growth in the country.

Tax savings of eight per cent amounting to RM8,000 based on the first RM100,000 of chargeable income will benefit some 34,000 SMIs.

What is significant about the Budget speech is Dr Mahathir's statement that government efforts will not only focus on increasing wealth but also enhancing moral values.

Herein lies the importance of our educational institutions and family development. Our education system should be regularly monitored to ensure schools and universities play an important role in enhancing moral values and fostering unity and understanding to address issues like racial polarisation and poor interaction among students of different races.

On women and family development, an amount of RM99.1 million has been allocated for next year, a 68 per cent jump over this year's figure.

I hope more quality programmes will be implemented to strengthen family institutions to cope with the challenging task of bringing up children and addressing social ills confronting our youths and teenagers.

Providing more financial assistance to primary schoolchildren of poor families in the form of a one-off allocation of RM120 a year to buy uniforms and other items besides the RM470 annual allocation for each primary school pupil under the food supplement and textbooks loan programme is a step in the right direction. The one-off allocation of RM120 in cash should be converted into vouchers to ensure there is no abuse or misuse.

I also welcome the Government's move to ensure some 130,000 single mothers earning less than RM600 a month are given priority to own low-cost houses.

The proposed allocation of almost a billion ringgit for public low-cost housing projects to address the needs of the low-income groups is most timely and will contribute towards making Malaysia squatter-free.

Another matter I wish to comment on is the Government's offer to provide financial assistance to NGOs to undertake activities beneficial to the community.

With an allocation of RM102.1 million to eight ministries for this purpose, I suggest steps be taken to reveal the ministries concerned so that the relevant NGOs could seek to apply for financial assistance.

In this connection, I propose that the Government consider an allocation of a million or more ringgit a year to Pemadam, a tested NGO involved in dadah prevention.