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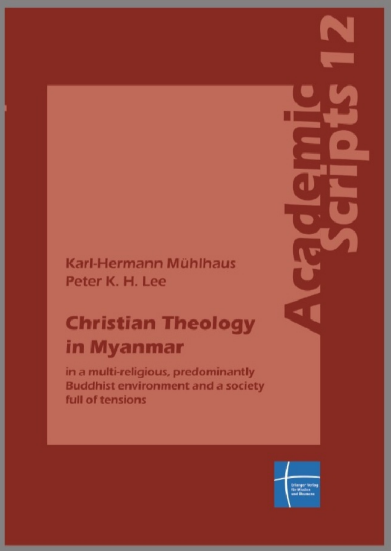
Karthik Karathikan Sibanyanam

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A Cultural Approach to Organize and Manage the Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia

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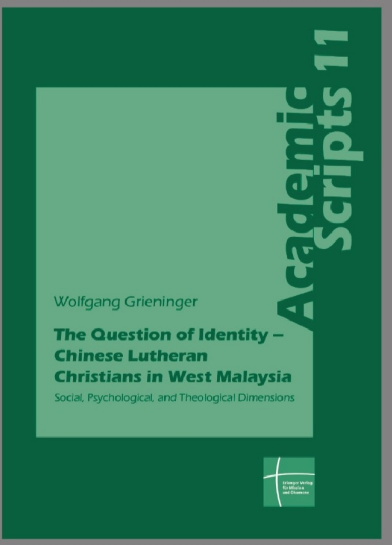
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CONTENTS

1 1. Introduction

1.1 *Gotong Royong* 1
1.1.1 "Why Don't you *Try Gotong Royong*" 1
1.1.2 The December 2021 Flood Incident in Malaysia 2
1.1.3 Floods and *Gotong Royong* in Malaysia 3
1.1.4 *Gotong Royong* - Misunderstood or Misused? 5
1.1.5 *Gotong Royong* as a Social Welfare Approach 5
1.1.6 *Gotong Royong* Social Management 7
1.2 Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia 8
1.2.1 Malaysia – A Pluralistic Society 8
1.2.2 Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM) 9
1.3 Evaluation 20
1.3.1 The State of SWCSM 20
1.3.2 "Why SWCSM is Under-organized?" 22
1.3.3 The Effects of Under-organized SWCSM 23
1.3.4 Proposed Solution: Organizing SWCSM with the ***Gotong Royong*** Approach 25
1.4 Research Gap, Objectives, and Questions 26
1.4.1 Research Gap 26
1.4.2 Research Objectives and Questions 27
1.5 Thesis Statement, Organization of Dissertation and the Methodology 29
1.5.1 Thesis Statement 29
1.5.2 Thesis Organization 29
1.5.3 Research Methodology 35

41 2. *Gotong Royong*

2.1 Introduction 41
2.2 Origin of *Gotong Royong* 41
2.2.1 The Phrase *Gotong Royong*: The Origin and Meaning 41
2.2.2 The Genesis of *Gotong Royong* through WWII 42
2.2.3 From Javanese Culture to National Identity 46
2.2.4 The Understanding of *Gotong Royong* in Indonesia 48
2.2.5 The Use of *Gotong Royong* as an Approach in Indonesia 53
2.2.6 The Misuse of *Gotong Royong* *57*
2.3 *Gotong Royong* in Malaysia. 58
2.3.1 From Indonesia to Malaysia 58
2.3.2 From Malay to Malaysian Culture 60
2.3.3 Understanding of *Gotong Royong* in Malaysia 62
2.3.4 The Malaysian *Gotong Royong* in Comparison with Its Indonesian Origins 75

2.4 Similar "Concept of Gotong Royong" in Other Cultures 76
2.5 Theoretical Roots of *Gotong Royong* 81
2.6 Conclusion 88

90 3. *Gotong Royong* Practices in Malaysia: A Micro-Level Empirical Investigation
3.1 Introduction 90
3.2 Empirical Investigation 91
3.2.1 Research Design, Methodology and Report .. .. .91
3.2.2 Empirical Findings 94
3.2.3 Key Findings, Incidental Insights and Interpretation 97
3.3 *Gotong Royong* as Social Service 101
3.3.1 Conceptualizing ***Gotong Royong*** as Social Service 101
3.3.2 Helping as Individuals 102
3.3.3 Helping as Neighbors 104
3.3.4 Helping as Members of a Residential Community or Social Group 108
3.4 Gotong Royong as an Approach to Organize Social Service . .. .110
3.4.1 Organizing Social Events 110
3.4.2 Organizing Community Projects 112
3.5 Conclusion 114

116 4. *Gotong Royong* Practices in Malaysia: A Meso-Level Empirical Investigation
4.1 Introduction . .. .116
4.2 Empirical Investigation. 117
4.2.1 Research Design, Methodology and Report 117
4.2.2 Empirical Findings 123
4.2.3 Key Findings and Interpretation 129
4.2.4 *Gotong Royong* in Social Welfare NGOs – Case Studies .. 131
4.3 *Gotong Royong* in Social Care Service and Organizational Practice 138
4.3.1 Conceptual Foundations of *Gotong Royong* in Social Service Organizations 138
4.3.2 Influence of *Gotong Royong* in the Personal Life of Social Care Workers, Practitioners, and Managers 139
4.3.3 Influence of *Gotong Royong* in the Organizational Life of Social Care Workers, Practitioners, and Managers 140
4.3.4 *Gotong Royong* in Organizational Management of Social Services 143
4.3.5 *Gotong Royong* as a Governance Mechanism 146
4.4 Conclusion. 149

152 5. *Gotong Royong* Management Model (GRMM): Developing a Management Model Inspired by the Practice of *Gotong Royong* in Malaysia

5.1 Introduction 152
5.2 Organizational Management 153
5.2.1 The Context of Organizational Management 153
5.2.2 Organization 157
5.2.3 Management 166
5.3 *Gotong Royong* Organization and Management 175
5.3.1 *Gotong Royong* Organization 175
5.3.2 *Gotong Royong* Management 183
5.4 *Gotong Royong* Management Model 193
5.4.1 The Motivation for Developing *Gotong Royong* Management Model (GRMM) 193
5.4.2 Framework Development for *Gotong Royong* Management Model (GRMM) 194
5.4.3 Discussing GRMM with St. Gallen Management Model (SGMM) 198
5.5 The Need and Imperative for the Gotong Royong Management Model (GRMM) in Contemporary Organizational Practice 202
5.6 Conclusion 205

207 6. *Gotong Royong* Social Management (GRSM): Implementing GRMM for Organizing and Managing Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM)

6.1 Introduction 207
6.2 Social Management, Social Welfare Care Work and Shared Responsibility 208
6.2.1 Social Management 208
6.2.2 Social Work and Welfare Services in Social Management 208
6.2.3 The Interdisciplinary of Social Work and Shared Responsibility of Social Management 208
6.3 Social Management in Malaysia 209
6.3.1 The Four Conditions of Organization from the Management Perspective 209
6.3.2 The Under-organized SWCSM: Reasons, Arguments, Consequences 214
6.3.3 The Need for a Suitable Management Model to Organize SWCSM to Realize Shared Responsibility in Social Care Service 216

6.4 The Application of GRMM 220
6.4.1 Why GRMM is a Solution Model 220
6.4.2 How to Apply GRMM as a Solution Model in Social Management 223
6.4.3 The Potential Good Outcome of GRSM 225
6.4.4 GRSM and its Effect on the Structure of Malaysian Social Welfare 228
6.5 A Critical Assessment of *Gotong Royong* Social Management (GRSM) 233
6.6 Conclusion 237

239 7. Conclusion
7.1 Summary: Let's *Gotong Royong* 239
7.2 Recommendations: Strengthening *Gotong Royong* Practice and Implementing *Gotong Royong* Social Management (GRSM) 244
7.2.1 Operationalizing *Gotong Royong*: Toward a Structured and Inclusive Social Welfare System in Malaysia 244
7.2.2 Micro-Level Recommendations (Individuals, Families, and Communities) 245
7.2.3 Meso-Level Recommendations (NGOs, Faith-Based Organizations, and Social Welfare Institutions) 249
7.2.4 Macro-Level Recommendations (Government and Policymakers) 252
7.3 Reflection: *Gotong Royong* as a Theory for Social Ministry and Diaconic Management 256
7.3.1 Developing a Theory from the Phenomenon of *Gotong Royong* 256
7.3.2 Viewing *Gotong Royong* through the Lens of Diaconic Science and Management 259
7.4 Outlook: The Future of *Gotong Royong* in Social Management 262

266 Bibliography

299 Appendices

Appendix 1 299
Survey Interview (S/I) Question Forms
Appendix 2 305
Questionnaire Survey/Interview (QS/I) Forms

Abstract

This dissertation explores the potential of *Gotong Royong*—a traditional Malaysian practice of neighborhood living rooted in the social ethics of collective action and mutual aid—as a new model for managing Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM). While it is commonly associated with community-based activities, this study re-examines *Gotong Royong* as a practical and culturally grounded framework for organizing social care services within a diverse and complex society.

The study was inspired by the floods that struck Malaysia in December 2021, which triggered public debate after a government minister controversially suggested *Gotong Royong* as a solution for flood mitigation efforts. The remark exposed widespread confusion and disagreement about the meaning and contemporary relevance of *Gotong Royong*, as well as its potential role in addressing broader social challenges.

At the core of this research is the question: Can the *Gotong Royong* approach—with its three key phases of preparation, coping, and evaluation, commonly used by communities to respond to disasters such as floods and health crises like dengue outbreaks in Malaysia—be adapted to organize and manage other social issues in collaboration with local communities, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations?

This dissertation argues that Malaysia's current social welfare care organization and delivery system is fragmented and inefficient due to limited coordination among government agencies, NGOs, and communities. Therefore, a culturally appropriate management model is needed—one that promotes cooperation, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

Using a multi-method research design—including interviews, case studies, and literature analysis—this study examines how *Gotong Royong* has historically functioned both as a social support system and as a community management tool. It identifies core management principles—planning, organizing, leading, and evaluating—that are embedded in the practice of *Gotong Royong* community projects and are essential for effective social service delivery.

Drawing on these insights, the dissertation develops and introduces the *Gotong Royong* Management Model (GRMM). This model offers a structured yet flexible approach to organizing and managing social work and care services. It emphasizes collective decision-making (muafakat), collab-

orative problem-solving, cooperation, and resource mobilization, with the aim of transforming competition into collaboration, isolation into interdependence, and exclusion into inclusion.

The GRMM is compared with established frameworks such as the St. Gallen Management Model to demonstrate its relevance and adaptability. Unlike conventional models, which often rely on hierarchical structures, the GRMM promotes a horizontal, community-based management approach grounded in mutual support and aligned with Malaysia's social and cultural context.

In conclusion, this dissertation shows that adopting *Gotong Royong* as a management philosophy can enhance the effectiveness of the organization and management of Malaysia's social welfare care and social service system. The GRMM provides a sustainable, culturally rooted solution for organizing social services, fostering unity, ownership and shared responsibility among diverse stakeholders. Practical recommendations are offered for policymakers, social service organizations, members and leaders of community, while also calling for further research into indigenous management models in other cultural contexts. By presenting *Gotong Royong* as a modern solution grounded in local culture and values, this study contributes to academic discourse and informs practical strategies for developing a more inclusive, cooperative management model and a resilient Malaysian society.

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List of Abbreviations

3Rs	Respect, Responsibility, Redistribution
3Ss	Solidarity, Sharing, Strengthening
BPJS	Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Sosial (Health/Social Security Agency)
CBR	Community-Based Rehabilitation
CG	Corporate Governance
CO	Community Organization
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSRs	Corporate Social Responsibility (initiatives)
DSN	Dasar Sosial Negara (National Social Policy)
DSWM	Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (Alternative/Alternate translation of JKM)
ELCM	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia
FELCMS	Federation of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches in Malaysia and Singapore
GEC	Global Environmental Centre
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GR	*Gotong Royong*
GRCO	*Gotong Royong* Community Organization
GRO	*Gotong Royong* Organization
GRMM	*Gotong Royong* Management Model
GRSM	*Gotong Royong* Social Management
IDWM	Institut für Diakoniewissenschaft und Diakoniemanagement (Institute of Diaconic Science and Management)
ISEAS	Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
JKM	Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia)
JKN	Jaminan Kesehatan Nasional (National Health Insurance, Indonesia)
JPNIN	Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional (Department of National Unity and Integration)
KRT	Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (Neighborhood Watch/Unity Area)
LSC	Luther Study Centre (Sabah, Malaysia)
MBPJ	Majlis Bandaraya Petaling Jaya (Petaling Jaya City Council)
MCKL	Methodist College Kuala Lumpur
MP	Member of Parliament
n.d.	No Date
NGO/NGOs	Non-Governmental Organization(s)
OS	organizational structure
PIBGS	Parents-Teachers-Volunteers Association

PBP	Program Bantuan Pemerintah (Government Assistance Program)
POLE	Planning, Organizing, Leading, Evaluating
PPP	Public Private Partnership
PRPM	Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu
PWD/PWDs	People with Disabilities
Q S/I	Questionnaire Survey/Interview
Q S/I R	Questionnaire Survey/Interview Respondent
RM	Ringgit Malaysia (Malaysian currency)
RT	Rukun Tetangga (Neighborhood Watch/Community-Based Organization)
SCA	Spastic Children Association of Selangor and Federal Territory
SCENT	Society, Culture, Economy, Nature, Technology
S/I	Survey/Interview
S/IR	Survey/Interview Respondent
SGMM	St. Gallen Management Model
SOA	School Operational Assistance
SPF	Siosar Protected Forest
STM	Seminary Theology Malaysia
STS	Sabah Theological Seminary
SWCSM	Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia
WW II	World War II

List of Tables

Table 4.1 Social Work/Service Centers and NGOs Visited (January–March 2024)
Table 4.2 Seminars and Workshops Conducted (January–March 2024)
Table 4.3 Level of Shared Social Responsibility
Table 4.4 State of Cooperation at Micro-Level
Table 4.5 State of Cooperation at Meso-Level
Table 5.1 The Three Fundamental Characteristics of Organizations Based on Laloux (2014) and Kühl (2011)
Table 5.2 The Evolution of Management Functions based on Corum (2015) and Hill Macshane (2008)
Table 5.3 Examples of Management Styles According to Prominent Management Gurus and Authors
Table 5.4 Examples of Management Models by Categories
Table 5.5 The Phases Involve in the Formation of GRO and Activity of *Gotong Royong*
Table 5.6 Succinct Description about the "Circle Within a Circle"
Table 6.1 Organizational Conditions and Characteristics

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 The Wheel of *Gotong Royong*
Figure 1.2 Current Structure of Social Welfare Assistance and Care under JKM Program
Figure 1.3 The Organization of Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM)
Figure 3.1 Breakdown of Respondents by Broad and Specific Categories
Figure 3.2 The Dual Meaning and Function of *Gotong Royong* in Malaysia
Figure 3.3 The Dual Essence of *Gotong Royong*
Figure 5.1 The Dual Role of Management in Organizational Environment with Multiple Sub-Social Systems
Figure 5.2 St. Gallen Management Model
Figure 5.3 The Circle Within a Circle (a)
Figure 5.4 The Circle Within a Circle (b)
Figure 5.5 The Circle Within a Circle (c)
Figure 5.6 Golden Circle Theory
Figure 5.7 Phases of *Gotong Royong* and Core Management Functions
Figure 5.8 *Gotong Royong* Simultaneous Management Activities
Figure 5.9 Dual-Level of Management Activities

Figure 5.10 Every Management Activity is Both Informal but Legitimate
Figure 5.11 Unified Management Activities
Figure 5.12 Earth's Magnetic Field
Figure 5.13 The *Gotong Royong* Management Model (GRMM)
Figure 5.14 Integrating SGMM into GRMM - A Community Centric Perspective
Figure 6.1 Illustration of an Unorganized Condition of an Organization
Figure 6.2 Illustration of an Under-organized Condition of an Organization
Figure 6.3 Illustration of an Organized Condition of an Organization
Figure 6.4 Illustration of an Over-organized Condition of an Organization
Figure 6.5 Formation of Community Organization via Self-alignment in its Environment
Figure 6.6 Current Structure of Social Welfare Assistance and Care under JKM Program
Figure 6.7 The Organization of Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM)
Figure 6.8 The Circular Framework of SWCSM Structure – 1
Figure 6.9 The Circular Framework of SWCSM Structure – 2 Reflecting the Dynamics of "Circe Within a Circle"
Figure 7.1 Practices for Dealing with Conflicting Demands

1. Introduction

1.1 *Gotong Royong*

1.1.1 "Why Don't you *Try Gotong Royong*"

What exactly is *Gotong Royong***?** Is it a work technique, a financial strategy, a philosophical concept, or a political ideology? Or is it simply a vague ideal invoked in uncertain situations? When Klang Member of Parliament (MP) Charles Santiago requested financial aid from the federal government, Public Works Minister Fadillah Yusof responded not with a definitive "yes" or "no," but with the statement: *"Why don't you try Gotong Royong?"* This ambiguous reply, which was publicly reported during a seminar in April 2022, sidestepped a clear answer to a practical request and left the MP frustrated and disappointed (Ganesan, 2022; Mohsen, 2022).

The December 2021 flood was one of the most severe disasters to affect the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia in recent decades. It was a heartbreaking tragedy, particularly for the people of Selangor, who suffered immense losses. The request for financial assistance – amounting to RM6 million – was intended primarily for urgent flood mitigation works. Given the pressing need for both immediate relief and long-term preventive measures, additional funds were also sought to support future flood management. The scale of the damage underscored the importance of comprehensive flood strategies, including infrastructure upgrades and early warning systems. However, instead of a constructive and supportive response, the phrase *"Why don't you try Gotong Royong?"* was met with mixed reactions from affected communities and observers. While some saw it as dismissive, others struggled to interpret its meaning in this context (Ganesan, 2022).

Following the incident and the MP's public remarks, a series of questions emerged in public discourse: Why did the Minister invoke the term *Gotong Royong* in response to a formal request for funding? Was it an off-hand remark that made light of a serious situation, or did he intend something more positive? Could flood mitigation realistically be carried out through *Gotong Royong*? Why was the MP so disappointed by the suggestion? And what did the Minister's response reveal about the government's understanding or possible misunderstanding of disaster response and public welfare?

Public opinion was divided. Some argued that it wasn't the term itself, but the Minister's tone and body language that suggested a lack of empathy. Others believed the response reflected a broader lack of governmen-

tal commitment to addressing large-scale disasters and supporting vulnerable communities. While some defended the Minister's statement, others felt that invoking *Gotong Royong* in this context was inappropriate or poorly timed.

In light of these debates, the author asks: How should *Gotong Royong* be correctly used and properly understood? Is there a broader misconception about its meaning in Malaysia? Can it truly serve as an effective model for disaster response and social welfare management? Or is its role being misinterpreted and misapplied in modern governance?

1.1.2 The December 2021 Flood Incident in Malaysia

The December 2021 flood incident was a bitter and transformative experience for Malaysians. The floods resulted in nearly 50 deaths, the evacuation of around 400,000 people, and an estimated RM6.1 billion in financial losses. The unprecedented volume of rainfall submerged areas on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia under almost four meters of water, turning roads into rivers (Rahman, 2022).

The annual end-of-year monsoon rains in 2021 were severely underestimated. People assumed, as usual, that the rain would only affect the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia. However, the orange alert issued by the Department of Meteorology Malaysia (MetMalaysia) prompted state agencies and the people in Kelantan and Terengganu to prepare for the flood. By the end of the flood season, it was reported that these states had managed the disaster relatively well compared to the west coast states. What they did and how they managed the disaster is an interesting question. The answer, in short, was *Gotong Royong*.

The term *Gotong Royong* can be used to summarize how the community responded. For example, on December 4, 2021, before the full impact of the monsoon floods hit, Sharifah from *The New Straits Times* reported that villagers in Rantau Panjang built "temporary 'bridges' as a precaution against floods." She described how the villagers "embarked on their annual *Gotong Royong* to face the annual flooding by constructing a temporarily elevated pathway to move about above floodwaters" (Abdullah, 2021). The *Gotong Royong* was organized by residents of two villages in Rantau Panjang, Kelantan – Kampung Terusan and Kampung Lanchang. Although *Gotong Royong* is a common practice organized by the village communities, government agencies also assisted by preparing evacuation centers, providing shelters, food, water, and medical supplies in collaboration with local institutions like schools, hospitals, and non-governmental organizations.

Meanwhile, Serina Rahman from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) reports that, as soon as MetMalaysia issued the flood warnings on December 17, 2021, the people in the eastern states of Peninsular Malaysia knew exactly what to do when the waters began to rise, alongside their local agencies (Rahman, 2022). This cooperation exemplified the '*Gotong Royong* spirit!' However, the people on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia were caught by surprise by the continuous, unexpected heavy rainfall. Unlike the people in the east, they were unprepared and uncertain about how to respond when the rain persisted. On December 17, 2021, MetMalaysia issued an amber alert, which quickly escalated into a red alert (the highest level), especially for the Klang Valley, Selangor, and neighboring states. Many areas in Klang experienced a month's worth of rainfall in a single day, leading to the floods on December 18. The water levels reportedly reached 'hip-level' in many areas, especially in Shah Alam.

The people in Hulu Langat, Selangor, also suffered greatly. The December 2021 flood left them traumatized, and they compared the event to a tsunami-like tragedy. Residents of Kampung Lui described how the rivers overflowed, and with their strong currents, they swept away homes and destroyed vehicles and belongings (Aiman, 2021).

Nationwide, the December 2021 flood was an unforgettable and devastating disaster. By December 20, many local roads and several highways across Peninsular Malaysia were submerged. Roads were described as 'an inch impassable,' resulting in major disruptions to infrastructure and movement. Many single-story homes, particularly in Taman Sri Muda, Shah Alam (Klang), were flooded to their rooftops, with floodwater reaching up to four meters in some places. This left 95 percent of the housing areas underwater. The unprecedented announcement of "Darurat Banjir" (state of national alert and emergency) was a sad moment that crippled many (Chan, 2021).[1] Amidst the ongoing fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, the December 2021 flood became a heart-wrenching event for Malaysian society.

1.1.3 Floods and *Gotong Royong* in Malaysia

Gotong Royong is a term commonly associated with flood events in Malaysia. It refers to a collaborative approach used to organize community efforts to address the challenges posed by the monsoon season, cope with flood-related issues, and rebuild lives following flood disasters. *Gotong Royong* activities can be categorized into three phases: before, during, and after the flood.

1 The December 2021 floods prompted the Malaysian government to declare a 'state of emergency,' highlighting the severity of the situation and the urgent need for assistance.

Before the rainy season and potential floods, community members typically organize *Gotong Royong* activities to implement preventive measures and prepare for the upcoming monsoon. During the rainy season, when floodwaters begin to rise, communities come together to provide mutual aid through evacuation efforts and by supporting each other in the spirit of *Gotong Royong*. After the flood, communities once again organize to restore order by cleaning and rebuilding their neighborhoods. They work together to help fellow residents settle back into their homes and resume normal life. Additionally, after the flood, communities often celebrate their resilience and evaluate their *Gotong Royong* efforts for future improvement.

The December 2021 floods illustrate all three phases of *Gotong Royong*. Newspaper reports indicate that, unlike residents in the east, such as those in Rantau Panjang, communities in the western regions of Peninsular Malaysia were unprepared for the disaster. However, despite the lack of preparation, many community-based activities were organized during the flood, reflecting the principles of *Gotong Royong*. As government assistance was slow to reach the affected areas, local communities took the initiative to help each other through these challenging times, embodying the '*Gotong Royong* spirit.

After the flood, the April 2022 seminar titled *The Impact of Climate Change on Coastal Areas like Klang* became another example of *Gotong Royong* in action (Ganesan, 2022). The seminar brought together relevant stakeholders to engage in dialogue with the victims, assess the impact of the December 2021 floods, discuss ways to mitigate future disasters, and improve pre-

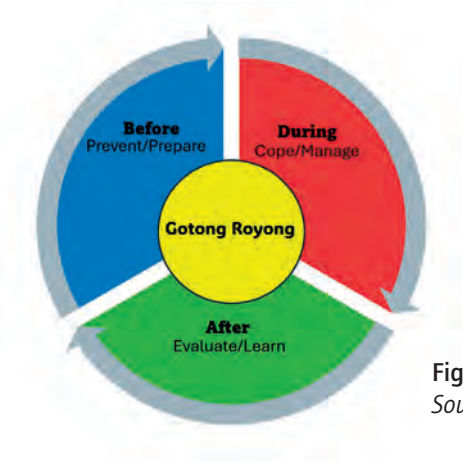


Figure 1.1: The Wheel of *Gotong Royong*
Source: Author's Own Illustration

paredness for similar tragedies. It was during this seminar that the Klang MP expressed his disappointment regarding the Minister of Public Works' response to his request for financial assistance, which was met with the suggestion: "Why don't you try *Gotong Royong*?"

1.1.4 *Gotong Royong* - Misunderstood or Misused?

Gotong Royong is a cultural approach used to organize social events in Malaysia. Traditionally more common among rural and village communities, it has also become a familiar practice in urban areas, particularly for organizing community clean-up efforts and social initiatives.

While *Gotong Royong* has long been employed to prepare for and cope with floods, could it be sufficient to tackle a disaster of the scale of the December 2021 floods? This was not just a community effort; it was a massive undertaking. Flood mitigation in the Klang region is a critical issue, requiring significant infrastructure development, preventive measures, and millions of Ringgits in funding.

Against this backdrop, the suggestion to "try *Gotong Royong*" may have seemed to the Klang MP as if the Works Minister was downplaying the severity of the disaster, the suffering of the people, and the responsibilities of local governments. In the context of an official political request for financial aid, the phrase likely came across as informal, dismissive, or even insensitive.

Gotong Royong is generally a positive term, one that inspires unity, cooperation, and collective action to accomplish complex tasks. But what went wrong in this case? Was *Gotong Royong* misused, or was it simply misunderstood? Only the Works Minister knows what he truly meant by her suggestion, "Why don't you try *Gotong Royong*?" Can *Gotong Royong* really be something to be "tried out"? What is clear from this episode is that the term can be used loosely, interpreted in different ways, and even misunderstood. Yet the idea itself persists, distilled into a simple exhortation: *try Gotong Royong*.

1.1.5 *Gotong Royong* as a Social Welfare Approach

Gotong Royong is not a new concept for those involved in social welfare work. It is widely regarded as an effective method for bringing together individuals and organizations from different backgrounds to collaborate in providing social services to those in need. The Works Minister's suggestion – "Why don't you try *Gotong Royong*?" – may have been well received by actors in the social care sector, particularly within non-governmental

organizations (NGOs). Many NGOs already incorporate the *Gotong Royong* approach not only in organizing community clean-up activities but also in their fundraising efforts and social service projects. The *Gotong Royong* model fosters unity, cooperation, and a shared commitment to achieving common goals for the betterment of society.

One notable example is Bethany Home, a training center for people with disabilities (PWDs) in Simpang Empat/Hutan Melintang, Perak, Malaysia. Bethany Home has successfully employed the *Gotong Royong* approach in both its internal training programs and external community engagement initiatives. The center brings together teachers, therapists, parents, and volunteers to support students with special needs and their families. As a faith-based, non-profit organization, Bethany Home relies on the *Gotong Royong* model to raise approximately RM1.3 million annually for operational expenses.[2] By uniting various stakeholders and organizing fundraising events such as its annual food fair and calendar sales, the center effectively mobilizes resources and fosters community engagement. From recruiting volunteers for classroom assistance to coordinating large-scale annual programs, *Gotong Royong* has proven to be an effective management strategy.

Other non-profit social welfare organizations in Malaysia also report positive experiences using the *Gotong Royong* approach. Many attest that it creates an open, collaborative atmosphere where social needs are openly discussed, solutions are developed, and collective action is taken. The '*Gotong Royong* spirit' encourages inclusivity, strengthens social bonds, and facilitates the planning and implementation of sustainable welfare initiatives.

Reflecting on the general patterns of *Gotong Royong* activities observed before, during, and after the floods in Malaysia, a conceptual framework – *The Wheel of Gotong Royong* – emerges as a model for organizing social welfare services. This model can be applied in structuring the Social Welfare Care Services Management (SWCSM) system alongside other social actors in Malaysia. It envisions *Gotong Royong* as a tool to address social issues, much like how it is applied in disaster management. The framework consists of three key phases:

2 This information, idea, opinion, or statement is supported by research data from the author's original doctoral research and was examined and approved through university-supervised examination procedures in accordance with institutional and data-protection requirements. To ensure compliance with data-protection standards for publication, identifying information about individuals and institutions has not been disclosed. See Section 1.5.3, the *Note on Research Validation and Data Protection for Publication.*

1. Before a Social Disaster – A time for learning, preparation, and preventive measures to mitigate potential social problems (e.g., drug and alcohol addiction). Awareness campaigns and early intervention programs can help equip communities with the knowledge and resources to prevent crises (Preventive/Preparative Phase).

2. During a Social Disaster – A time for crisis management, rehabilitation, and support services. Providing social care, emotional support, and immediate intervention can help individuals and communities cope with challenges (Rehabilitative/Support Phase).

3. After a Social Disaster – A time for reflection, evaluation, and continuous learning. Assessing past efforts, making improvements, and fostering long-term cooperation can strengthen social resilience (Evaluative/Awareness Phase).

The *Gotong Royong* approach is in practice and proven effective in fostering community engagement, collective management of social projects, and resilience. Given its success in disaster response and social welfare initiatives, it holds great potential for organizing and collaboratively managing social care services in Malaysia. Ultimately, *Gotong Royong* is not merely a concept for communal cleaning – it is a form of social service in itself and a strategic management approach.

1.1.6 *Gotong Royong* Social Management

As a concept, *Gotong Royong* offers a practical approach to organizing and managing social welfare care services. Given its proven effectiveness in bringing together diverse stakeholders, mobilizing resources, and fostering collective action, it warrants a deeper study particularly from a management perspective. Moreover, as seen in the December 2021 flood incident, where *Gotong Royong* was potentially misunderstood or misapplied, it is crucial to investigate its meaning and implications before advocating for its broader use in management.

This study aims to explore the origins, meanings, and interpretations of *Gotong Royong* among Malaysians. If *Gotong Royong* is to be effectively applied in organizing social welfare care services, it must be examined through the perspectives of social workers, managers of welfare organizations, and local community members. Understanding its role and limitations will clarify the extent to which *Gotong Royong* can be utilized as a management approach in delivering social welfare services in Malaysia. Additionally, an analysis of its management elements is necessary to determine its viability as a structured

framework for executing social care initiatives.

As a cultural tradition, *Gotong Royong* is deeply valued across Malaysia, with embedded social values and management principles. Therefore, it is a subject worthy of academic research. Investigating its management dimensions and highlighting its unique advantages could provide valuable insights for social service planning. By titling this Ph.D. dissertation *Gotong Royong Social Management*, the author seeks to present *Gotong Royong* not only as a social service practice but also as a strategic approach for organizing and managing social welfare care services in Malaysia. Furthermore, this research aims to develop a management model based on the *Gotong Royong* cultural practice, offering a distinctive and community-driven framework for social service management.

1.2 Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia

1.2.1 Malaysia - A Pluralistic Society

Malaysia is a highly pluralistic and diverse society (Cf. Ashray, 2018, p. 428). Its population is made up of individuals from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. As of the first quarter of 2024, Malaysia has 30.6 million citizens and 3.4 million non-citizens (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024).

By ethnicity, 70.4% of Malaysians are classified as Bumiputera, which includes the Malay ethnic group and the Orang Asal (indigenous people), 22.4% are of Chinese descent, and 6.5% are of Indian descent. The remaining population is classified as "Other" (Siddharta, 2024). Regarding religion, 63.5% of Malaysians practice Islam, 18.7% follow Buddhism, 9.1% are Christians, 6.1% practice Hinduism, 1.8% identify as atheists, and approximately 0.9% to 2.7% follow other religions, such as Animism, Confucianism, Taoism, Sikhism, and Bahaism (Cf. Siddharta, 2022). The four primary languages spoken are Bahasa Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil, with various other languages (e.g., Javanese, Telugu, Punjabi) and dialects (e.g., Hokkien, Cantonese) spoken by many communities.

Thus, Malaysia is commonly referred to as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual society. Upon gaining independence in August 1957, Malaysians decided to coexist and govern their nation through a parliamentary democratic system. This collective commitment to living together while respecting each other's beliefs is a defining characteristic of Malaysia's pluralistic society.[3]

3 A pluralistic society is one in which individuals from different origins, backgrounds, belief systems, and other differences come together to live in harmony. In such a society, there is no

For example, the Christian community, the third-largest religious group in Malaysia, views the nation as a pluralistic society. The book *Christian and Nation-Building in a Pluralistic Society* does not provide a singular explanation or proof for why Malaysia is considered pluralistic (Cf. Hwa Yung and Ting, 2021). However, it highlights the contributions of Christians from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds to nation-building. Indeed, most Malaysians naturally claim that Malaysia is a pluralistic society, without needing external validation or a strict definition of what constitutes such a society.

In practice, Malaysians embrace the diversity of their society, fostering genuine respect for each other's differences. Their lifestyle allows individuals to maintain their cultural identities while sharing common spaces. Beyond mere tolerance, Malaysians actively practice acceptance within their diverse communities. However, some argue that Malaysia is still evolving into a fully pluralistic society, and that the process of building this ideal is ongoing.

1.2.2 Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM)

1.2.2.1 The Three Levels of SWCSM and the Challenges

Organizing and delivering the various types of Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM) is a complex task. Like any society, and especially in a diverse context, numerous social issues must be addressed by Malaysian society as a whole. Failure to do so may lead to societal strain, hindering progress. A society's social health, stability, and strength form the foundation for national development in various areas, including the economy and political stability.

The SWCSM can be examined from three main perspectives: macro, meso, and micro-levels. The macro-level refers to the government and policy-making aspects of the social welfare system. The meso-level pertains to the private non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in providing social services. The micro-level focuses on the individual and neighborhood community efforts in organizing and offering social care services.

The establishment of the "Federal Department of Social Welfare" by the British colonial administration in 1946 marked the formalization of government-level social welfare services in Malaysia. Prior to this, as early as 1912, the colonial government had introduced some welfare programs, mainly for the well-being of immigrant laborers from China and India.

force or coercion to abandon one's existing beliefs and adopt new ones. The guiding principle in a pluralistic society is "live and let live" (Science Struck, n.d.).

However, the scope of social welfare services expanded significantly after the creation of the Social Welfare Department in 1946. Initially, its primary focus was on addressing the social problems arising from the aftermath of World War II (WW II) and the Japanese occupation (Cf. Ling, 2002, p. 86; Rom et al., 2016, p. 4546).

At the non-governmental level, Malaysia has a long history of organized social care services with philanthropic values. These welfare services can be traced back to the social activities undertaken by religious and ethnic-based organizations long before the formation of the Social Welfare Department in 1946 (Cf. Ling, 2002, p. 86). As early as the beginning of the 19th century, NGOs organized social services to meet the needs of the people, particularly caring for immigrant laborers brought to the country by the colonial government (Ibid).

While government-level social work focused mainly on foreign laborers, whom the colonial administration considered its primary responsibility, non-governmental social services catered to a broader spectrum of the needy. Faith-based and ethnic-based organizations, such as Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian mission societies, as well as Chinese and Indian clan associations, provided care by being actively involved in their communities. These groups served the diverse populations amid challenging circumstances (Cf. Young Soon, 2021, p. 90). Unlike the colonial government's economic-driven agenda, the social services provided by faith-based, ethnic-based, and corporate organizations were deeply appreciated. Their genuine care for the well-being of Malaysian society, motivated by compassion rather than economic gain, has always been commendable.

In the following section, the social actors at each level of the Social Welfare Care Services in Malaysia (SWCSM) will be described in detail, with an exploration of how they are perceived by their counterparts at other levels.

1.2.2.2 Macro-Level

After 67 years of independence from British colonial rule, Malaysia's government still employs the same departmental structure to organize social welfare services at the national level. The Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM), commonly translated as the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (DSWM), operates under the federal Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. Despite the country's rapid economic growth and development, Malaysia faces demographic pressures and increasing social issues. While the government grapples with structural challenges in meeting the growing demands for support from vulnerable groups, the capacity

of a single department like JKM to address these needs is often questioned (Ashray, 2018, p. 428). Moreover, both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often find themselves competing for resources and support to carry out social welfare work.

The JKM carries a heavy workload, providing a wide array of welfare services. It offers financial assistance to needy or vulnerable groups, provides counseling and consultation services to families, and manages community-based rehabilitation centers and institutions for people with disabilities, the elderly, orphans, and juvenile schools. It also regulates social service centers, including daycare centers established by NGOs (Ibid, p. 432). The JKM's role in overseeing laws and regulations pertaining to social welfare and community development is critical and should be recognized.

However, the federal government's attention to social welfare services is widely regarded as insufficient, particularly in terms of financial allocations and investments. For example, between 1997 and 2014, the federal government allocated an average of only 1% of its GDP to social welfare expenditure (Ibid., p. 429). Furthermore, Malaysia has an additional income resource known as zakat (an Islamic religious obligation to give to charity), which should be considered a supplementary fund for social welfare services, given that the majority of the population is Muslim (Ibid., p. 432). However, religious and corporate contributions are not sufficiently directed toward social welfare services in the country.

According to the Malaysian Federal Constitution, the responsibility for social welfare is shared between the federal and state governments (Ashray, 2018, p. 432; Abdul Samad, 2019, p. 31). While each state government establishes its own welfare offices, social workers and welfare officers are employed and paid by the federal department, with state governments managing their own local support staff. This arrangement illustrates the administrative relationship and cost-sharing between the two levels of government. However, the division of responsibility in the planning and delivery of non-financial social welfare services remains unclear and poorly defined.

The JKM proudly traces its origins back to the British colonial administration. It credits its transition through various ministries since independence to its vital role in the nation's social development. JKM describes this progression as an "evolution" in fulfilling its role in the nation's develop-

ment (Social Welfare Department).[4] However, JKM and its governmental counterparts perceive this evolution differently. Some critics argue that operating as a social welfare department focused on supporting the nation's economic agenda mirrors a colonial-style approach to social welfare administration.

The colonial model of social welfare administration, which primarily served to support the government's economic agenda (Cf. Ashray, 2018, p. 431), remains evident in Malaysia today. Viewing social welfare primarily as a tool for economic development and political stability is a problematic approach. The selective provision of assistance by targeting groups deemed important by the government to bolster its economic standing, has been widely criticized in Malaysia as a reflection of an outdated colonial mentality.

Additionally, the funding and spending practices of the welfare department have been criticized by non-governmental social actors. The government's social welfare expenditure is seen as neither sufficient nor appropriately allocated (Cf. Ashray, 2018, pp. 429-430), with the majority of funds directed toward cash transfers and resource distribution (protective measures) while insufficient resources are allocated for preventive and promotive social measures (Cf. Young Soon, 2021, p. 91).[5]

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4 Starting with the involvement of addressing various problems arising from the Second World War, the role and functions of this Department have expanded to preventive and rehabilitation services in social issues as well as community development. As one of the government agencies that plays an important role in social development, it has been placed under several Ministries (Social Welfare Department 2023):

1946-1951: Department of Social Welfare Malaya (Foreign Labor Ministry)
1952-1955: Department of Enterprise and Social Relations
1956-1957: Department of Health and Social Welfare (Health Ministry)
1958-1959: Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (Health Ministry)
1960-1962: Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (Labor Ministry)
1963-1964: Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (Health Ministry)
1964-1982: Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (Labor Ministry)
1982-1990: Ministry of General Welfare
1990-2004: Ministry of Social Welfare Malaysia
2005-present: Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development.

5 Non-governmental social actors, such as social care providers and managers from NGOs, play a crucial role in the delivery of social welfare. For example, Wong Young Soon of Malaysian Care (2021) presents a viewpoint that contrasts with the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia's (JKM) claims concerning the preventive and rehabilitative aspects of its social services. It is important to note that Wong's assessment specifically referred to a particular financial year in JKM's reporting.

Social welfare has not received sufficient priority from both the federal and state governments, a criticism shared by many NGOs. Over 75 years of operational experience, including shifts across multiple ministries, have yielded little progress in how JKM administers financial assistance. At times, the delivery of "cash and kind" transfers is seen as a mechanism for vote-buying by the ruling party, thus making social welfare an instrument of election politics (Ibid; Ashray, 2018, p. 428). Meanwhile, social issues continue to grow in complexity, and the burden of providing social services is increasingly placed on NGOs, charitable organizations, and the community (Young Soon, 2021, p. 91).

Indeed, social care workers and service providers are in high demand in Malaysia. A common complaint among the needy and their families is, "We see only social welfare officers, but not compassionate care workers."[6] JKM officers are often overwhelmed with administrative tasks and are frequently seen processing application forms or checking eligibility for grants and services. Instead, they should be focused on conducting comprehensive assessments of the needs and issues of the vulnerable groups they serve, providing direct social work with clients, and employing a range of intervention strategies.

In addition to these criticisms, many have offered suggestions for reforming JKM's approach. One major recommendation is to redefine social welfare services in Malaysia. Part of this redefinition might involve reconsidering the translation of the term "welfare," which in Bahasa Malaysia is "Kebajikan." In English, welfare is commonly understood as "financial aid for the poor" (Mohd Rom et al., 2016, p. 4545). JKM may still adhere to the traditional British understanding of welfare, whereas modern social welfare encompasses broader concepts such as social security, social protection, and community-based welfare.[7] The term "Kebajikan" has limited the scope of social services to merely delivering financial assistance to the poor.

JKM has made efforts to evaluate and improve its welfare interventions, particularly with initiatives launched in the late 1980s. Notably, the inadequacies of the remedial and residual welfare models were acknowledged,

6 The author has personally heard this cry from many parents of children with disabilities during his service as a special education teacher and director of Bethany Home (Training Centre for Children with Disabilities) between year 2009 to 2018. See ELCM's Social Ministries at www.elcm.org.my. Supported by the author's approved doctoral research. See note 2.

7 Mohd Rom et al. (2016, p. 4545) quote Greve (2008) to explain the concept of welfare: "Basically, welfare refers to well-being. It is a condition of being well, which refers to the happiness, health, and fortunes of a person. Social protection is about preventing, managing, and overcoming situations that adversely affect people's well-being."

leading to the introduction of community-based rehabilitation programs (CBR) for people with disabilities, as well as community development projects for the rural poor and women (Ling, 2002, p. 86).

As a social actor at the macro-level, JKM has worked to engage local communities and other social actors in collaborative efforts to address social issues. For example, in CBR projects, JKM has invited local communities to join forces and work together on social problems. However, the purpose of this collaboration is not always clear to all involved. JKM often works alone, is overburdened, misunderstood, and underappreciated. It is unfair for JKM to bear the entire responsibility for social welfare, which is meant to be a shared responsibility among various stakeholders.

1.2.2.3 Meso-Level

While the Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM) operates at the government or macro-level, numerous private and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide social welfare services at the meso-level. These organizations can be categorized as either for-profit or non-profit. For-profit business entities function within the economic framework of the country, relying on financial capital from shareholders, while non-profit organizations depend on public donations, kind gifts from well-wishers, and honorariums paid to employees and volunteers.

In Malaysia, NGOs can further be classified into two main categories: State NGOs and Autonomous NGOs. State NGOs are heavily reliant on state funding, whereas Autonomous NGOs, while registered and supervised by the government, primarily rely on donations from the public and foundations. It is important to note that Autonomous NGOs differ from State NGOs in that they were not initiated by the state, but by interest groups with various motivations such as religious, philanthropic, and more.

The origins of Malaysia's NGO sector differ from those in Western nations. These organizations were initially formed to assist the government in reaching out to rural and disadvantaged communities, rather than opposing the government. The role of NGOs in Malaysia is significant and unique, as they "play a special and unique role in a democracy by contributing to the foundation of a just, sustainable, and participative society" (Alatas, 2003, p. 62). Social Welfare Groups help the government achieve many of its objectives.

Moreover, NGOs in Malaysia are vital not only to the government but also to the private sector and society at large (Zaharuddin et al., 2018, pp. 2112-

2113). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs from profit-driven businesses often rely on the existence and support of NGOs. By working closely with communities and the needy, NGOs facilitate these partnerships. They are sometimes seen as both libraries and bridges, providing crucial information, identifying target groups, and serving as the means to connect with the needy.

However, many NGOs, particularly non-profits, face challenges due to a lack of funding, resources, and support. This hampers their development and disrupts their operations, making long-term planning difficult. The prospect of closure is often high for NGOs. When seeking government assistance, they are often met with resistance, with self-motivation and shared responsibility being emphasized. Public fundraising efforts are also limited due to economic constraints. As Alatas (2003) and Zaharuddin et al. (2018) highlight, the question remains: "What are the sources for sustainable funding?"

While the role of NGOs and non-state actors in meeting social welfare needs in Malaysia is commendable, it is often underacknowledged. As previously noted, religious and ethnic groups have been serving communities since the colonial period and pre-independence era. These groups have been people-centered, maintaining close contact with the needy, and responding compassionately when required. Their organizational management models are bottom-up, in contrast to the top-down, bureaucratic, and politically-driven government approach. Despite their unique qualities and capabilities, they are often overlooked and treated as a threat. The differences among NGOs based on ethnic, language, and religious ideologies may make them less uniform and unofficial, but they are highly effective in providing social services, often outperforming public welfare services in both capacity and reach.[8]

Unfortunately, NGOs in Malaysia remain undervalued. As Zaharuddin et al. (2018, p. 2113) points out, the lack of government recognition and incentives hampers the growth and development of NGOs in their social work. Many NGOs struggle with limited funds and manpower, making fundraising projects increasingly complicated. While the number of new NGOs continues to rise, an equal number are forced to close down or operate with numerous limitations and challenges. This situation is further exacerbated by financial mismanagement and difficulties related to legitimacy and registration, which jeopardize the credibility of NGOs in Malaysia (Ahmad and Mat Zain 2023, p. 667). Due to some mismanagement and scandals, all

8 For example, Young Soon (2021, p. 91) notes that JKM facilities had a capacity for only 1,200 children, while NGOs were able to house 27,441 children, as discussed in The Role of Christians in Building Compassionate Communities.

NGOs are often viewed with skepticism by the general public, which further erodes trust in these organizations. Additionally, the competition for limited resources sometimes casts NGOs in an unfavorable light. This raises an important question: Who should step in to help them? Should the government take more responsibility in supporting and assisting NGOs in this matter? The continued lack of support and acknowledgment from the government further hinders NGOs' ability to improve their services and social impact (Zaharuddin et al., 2018, p. 2113).

1.2.2.4 Micro-Level

Traditionally, Malaysians have not relied solely on the government or formal social welfare organizations for social care work. Instead, social assistance is often initiated and organized by members of a neighborhood to address the pressing social needs within their communities. This practice is commonly referred to as community work or community projects.

Organizing community work has long been a custom within Malay society, predating Malaysia's colonization by foreign powers (Hatta and Mat Saad, 2014; Ng 2022). This tradition extends beyond the Malay community, as it has been widely practiced among Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds, especially in communal living environments such as farming and fishing villages, cocoa and coconut plantations, and rubber and oil palm estates. Even during the colonial period and the early years of independence, Malaysians united to address social issues within their communities through collective action and mutual support.

Today, community work and social initiatives continue to be organized at the grassroots level. Individuals and families provide assistance to their neighbors in need, thereby strengthening the social fabric of their communities. As responsible citizens, taxpayers, and donors, individuals expect the government, elected representatives, and social service organizations to fulfill their roles in ensuring the country's social welfare. However, the contributions of individuals and neighborhoods in sharing social responsibilities deserve greater recognition.

Too often, these micro-level efforts—acts of informal social work and mutual aid—are overlooked and undervalued in official discussions about social welfare services in Malaysia. Nevertheless, these grassroots contributions play a vital role in the broader social welfare system, complementing both macro- and meso-level initiatives.

Gotong Royong and Rukun Tetangga

Traditionally, Malaysians have enjoyed living in close-knit communities. They have long managed their own social and economic issues by practicing a mutual helping system known as *Gotong Royong. Gotong Royong* is a neighborhood interdependent, mutual support system, traditionally practiced by the Malay ethnic community. It requires individuals to help their neighbors when they are in need, creating an obligation to reciprocate when the need arises. Fisk (1982) and Doling and Omar (2002) assert that this mutual helping system was especially practiced by Malays, extending beyond the family circle to relatives and members of the wider society (Doling and Omar, 2002, p. 35).[9]

Gotong Royong is a cultural norm where members of the Malaysian community help one another in times of need, whether it's for building a house or celebrating a wedding (social events). This help establishes an obligation to reciprocate when the need arises (Ibid, p. 35). This community-level mutual aid system is regarded as the heart of Malaysian social welfare. The spirit of *Gotong Royong* and mutual helping is integral to the social welfare care system in Malaysia.

Recognizing the importance of this communal approach, the Malaysian government established a department to promote and coordinate programs for societal unity in diversity. This initiative is known as *Rukun Tetangga* **(RT)**, literally meaning "pillar of neighbors" (**Wikipedia,** n.d.). RT is a community-based organization that operates as an unofficial administrative division in Malaysia (**Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional,** n.d.). Initially, RT was introduced as a Neighborhood Watch system in 1975, at the height of the communist revolt (Bin Abdullah et al., 2017, p. 59). Its original objective was to ensure the security of neighborhoods with the voluntary support of community members. After the communist insurgency ended in 1990, RT evolved into a community-based organization, designed to maintain the well-being of the people while fostering national unity. It is the spirit of *Gotong Royong* that continues to fuel the operation and existence of RT today.[10] RT operates effectively by combining government and non-governmental assistance with the *Gotong Royong* approach.[11]

9 Doling and Omar (2002, p. 35) claim that Malay Muslims in Malaysia are often described as a society that practices cooperation, organizing social events and welfare programs through the *Gotong Royong* cultural approach.

10 Supported by the author's approved doctoral research. See note 2.

11 See n. 10 above.