

Newcomers get some help settling in

More self-help groups in place to focus on new communities in S'pore

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WITH Singapore's changing demographics, thanks to increasing immigration, more community groups are beginning to spring up – on top of the four main ethnic self-help groups (SHGs) already in existence.

The challenge is for them to work together to keep Singapore's racial and religious harmony intact, said Mr Zainudin Nordin, Central Singapore District Mayor and chairman of OnePeople.sg, a non-profit organisation on race relations here.

"If you look at the new people in Singapore, I imagine there will be interest groups, communities, associations and professional groups being formed because of interests, race, religion, language and tradition," he told reporters yesterday at a racial harmony walk.

Of the 5,000 participants yesterday, about 10 per cent were new citizens and Permanent Residents.

"That will mean more needs to be done to interact and bring them into the mainstream," he said, adding that such efforts



Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and CDC Mayor Zainudin Nordin at yesterday's walk. OOI BOON KEONG

need to be heightened.

Some 2 million more migrants are expected here over the next 40 to 50 years – boosting Singapore's population to 6.5 million, according to Government estimates.

Despite the arrival of new migrants, SHGs such as the Chinese Development Association Council, Mendaki and Singa-

pore Indian Association (Sinda) would still play an important role because they cater to the "majority" of Singaporeans, said Mr Zainudin.

"They will continue to focus on issues which are unique to certain communities," he said.

At least one expatriate group, the

Maharashtra Mandal Singapore, is already planning to engage the likes of Sinda. The group – comprising some 600 Indian nationals from the west coast of India – is currently in talks with Sinda and the Hindu Endowment Board about joint cultural programmes to foster closer ties between expatriate and Singapore-born Indians, said its president Avinash Lotke.

The 34-year-old, a Permanent Resident working as a sales manager here, added that such events can help plug the perceived "disconnect" between the two groups of Indians in Singapore – an issue raised in Parliament last year.

Another participant, local-born Chinese Lim Hong Yin, 53, described the anxiety harboured by some Singaporeans, especially those from the lower socio-economic strata, against immigrants as a "ticking time bomb".

Acknowledging that it would be challenging to integrate the new migrants, Mr Zainudin said the way forward is not to focus on problems but common values. This can be done through focus group discussions with our new migrants.

"We want to show them that they are not so different from us – there are a lot of cultures and traditions that may be different, but values are the ones that cut across religions and races," he said.