

**Community Volunteerism and Social Support in Neighbourhood
Community: Implications for Community Social Work Practice in Kg.
Medan, Selangor, Malaysia**

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ABSTRACT

Rukun Tetangga (RT) or community neighbourhood is frequently regarded as a means of fostering unity and ensuring neighbourhood security; however, its role as a space for community social work that builds social support has received limited empirical attention. Based on a qualitative study of RT in Kg. Medan, Selangor, this article discusses how community volunteerism, social support and neighbourhood networks function in strengthening the well-being of a multi-ethnic urban community. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 14 informants chosen through purposive and snowball sampling. The findings indicate that RT functions as a community support system through three primary mechanisms. First, voluntary involvement is driven by social responsibility, personal satisfaction, and support from family and friends. Second, bonding and bridging relationships enable residents to build closeness, inter-ethnic cooperation and neighbourhood assistance. Third, linking relationships with government agencies, non-governmental organisations and local leaders expand community access to resources, assistance and social programmes. Nevertheless, leadership, financial and infrastructural challenges limit the effectiveness of RT as a platform for social support. This article indicates that RT is an essential form of informal community social work practice in Malaysia, particularly in terms of enhancing grassroots communities' well-being, resilience, and solidarity.

Keywords: Community social work, volunteerism, social support, Rukun Tetangga, community neighbourhood, social capital

1. Introduction

Multi-ethnic urban communities require social mechanisms that can connect residents, encourage trust and provide support when they face daily needs, welfare problems and local security issues. In the Malaysian context, Rukun Tetangga (RT) is one of the important grassroots community institutions because its function has expanded from a security orientation to neighbourhood relations, community development and a transformation model based on five pillars, namely unity, economy, security, education and quality of life (Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional, 2021; Kementerian Perpaduan Negara, 2021). Although RT is often associated with the national unity agenda, its social function is also directly related to community social work practice because it involves the mobilisation

of residents, social support, the identification of community needs, the resolution of local issues and the development of collective capacity (Kementerian Perpaduan Negara, 2021). This article explores community participation and the formation of social capital towards strengthening unity in RT in Kg. Medan, Selangor. Kg. Medan is a significant location because it has a multi-ethnic urban background, socioeconomic challenges and a history of social tension. Therefore, a discussion of RT in this area is important not only from the perspective of unity, but also from the perspective of social well-being and community resilience. In the context of community social work, the existence of neighbourhood support networks and voluntary leadership can help residents address social needs in ways that are closer to the realities of local life.

However, most discussions of RT still tend to emphasise policy aspects of unity, security and community leadership (Abdullah et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2018). Less attention has been given to RT as a community-based social support system that operates through volunteerism, neighbourhood relationships and institutional networks. This article examines the role of RT in Kg. Medan as an informal community social work space. The article seeks to analyse the manifestations of volunteering and social support within RT and explain its implications for community social work practice in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community Social Work and Volunteerism

Community social work emphasises efforts to strengthen the capacity of communities to identify needs, mobilise resources and build collective action. In this approach, the community is not merely a recipient of assistance, but a social agent with knowledge, networks and the potential to solve local problems. This concept is closely related to community development, which emphasises community participation as the basis for social change and the improvement of quality of life (Cohen & Uphoff, 1980; Abbott, 1995; Asnarulkhadi, 2005).

Volunteerism is also an important element of community social work because it enables residents to take an active role in caring for collective well-being. Clary and Snyder (1999) explain that volunteer motivation may arise from personal values, social relationships, learning and self-satisfaction. In the RT context, volunteerism does not necessarily occur through professional social work training, but through daily practices such as gotong-royong, visits, food assistance, security activities, community programme management and the coordination of assistance for vulnerable groups. Thus, RT can be seen as an informal community social work space rooted in neighbourhood culture and social responsibility.

2.2. Social Support and Social Capital in the Community

Social support refers to the emotional, instrumental, informational and network-based assistance that individuals obtain through social relationships. In a neighbourhood community, social support is formed when residents know one another, trust one another and are willing to help one another. Social capital helps explain how social relationships can

become a resource that supports individual and collective action (Bourdieu, 1986). Coleman (1988) views social capital as a resource embedded in the structure of social relationships, whereas Putnam (2000) emphasises networks, norms and trust that facilitate cooperation. In community studies, social capital is often described through three main forms, namely bonding, bridging and linking. Bonding refers to close relationships within groups that share certain similarities. Bridging refers to relationships across social or ethnic groups, while linking refers to community relationships with institutions that possess power or resources (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004; Woolcock, 2000). These three forms are important for understanding RT because RT activities not only strengthen relationships among neighbours, but also connect residents from diverse ethnic backgrounds and open access to government agencies, NGOs and local authorities. In the context of governance and values, social capital is also seen as an important resource for strengthening cooperation, trust and social responsibility within the community (Mahmud & Mohamad, 2024).

2.3. Rukun Tetangga as a Community Support Platform

RT was established as a voluntary community organisation that plays a role in promoting neighbourhood relations, harmony, security and community development. Previous studies show that RT has an important function in improving ethnic relations, neighbourhood security and community participation (Abdullah et al., 2016; Beh et al., 2021; Dora, 2011; Tamring et al., 2020). However, the role of RT should not be viewed narrowly as merely a security mechanism or a unity activity. Through various wings, including the Women's Neighbourhood Group, Youth Neighbourhood Group, Senior Citizens' Neighbourhood Group, Neighbourhood Cadets and the Voluntary Patrol Scheme, Rukun Tetangga (RT) has significant potential to function as an integrated community support mechanism addressing welfare, security, health, social education and community-based aid mobilisation.

RT is significant in the context of community social work since it is so close to residents' daily life. RT leaders and members know local issues, identify those in need, connect residents with external resources and organise activities that build social relationships. In this context, RT can function as a community support system that combines neighbourhood values, volunteerism and institutional networks. Developments in community digital communication, including the use of applications such as WhatsApp in neighbourhood communities, also show that local social support increasingly operates through a combination of face-to-face interaction and everyday communication networks (Zakaria & Chan, 2022). Therefore, this article does not evaluate RT merely as a policy instrument, but as a space of social practice that enables communities to support one another and strengthen collective well-being.

3. Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative case study conducted in RT Kg. Medan, Selangor, Malaysia. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to understand the experiences, interpretations and social meanings that community members give to their participation in RT. The case study design is also appropriate because RT Kg. Medan has a specific social context, namely a multi-ethnic urban community, population density,

socioeconomic challenges and a history of social tension, which makes it significant for examining the formation of social support and social capital.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 informants. Informants were initially selected using purposive sampling based on their experience with RT activities, position in the community or knowledge of unity and welfare activities in Kg. Medan. Snowball sampling was then used to obtain additional informants who met the study criteria. The interviews provided space for informants to share their experiences regarding the role of RT, motivations for involvement, forms of social support, inter-ethnic relationships and the challenges faced in mobilising community activities.

The data were analysed thematically through repeated reading of the transcripts, initial coding, category development and the formation of themes related to volunteerism, social support, bonding, bridging, linking and implementation challenges. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it enables researchers to identify patterns of meaning in qualitative data systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Informants' identities were maintained using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and research ethics.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. RT as a Community-Based Social Support System

The findings show that informants viewed RT as an important platform for fostering unity, connecting residents and supporting community needs. RT is understood not merely as a formal committee, but as a place on which residents rely when facing social, security and welfare needs. In the context of community social work, this function is important because social support does not occur in the abstract, but through neighbourhood relationships, shared programmes and the presence of active community leaders.

“Rukun Tetangga is actually meant to unite all ethnic groups in our community. To cooperate, to strengthen ties with one another... In every community, there must be several ethnic groups. It does not matter whether Malay, Indian or Chinese... RT is voluntary. There is no money... (Mat, male, 63 years old)”

“To unite the community... Although we live with different ethnic groups, we are united. Like when we organise a programme together. Even when we have a feast, we invite everyone... We can bring the bonds of friendship closer. (Jai, female, 63 years old)”

RT functions as a space for social interaction that builds a sense of togetherness. When community programmes are implemented openly, residents from diverse ethnic backgrounds have the opportunity to meet, cooperate and build trust. In community social work practice, spaces such as this are important because they reduce social distance and form the foundation for more sustained social support. This situation shows how local

participation can become a process of social empowerment, and not merely participation in activities (Asnarulkhadi, 2005).

4.2. Volunteerism as Social Responsibility and Community Care

Involvement in RT is also influenced by a sense of social responsibility. Informants emphasised that RT work requires leaders and members who go to the ground, know the residents and are willing to help regardless of background. This volunteerism functions as a form of community care, especially when residents face food shortages, welfare problems or require assistance to mobilise local activities.

"I am also involved with the committee. I look after people affected in terms of food... Gotong-royong is still strong. It is not a matter of choosing friends... It is not easy to mobilise people if there is no association, no RT. (Amar, male, 64 years old)"

"I also go to the ground... Not just giving instructions... I do the work together, I care... Some report that they have no food or no rice. We quickly make an effort. Whatever we can manage... (Ali, male, 51 years old)"

Voluntary leadership in RT is not limited to managing meetings or programmes, but involves welfare actions that are close to the principles of community social work. RT leaders act as connectors between residents' needs and available resources, whether through internal community assistance or external networks. These findings expand the discussion of RT leadership, which is often associated with security or unity, towards the role of community social support in the context of urban communities (Ationg et al., 2021; Bakar, 2014).

4.3. Personal Satisfaction as a Motivation for Volunteerism

In addition to social responsibility, involvement in RT also provides personal satisfaction. Informants expressed happiness when community programmes succeeded and when their efforts were appreciated by residents or external parties. This satisfaction is important because voluntary work often demands time, energy and personal sacrifice.

"For me... I have actually been interested in community work since school... there is enjoyment, there is satisfaction. Because we are already interested in it... This thing is not paid... It is voluntary... (Jafari, male, 54 years old)"

"I feel happy when the large-scale activities we organise are successful. When they succeed, I am happy. I feel happy. It is satisfaction for the residents, not for me... it is a victory for RT and all the committee members... (Ali, male, 51 years old)"

This finding is consistent with the view that volunteers are driven not only by material rewards, but also by social meaning, a sense of usefulness and appreciation, and satisfaction when they see positive changes in the community. Nichol et al. (2024) show that

volunteering can benefit volunteers' well-being and social connectedness. In the context of community social work, this intrinsic motivation is important for maintaining the continuity of voluntary involvement, especially in communities with limited financial resources.

4.4. Family and Friends' Support as an Ecosystem of Involvement

RT involvement does not stand on an individual basis. Informants emphasised that the support of family, friends and neighbours is important in enabling community activities to be implemented consistently. Families not only provide emotional support, but also participate in community programmes and help strengthen a culture of volunteerism.

“Actually, we need support from the family, from friends... then we can advance and make the activities carried out by RT successful. There must be support from family, friends and all neighbours. (Jafari, male, 54 years old)”

“The family has to play a role so that they understand our role... We also have to bring them along. Because unity starts from home. If things are already chaotic there, it is even harder to bring others in. (Zul, male, 57 years old)”

Social support in RT begins with the family unit and expands into neighbourhood networks. The idea that unity begins at home emphasises the relationship between family well-being, emotional support and community involvement. From a social work perspective, this shows the need to view the community as a network of interconnected relationships, not merely as a geographical location.

4.5. Bonding and Bridging as Neighbourhood Support Networks

The findings show that RT activities form bonding social capital through close relationships among community members and bridging social capital through inter-ethnic interaction. Activities such as gotong-royong, sports programmes, visits, wedding ceremonies and welfare programmes create space for residents to know and help one another.

“We call our friends... Everyone together... Malay or Indian, everyone calls me. Even the small children call me too. (Kumuta, female, 46 years old)”

“I am confident. Because RT can strengthen relationships and strengthen unity... For me, in this area there is no problem. We can be together. We can sit at the same table. For example, when it is the wedding of a committee member's child, or when someone is sick, we will visit from house to house. It does not matter whether Indian or Malay, it is the same. (Hamad, male, 52 years old)”

“There is no such thing as Indians not wanting to join, Malays not wanting to join; it is not like that. Our RT block is very good, very steady. (Jay, female, 62 years old)”

Social support in RT is not limited to the same ethnic group; it also encompasses inter-ethnic relations. The practice of inviting all residents, visiting sick neighbours and assisting with community events demonstrates that RT builds inclusive neighbourhood support networks. In the context of diverse urban communities, bridging is highly important because it enables residents to overcome prejudice, build trust, reduce social distance and strengthen community cohesion (Putnam, 2000; Tamring et al., 2020).

4.6. Linking Social Capital and Access to Institutional Resources

Besides facilitating interactions among residents, RT serves as a liaison between the community and external organisations. The findings indicate that connections with the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK), the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), Petaling Jaya City Council (MPPJ), the Department of National Unity, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), state assembly representatives, and councillors facilitate RT in acquiring information, financial assistance, security initiatives, welfare support, and interventions regarding public health matters.

“AADK is indeed closely connected with me... For example, health, MPPJ. If there is dengue, I will inform them. I will inform MPPJ, and they will come. (Hamad, male, 52 years old)”

“As for other agencies, sometimes we invite AADK, the police; like CSR, we invite the police to make a visit... They must involve RT before they can gather people. (Jafari, male, 54 years old)”

“I consider my relationship with the Department of National Unity to be close... Every year we organise programmes together with PDRM; the National Anti-Drug Agency is also involved... We have no problem with external agencies... during the MCO period... contributions from NGOs never stopped. (Ali, male, 51 years old)”

This linking relationship shows the strategic value of RT as an intermediary between the community and formal institutions. In community social work practice, the intermediary role is very important because many residents' needs cannot be resolved by the community alone. RT helps translate community needs into institutional action, whether in the form of agency visits, NGO assistance, security interventions or welfare support.

4.7. Challenges of RT as a Social Support Platform

Although RT has the potential to serve as a social support system, the findings also show several main challenges that limit its effectiveness. These challenges involve leadership, finance and infrastructure. From the perspective of community social work, these challenges

are important because the continuity of social support depends on the capacity of community organisations to manage resources, involve volunteers and provide suitable activity spaces.

“The chairperson must be active. If the chairperson is not active, it means all the members will not be active either. The priority is the chairperson. (Jafari, male, 54 years old)”

“If there is money, we make plans. Sometimes it is not enough for us to run programmes for one year... We must find our own funds... It is just a financial problem. (Jai, female, 63 years old)”

“The biggest challenge... I asked, how many years have it been six thousand? If possible, consider increasing it a little to ten thousand... The existing allocation needs to be reviewed. (Zul, male, 57 years old)”

These challenges show that volunteer-driven community social work requires adequate structural support. Dependence on leaders can weaken activities when leadership is inactive. Financial constraints reduce RT's capacity to plan consistent activities, while inadequate infrastructure limits space for meetings and programmes. Therefore, RT as a social support platform needs to be strengthened through leadership training, realistic funding and more systematic institutional cooperation.

The findings of this study show that RT in Kg. Medan can be understood as an informal community social work space that combines volunteerism, social support and social capital. Although RT is not a professional social work organisation, its functions are similar to the principles of community social work, namely identifying residents' needs, mobilising local resources, building collective action and connecting the community with external institutions. This strengthens the view that community participation can become a basis for social development when it is driven by networks, trust and collective action (Cohen & Uphoff, 1980; Abbott, 1995; Asnarulkhadi, 2005). This role is highly important in multi-ethnic urban communities because issues of well-being cannot be separated from social relationships, trust and the community's capacity to cooperate.

First, volunteerism in RT shows that the community has internal capacity to care for local welfare. Informants who go to the ground, manage food assistance, mobilise gotong-royong and support community programmes reflect an organic form of social care. This is consistent with the literature on volunteerism, which emphasises value-based motivation, social relationships and volunteers' well-being (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Nichol et al., 2024). This article is important in expanding understanding of community social work in Malaysia because community intervention does not necessarily begin solely from professional agencies, but also from local voluntary structures that already exist in residents' lives.

Second, support from family and friends shows that community involvement needs to be understood as a social process supported by close networks. Volunteers do not act in isolation; they require emotional support, time and energy from family members and

neighbourhood friends. This has implications for community social work practice because efforts to strengthen residents' involvement need to include families, youth, women and older persons comprehensively, and not only the formal committee. Babaei et al. (2012) suggest that strengthening bonding social capital can enhance the level of community empowerment, particularly through the strengthening of close social relationships among individuals who share ties of trust and familiarity, such as family members, close friends and neighbours.

Third, bonding, bridging and linking social capital shows that RT builds social support at multiple levels. Bonding strengthens closeness among neighbours; bridging connects residents of different ethnicities; and linking opens access to institutional resources. The combination of these three forms of social capital is important because community well-being depends not only on internal relationships, but also on the community's capacity to access external resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). However, the effectiveness of such social capital depends on inclusiveness, active leadership and RT's ability to avoid the dominance of particular groups.

Fourth, leadership, financial and infrastructural challenges show that volunteer-based community work still requires realistic policy support and resources. If RT is expected to play a role in social well-being, community security and unity, then support for RT cannot be limited to symbolic recognition. Therefore, community leadership training, adequate programme funding, agency coordination and monitoring mechanisms are greatly needed so that RT can truly function as a sustainable platform for social support (Kementerian Perpaduan Negara, 2021; Zakaria et al., 2018).

4.8. Implications for Community Social Work Practice

This study has three significant implications for community social work practice in Malaysia. Firstly, social work practitioners and welfare agencies can view RT as a strategic partner in identifying community needs, channeling assistance and implementing social prevention programmes. RT has an advantage because it is close to residents and has knowledge and experience of local problems. This capacity makes RT relevant as a community intervention platform that is close to the principles of community development and empowerment (Dora, 2011; Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional, 2021).

Secondly, basic training in community social work can be provided to RT leaders, particularly in the areas of community need mapping, simple case management, referrals to agencies, cross-cultural communication skills and the protection of vulnerable groups. This capacity building is not intended to turn RT leaders into professional social workers, but to strengthen their capacity as community volunteers who are more sensitive to local and social issues.

Thirdly, the RT model can be used as a basis for a localised approach to community social work that is suitable for the Asian context. In societies that still have neighbourhood, gotong-royong and family network cultures, a community approach that values local social resources has the potential to increase the effectiveness of social interventions. At the same

time, community digital communication can be strengthened to support programme dissemination, needs mapping and aid referrals, considering findings on the role of communication applications in meeting the social needs of neighbourhood communities (Li & Yu, 2025; Zakaria & Chan, 2022).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is significant since it examines community volunteerism and social support in RT Kg. Medan, with a focus on implications for community social work practice. The findings show that RT functions as a social support system through voluntary involvement, neighbourhood relationships, inter-ethnic assistance and relationships with external institutions. Volunteerism in RT is driven by social responsibility, personal satisfaction and support from family and friends. At the same time, bonding, bridging and linking social capital enables RT to strengthen community well-being, solidarity and resilience. However, the potential of RT as a community social work platform cannot be fully realised without addressing leadership, financial, and infrastructural challenges. Consequently, RT must be reinforced not only as a tool for unity but also as a grassroots social support entity capable of collaborating with welfare agencies, local authorities, NGOs, and social work practitioners. With sufficient support, RT possesses the potential to evolve into a pertinent social work model for multi-ethnic urban areas in Malaysia.

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