SOCIAL NETWORK AND TRADITIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS
FOR VICTIMS

Tolani Asuni
Director, United Nations Social Defence Research Institute
Via Giulia, 52
00186 Rome, Italy

In most traditional societies situations of crises of any type are usually the concern of the community and extended family. Illness, injuries, whatever the cause, are included in these situations. Furthermore the practice of compensation is often built into traditional legal systems.

A person who is a victim of any criminal behaviour of another person is usually surrounded by members of the community. Not only is he given what immediate physical help he needs; he also receives bountiful emotional support. He/she has the chance of repeating his or her traumatic experience over and over again to visitors who are sympathetic listeners. The cathartic effect of this situation cannot be over-estimated.

Furthermore, efforts are made to apprehend the offender, and brought to face the consequences of his criminal behaviour. He is made to pay for the damage he has done either symbolically or in reality depending on the circumstances. In this process not only is the natural instinct of revenge vicariously satisfied in the victim, a measure of restitution is achieved also, as where possible the victim and offender are brought face to face.

Depending on the nature of physical personal damage done, when the crisis is over, a thanksgiving or cleansing ceremony is performed. This may be in the form of a ritual sacrifice and it often has a cathartic effect. Life is most valued, and the fact that life is still preserved is a reason for thanksgiving in an area where the
hold of life is so tenuous because of endemic diseases, poor sanitation and general low conditions of living, where there is high infantile mortality rate, and life expectation is relatively short.

Loneliness is an important factor which affects the emotional life of people generally, much more so the life of a victim of any sort. In some societies ability to live alone is highly regarded and is cherished. This may be acceptable in normal circumstances, but in the time of stress like victimization, it is not always desired. In fact this is the time when living alone could be a definite disadvantage. In traditional societies the person who by choice lives alone is regarded as being odd. In tropical countries life is lived more outdoor than indoor, so the chances of being alone involuntarily are limited. So in the time of crisis, it is usual to have even more people around.

One can still be lonely in a crowd — especially a crowd of unfamiliar people. In talking about people surrounding a victim, I am referring not to unfamiliar people, but intimate people like relatives, friends and neighbours.

One of the most serious forms of victimization is rape, and the depression suffered by a rape victim has been likened to the transient depression one feels when a loved one dies. The reaction of some traditional communities in terms of support to a raped person is also similar to that of a bereaved person. She is encouraged to express her emotion freely but not excessively. Those around her sometimes weep with her. There is always someone near her who is usually unobtrusive. She is encouraged to eat and sleep, she is not disturbed.

If one looks for the elements of crisis intervention, one can easily identify them in the traditional support system given to those who are in crisis — human company, ready and sympathetic listeners to the talks of the victim which could be ceaseless, freedom to express emotions, material and physical help where needed, emotional support, etc.

Having said all this, it is necessary to emphasize that the situation is changing especially in the cities, where the sense of community and neighbourliness is considerably reduced if it still holds at all. The unfortunate fact is that the traditional support system has always been taken for granted, and no deliberate effort is being made to find substitutes for it in the cities where it is fading out. There is no doubt that there is need for substitute