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Seira Yun of Socious seeks lasting social impacts

Roundtable

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Trying to efficiently connect mission-aligned and talented individuals to meaningful jobs was a lightbulb moment when Seira Yun realized the need for an app that could provide this service.

As a committed social entrepreneur, Yun had always been looking for ways to maximize sustainable impacts. Yun realized he needed to find a way to help connect the 94% of young people who say they want to use their skills for good to the impact organizations that are looking for committed talent. "I was just trying to solve my own problems as a social entrepreneur," he explained. "I remember how tough it had been for me seeking a significant job in the impact sector."

So Yun and his team created Socious.io to connect impact organizations and purpose-driven people looking for jobs. "This talent can thrive when their company's mission and personal mission are aligned, their cultural values are aligned, as well as the skill fit," he said. "So we decided to focus on Socious."

Matching talented people driven by a social purpose is something that the social entrepreneur can relate to very well. Having spent decades helping peo-

ple, Yun hopes Socious benefits others who are also motivated to work in the impact space.

Yun took time out of his busy schedule to sit down with Ross Rowbury and a small audience for the 36th Japan Times Roundtable to talk about what inspired him to make the journey from college dropout to social entrepreneur, and why he is determined to assist others to focus on all the good they can do.

Adversity, tragedy, basketball

With a Japanese father and Korean mother, growing up in Japan and being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and also identifying as pansexual, Yun was well aware of the old Japanese adage "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."

"I stuck out on the margins of society where I grew up in Kawasaki, and in school I was bullied," he explained. "And that led to mental health issues, and I suffered from depression and bipolar disorder." While he now feels he is on top of his mental health issues, he considers that they defined his youth.

Things began to spiral out of control for Yun in later youth. At the age of 19, he was detained in a mental institution when his classmates thought he was suicidal. With help from doctors and specialists, he eventually got the help he needed and was dis-



Seira Yun is the founder of the Socious app. YUICHO TAIYA

charged. However, tragically a month later, his best friend, Yuma, died in a car accident. "That had a huge impact on my life. We played basketball together in junior high school, and Yuma was someone who was really strong," explained Yun. "Yuma was still pursuing his dream of going to the NBA when he died, and I felt maybe there's a meaning to this. I started to wonder how I could be useful, how I too could be strong like him, how I could overcome obstacles like Yuma had once done." Yun began to wonder what he could do with his life, and decided that working with the United Nations would be one of the most impactful ways to contribute.

International career

Yun knew he would need at least a master's degree to work at the U.N., so after returning to school after a lot of disruption in his life, he "somehow" got into a university and went on to complete a bachelor's degree in international liberal studies at Waseda University, as well as a master's in international law at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. After two years of unpaid internships with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), he eventually realized his dream of a paid job at the U.N. "I guess two years of volunteer work paid off in the end," he joked.

Yun's first job was working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon: visiting refugee camps, gathering data about their needs and overseeing their well-being. Despite the satisfaction he found in the assignment, he still wanted to deal more directly with the beneficiaries in the conflict zones, and so began working with the International Committee of the Red Cross, well regarded as an organization whose protocols allow it to get closer to those most immediately in need. "When conflict happens, the U.N. will usually get their cars out of the way," he said — "and then the ICRC will then just drive straight into the conflict."

Getting donors' attention

Yun's work at the Red Cross took him to Iraq during the conflict with the Islamic State group, often observing the Red Cross treat injured Islamic State operatives when Iraqi doctors refused to. He also worked with Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh, one of the world's most intractable refugee issues. He began to realize that help for these people was often dependent on garnering the world's attention.

"These organizations — the U.N., the Red Cross — they rely on donations, and donors' attention is very important as to where the money goes, and I have seen some good projects that have been suspended not because the need doesn't exist but because of the donors' new focus on this or that new issue, and so I thought, 'Maybe there's a better way.'"

Social solutions with revenue

Yun thought there could be room for business to step in and take up the slack on underfunded projects outside of immediate conflict zones, helping to solve social and environmental problems while still maintaining financial sustainability by generating revenue.

He took himself back to school for a sec-



Yun and the Socious team at the Web Summit in Lisbon in November. SOCIOUS.IO

ond master's to study social innovation, returning to Japan in 2018. After founding his first social venture and experiencing the challenges of hiring mission-aligned talent, he realized the need for an organization like Socious.

For the future, Yun hopes that Socious can help other social innovators work not just in startups, but eventually move into established corporations. "These large corporations have a huge impact on society, and if some of them have more ethical, sustainable and gender-equal practices, then the impact on society will be massive," he said.

For the rest of us who are inspired by Yun's story, he insists that it is never too late. "It's a marathon, not a sprint," he said. "Maybe you know what you want to do when you are 12, but I know people who find their calling when they are 60, and they do amazing things in their lives. I believe experiencing different things will help you find your calling — there are no meaningless experiences in life."

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information or to assist a Roundtable, scan the QR code or visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



Yun, a serial impact entrepreneur and angel investor and a full-stack developer, has led teams at the Red Cross, the UNHCR and social ventures. YUICHO TAIYA

Times Gallery



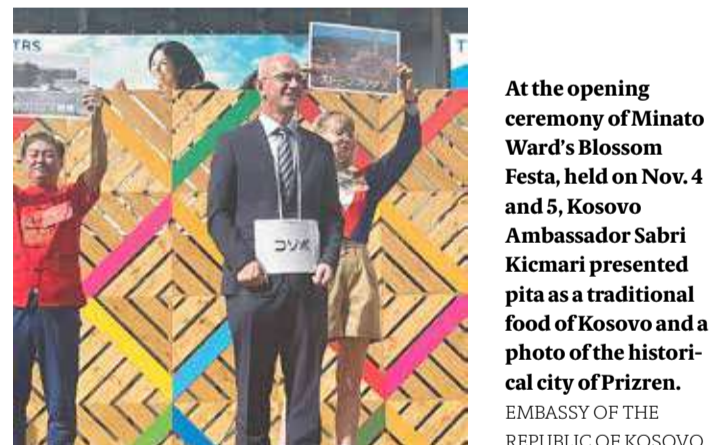
Member of Diet Yoshiaki Wada and Indian Ambassador Sibi George onboard INS Kadmat with its crew during port call at Yokosuka, JMSDF Base in early December. EMBASSY OF INDIA



Jun Karube, senior executive adviser at Toyota Tsusho Corp., Kenyan Ambassador Tabu Irina and Takehiro Shimada, chief of protocol at the Foreign Ministry, celebrate Kenya's 60th anniversary of independence on Dec. 12 in Tokyo. EMBASSY OF KENYA



The Japan Times Director Yusuke Numata with Tokyo Women's Club President, Valerie Moschetti, at this year's donation presentation ceremony held on Dec. 4th. TOKYO WOMEN'S CLUB



At the opening ceremony of Minato Ward's Blossom Festa, held on Nov. 4 and 5, Kosovo Ambassador Sabri Kicmari presented pita as a traditional food of Kosovo and a photo of the historical city of Prizren. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO



A humorous moment from the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Japan Gala Dinner & Concert 2023 in Tokyo on Dec. 8. ITALIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN JAPAN



Jamaican Ambassador Shorna-Kay Richards with Tsuyoshi Kitakaji, president of Rudder Ltd., at the embassy's launch event for Jamaican rum in Japan. EMBASSY OF JAMAICA



A scene at the Startup Ecosystem Summit 2023, which launched Tokyo's Innovation Base, marking a pivotal moment in influential figures reshaping Japan's startup landscape, on Nov. 27. STARTUP ECOSYSTEM SUMMIT 2023



Argentine Ambassador Eduardo Tempone shows first lady Yuko Kishida some Argentine cultural items at the Latin American Charity Bazaar. EMBASSY OF THE ARGENTINE REPUBLIC

Okayama's Maniwa, a model city for sustainable rural revitalization

Sustainable Japan Awards: Excellence Award winner

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Maniwa in north-central Okayama won this year's Sustainable Japan Excellence Award in the satoyama category, presented by The Japan Times for the city's efforts to create and maintain the circulation of resources.

In a recent interview with The Japan Times, Mayor Noboru Ota spoke about examples of resource use and regeneration in Maniwa that are having positive impacts on the local environment and economy.

The Maniwa Biomass Power Plant uses wood from forest thinning and general industrial waste from local lumber mills that would otherwise be discarded. About ¥1.2 billion (\$8.3 million) of the plant's ¥1.8 billion in annual sales is spent on biomass for fuel. Part of that goes to the owners of forests and mountains at the rate of ¥550 per ton. "The total amount paid to the owners since the beginning of the operation of the plant in 2015 has reached ¥310 million," Ota said. It costs money to maintain healthy forests through proper thinning, part of the reason why so many individually owned forests have been left abandoned across the country even though forest management also protects water sources and helps prevent disasters. "Giving back some of the profit to the owners leads to the regeneration of forests," he said.

Forest reproduction has profound significance in terms of reducing carbon emissions. "Younger trees have been proved to

absorb more carbon dioxide than older ones, so we are now involved in an experimental project to plant fast-growing trees," Ota explained. To stabilize the procurement of the raw materials for making wood chips for the plant, the city is also planning to use more broadleaved trees, which are harder to handle than conifers in artificial forests because of their diverse sizes and shapes.

The biomass power generation also has created new jobs. "We have 15 workers at the plant, and hired 35 people to do jobs related to the plant such as logging and transporting lumber. The city's current energy self-sufficiency rate is 62%. We are aiming for 100% to achieve the local consumption of locally produced electricity based on the circulation of resources," Ota said.

The environmental awareness that has been rising among the citizens thanks to the success of the biomass power plant is also supporting other ongoing projects. One of them creates liquid fertilizer from raw garbage and sewage from houses. As well as producing fertilizer, the methane gas generated during the process is used to generate electricity to supply power to a waste recycling plant.

The fertilizer is concentrated by seven times, making it more efficient to spray at farms. It will allow farmers to use environmentally friendly fertilizer at reasonable cost, reducing the ¥9.5 million they spend annually on fertilizers. There are various benefits to the city as well. Almost ¥19.5 million that has been flowing out of the city to purchase fertilizers will be saved. The three garbage incineration plants can become one, reducing the cost of garbage disposal by ¥147 million and cutting carbon emissions by 1,900 tons annually. The waste recycling plant is scheduled to start operations in the autumn of 2024.

There is also an example of the circulation of resources in the financial sector. In January 2023, the city launched a trial operation of Manicoin, a regional digital cur-



Maniwa's biomass accumulation base. MANIWA

rency that can be used at stores in the city. Other functions, such as providing points for making tax payments or money transfers, receiving various government grants and subsidies, or participating in activities that contribute to achieving the U.N.'s sustainable development goals, will be added to the Manicoin application. "This will also help improve the efficiency of administrative work at City Hall," Ota said.

He boasted that over 12,000 people out of the total population of 42,000 have already downloaded the application and said the service will start to generate profit once users reach 20,000. Store owners pay a processing fee of 1.5%, which is lower than credit cards and other common payment options. In addition, users receive a 1% rebate on their purchases. This simple and instant benefit may appeal not only to residents but to tourists as well.

"I want to create an atmosphere that encourages new challenges here, in an aging municipality where 40% of the population is 65 or older," Ota said. Maniwa has been receiving visits from officials of many other municipalities looking for sustainable ways to manage their communities. With many ongoing projects to enhance the circulation of resources, Maniwa will continue to serve as a model of an attractive rural city where sustainability and livability go hand in hand, and a source of inspiration for enriching people's lives despite rural depopulation.

The Sustainable Japan Award commends individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainable efforts. To learn more, scan the QR code or visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/sjaward2023>

