

BREAKING THE HOMELESSNESS CYCLE

WITH BIKE SHARING

Inspired by her vision of building a society in which anyone can start over, a young Japanese changemaker has helped more than 4,300 people in need since launching an NPO in her teens. Here she speaks about the backbone of her activities and how to find a successful model for resolving social issues.

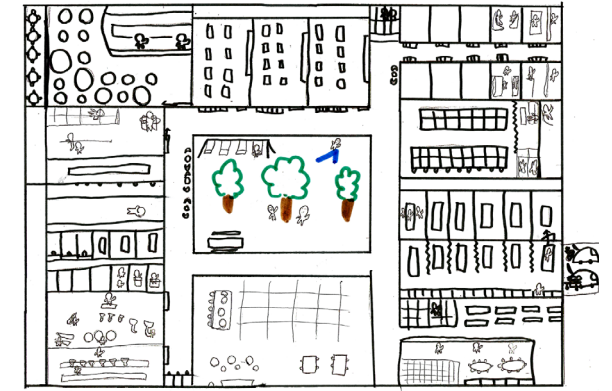
In recent years, bicycle sharing has swept rapidly through Japan, having been already introduced in more than 160 cities nationwide. Some might wonder, could this new system be used to solve other social problems, such as homelessness? A surprising query indeed, but KAWAGUCHI Kana, a Japanese social entrepreneur based in Osaka, has used it to produce admirable results. She focused on the fact that a lot of homeless people were using bicycles for refuse collection, which for many is their main source of income. In 2011, Homedoor—the certified NPO established by Kawaguchi—launched HUBchari, a bicycle sharing system. While offering residents a new mobility option, by employing homeless people as staff the system has also paved the way for them to

capitalize on their bicycle-repair skills honed through refuse collection, and earn a higher and more stable income than they have before. With the system gradually gaining in popularity, the number of bike ports has now grown to about 300. “We flexibly try out new ideas and, through repeated trial and error, find the ‘switch’ that will turn a vicious cycle into a virtuous one.”

Kawaguchi’s involvement in seeking solutions to homelessness started when she was just 14 years old. She was commuting to school by train and was shocked to see an area full of people living on the streets. Why do people become homeless in this affluent country of Japan? That simple question led her to volunteer at a soup kitchen. When she was



When Kawaguchi was 16, she was selected as Japan’s volunteer goodwill ambassador by an international award that recognizes the world’s middle and high school students for their volunteerism. She took part in a conference with other representatives from around the world (center photo, second from the left). “It was a revelation to see so many people my age who had already been able to raise vast sums of money or who had launched their own projects.” Immediately after that, she drew up a floor plan of her ideal facility (right), which led to her current operations.



in high school, she drew a picture of the dream she wished to realize. It was a floor plan for a facility where anyone could easily stay, eat, and find work. Kawaguchi recalls, “I wanted to create a place where homeless people could feel that things would work out for them if they were to go there.”

Homedoor, which Kawaguchi established at the age of 19, was the result of that inspiration. Since then, while going through a process of experimentation, the organization has assisted a total of more than 4,300 people in need. It provides comprehensive support to help people escape homelessness: from conducting nightly rounds distributing food to operating a shelter and cafeteria, providing employment support, and helping people to find housing. The goal is to create a new model for a social structure that does not generate homelessness. According to Kawaguchi, “One of our roles is to work in the field to discern what is lacking in regard to the various kinds of support already provided by the public and private sectors.” When Homedoor was established, staff spent nearly a year chatting with people in areas where many were financially distressed in order to get their insights. It was during this time that one homeless person happened to mention that he was good at repairing bicycles, and that inspired the idea for HUBchari.

Recently, Kawaguchi has also been tackling the issue of youth homelessness, a common issue worldwide. “In Japan, it is difficult to support such people because they don’t gather in specific areas, and many of them don’t look homeless. Our next challenge is to create a system that helps people who are not so visibly in need of support,” says Kawaguchi, who has now been watching over the homeless

population for over a decade. While pursuing medium- to long-term support measures that will lead to stable employment for young people, she has also begun approaching the government and private companies to ask for their cooperation in helping people seek support. One result of her efforts is that starting in February, email notifications by a telecommunications company to people who have fallen behind in paying their mobile device bills will include a website providing information regarding the welfare system and other support. “With knowledge about the problem of homelessness comes responsibility. I think we must consider what *can* be done, and not turn a blind eye to this situation. I want to create a society in which anyone can start over.” ●



Top: HUBchari is a bicycle sharing service employing homeless people as staff. It has grown into Homedoor’s major project, accounting for about 40% of the NPO’s revenue.

Bottom: “& Center,” which opened in 2018, is an emergency shelter with 18 individual rooms. “It’s hard

to find the will to start over when living in a harsh environment, so when people are going through tough times, I want to provide them with the best hospitality,” says Kawaguchi.



Social entrepreneur KAWAGUCHI Kana goes on nightly rounds to check up on the homeless population while distributing daily necessities. Homedoor, the certified NPO she established in 2010, has over 1,600 registered volunteers who support the organization’s operations mainly by conducting such rounds. DAISUKE GONDO