

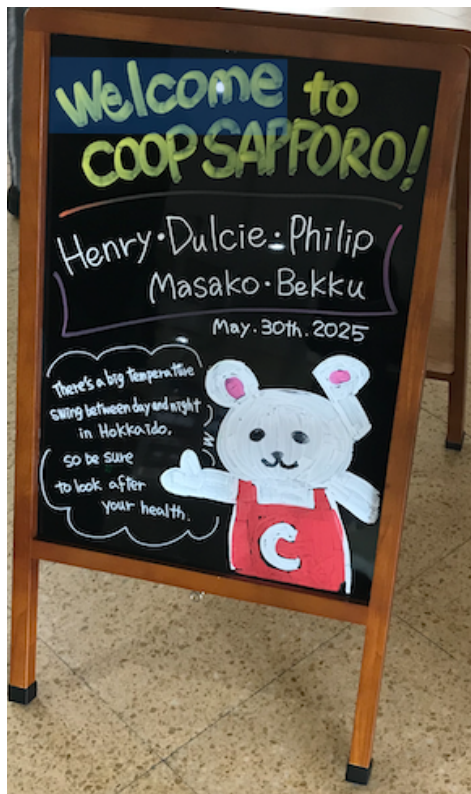
# On the Trail of the New Social Economy

## Coop-Sapporo, May 2025

(Mostly published in Coop News, January 2026)

by Henry Mintzberg

*Coop-Sapporo is not a traditional cooperative so much as an affiliation of social enterprises that it has organized to serve a range of community needs on the Japanese island of Hokkaido, from cradle to grave. This suggests a new model of the social economy: how communityship in the plural sector can play a consolidating role in rebalancing a society.*



**The Invite** Some years ago, in search of an out-of-the-way place to visit in Japan, we went to the Oki Islands, the closest part of Japan to Korea. Hiroshi Abe—a local, and friend of a friend, who now publishes books and organizes training programs—welcomed us warmly and took us around. This past December, I heard from Abe-san again. He was writing on behalf of Coop-Sapporo, which delivers a host of services to the north island of Hokkaido, about the size of Ireland. They were celebrating their 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and were inviting me to do a keynote speech. I was told that its chief, Omi-

san, was a particularly enthusiastic fan of my book, [Rebalancing Society](#), and had all the managers of the Co-op read it, in Japanese—reportedly several times.



<Meeting Omi-san>

**Opportunity for Rebalancing Society** Since 1991, I have been working toward rebalance society (as the [book](#) in 2015, a [website](#) since 2021, and now a pamphlet in progress called “For the Sake of Survival”). Briefly summarized, this seeks to get us past two-sector pendulum politics—swinging between left and right, public and private sectors, with paralysis in the center—to the idea of three-sector balance in society, across public sector governments that provide protections for the people, private sector businesses that supply many of their goods and services, and plural sector (civil society) associations that engage them in many of their community relationships. Cooperatives—essentially businesses, or *social enterprises*, operating in the plural sector, and owned by their members, not investors—are prime examples of the latter, alongside the many organizations that are owned by no-one (such as foundations and congregations, charities and NGOs). See the diagram below.

# Balanced Society



Reading about this Co-op, and in search of new models that could restore balance across the three sectors of society, particularly with regard to social enterprises, I suggested that we do a several-day tour of the island, to visit various facilities of the Co-op, to become more fully briefed before the event.



**En Route in the bus** And so six of us spent the better part of a memorable week driving around Hokkaido in a big bus: Dulcie Naimer, my partner who has excellent insight about rebalancing society, Phil LeNir, an enthusiastic fan of these efforts who runs a company called CoachingOurselves.org, Hiro Abe, full of creative enthusiasm for

the exercise, Masako Fujii, who proved to be much more than the translator for the trip, with her sophisticated knowledge of the subject matter and capacity to pull ideas together, and Emi Ogata, sent by the Co-op to organize all this, who proved to be especially adept at re-organizing it as well. We sat in the usual bus formation, until Dulcie wondered if we could turn the seats to face each other, since we were driving several hours every day. So we reconfigured the back of the bus into a workshop, as shown in the photograph, to discuss what we were finding as we rode along.



<Masako in character>

In advance, I had developed a list of about 40 questions to address about rebalancing society in general. Together, we reduced these to 10 that could be particularly relevant in our discussions, listed in the accompanying box, plus an 11<sup>th</sup> one that Phil had added in the previous week, about whether depopulation, which was a concern in all of Japan, but particularly Hokkaido, might be seen as an opportunity to rebalance society.

## **Guiding Questions for the bus**

**1 How to get the message out about three-sector balance beyond two-sector politics?**

**2 How to raise the profile of the plural sector, so that it can take its place alongside those called public and private?**

**3 Also, how can we recover community in the face of individualizing technologies?**

**4 Why do some communities thrive and not others? Likewise with some social initiatives and social movements**

**5 How to consolidate the many social initiatives into a global movement for reformation?**

**6 How to get more robust and responsible organizations?**

**7 How to activate the concerned but silent majority (people with mortgages, 30-70)? What inspires those people who are engaged for action?**

**8 How to promote better in place of more (and replace GDP by DGB—Dynamic Global Balance)?**

**9 Whatever happened to leadership? Where can we find the Nelson Mandela's now?**

**10 What is dumbing us down? How to wake us up?**

**11 Is "rebalancing society" the inevitable outcome of depopulation and degrowth in a capitalist society?**

**Depopulation as an Opportunity** In fact, we were off to a good start, because of what happened at a couple of events in Tokyo during the previous week that shed light on Phil's question. In a morning discussion with about 50 senior Japanese business executives, they raised the issue of stagnation in the Japanese economy, particularly with regard to depopulation. With Phil's question in mind, I suggested they might see this as an opportunity rather than a problem, but I had no idea what that could be. The answer came that evening at a reception, when I met a Japanese professor of law who studies this very issue, Fusako Seki. When I posed Phil's question, she answered, simply, yes, explaining that depopulation tends to bring out in their community people who have hitherto been isolated. She mentioned, in particular, the elderly, the handicapped, and women (presumably those secluded in their homes). We were to see this in action on our tour.

**Kinds of Co-ops** Some cooperatives are owned by their *suppliers*, as in farmer/agricultural ones, often to bypass costly middlemen in bringing their crops to market. Others are owned by their *workers*, as in the large Mondragon Federation in Spain, whose many businesses are each owned by their own workers, who are also own the overall Federation —70,000 of them. The most common are the co-ops owned by their *customers*, often supermarket chains and mutual insurance companies.

It's been said about bacon and eggs that the chicken is involved, but the pig is committed. In customer co-ops, the members tend to be chickens, not pigs—they can join easily enough, and likewise leave—whereas in supplier and worker co-ops, the members tend to be pigs, with their livelihoods at stake. Coop-Sapporo is essentially a customer co-op, but being much more than that, as we shall discuss, both its members and the people of Hokkaido can be seen as committed pigs too.

**Observing and Reflecting** En route, we had an opportunity to visit a wide range of activities that come under the umbrella of Coop-Sapporo. On the first day, we visited a facility that bottles water, not only for the co-op supermarkets, but also to store large quantities for an expected earthquake. Next, we visited a plant that polishes and packages rice for the supermarkets and elsewhere, in partnership with a farmer co-op nearby, whose members grow the rice.

One day, we visited retail, in two very different ways—people coming to the Co-op, and the Co-op going to the people. We visited one of the 109 supermarkets, where members and other people of Hokkaido shop. (The Co-op is also piloting a health-check services for their employees, with the intention of extending it to people in remote areas of the island.) Later, our bus followed one of the co-op's 97 mobile grocery vans that go out to people in remote communities. It stopped in a tiny village,

where its doors opened to become a small supermarket. We saw an elderly woman go up the stairs to buy her food, and then be walked home by a clerk who carried her bag.



<Shopping in a van>

Coop- Sapporo is particularly proud of the ATM machines that it has installed in some of these vans, to give people access to banking services. Coop-Sapporo also has 1360 delivery vans that deliver grocery orders directly to peoples' homes. These vans also recycle, by taking back used clothing.

On another day, we visited a school where Coop-Sapporo partners with the municipal government to provide lunches for the children, while “teaching health, manners, and community values.” Other visits included the Co-op’s Eco-center that educates people about the problem of climate change, and a major logistics facility for the distribution of food. We were also shown “First Child Boxes,” given to members (to entice them to join). This indicates the Co-op’s determination to provide cradle to grave services, starting with these baby boxes and ending with funeral halls.

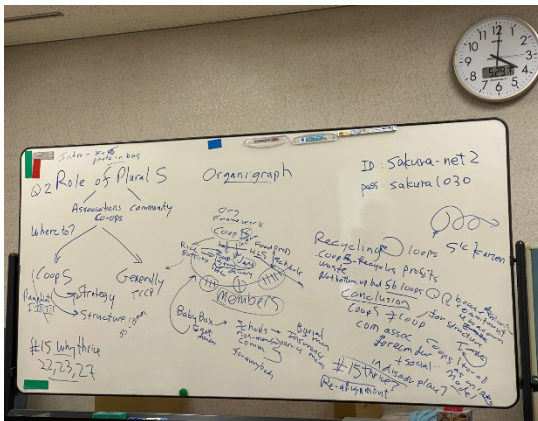
In the midst of all this, as we drove between these visits, we were brainstorming in our bus about what we were seeing. Our ideas built, and began to consolidate—as did we, ourselves, as a little community—so that by the fifth day, we were ready to sit down in a room with a whiteboard to figure out what to make of all this. Over the course of about

two hours, all of this came together, thanks to the use of an organigraph.



<Brainstorming>

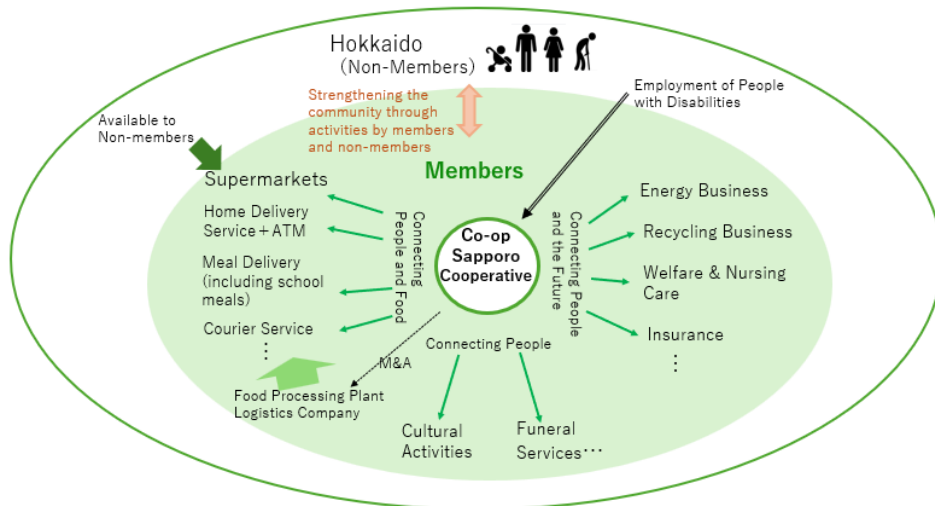
**Picturing Coop-Sapporo as a model of social balance** The French word for organization chart is *organigram*. Years ago, I started to draw [organigraphs](#) when I worked with a new organization, to get past the narrow chart of who bosses whom. With a few of its people, we made a chart of how work flowed through the place. The diagram below shows how we started with the Coop-Sapporo organigraph.



<Brainstorming Organigraph>

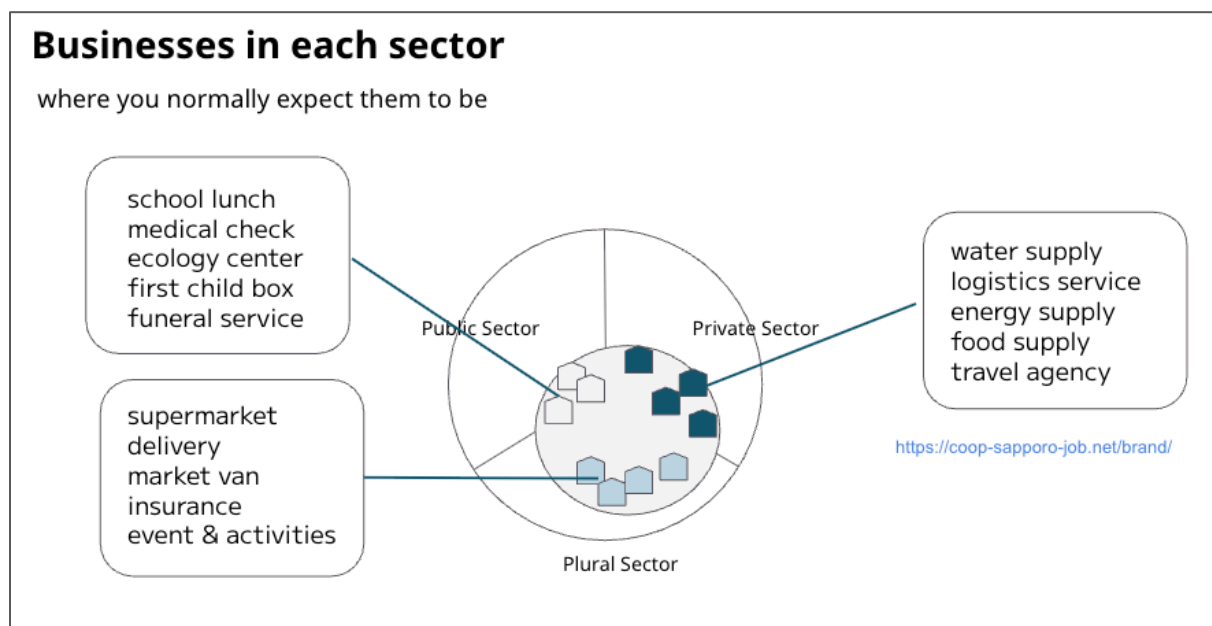
The final organigraph, below, shows Coop-Sapporo in the center of a circle, with its members and other recipients of its services all around—cradle to grave, from baby boxes, to lunches for school children, through food, banking, and insurance services for adults, to funeral halls at the end of life—supplemented with other communal events (one of which, “Restaurant at a Farm,” is described at the end).

# Organigraph of Co-op Sapporo



\* Created by the Editorial Team with reference to a diagram by Professor Mintzberg.

A breakthrough came when, looking at the organigraph, we concluded that Coop-Sapporo is not a just a cooperative, at least in the traditional sense of being in one business for its own members (as in mutual insurance companies), so much as *an affiliation of social enterprises organized by a cooperative*, some its own and some partnered with a government, as in the lunch program, with a business, as in water supply, even with another co-op, as in the rice operation. See the other circular diagram below, that shows these businesses on the first diagram of the three sectors, some of them alone, within the plural sector, other times together with public, private, or plural sector partners. Coop-Sapporo can thus be seen as a fascinating new model of how [communityship](#) in the plural sector can play an integrative role in rebalancing society.



## Coop-Sapporo's businesses in each sector

Here are some other conclusions that we drew:

- ✓ Coop-Sapporo **in** a community (when delivering food to the people of Hokkaido).
- ✓ Coop-Sapporo **as** a community (with regard to its own members, 2 million strong, and employees—the latter having served over 14 years, on average—with Omi-san in the center more than “on top”).

- ✓ Coop-Sapporo **is** a community, for economic and social development: it functions where self-interest meets common interest (with a motto of “One for all, all for one”).
- ✓ Coop-Sapporo is a collaborative structure, connected with all sorts of feedback loops.
- ✓ Coop-Sapporo represents a realignment of community, government, and business: it replaces or supplements the public sector when it cannot serve, and replaces the private sector where it chooses not to serve.
- ✓ Coop-Sapporo recycles, not only clothing, but also profits, into other activities that help to build the essence of communityship.
- ✓ Hence, Coop-Sapporo is an integrated model for social service/social enterprise rather than a decomposed model of market activities..

## **Keynote Presenting and Listening**

The next morning, we presented our findings to about 50 of the Co-op managers, beginning with a summary of rebalancing society as a concept, and then outlining our conclusions with the diagrams and the points above. The managers then formed into small groups, to discuss the following question—How can Coop-Sapporo take these ideas forward?—while the six of us, together with Omi-san, discussed “How can Coop-Sapporo become a model for the world?”

A debrief followed, during which the [keynote listeners](#), who had been sitting with their back at each table, were now sitting in a circle in the middle to share what they heard, while Omi-san sat at the side, with his back to everyone else, himself now the keynote listener. Then he presented his own conclusions about what he heard this morning, with all the co-op managers listenening.



<Omi-san as keynote listener, listening to the keynote listeners>

**Going Forward** The next day, it was off to the local university to make the presentation for which I was originally invited, to celebrate Coop-Sapporo's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To put the icing on the cake, more than so to speak, this was followed by a remarkable lunch. Thirteen times a year, the Co-op celebrates local ingredients with an event called "Restaurant at a Farm." Beside a farm, tables and chairs are set up for about 40 diners—with the office staff of the Co-op doing the serving. On this day, we were especially lucky. The chef was an award-winning one in Japan. Believe me, we ate brilliantly throughout this week, but never like this, never anywhere like this!



<Restaurant at a farm>

During the lunch, I presented Omi-san with a copy of my Rebalancing Society book, inscribed "To Omi-san, but for Akari", his granddaughter, commenting that maybe one

day, she will read it in English. Tears welled up in my new friend's eyes.



<Omi-san receiving the boo

