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# The Hansalim Life Movement and New Cooperativism in South Korea

Jonathan Dolley

The concept of New Cooperativism (NC) marks a shift in thinking and practice among a growing number of academics and activists seeking to draw the global co-operative movement back to its roots in the values of mutual solidarity and resistance against oppression. Crucially, it moves the debate beyond economic arguments for co-operative models to introduce a more holistic perspective which explores the political, ecological, social, and ethical implications of more inclusive forms of co-operation. Until now, however, the literature on NC has focused on its emergence in North America, Europe, and South America since the 1970s. This article argues that the Hansalim Life Movement shares many of the values and characteristics of NC. Hansalim's growth into a large multi-stakeholder federation of producer and consumer co-operatives gives them unique insights into the opportunities and challenges of implementing NC values in practice. To demonstrate the alignment of Hansalim with the emerging concept of NC, I present a re-framing of NC across four dimensions which forms the basis of a brief outline of Hansalim's values, structure, and activities. These are: purpose, ethic, political-economic orientation, and governance. I conclude by suggesting four lines of enquiry through which to enrich the concept of NC.

## Introduction

New Cooperativism represents an exciting turn towards solidarity among the vanguard of the global co-operative movement. The recent special issue on New Cooperativism (NC) in the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* (Ridley-Duff & O'Shaughnessy, 2022) highlights its growing influence in both academia and the diverse and evolving practices of co-operation across the UK, Europe, USA, Canada, and South America. Examples of NC have been studied in each of these regions from the social and community co-operatives of Italy (Bianchi, 2022; Sacchetti & Tortia, 2014) and the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in Spain to Multi-stakeholder Cooperatives (MSC) in the USA (Lund, 2012) and Canada (Michaud & Audebrand, 2019), and the workers co-operatives of Argentina (Kasparian & Rebón, 2022). More recently, the growth of peer-to-peer and platform co-operatives in connection with the concept of commoning as a challenge to capitalism have added a new and highly technology literate dimension to NC as an expanding and diverse movement (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2014; Papadimitropoulos, 2021; Pazaitis et al., 2017). In this article I suggest another, as yet untapped, source of ideas and examples which could enrich the debate around NC and contribute to the global engagement with the concept. That source is the Hansalim Life Movement of South Korea and the Life Co-operatives which emerged alongside it as pioneers of Korea's social and solidarity economy (SSE) (Jang, 2020; Jung, 2016; Kim, 2017).

In what follows, I develop a conceptual framework to facilitate comparison of various expressions of NC across contexts and sectors. I then apply this framework to demonstrate the ways in which the Hansalim Life Movement exemplifies many of the features of NC but at a previously unprecedented scale and complexity. Finally, I outline a research agenda for the study of Hansalim and the wider Korean co-operative movement.

## New Cooperativism in Four Dimensions

'New Cooperativism' was introduced by Vieta (2010) and has quickly become an umbrella term for a wide range of co-operative social enterprises seeking to recover and reinterpret the radical roots of nineteenth century co-operativism in a contemporary context. Ridley-Duff and O'Shaughnessy (2022) identify two phases of NC that emerged in North America, Europe, and South America between the 1970-2000s and 1990s-present respectively. A list of characteristic

features was compiled by Vieta (2010, 2018) and later expanded by Ridley-Duff (2020). In addition to these lists of features, proponents of Open Co-ops (Conaty & Bollier, 2014; Pazaitis et al., 2017; Troncoso, 2014) and DisCOs (Distributed Cooperative Organisations) (Troncoso et al., 2020) have contributed their own sets of principles and features which add to a diverse landscape of ideas and practices associated with NC. While these lists are helpful in conveying the shape of these new co-operatives, there is also a need for a more structured concept to support fruitful cross-cultural and cross-sector comparisons of diverse forms of NC and other expressions of co-operativism and socio-economic organisation.

I synthesise four complementary definitions of what could broadly be described as new cooperatives — 1) Vieta (2018), 2) Ridley-Duff (2020), 3) Open Co-ops (Pazaitis et al., 2017), and 4) DisCOs (Troncoso et al., 2020). This simple analytical framework enables a more intuitive comparison of differing expressions of NC with each other and with other forms of socio-economic organisation.

Drawing on the outlines of the various conceptions of NC, described extensively in the recent special issue, I have arranged the characteristics of NC according to four dimensions (see Table 1) to allow for comparison. My categories — purpose, ethic, political-economic orientation, and governance — are derived as a way of organising the listed features into distinct groups or clusters of values and practices that appear closely related. Each column lists the features identified by authors' own numbering so that the reader can easily refer them back to the original sources.

First, NC is defined by a **purpose** which goes beyond conventional economic motivations for co-operation to explicitly embrace a broader focus on social and environmental benefits as primary. This focus is qualified by reference to issues of justice and equity implied by the emphasis on the need to be inclusive of a broad and diverse range of stakeholders, rooted in the local community and anchored by collective ownership and an equitable distribution of benefits. An explicitly moral component is acknowledged by claiming orientation towards the common good and enlarging the concept of value beyond the narrowly economic.

Second, enlarging the concept of value raises further ethical questions about how we value human dignity, and our relationships with one another and the non-human world as we pursue our shared purpose. Therefore, NC appears to express an explicit **ethic** or set of moral principles to guide human relations. Based on this ethic, work and organisational functions are re-conceptualised to shift emphasis away from financial/economic productivity towards the well-being of the individual, the organisation, and the wider community. This reflects a conscious resistance against the instrumentalising and commodifying effects of neo-liberal capitalist economies (Thomson et al., 2021) by re-asserting the importance of recognising life as intrinsically valuable.

Third, this ethical position in turn calls for a decisive stance towards the incumbent social, economic, and political status quo. This is a distinctive **political-economic orientation** or attitude towards dominant capitalist economic systems which is expressed through a particular strategy for engaging with them. The orientation of NC is towards commoning as a post-capitalist politics, which sets them in opposition to capitalist principles and what they see as the co-option of 'old co-operativism' into the market structures of capitalism. This entails responding with community-led solutions to the crises generated by capitalism, rather than exploiting them as opportunities for profit. It means developing economic alternatives to capitalist market relations, as well as maintaining an openness to local and transnational collaboration to build a mass movement for wider social and political change. The curating of this purpose, ethic, and political-economic orientation from the grassroots to the scale of organisations and alliances is a challenge that requires carefully designed governance structures.

Table 1: Comparison of four definitions of New Cooperativism

Dimension	Vieta (2018)	Ridley-Duff (2020)	Open Co-operatives (Pazaitis et al., 2017)	Open-value co-operativism (DisCO) (Troncoso et al., 2020)
1. Purpose	(1) Rooted in the local community in a way that emphasises subsidiarity and community-led development. (4) Inclusive of a broad range of stakeholders. (6) Collective ownership and equity in distribution of benefits.		(1) Common good orientation.	(1) Social and environmental priorities. (6) Reward creation of market value, commons-creating value, and care work value.
2. Ethic	(3) Focused on ethical and sustainability outcomes.			(5) Care for the collective and the individual.
3. Political-economic orientation	(2) Responds to local challenges and crises with alternatives to capitalism.	(2) Focus on 'commoning' and producing commons resources.	(3) Creation of commons. (4) Transnational collaboration oriented towards broader transformation.	(3) Creation of commons. (4) Glocal (Design Global, Manufacture Local).
4. Governance	(5) Horizontal forms of governance and collaboration.	(1) Multi-stakeholder ownership and governance. (3) Enfranchising labour members.	(2) Inclusive of multiple stakeholders.	(2) Whole community governance. (7) Decentralised federation.

Fourth, in terms of **governance**, NCs adopt multi-stakeholder, inclusive, and democratic forms of organisation and decision-making to ensure the interests of all affected groups are taken into account. Horizontal structures are favoured in place of hierarchy and coercive control to protect the autonomy and creativity of individuals and member organisations. Deliberative and transparent decision-making processes are prioritised over secretive or top-down styles so as to foster strong relationships based on trust, provide contexts for healthy conflict and resolution, and to minimise factionalism. Alongside this, NCs take a federative approach to expanding their size and scope which avoids centralised control in favour of distributed alliances to preserve the autonomy and dynamism of member organisations.

Table 2: Four dimensions of New Cooperativism

Dimension	Characteristics
1. Purpose	Equitable creation of social and environmental benefits in the interest of the common good.
2. Ethic	Enlargement of the concept of value beyond narrow economic terms to explicitly recognise (a) generosity to the wider community, (b) care for the health of the organisation and its members.
3. Political-economic orientation	Commoning towards alternative economies, local responses to crises of capitalism.
4. Governance	Multi-stakeholder, inclusive, horizontal, democratic, and federative.

Condensing these into a working definition of NC with four dimensions (Table 2) makes it easier to compare the commonalities and differences across various expressions of co-operativism. For each dimension we can identify and contrast both the values and practices adopted by so-called 'old' co-operatives, 'new' co-operatives and other solidarity and commoning movements. These four dimensions form the lens for my analysis of Hansalim below.

## Research Method

The following empirical material is based on my ongoing engagement with Hansalim as part of a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship. Between September 2021 and March 2023 I reviewed Korean and English literature on Hansalim and Korea's Life Co-operatives and analysed the federation's own official documents and reports (Hansalim, 2017a, 2017b, 2019a, 2019b, 2021a, 2021b, 2023). Interviews include almost 30 people from Hansalim's various stakeholder groups in Seoul, Gyeonggi, Paju, Goesan, Cheongju, Asan, and Busan. Throughout the research process I have also held regular seminars with researchers from the Mosim Institute to discuss questions that emerge through my engagement with the written material and interviews. This ongoing work informs my current understanding of Hansalim's goals, values, structure, and practices, a summary of which is given below.

## Hansalim

Hansalim began as a small rice market on the outskirts of Seoul in 1986 (Hansalim, 2021b). It was a co-operative of producers and consumers formed with the purpose of creating an alternative to the contemporary food system which damaged the environment, endangered the health of consumers, and drove small-scale farmers ever deeper into poverty (Hansalim, 2017b). Today, we would refer to it as a multi-stakeholder co-operative (MSC) or solidarity food co-operative.

The founders had a vision to unite farmers and consumers in a community of mutual trust and support with a sense of shared responsibility to one another and for the non-human world. However, this vision encompassed more than the production and consumption of safe eco-friendly food for fair prices. In the first few years, the founding members — a group of pro-democracy activists, intellectuals, farmers, housewives, artists, and poets — sought to diagnose the roots of the destructive tendencies in modern society that seemed to be driving humanity towards division and the suicidal destruction of the ecosystems upon which all life depends.

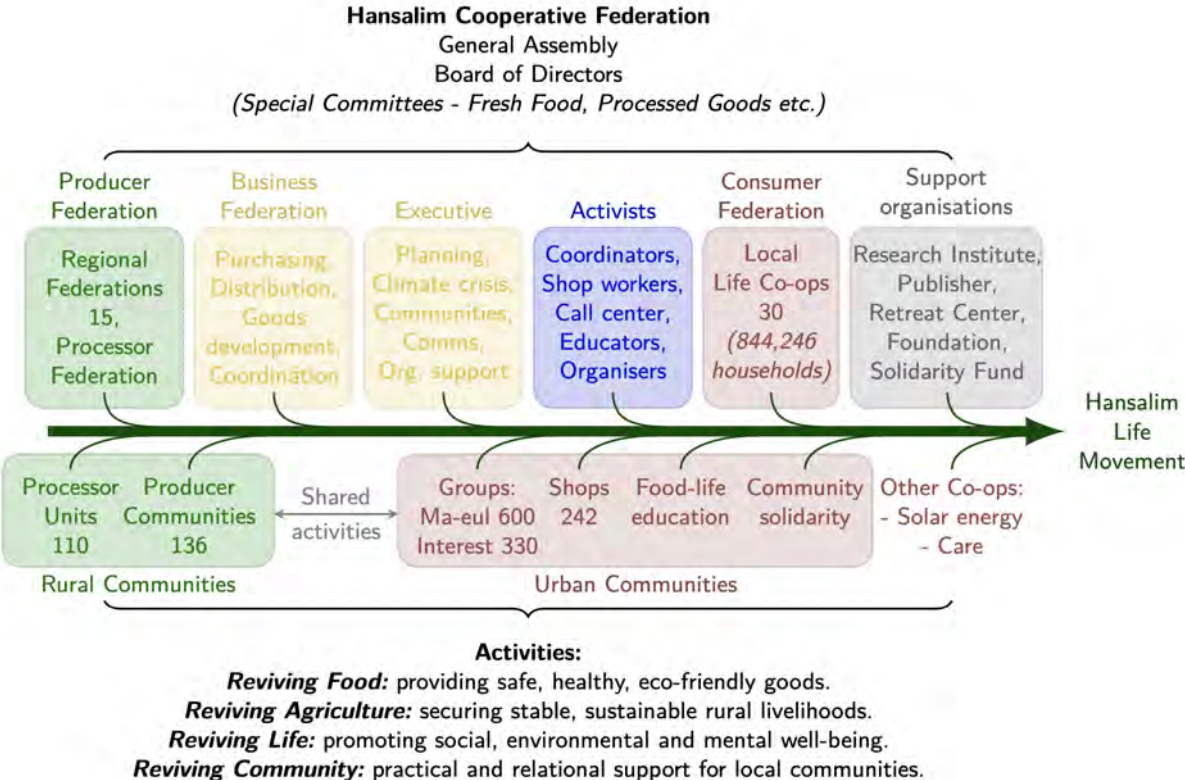
They launched the Hansalim Life Movement and published the Hansalim Manifesto (Hansalim, 2019a, 2021a) in 1989 which outlined their critique of both capitalist and communist industrial civilisation as based on a flawed mechanistic worldview inherited from western philosophy and the Enlightenment. As a remedy they presented an alternative worldview which rejected the instrumentalisation of human and non-human alike, proposing a spiritual worldview that recognised all things as bearing the Divine Life that permeates and unites the cosmos. In this view, all life is intrinsically and equally valuable and the proper attitude towards one another and the non-human world is one of respect and service to enable mutual flourishing. Their purpose, therefore, was to implement a practical economic alternative to capitalist industrialism and promote a wider cultural shift in society as a whole. Their vision was of a world in which all can live together in mutual solidarity — human and human, human and nature — and food was the starting point for this transformation.

Since its founding, Hansalim has expanded its activities from production of raw foods to include processed foods, cosmetics, cleaning products and other household consumables, and fair-trade goods. By 2022, Hansalim had grown to become a federation of co-operatives with a membership of 844,246 households and including more than 2,303 agricultural producer households, 110 processor units, 242 shops in cities across the country, supplying eco-friendly

and organic produce (4,458 goods in total) to hundreds of thousands of people through these shops and also online (Hansalim, 2023). As an alternative food network it is a remarkable achievement. Moreover, sustained by its revenues as a food retailer, Hansalim formed a central co-ordinating organisation and established a range of support organisations in service of the public good and the movement’s wider social and environmental goals.

To provide a more complete picture of the structure and range of activities of Hansalim, Figure 1 shows the Hansalim Life Movement and each of the stakeholders and organisations from which it is formed. It does not describe the legal structure of Hansalim but rather a conceptualisation of how each part of Hansalim fits together in practice. As a legacy of the historical development of Korean co-operative law, Hansalim and the other Life Co-operatives are registered as single-stakeholder consumer co-operatives. Thus, in legal terms, Hansalim is a single-stakeholder co-operative of consumers. The diagram below shows how Hansalim manages to operate a multi-stakeholder democratic process despite these legal constraints.

Figure 1: Visualising Hansalim’s structure



The producer members (생산자 — seng-san-ja) of Hansalim (2,303 households) are organised locally into 136 production communities (생산공동체 — seng-san-gong-dong-chaee) each formed by 5 or more households who live in relative proximity. The total cultivated area adds up to 45.75 km<sup>2</sup> (or 11,305 acres) producing fresh fruit and vegetables, rice and grains, meat and dairy goods, oil and seasoning crops, among other things. An additional 110 processors units process raw materials from Hansalim’s producers as well as sourcing seafood and other materials from organic and environmentally friendly sources which are carefully monitored for safety. The producers and processors are bound together into 13 regional alliances with their own boards of elected directors which together form Hansalim’s Producers Federation with their own elected president. Many of these alliances pool resources to run local distribution hubs, processing facilities, and organise the sharing of equipment and recycling of farm wastes. They run their own offices and employ support workers and some have systems to recruit and train new farmers, improve farming techniques and develop new goods.

Consumer members (조합원 – jo-hab-won) are organised into 30 local, autonomous co-operatives across the country. They run the local retail shops (242 in total between them)

as well as Ma-eul (neighbourhood) meetings, interest groups, food-life education/training, community kitchens, environmental campaigns, and other charitable and community building activities. Consumer members established a solar energy co-operative and some also run a network of care co-operatives providing childcare, eldercare, and care for vulnerable groups. In addition, the consumer co-operatives organise farm visits and work parties ('helping hands') to connect consumer members with local producers, collaborate with local producers to donate food and resources to those in need, run recycling, fundraising and social media campaigns, and hold festivals to gather consumers and producers together around shared food and celebration.

Among Hansalim's consumer members a distinct group of self-employed workers known as Activists (활동가 — hwal-dong-ga) are responsible for much of the formal and informal operations of each local co-operative. Activists are co-operative members who have received training for specific roles and are paid a stipend and expenses to carry out numerous activities including running the shops, coordinating activities, and participating in leadership and governance.

The organisational structure of the Hansalim Co-operative Federation formally consists of the General Assembly and a board of directors with an elected chairperson. These include representatives of the Consumer Federation, the Producer Federation, the Business Federation, and several support organisations. Organisational support, policy planning, and communications are provided by a separate executive entity which reports to the board of directors and helps to co-ordinate environmental campaigning and training activities, facilitates policy deliberation through numerous special committees and supports the processes of deliberative and democratic decision-making. In addition, each of the separate federations and the local co-operatives also have their own boards of directors and chairpersons as well as special committees, executive entities, and business operations.

Funded from a percentage of the retail sales and various other business activities, the Business Federation reports directly to the board of directors of the Hansalim Co-operative Federation and is the central coordinating organisation of a large portion of Hansalim's economic activities. The Business Federation employs staff to run the central distribution system, purchasing and price negotiation, marketing, online sales, goods development, and innovation in packaging.

The five support organisations include a research institute, publishing house, retreat centre, charitable foundation, and a solidarity fund. The Mosim and Salim Research Institute aims to provide a critical voice of reflection on Hansalim as a movement and a co-operative business endeavour, researching the Hansalim Life Movement and the Korean co-operative movement, funding independent researchers and engaging with external academics and activists. Hansalim's publishing house publishes books related to the history, philosophy, and activities of the Life Movement. The charitable Foundation provides aid to local and international causes, while the Solidarity Fund is a peer-to-peer social investment organisation which provides farmers with favourable loans to purchase inputs. Finally, the retreat centre offers training in mind and body practices to promote mental and physical well-being.

Hansalim's purpose is summed up in four phrases (Figure 1). The first, 'Reviving Food' (밥상살림 — bapsang-salim) refers to the goal of providing consumers with safe, healthy, eco-friendly food and other household goods and this defines the responsibility that producers adopt for the life of consumers. Second, 'Reviving Agriculture' (농업살림 — nongup-salim) refers to the goal of securing stable and sustainable livelihoods for producers and this defines the responsibility which consumers adopt for the livelihoods of producers. Third, 'Reviving Life' (생명살림 — saengmyeong-salim) expresses the responsibility of care for others (human and non-human) which producers and consumers together share and which is worked out through outward focused activities such as environmental campaigning, education, social welfare projects, and inward contemplative and reflective practices. Finally, 'Reviving Community' (지역살림 — jiyek-salim), emphasises the need to strengthen local community resources and relationships.

Seen in these terms, Hansalim is an unusual example of a solidarity food co-operative (MSC) developing sufficient scale, complexity, and diversity that it can sustain a large-scale alternative agri-food system even within a highly urbanised industrialised capitalist economy, while also carrying out environmental campaigning, education, and even international aid activities.

It is also appropriate to consider Hansalim an example of NC. As Table 3 shows, Hansalim’s values and activities correspond closely to the characteristics of NC across all four dimensions. First, the creation of an alternative food system and using some of the revenue to fund education, campaigning, research, and assistance is a concrete implementation of the purpose of NC. Second, the emphasis on the value of human and non-human life as a core principle of the movement and the co-operative model matches closely with the ethic of NC. Third, since its foundation, Hansalim has been a resistance movement against capitalism, seeking practical economic alternatives for farmers and fostering mutual collaboration with consumers and other groups nationally and internationally. Fourth, as a multi-stakeholder federation of democratic co-operatives held together by a process of deliberative democracy it clearly embodies the governance principles of NC.

Table 3: Hansalim as an example of New Cooperativism

Dimension	NC Characteristics	Hansalim
1. Purpose	Equitable creation of social and environmental benefits in the interest of the common good.	Creation of alternative food system to give consumers access to safe healthy food, provide farmers with secure incomes, and protect the environment. Public good served by education, campaigning, community building, and financial support.
2. Ethic	Enlargement of the concept of value beyond narrow economic terms to explicitly recognise (a) generosity to the wider community, (b) care for the health of the organisation and its members.	Values human and non-human life as intrinsically and equally worthy of respect and service.
3. Political-economic orientation	Commoning towards alternative economies, local responses to crises of capitalism.	Resistance against globalised industrial farming systems and capitalism by establishing short food chains, strengthening local economic relations, participating in national and international collaboration.
4. Governance	Multi-stakeholder, inclusive, horizontal, democratic, and federative.	Federation of co-operatives and associations held together by deliberative democratic processes that include multiple stakeholders.

## Conclusions

This brief account of Hansalim suggests that there are rich opportunities for NC scholars and practitioners to learn from their experience and to exchange knowledge. Although I have painted a picture of successful growth and development, Hansalim and the other Life Co-operatives also face severe and intensifying challenges to their long-term futures which are putting increasing stress on some of their core values such as solidarity, justice, and their commitment to democratic process. Rapid growth in membership and economic success over the past decades have created greater vulnerabilities to market forces and threaten to dilute the movement’s commitment to their original social and environmental objectives.

Hansalim and the wider Life Co-operative movement in Korea are entering a turning point. In response to these challenges they are investing in research and dialogue and have begun to diversify their activities to adapt to the changing needs and conditions of Korean and global society. There is tremendous potential to build research partnerships and develop collaborative activities between Korean and European solidarity co-operatives and academics to explore



critical questions for the future of co-operativism as a force for sustainable development and social transformation.

In conclusion, based on the four dimensions outlined above, I suggest four lines of enquiry through which to approach Hansalim and the Life Co-operatives to encourage mutual learning:

- **Purpose:** How have their philosophical and socio-political roots influenced their purpose? What insights can be gained for enriching the conceptual foundations and definitions of purpose in NC?
- **Ethic:** What are the features and foundations of their ethical frameworks and what are the challenges for practical implementation? How do these compare to those of NC and other co-operative and capitalist forms of socio-economic organisation? What lessons can be learnt for NC conceptions of work, power relations, gender, class, and ethnicity?
- **Political-economic orientation:** What challenges and opportunities have they faced as they attempt to resist and transform the incumbent political-economic system while also seeking to scale-up and remain economically viable? What lessons does this experience hold for others in NC working towards wider social transformation?
- **Governance:** How and why have their governance models evolved as they have grown in scale? What are the consequences of this evolution for individual well-being, gender representation, and for organisational functions and relationships?

While much of the literature on Korea's co-operatives has focused on their management structures, there is limited research linking their experiences to the emerging concepts around Open Co-operatives, New Cooperativism, and commons transitions. This leaves much potential for shared learning across contexts and collaborative innovation in co-operative values, forms, and practices. In my own conversations with Hansalim's members, representatives, and researchers I can confirm that they are also keen to learn from others, who like them, are seeking to develop a more radical expression of co-operativism fit to tackle the growing challenges of social, economic, and environmental crises. I end with a request that any readers who have an interest in such a collaboration reach out to myself, the Mosim and Salim Research Institute, and Korea's other co-operative movements to continue the conversation.

## The Author

Dr Jonathan Dolley is a Fellow of the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme and a Research Fellow at the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of Sussex. His research focuses on solidarity co-operativism, alternative food networks, urbanisation, peri-urban food systems and sustainability transformations.

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