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Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung  
E-Mail: [pedocs@dipf.de](mailto:pedocs@dipf.de)  
Internet: [www.pedocs.de](http://www.pedocs.de)

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## The educational potential of social economy projects in the Himalayas: the case of Avani

*V.P.J. Sambhavi*

University of Leuven, Belgium (sambhavi.vpj@kuleuven.be)

*Mieke Berghmans*

University of Leuven, Belgium (mieke.berghmans@ppw.kuleuven.be)

*Joke Vandenabeele*

University of Leuven, Belgium (joke.vandenabeele@ppw.kuleuven.be)

### Abstract

*In this article we analyze the social economy projects of Avani – a Community Based Organization based in Himalayas and reflect on their potential for enabling a critical pedagogy of place. We use the concept of tactics in a spatial and educational sense to explore Avani's projects as an intervention within the dominant place logic of capitalism that opens market opportunities and enables new experiences of living and being for hill communities. We argue that these experiences are educational since they invoke, what we want to call, the possibility to verify one's equality and one's ability to do something. Our study is based on an ethnographic case approach and combines literature review, staff interviews and documents of Avani along with sensitizing concepts to guide our analysis.*

Keywords: tactics; pedagogic subjectivation; critical pedagogy; community based organization, India

### Introduction

Reflections on 'social economy' projects as incubators of adult learning, emancipation and democratization are not new. In fact, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cooperative organizations (such as self-help groups, mutual insurance groups or trade unions) were an important source of inspiration for prominent adult learning theorists like Mary Parker Follett (1924) and Eduard Lindeman (1989). When we talk of 'social



economy' projects today however we do not (only) refer to these 'traditional' examples of the cooperative movement. Social economy today encompasses a much greater variety of organizations and projects; from Grameen Bank, to Community Supported Agriculture to Fair Trade projects to training companies,<sup>1</sup> all these organizations are referred to as social economy projects. What brings this diverse group of organizations together, is that they do not only pursue profit but also seek to pursue social goals, thus inserting principles of social justice into their economic operations (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005; Quarter, 1992). The term 'social economy' has been more popular in the North. NGOs in India that follow a similar approach i.e. raise funds through commercial activities to support their social mission are registered as a trust or society (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). In line with the cooperative movement of early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these social economy projects often contain a promise of empowerment, solidarity, democracy and sustainability. They contain a promise of empowering marginalized people and of giving room to marginalized issues (climate, poverty alleviation, conservation etc.). Yet it is unclear to which extent and within which limitations these promises can be fulfilled. To which extent do these organizations really empower, enable new ways of living? Do these organizations truly embody an alternative? Or are they merely 'capitalism in disguise'? Under which conditions do these projects realize the educational possibilities for the marginalized communities they cater to? How do they bring about the possibilities for education within the scope of their social economy projects? What are the strengths, limitations and trade-offs that these projects are confronted with when combining social goals with economic operations? There is a growing interest in these types of projects - in the practical, policy making as well as academic field - but still many questions remain unanswered.

In this paper we make a modest contribution to finding answers to these questions. We present a case study of the social economy projects of Avani, an organization that aims to create "opportunities for rural women and men to find viable employment through a self-sufficient and environmentally sustainable supply chain" in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, nested in the Indian Himalayas (Avani-Kumaon, n.d.). We analyze how social economy projects generate new experiences and stimulates new ways of being and living for the marginalized people of Kumaon. Taking an educational standpoint, we focus and theorize predominantly on how the experiences generated by social economy interventions can stimulate the hill people to critically reflect and act upon the dominant socio-economic structures that impact their lives. We will in particular explore how Avani's projects on textile making and renewable energy, enable local rural communities to pursue better opportunities for living and being in the hills. Given the project's obvious social economy orientation, we will explore what conditions makes these experiences educational and how Avani makes it possible by taking up a halfway position in a variety of ways.

We have structured this article as follows. We begin with a short discussion on the methodology followed by an examination of the Himalayas as a place confronted with double marginalization. Against the backdrop of marginalization, we give a brief overview of Avani's vision, organizational structure and our focal projects for this article. Then, we turn to explore the new experiences fostered by Avani in their projects in terms of the new ways of being and living, which we discovered through our empirical research. Further, taking into consideration the criticisms against Avani's projects, we show how living and being experiences can be educational and the educational condition of 'suspension' that makes it possible. In a last part we analyze how suspension is enabled by Avani's choice to position itself as a halfway point of

connection. Lastly, we conclude by pointing out the fragility of these moments of suspension that opens some new questions for further research.

## Methodology

Our analysis is based on an ethnographic study of Avani's projects, which was undertaken in two phases, June-Aug 2012 and July-Sep 2014. During these phases, we undertook 35 interviews and 2 focus group discussions with hill communities, 6 staff interviews and analyzed official documents along with academic literature. Our interviewees from the hill communities were chosen from 3 villages – Chachret, Tunera & Morari using snowball sampling method. In these interviews, we explored their experiences of participating in Avani's projects on textile making and renewable energy. We deepened the insights from these interviews by holding focus group discussions with women (since they comprise the vast majority of participants) from Chachret (between 50-65 years) and Morari (14-25 years) where we delved into their conflicts and expectations in relation to the projects. In our interviews with Avani's staff members, we explored the vision underlying Avani's projects as well as their challenges in developing and implementing new initiatives. The official documents we studied included annual reports from 1998-99 to 2014-15, Avani's business plans and organizational report as well as project report and grant proposals for textile and renewable energy projects. These documents gave us an insight into Avani's role as a community organization, their long-term goals in developing new projects as well as the intricate issues of collaborating with local communities and other stakeholders. These multiple sources of data were used for the purpose of triangulation during data collection as well as data analysis.

Our analysis was primarily guided by the sensitizing notion (Blumer, 1954) of tactics (de Certeau, 1988) which we tried to understand both in terms of its spatial and educational relevance. The notion of tactics (de Certeau, 1988) was drawn from the literature for its usefulness in accounting for acts of subversion by the weak against a repressive context created by the powerful. Tactics is a concept that has stimulated us to understand the significance of Avani's projects and their way of enabling the hill communities to create a niche within the global capital economy. To understand the spatial relevance of tactics, we drew on the writings of David Harvey, (2003) a prominent social geographer. His ideas on the dominance of capitalism on place allow us to show how Avani's projects act as a counter dynamic. Since we wanted to understand this notion of tactics in its educational sense also, we drew inspiration from Masschelein and Simons's (2013; 2010) analysis of what makes education possible. Their notion of 'pedagogic subjectivation' (Simons & Masschelein, 2010) helped us to analyze the experiences of potentiality enabled within Avani's projects as being educational. These potentialities are about being able to live and be in new ways that allow hill communities to critically reflect and act towards their place. For our analysis, we choose these particular sensitizing concepts because we want to focus on the educational process within Avani's projects. In this sense, we are in line with J.K. Gibson-Graham's (2014; 2013) attempt to develop a vocabulary of economic practices that is different from a capitalistic one. However our focus differs from Gibson-Graham as we want to develop a vocabulary of education based on Avani's social economy projects. Based on the sensitizing notions of tactics and 'pedagogic subjectivation', we want to answer the following research question:

How do Avani's social economy projects circumvent the dominant capitalist economy to evoke possibilities for new experiences of living and being that are educational?

### Avani and the Himalayan hills

Avani was started in 1997 with the purpose of creating "opportunities for rural communities to find viable employment through a self-sufficient and environmentally sustainable supply chain" (Avani-Kumaon, n.d.). They work with isolated farming communities in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, India and have a presence in over 108 villages in the districts of Bageshwar and Pithoragarh that comprise some of the most geographically remote areas in Uttarakhand (Avani-Kumaon, n.d.). In this section we will briefly introduce the social economy projects of Avani. But before that we will scrutinize the background of double marginalization of this particular region against which these projects have been developed.

#### *The Himalayan hills: a double marginalization*

The marginalization of the remote and isolated villages in the Central Himalayan mountain ranges of Uttarakhand can be traced back to the early beginnings of commercial forestry in this region (Guha, 2000, p. 56). Commercial forestry gained an impetus after the government's 1878 act which reserved local forests for economic activities (Guha, 2000, p. 38). Traditionally the forests belonged to hill communities and were used by them for sustaining their daily needs. After the act was passed, hill communities could no longer assert their communal rights over the forests to carry out their subsistence activities (Rangan, 2004). Interlinked with this process of resource exploitation, the hill region was also excluded from benefitting from the profits accrued through economic activities (Guha, 2000, p. 141; Gupta, 2015; Rangan, 2004). Thus, the use of the hill's natural resources for economic activities installed two interconnected processes of marginalization: being pushed at the margin as a subsistence economy, indigenous to the hill community and being pushed at the margin of the global capital economy as a hill region. Below we elaborate on both processes of marginalization and reflect upon them in light of the spatial characteristics of the Himalayan hills.

The hill community's marginalization as a subsistence economy has been attributed to the Indian government's policies that overtook the rights of small peasants in favor of big investors to promote capitalistic production (Banerjee-Guha, 2013; Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Randeria, 2007; Williams & Mawdsley, 2006). The loss of traditional rights of use over the forests threatened the very survival of the hill communities since they relied on its use values in order to meet their everyday needs. The forests were the main source of fodder, firewood and its non-timber produce like resin, grass, fruits and nuts were frequently used for petty trade (Guha, 2000). Apart from sustaining daily needs, the hill community's relation with nature was tied to socio-cultural belief systems wherein care for the environment was regulated within the community through forms of worship, taboos regarding resource exploitation, conservation ethics and community norms of usage (Negi, 2010). However, with the introduction of commercial forestry, these indigenous practices were prohibited because they were deemed as unscientific, which made it easier for the government to pursue its agenda of commercial exploitation of forests (Guha, 2000). Consequently the hill community could no longer carry on subsistence activities as their traditional rights were renegeged under the guise of commercial forestry.

The hill region became marginalized in a second way when the economic opportunities around the use of indigenous resources were reserved for the development of the plains while the hills were neglected. As pointed by several researchers already (Bahuguna, 1982; Berreman, 1989; Bhatt, 1988; Gadgil & Guha, 1993; Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1986), Indian government's policy to use hill resources as raw materials for industries located in the plains contributed to the hill's economic marginalization. The government was denounced for using the hill's resources to promote industrialization in the plains while ignoring the indigenous development of the hill areas. This resulted in a growing regional inequality between the hills and the plains wherein the hills were pushed to the brink of poverty while the plains continued to prosper. This situation of inequality is known as *pahar-maidan* (hill-plains) conflict in local parlance (Jayal, 2000). With India's meteoric rise in the global capital economy in recent decades, this regional inequality has only intensified compelling hill people to migrate in search of better living opportunities (Rangan, 2004).

To enhance our understanding of the hill's marginalization in relation to its spatial characteristics, we turn to Harvey's theorization on the role of place in the functioning of capitalism. According to Harvey (1993), capitalism depends on places that are amenable to constructing 'built environments' such as buildings, roads, airports and other modern infrastructure necessary for production and sale of goods. These forms of 'built environments' act as a means to efficiently mobilize production inputs such as raw materials, capital, labor, markets and technology, which are necessary for capitalism to function. Therefore, places that are capable of supporting such infrastructure are deemed favorable for capital investment, which Harvey terms as the market logic of place (Harvey, 2005).

However places are unequal in their capacity to adopt the logic of market (Harvey, 1993). Going back to our case, the difficult terrain and fragile environment of hills cannot support the infrastructural amenities required for capitalism to function (Mehta, 1999; Mittal, Tripathi, & Sethi, 2008). Consequently hills were neglected for investment while the plains were able to easily become centers of capitalistic production owing to the ease of connectivity and its infrastructural endowments (Rangan, 2004). Although the hill region's geographical characteristics rendered it unfavorable for capitalistic production, its rich natural resources were valued for capitalistic production, as exemplified by the practice of commercial forestry. By restricting the communal control and use of forests – through government policies and acts prohibiting traditional practices, the hill people were prevented from using them for subsistence activities (Guha, 2000). Instead, these resources began to be used for commercial purpose of industries located in the plains, thereby necessitating migration to the plains in search of livelihood. Such strategies, which Harvey (2003, p. 145) terms as 'accumulation by dispossession' are reflected in the way plains were developed by dispossessing the hills of its human and ecological resources.

#### *Avani's choice for social economy projects*

It is against this background of marginalization, Avani, as a Community Based Organization<sup>2</sup>, chose to develop their social economy projects. In these projects Avani does not only aim to make profit, but also seeks to pursue social goals, thus inserting principles of social justice into their economic operations (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005; Quarter, 1992). Indeed, Avani asserts that every "business decision related to Avani products is guided by a strong responsibility toward environmental best practices and sensitivity to the cultural context of the villages" where they work (Organization Report,

Avani). Driven by the tripartite aims of “economy, ecology and empowerment” (Avani-Kumaon, n.d.), Avani claims to be committed to developing innovative approaches to sustainable development in collaboration with hill communities. Based on this vision, they promote rural artisans (weavers, knitters, spinners etc.)<sup>3</sup> to form cooperatives and strengthen their capacity to create commercial products by providing them with technical and market inputs (Organization Report, Avani).

Avani works in a decentralized fashion, wherein it positions itself as a voluntary organization that works with producer cooperatives to facilitate their capacity for production and sales. These cooperatives are run independently from Avani through a core team, that is democratically elected from among the cooperative’s own members and are wholly responsible for production. The members are co-owners as well as workers with a share in the profits of the enterprise. They depend on Avani for support facilities to sell their products in the international market and also for investment in their capacity building. Though Avani doesn’t use the term social economy and is legally registered as a ‘society’, it shares a number of principles associated with social economy initiatives, in terms of democratic functioning, prioritizing service to community over profit and autonomous management (Defourny, Grønberg, Meijs, Nyssens, & Yamauchi, 2016). Drawing on these principles, Avani has forayed into a variety of sustainable development areas - in renewable energy, craftwork, natural pigments, textiles and organic farming, but as mentioned earlier, we will focus on two of Avani’s major development enterprises: dealing with textiles and renewable energy. Below we give a brief overview of these projects.

Their textile enterprise called ‘Earthcraft’, brings together weavers, spinners, dyers and farmers in order to create a line of handmade textiles (Business Plan, Avani). Avani uses local plant species and traditional handicraft skills to create their products. In this process, traditional skills such as weaving and threading are being revived and upgraded to match market standards. To ensure that their production processes are environment friendly, they experiment with weeds and those plant species that do not have existing commercial use to create an innovative line of fabrics and pigments (Grant Proposal, Earthcraft). The focus on using local resources in an ecological manner is also reflected in their renewable energy project, named ‘Avani Bio-Energy’. For this project, Avani pioneered the use of pine needles as a fuel for generating electricity. Pine needles are highly inflammable leaves of pine trees that are a major cause of forest fires in Himalayas. By developing commercial use of pine needles, Avani’s bio-energy project not only conserves the environment but also creates local livelihood opportunities for the villagers. Moreover, the ash residues are converted into smokeless charcoal for use as cooking fuel for village communities, as an alternative to firewood (Grant Proposal, Avani’s Bio-Energy Pvt. Ltd.). For both these projects, Avani has partnered with institutions based outside the hills; in order to consult technical experts as needed and access niche markets that can support their innovations (Annual Report 2009).

#### Avani’s project giving rise to educational experiences

The aims of these two social economy projects, ‘Earthcraft’ and ‘Avani Bio-Energy’, were to create livelihood opportunities and conserve the local environment. As our analysis below will show, in fulfilling these aims, Avani fosters a range of experiences for hill communities (particularly for women) that were not possible for them before. We regard these experiences to be educational since they invoke, what we want to call, the ‘potentiality’ within hill communities to be able to live and be in new ways. We will

introduce the notion of ‘pedagogic subjectivation’ (Simons & Masschelein, 2010) to deepen our understanding of how these experiences of potentiality enabled within Avani’s projects can be regarded as educational.

### *New ways of being and living*

Key to the new experiences that are enhanced by Avani is the possibility for hill people to become producers to the market of the plains. Whereas earlier they were predominantly passive consumers of the products of the capitalist market dependent on migrant remittances, the project of Avani enables them to take up a productive position. As producers of textiles, they discover a new way of being in the market. They also gain decision-making capacity to determine the kind of goods made, its quality, environmental impact and of course earn from it. This capacity to produce goods and contribute to the market allows them to draw benefit from the sale of their products. As producers, they have the opportunity to earn and become financially independent, which is a great shift in experience for hill women especially. In this regard, Rashmi Bharti, Avani’s director shares her view (Personal Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> Aug 2014)

Women who are disadvantaged... and there is lot of abandonment, second and third marriages and no rights [are being] given to the first wife, second wife, you know... so lot of this category of women who needed a source of income have become a part of what we do and they have educated their children though help facilities have been provided by the women themselves.

Avani’s practices allow women to become capable of independently earning their means of living without necessarily depending on male family members, as is the norm in the hill’s patriarchal culture. With the capacity for financial independence, hill women, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds have found a means to position themselves in new ways within the hill community. Connected to this capacity for earning and producing is their ability to acquire better material conditions of living. Furthermore, hill people have been accustomed to consuming inferior quality products from the market due to lack of alternatives and suffer from its ill-impact on their health and well-being. As Rashmi Bharti, Avani’s director, shares her view below (Personal Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> Aug 2014)

All remote rural areas are dumping grounds for all kinds of consumer goods starting from medicines to bad quality foods. And all companies are doing that... so the village population is treated like this amorphous idiotic hole, which doesn't exactly know what they are doing...

As producers with independent access to financial means, hill people have now revived traditional products like ‘organic *Kumkum*<sup>4</sup>’ for their daily use instead of using the synthetic *Kumkum* from the market that is harmful. They do not need to rely on the low quality chemical products that come from the plains and are being dumped on their communities but have now the possibility to use a healthier, locally made product. This allows them to be able to consume better products for their daily use and enhance their living standards.

These new ways of producing, consuming and earning in their own place have enabled hill communities to embrace new ways of being an indigenous people. This is an important step to ensure that indigenous skills remained relevant for the younger

generation whose choices have been shaped by capitalistic influence. Rashmi Bharti (Personal Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> Aug 2014) talks about it in the excerpt below

There used to be traditional soaps and there were 3 plants that those women were using even until about 40 years ago, for washing hair and for washing floors... but the current generation thinks that *Sunsilk* is the ultimate thing but it's not like they don't want to use [plants]but it is because they don't know about it now.

The rich ecological knowledge that allowed older generations to be self-sufficient in fulfilling their daily needs has been lost within the younger generation. With this loss of traditional know-how, capitalism has turned them into dependent consumers. Avani's projects stimulate the hill people with possibilities to (re)discover and re-shape their position as an indigenous culture. It stimulates the active use of indigenous skills.

By creating an economic basis for the revival of traditional skills, hill communities are experiencing also new ways of cooperation and collaboration in pursuing development. In the Earthcraft project, for instance farmers and artists could collaborate as textile producers. This allowed them to come together and build a productive enterprise where they share mutual concerns and goals, thereby enabling a sense of solidarity among the community. The bringing together of diverse rural artisans and farmer in a shared economic project enables them to build their economic strength as a cooperative.

#### Conceptualizing Avani's projects as educational

Our short analysis of the kind of experiences that become possible within Avani's projects should not be read as an attempt to give a very positive image of what Avani does in these remote communities. In our research we came across a host of tensions, hostilities and risks that are also very much a part of Avani's projects. We tried to explore them further during interviews with hill communities and Avani staff members. A key tension is that Avani is operating in a manner that incorporates care for the environment and social justice within the framework of a market practice. Its 'alternative character' of offering new possibilities merely allows a leeway and should thus not be interpreted as 'radically overthrowing' the dominant system. Its fragility becomes apparent when we consider that hill men do not consider Avani's projects as a viable livelihood option for them. In our interviews, hill men claimed to prefer working for 'proper jobs in a proper company', in a city and found Avani's projects too rudimentary to be considered worthwhile. This is because Avani's choice to use traditional skills and simple technology made them feel that it was unsuitable for their caliber and status (Interview with hill men, Aug 2014). The men described Avani's livelihood opportunities as "insignificant", "technologically deficient" and "worthwhile only for the desperately poor" during the interviews and subsequently expressed their reservations about participating in it. Avani's projects thus do not directly reach out to the whole community, and remain mostly confined to women folk (Interview with Rajnish Jain, Avani's director). More importantly, this also generated frustration and irritation in the community. Indeed, some of these men were quite disturbed by the fact that their wives, who used to financially depend upon them, now earn their own money (Interview with Savitri, Chachret). Women report that this creates problems at the household level due to marital conflicts (Focus group discussion, Chachret). It can thus be wondered, if Avani, by introducing an economic project and targeting women as

money-makers, does not potentially and in a quite radical way disrupt the traditional values that used to regulate household life in the hill society.

Moreover, it could be asked if Avani doesn't stimulate competition and individualism in the hill society, thus destroying the collectivist values that used to support the hill community? Since our research project did not aim to uncover how the community values have changed under the influence of the work of Avani, we have insufficient data to make strong claims regarding this issue. Further research is needed. Yet, it is worth mentioning that research (Ball, 2001) suggests that the introduction of economic projects in collectivist societies, can both strengthen and destroy collectivist values. Often in a first stage, just after when the economic project has been introduced, collectivist values erode and individualization is introduced. However, this does not necessarily have to lead to a more opportunistic and socially disintegrated society. If cooperative values – other than the traditional values are stimulated, then the economic projects can actually contribute to reinforcing or strengthening collectivism. With collaboration and cooperation, and mutually shared values being promoted in the cooperative structures that the women are organized in, it is thus at first sight probable that these projects do not lead to individualization (Ball, 2001). Nevertheless, with men not being part of this cooperative decision-making structure, this might be 'jumping to conclusions' (Ratner, 2009).

Despite the criticisms that can be leveled against Avani's practices, we want to argue that from an educational perspective, it is important to emphasize that Avani does enable hill communities to enhance their ability to act upon the world through the experiences we showed before. We draw upon the concept of tactics to understand what Avani does within these projects spatially, while at the same time also creating educational possibilities within them. Tactics inspires us to analyze the way Avani makes an alternative use of the characteristics of hill region to circumvent the dominant place logic of capitalism. In particular, it steers our focus on how Avani takes advantage of the 'cracks' in the place logic of capitalism to create market practices that benefit hill communities. This is exemplified by Avani's choice to depend on the hill's wild plants, weeds – resources that are not used commercially – to make innovative products. It allows hill communities to draw upon their indigenous knowledge in experimenting with local plants and develop products inspired by the hill region, making it a place of production. It is this particular use of hill resources to enable new kind of market practices that we regard as a kind of place tactic.

It is the place tactics of Avani that opens opportunities for hill communities to become capable of actively setting their own terms of market exchange and hence overcome their marginalization within the capitalist economy. Avani's projects allow hill communities to circumvent the limitations of the dominant place logic and create a position for themselves as part of the capitalist order. Their orientation towards enabling marginalized communities to create a position of equality within the dominant order is in line with the emancipatory ideals that social economy projects are known for. This outcome of social reform, is in fact how social economy projects tend to justify their work and define their mission for emancipation (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005).

But, in this article, we want to emphasize another possibility for emancipation stimulated by Avani that goes beyond the achievement of project outcomes and is in fact rooted within the processes of the project itself. Here we align ourselves with educational philosopher Joris Vlieghe (2014) who offers a distinct perspective on critical pedagogy that goes beyond the customary idea of an education for emancipation, enabling the marginalized to acquire a better position in the societal order. He argues that this view fails to value the possible intrinsic emancipatory value of educational

processes. According to Vlieghe it is important to locate emancipation also within the practices itself, which he terms as educational emancipation. Vlieghe (2014) takes a Rancierian perspective to argue that the possibility to verify one's equality and experience one's ability to do something is emancipatory in itself.

We also draw inspiration from Simons & Masschelein (2010) who reserve the concept of 'pedagogic subjectivation' to refer to experiences of being able to act, to see, to be etc. as being educational. Their conception of pedagogic subjectivation is derived from the school context, which they construe as a space that is in between where students come from and what they will become as adults. In the space of the school, students are introduced to school material (Art, Literature etc.) as a means of sparking their interest in the world and developing their own relation to the world in this process. Studying the school material is a means for students to understand the world without conforming to the practical ways of use in the real world (say, to create a particular painting). The purpose is for students to be able to experience their own potentiality to think, speak, understand etc. as part of the world. Here the school material is not merely an object of knowledge but a means for students to relate to the world as someone who is 'able to'. It is this being 'able to' that forms the crux of an educational practice. The school, in this sense, is that space that separates students from their social origins and their future profession to give them the possibility to develop their own relation with the world through the material they study.

In a similar way, Avani's projects provide the space where hill communities get the opportunity to work with hill resources in order to live and be in new ways. Avani's projects act as a space for hill communities to innovate new uses of hill resources, such as developing pine needles as a fuel and using wild plants such as myroblan, and eupatorium for extracting pigments in order to create their own Himalayan products. Pine needles (a forest weed) have been traditionally used as fodder and for household heating purposes and are a major cause of forest fire in the hill region. Drawing on its combustive properties, hill communities and Avani collaborated to experiment its properties as a fuel for electricity generation (Annual report 2011-12). In other words, Avani makes hill resources available so that hill communities can freely work with them. This is according to Masschelein and Simons (2013) an important act of education which they refer to as 'suspension'. The availability of resources for free experimentation acts as a means of generating an interest towards the world and re-connect with the world under new terms. For hill people, the possibility to use local resources to create products that are organic and ecofriendly allows them to relate themselves to the outside world as an ethical and ecologically conscious community.

In our case suspension is about purposefully choosing to use those resources that are not bound by regulations in the way they are to be used and hence available for free experimentation. For Simons and Masschelein (2013) suspension is an act of de-familiarization that sets a task or place free of the usual norms that determine its use. The space of the school is a space of de-appropriation, where all students are treated the same irrespective of their social origins or future career and their school material (art, literature etc.) no longer conforms to its regular use in the world (to create paintings, or write books etc.) and simply become means of study. Thus, the four walls of the schools effectively create the possibility for students to explore school material that comes from the real world and be 'able to' do something with it, in their own way. Below, we analyze how Avani's projects, though not confined by four walls, similarly generate suspension by the very way Avani physically takes up a halfway position between the hills and the plains. This enables Avani to maintain a distance from the logic of the

capitalist market and enables hill communities to have a free space to work with hill resources.

*Taking a Halfway position to enable the educational condition of suspension*

Avani's head office is situated on a main road, halfway between the closest town – Berinag and the remote villages. As such the project physically occupies and creates a halfway point of connection between the hills and the plains. Their office creates an access point for isolated hill villages to access credit facilities, consultants and the markets of the plains. In establishing a connection, the office bridges the gap between the hills and the plains and acts as nodal point to bring diverse stakeholders from the hills and the plains to collaborate in their projects. But this halfway position creates at once a point of connection with and a distance from the plains and capitalism. What Avani tries to do is to create a point of connection with the plains on the terms of the hill people. Whereas before the relationship between the plains and the hills was characterized by some form of predation in which the hills were overwhelmed by the capitalist system, being exploited, not being given any choice, Avani contributes to new form of connections with the plains in which the hill people can set the conditions of the connection and thus keep the exploitative power of capitalist market at a distance. Based on our analysis of documents and of the interviews with Avani staff we arrive at three important ways of taking up this halfway position: between subsistence and capitalist economy, between donor and community concerns, and lastly between professional design experts and traditional hill artists.

In a first move, Avani's spatial halfway position makes it possible for knowledge and skills used within the subsistence economy of the hills to find new forms of expression within the capitalist economy. It allows Avani to position itself halfway between the subsistence economy and capitalist economy by creating market practices that depend on locally available raw materials, traditional skills and cultural heritage of the hills. To take an example, the Earthcraft project experiments with forest weeds that normally harm the environment to create handspun natural fabric, draw new pigments and contribute to new ways of local production techniques that are environment friendly. Their choice to use plant species that are not already exploited commercially as raw materials opens up new reservoirs of resources for commercial use and promotes farmers to engage in their conservation and protection. Such experiments with local skills and resources have resulted in innovative products such as natural indigo (a pigment) and pine needle based gasifier (a technological innovation) that bears the Himalayan stamp. This approach shows how subsistence culture can be built into economic practices and reflects the possibility for hill communities to explore new ways of using resources, production processes, techniques and handling environmental impact that is determined by how they want to live and be in their place.

Further, Avani's spatial location allows them to take a halfway position between the donor led development agenda and the community concerns since they are known for representing grassroots issues to international donors. In relation to this intermediary position of NGOs, Rajnish Jain, Avani's director (Personal Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> Aug 2014) shares his view below.

You know there is a lot of emphasis in the world in last few decades in involving NGOs in the development agendas... and so driven from the international donors you know... governments are also arm twisted in roping an NGO in the development agenda... these NGOs are actually implementing the agenda for that particular program.... [NGOs]

should be helping the government formulate policies and then implement that with their own machineries...

This quote shows how the international pressure to involve NGOs within development agendas is shaping their role to become service delivery agents of donors. As such, Avani's position offers a valuable point of connection for international donors to reach the isolated hill communities through their programs. However, as pointed in the quote, Avani does not prefer such a role but instead seeks a more independent role in developing the hills based on their own practices. This stance of Avani is critical in making their projects a free space that is not regulated by donor conditions and allows community members to articulate their concerns and expectations in designing the project. Lastly, Avani's location on the main road allows them to tap into the pool of expert professionals and interns located far outside the vicinity of the rural villages where their work is based. By connecting traditional crafts with professional expertise, Avani shows possibilities for the rural hill artists' enterprise to be able to position itself in the global market. However Avani's halfway position between professional experts and traditional village artists also creates a space where traditional skills and professional expertise are de-appropriated from their regular use, from its household use and factory use respectively and allows hill communities to blend the two in new ways that they deem as suitable.

## Conclusion

In this article we scrutinize how social economy projects act as vehicles of social and economic empowerment. These projects are usually known for enabling marginalized communities to have better life opportunities and for their emancipatory agenda. We looked at their emancipatory potential, suggesting to consider them meaningful, not just for social and economic development but also as an educational space. Our analysis draws on the case of Avani, which enables hill communities to set their own terms of living and being by critically acting upon their place. The key concept in our analysis of Avani's projects is tactics (de Certeau, 1988). It is a concept that enabled us to understand the emancipatory potential in a spatial as well as an educational sense. Avani's projects strive to circumvent the inequalities perpetuated within the capitalist economy even while being a part of it. This is reflected in Avani's choice to use local resources to create innovative market practices and in doing so giving a tactical twist to what we have described as discriminatory place logic of capitalism. Avani renders the hills to become a place of production instead of being marginalized within capitalism. Avani's projects are considered emancipatory for their outcomes, that is, achieving social and economic emancipation of the hill people within capitalism.

What we came to in our analysis is that this spatial intervention of Avani makes it possible that another emancipatory process can occur. We locate this emancipatory process within the experiences that take place during the project itself and it is this process that makes social economy projects educational. Projects such as Avani's enable people to freely experiment with local resources in their own way and to experience their potentialities in this process. We use the theoretical lens of pedagogic subjectivation (Simons & Masschelein, 2010) to understand how these experiences are emancipatory in itself. We show how local resources act as a means of sparking the interest of hill people in the world and developing their own relation to the world. An essential condition of this educational emancipation is the act of suspension. It is about creating a free space where people can explore something from the world on their own

terms. Our research shows how social economy projects are important facilitators in creating this free space where the impact of the dominant order can be suspended to make educational emancipation possible. In the projects of Avani, their choice to use those resources, such as weeds and wild plants that have no existing commercial use and are thus free for experimentation makes suspension possible. It is further enabled by Avani's halfway position between hills and plains, capitalist economy and subsistence economy, donor agenda and community concerns, and finally professional artists and rural craftsmen.

We came to understand this act of suspension as a rather tenuous condition to maintain. This opens possibilities for further investigation. A first question is about the way this suspension can be made possible by social economy projects. In our research we analyzed one particular way of doing this. We analyzed how Avani chose to locate their office in a place halfway between hills and plains. This very physical halfway position makes it possible to balance between powerful external agents and the expectations of marginalized hill communities. A second question is about a better understanding of the risks posed by the hybrid identity of social enterprises to the possibility for emancipation. Their dual identity does open better life opportunities for marginalized communities, but at the same time it also puts these institutions at risk of being coerced by external agents to fulfill their demands, jeopardizing the scope for educational emancipation to take place. A third question is about how social economy projects value the possibility of educational emancipation as part of their agenda. For instance, it could be asked if Avani deems these emancipatory processes as important as processes of social and economic emancipation and how they want to maintain both processes. Lastly, this research also invites further exploration of how experiences of educational emancipation are shaping the traditional relations of cooperation among the participants of these projects. It would be interesting to examine hill women's perspectives on how their experiences in Avani's projects have stimulated them to relate to the outside world in another way and if it has led to any shifts in the traditional status quo between men and women.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Defourny (2016) offers an interesting reflection on the different models that reflect different types of 'social economy projects, referring to a 'non-profit entrepreneurial' model, a "social cooperative" model, a "social business" model and a public-sector social enterprise model.

<sup>2</sup> For the argument of our paper, it is sufficient to stick to this fairly general definition of social economy projects. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile pointing out that the search for a definition of "social economy" is an on-going search, which is filled with difficulties & complexities. More information on this issue can be found in works such (Defourny & Nyssens, 2007; Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> "AVANI's team identifies clusters of farmers, weavers and dyers, who become co-owners in the enterprise through membership in a cooperative society. AVANI provides members of the cooperative a range of support services enhancing their output and livelihood opportunities, including access to essential raw materials (water, electricity, dyes), training in market designs, and standards for quality control." (Avani-Kumaon, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> *Pethia /Kumkum* (vermillion) is a red powder used for cosmetic purposes.

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