ICT, Education, and Regional Development in Swiss Peripheral Areas

Chiara Giorgi
Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI), Switzerland

Dieter Schürch
Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI), Switzerland

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of 20th Century, the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has deeply influenced many aspects of everyday life, leading to the creation of new meanings for the traditional concepts of identity, culture, economy and, above all, communication (Mantovani, 1995; Perriault, 1989; Rullani, 2002). Trends about technological development show how, in the next years, the change will gradually concern all elementary daily actions, due to spreading of the electronic devices in the environment (OCDE, 2002; Saracco, 2003). If ICT will be ever more deeply-rooted in our reality, how fast will they consequently influence our socio-cultural identity? What sort of consequences do we have to imagine at economic level? What variety of scenarios can we draw about our future? And, above all, how will the concept of development change?

If on the one hand the global trend seems to lead towards a reality without any kind of borders, on the other one the political and cultural centres are privileged in taking advantage of the opportunities opened by ICT. Therefore, peripheral areas[1] run the risk of becoming more and more isolated and excluded from the innovation process. Is it possible to reverse this tendency by using ICT as developmental devices? Can we re-direct the attention on those areas that seem to be "dead" regions? And in what way?

BACKGROUND

The relationship between communication and regional development has deeply influenced the fate of a great number of geographical areas; examples are the building of railways, of roads and fluvial connections. If and in what way can the CmC[2] be considered a factor, parallel to those we have mentioned, to open new opportunities for peripheral regions?

The rapid spread of communication networks— ignoring the presence of natural and political boundaries—is changing the economic and social scenarios. In this context, new kinds of "regions" are emerging, the so-called "learning regions" (Florida, 1995). They are characterized by a system in which communication networks and data processing work give both shape and substance to connections between public institutions (such as schools and universities) and private institutions (firms), this leading to generate new knowledge and productiveness.

In Switzerland, a country characterized by a strong multicultural and multilingual tradition (above all in valleys of alpine regions), the creation of a new idea of "region" meets several kinds of dissensions. There are a lot of questions about the way to get over mental and cultural borders (see Arnaud & Perriault, 2002; Bressaud & Dirtler, 2003; Calvo, Ciotti, Roncaglia & Zela, 1998).

The behavioural changes always continue in daily action, and the action always places itself in a human, social, geographical, cultural and economic territory (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). The use of communication devices can't escape this rule, because they've got a sense if they can be interpreted and situated by the people who live in that particular area (Galimberti & Riva, 1997). The process of interpretation of these devices had to consider, on the one hand, the starting of forms of "unlearning" (Grabher, 1993), and on the other one the building of a different nature of the concept of territory that has to be identified and tested (Delai & Marcantoni, 1992).

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SWISS PERIPHERAL AREAS

Situation in Peripheral Sub-Alpine Regions

Swiss reality is characterized by fragmentation at several levels. From a geographical perspective, the mountainous territorial morphology creates several natural partitions, causing the isolation of some areas and particularly those distributed along the Alpine chain. Besides, the Swiss Confederation is a set of 26 political Cantons, each of

these having its own administrative independence even if partial, and with four official languages[3]. At a deeper level, the fragmentation is perceived as socio-cultural complexity: geographical and political configurations, in fact, don't correspond to an unequivocal identity; very often different cultural and language realities—including dialects - are present on the same territory, giving it a cross cultural profile[4].

The process of globalisation over the last decade has led to the trend of concentring the power in the centres, namely those places having infrastructures and accessibility to innovation, and so to choose a developmental way. These centres become the reference point for all the relevant activities. These are the "places of the knowledge," the places where people decide the future trends of development, definitely the places that the peripheral regions "gravitate around." From this perspective, the break between central and peripheral areas becomes even more perceivable. Peripheral regions seem to have neither any kind of power about their future development, nor interesting elements making them recognizable as "cultural regions." If this trend is observed at a general level, now it has repercussions also on Swiss Confederation, European symbol of a perfect integration between different cultures and ethnic groups.

What is actually going on in these regions, often coincident with valleys? First of all, it is important to point out the trend of native people moving out from the territory, frequently youth, to find a better working perspective just in the centres. This leads, obviously, to a progressive death of the local economy and working activities. The economic sphere, anyway, can't be separate by the question regarding education, in which the working world is deeply-rooted. If this movement from the regions begins in the young age, it's necessary to understand the reason underlying that.

During the period of education, the young decide to abandon his/her own place of origin to look for better education and training opportunities. In some cases, the young have no other choice. This problem is strongly felt about vocational training, that represents a relevant portion of educational system: more than 60% of young people, in the age of secondary education, choose the way of apprenticeship. Swiss apprenticeship is based on the dual vocational system coming from the German tradition. Apprentices work in a company or small firm and at the same time attend Vocational School. The dual system spans over the whole training period, up to four years, thus insuring the connection between school and education and the working world. What happens in remote regions? Vocational Schools collect different professional trainings and are often dislocated far away. The apprentice is forced to leave his native territory during the week to move to the place where he can study and carry

on his/her apprenticeship in a firm. This situation of eradication from the native territory leads the young to a progressive loss of his/her own socio-cultural identity, to get hold of the place he/she will study or work.

Finally, we have to face a sociological problem: the development of a negative mentality. If valleys are characterized by the elements mentioned before, the young person—but not only our youth—is led to relate his/her native region with lack of real opportunities for the future, and definitely not to recognize any chance of development.

What long-term consequences can we imagine for the increasingly isolated valleys? How is it possible to intervene, so as to change this vision about the future? Can the introduction of ICT change this situation?

Swiss Regional Development

Since 1995, Swiss peripheral zones of sub-alpine arch (see Figure 1) are involved in projects of regional development, based on the conviction that changes take place not simply by giving direct financial support, but by setting up educational and training devices, to achieve a revaluation of these regions as characterized by their owns specific social, cultural and economic values and so to allow them to survive both on the identity level and the economic one.

Poschiavo Project: A Pilot Project

The pilot project, Progetto Poschiavo[5], started in 1995 involving the area of Poschiavo Valley, a region of the Grisons Canton at the boundaries with Italy, speaking Italian, German and Romansh. The aims of the project were both the revaluation of the cultural and linguistic reality by a human ecology approach[6], and the realization of a communication network that allows a cultural exchange not only within Poschiavo region, but also between this territory and the centres, to promote a reversal of the tendency towards isolation.

From a practical point of view, the project followed a regional development strategy founded on the direct involvement of the local people. After an initial contact with local institutions, a group of people was trained to take the role of Practice Assistant in Distance-Education (APFD)[7], to accompany the local population in project of territorial development. In this sense, it was important that APFD were native people, to avoid any hindrance to the developmental process itself. The second step was the setting up of project groups (composed of local people and accompanied by an APFD) and the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies. During this period, participants acquired both the means to "read" the territory through a human ecology approach and the necessary know-how to use ICT. The project

4 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/ict-education-regional-development-swiss/11411

Related Content

Role of ICTs in Socioeconomic Development and Poverty Reduction
Hakikur Rahman (2007). *Information and Communication Technologies for Economic and Regional Developments (pp. 180-219).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/role-icts-socioeconomic-development-poverty/22516

The Development of Smart Public Spaces in the Greek Historic Centers
Despina Dimelli (2021). *Transforming Urban Nightlife and the Development of Smart Public Spaces (pp. 191-210).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-development-of-smart-public-spaces-in-the-greek-historic-centers/278584

Blogging the City: Research, Collaboration, and Engagement in Urban E-Planning. Critical Notes from a Conference
Pierre Clavel, Kenneth Fox, Christopher Leo, Anabel Quan-Hasse, Dean Saittaand LaDale Winling (2015). *International Journal of E-Planning Research (pp. 54-66).*
www.irma-international.org/article/blogging-the-city/123139

Mapping Game Mechanics for Learning in a Serious Game for the Energy Transition
Cristina Ampatzidouand Katharina Gugerell (2019). *International Journal of E-Planning Research (pp. 1-23).*
www.irma-international.org/article/mapping-game-mechanics-for-learning-in-a-serious-game-for-the-energy-transition/223967

Communicative Planning Theory Following Deliberative Democracy Theory: Critical Pragmatism and the Trading Zone Concept
Raine Mäntysaloand Karoliina Jarenko (2014). *International Journal of E-Planning Research (pp. 38-50).*
www.irma-international.org/article/communicative-planning-theory-following-deliberative-democracy-theory/108869