

Chapter 4.24

ICT, Education, and Regional Development in Swiss Peripheral Areas

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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 areas¹ 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 CmC² 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 & Dirlter, 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 languages³. 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 profile⁴.

The process of globalisation over the last decade has led to the trend of concentrating 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.

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