Digital Periphery?

A Community Case Study Analysis of Digital Transformations in the Region Engiadina Bassa/Val Müstair

u^b

UNIVERSITÄT BERN

This PhD project by Reto Bürgin analyzes expectations, preparations and innovations triggered by the development of broadband Internet and the use of ICTs in a peripheral region in the Canton of Grisons.

Introduction and Background

The potential of digitalization (broadband development and use of ICTs) for Swiss Alpine regions is widely discussed. Yet, there is a lack of data regarding the adoption of digital technologies in the communities that are affected. This study contributes to debates on digitalization in the periphery. We show that digital connectivity offers chances but also entails crucial limitations as urban-rural linkages can be created, yet spatial divides still exist.
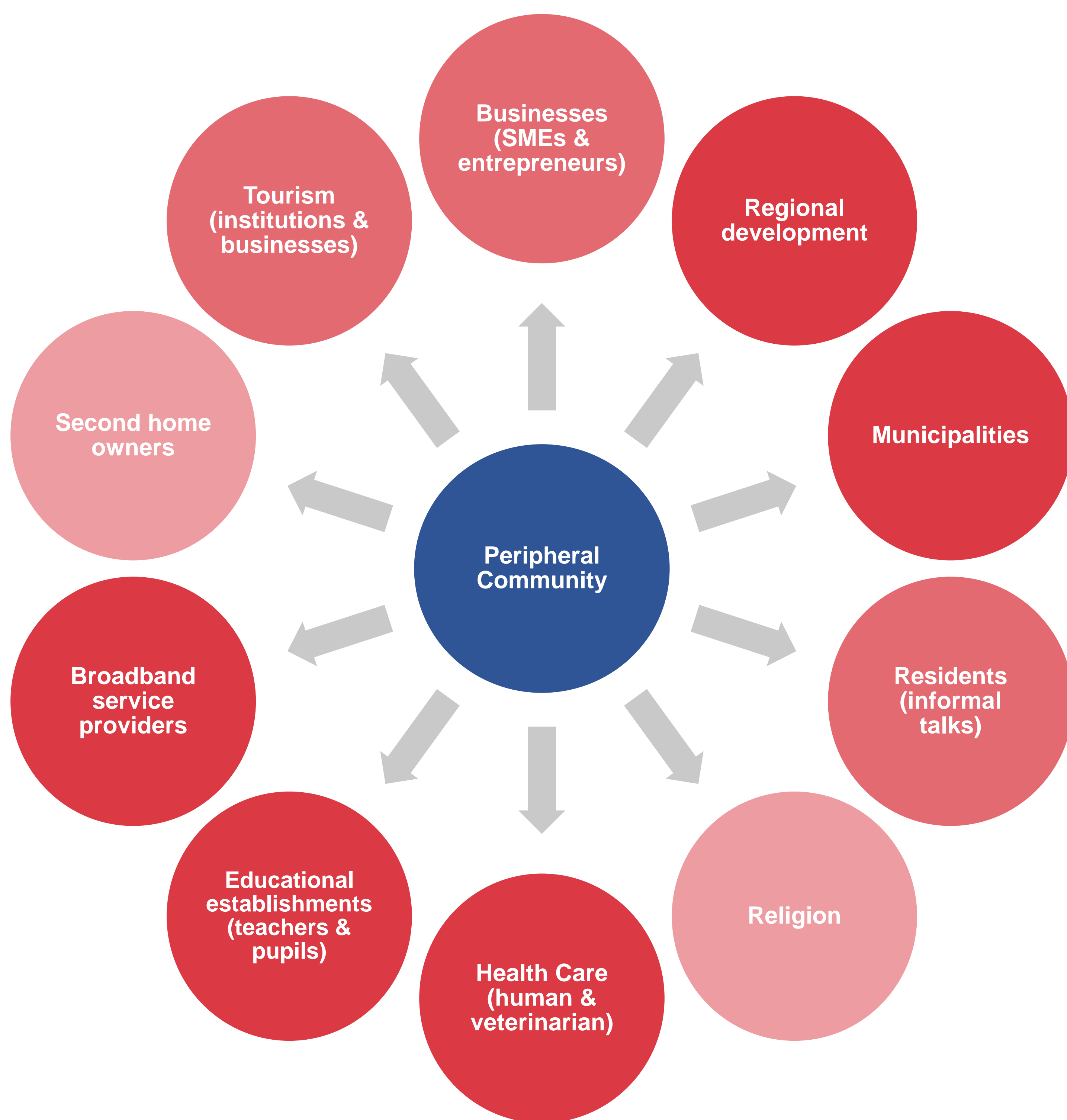
Objectives

To date, we do not know much about the transformations in the peripheral community due to digital development. In this regard, the research focuses on the following questions:

- How fertile is the ground for digitalization in the mountain community in the region Engiadina Bassa/Val Müstair?
- What do the communities' actor groups expect from digitalization?
- How do the different actor groups prepare for it and why?
- What kind of innovations will be triggered due to digitalization?

Additionally, a special focus of our analysis lies on the topic of digital urban-rural linkages.

Peripheral Community:
- Businesses (SMEs & entrepreneurs)
- Regional development
- Municipalities
- Residents (informal talks)
- Religion
- Health Care (human & veterinarian)
- Educational establishments (teachers & pupils)
- Broadband service providers
- Second home owners
- Tourism (institutions & businesses)

Method

- Community case study approach
- Embedded single-case design
- Qualitative semi-structured interviews with actors as units of analysis (figure above)
- 46 interviews (conducted in summer 2018)

Project Status

- Analysis of empirical material
- Writing of peer-reviewed publications

Outlook: Digital Multilocality: Analyzing urban-rural linkages in the context of co-working spaces in the Swiss Alps

- New project funded by SNF «Digital Lives»
- Mixed methods: digital records, personal diaries, walk-alongs, semi-structured interviews
- Start in December 2018

First Results

- **General:** Digitalization has more potential for larger enterprises, larger hotels, schools and health service providers that already invested in digital infrastructure. There are financial limitations especially for SMEs and smaller hospitals.
- **Expectations:** Most actors have high expectations in terms of simplified bureaucracy, generation of new customers and enhanced work processes. These come, however, at the expense of more psychological stress (data overload) and economic dependency on digitalization.
- **Preparations:** Most transformations in terms of preparations take place in the areas of training of employees, teachers and doctors. Connecting a business to fiberglass broadband seems not to be necessary for all actors in the periphery (e.g. small BnB, second home owners).
- **Innovation:** Being connected to broadband does not generate more innovations in the periphery. Innovativeness depends on the actor's affinity and openness for digital technologies. Digitalization can advance innovation, but does not create it.
- **Linkages:** Digitalization reduces cognitive distance while developing new markets and generating new customers.