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Living at a geographic disad

The disappearance of state monopolies in the public services sector is making life difficult for remote regions. A closer look at our linguistic regions documents anxiety and concern among the population but also throws light on the innovative measures being taken to combat the threatened end of full-service coverage.



People with features carved in Wood.

The cable car: a lifeline

BY PABLO CRIVELLI

“BRAGGIO CONSISTS of five parts,” explains the village’s 47-year-old mayor Gabriele Minotti, tracing a blood-red circle in felt-tip round the avalanche-prone zones on a map of the village. Since 1986, when an avalanche hit the village and swept away several houses, no more such disasters have occurred. But as a safety precaution, new protective facilities have been built.

For centuries the residents of Braggio built their modest homes in relatively protected zones. Now, however, the age-old knowledge based on centuries of experience and passed on from one generation to the next is at risk of dying out. The survival of this small hamlet of 69 souls, situated at

1320 meters above sea level, 25 minutes by car from Bellinzona and 90 minutes from Chur, hangs not so much by a thread as by a cable. Thanks to the aerial cable car built in 1962, Braggio is now less isolated than in older times. The cable-car trip from Arvigo to Braggio lasts six minutes and covers an altitude difference of 500 meters. Although asphalt-covered, the old mule track up to the village is unpassable for most of the year.

Uncertain future

But a cable car which connects villagers with the outer world is not enough on its own to make their lives easier: “Without financial assistance from Berne and Chur we would close down,” says Mayor Minotti, who works for the cable-car company and has lived in

Braggio with his wife and two sons for some time.

Acclimatisation was never a problem for him: “I love the mountains, and my wife is originally from Braggio.” Asked about the future of his village, he replies, “Everything depends on the children and what they will do when they leave school.” Of the 69 residents, 15 are under the age of 16. “It’s still too early to make any predictions, but the oldest of the boys will have to rent a room in order to do his apprenticeship in the Ticino. He’ll hardly want to travel down and back every day!”

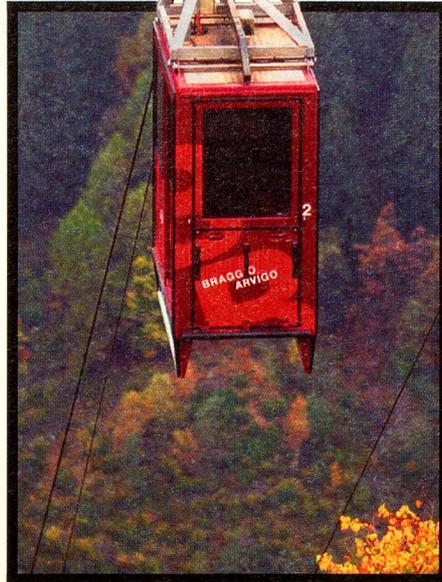
The threat of a declining population is real. Whether Braggio will become a tourist village which is only occupied in the summer, depends very much on the six families

vantage

who make their living from agriculture. The international liberalisation of the agrarian market is creating some uncertainty. As Minotti explains, everything these families produce is sold on the local market. But how long can this continue? "If they give up too, the situation here will quickly become precarious."

Like many other communities in the Calanca Valley, Braggio is severely strapped for cash: Tax revenues do not cover costs. Were it not for the cantonal subsidies, "I don't know what would happen..." sighs the mayor. The majority of revenue from taxes is invested in the school. "The children are away all day, and we have to bear the cost of their meals. And now there's even talk of a tax on garbage bags."

Many residents of the Calanca Valley turn up their noses at the mention of merging their separate communities. But something has already been done in this direction: One secretary handles the correspondence for four communities, including Braggio. The privatisation of public services threatens to weaken even further the already delicate balance on which the village's existence is based. For several years there has also been



Without the cable car, Braggio would be even more cut off from civilisation.

talk of doing away with the post office. If it were up to Berne, the local branch would already be closed. "The post office is extremely important for our elderly inhabitants, just like the grocery store my wife runs," says Gabriele Minotti emphatically.

The school is now a youth hostel

There is no shortage of recipes for stemming the flow of emigration from peripheral re-

gions, but they often prove unrealistic. The panacea of tourism appears to offer no solution. The area lacks the requisite infrastructure, "and it would cost a great deal to build," says the mayor. Only a few tourists stay overnight in the youth hostel which until 1973 housed the school. "Most guests are merely passing through." The first tentative step towards making the village more attractive for tourists could be to automate the cable car. At the moment it is impossible to get up to the village after eight o'clock in the evening.

Despite these day-to-day problems, Braggio's situation is not as dramatic as in other areas: "Landarenca, a small village of 10 residents on the opposite slope of the valley, is worse off than us," says Minotti. And although Braggio's geographic situation appears to damn it to a bleak existence, there are always people who eschew the city life for life in the mountains, despite all its negative aspects – like the man who delivered a wheelchair in Braggio a few years ago and was so stunned by the beauty of the place that he decided to move there with his wife and children.



In these fast-moving times it is important to have a point of reference: In Braggio, the Church also endeavours to support the population.