SOCIAL WORK 2050

Designing Healthy, Inclusive and Sustainable Regional Futures

A reader for the E³UDRES² Live Lecture

This text develops the intellectual journey behind the lecture: from global pressures to regional realities, from two contrasting futures in 2050 to practical choices that can begin by 2030.

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AI use disclosure
OpenAI Codex (OpenAI, 2026), a continuously updated service accessed between September and October 2026, was used iteratively throughout the development of this reader to support idea generation, scenario construction, structural revision, language editing and consistency checks. The author directed the process, evaluated and revised all generated material and assumes full responsibility for the arguments, interpretations and final text. This disclosure follows current APA guidance on transparency, attribution and author responsibility in the use of generative AI (American Psychological Association, 2025).

How to read this text

This reader is not a transcript of a slide deck. It is the longer argument behind it. The lecture itself is designed to be interactive and selective: it introduces a question, lets participants encounter a future social worker, invites decisions, and then moves backwards from 2050 to actions that can begin in the present. The reader slows that journey down. It explains why each step matters, shows how the regional examples relate to one another, and makes the scientific foundations of the practical framework visible.

The central question is simple to ask and difficult to answer: What will social work need to become if European regions are to remain healthy, inclusive and liveable in 2050? The wording matters. It does not ask what social work will become, as if the future were already written. It asks what the profession may need to become under changing conditions—and what choices can still be made.

Three regions provide recurring lenses. Setúbal represents a southern European metropolitan and coastal setting. Enschede and the wider Twente region represent a medium-sized, cross-border urban region in north-western Europe. Vidzeme, with Valmiera and a network of smaller towns and villages, represents a more rural northern European setting. The locations were selected partly because the Polytechnic University of Setúbal, Saxion University of Applied Sciences and Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences belong to the E^3UDRES^2 alliance (E^3UDRES^2, n.d.). This gives the comparison an institutional connection to the Live Lecture; it does not turn the regional descriptions into empirical profiles.

The regional passages are illustrative teaching cases, not forecasts or official assessments. The author is based at Saxion in Enschede and knows that setting from professional and everyday experience, but has neither conducted comparative regional fieldwork for this reader nor personally visited Setúbal or Vidzeme–Valmiera. The starting descriptions use a limited set of publicly available regional sources; the developments projected to 2050 are speculative extensions constructed for teaching. Their purpose is to show why global change cannot be discussed as if it affected every place in the same way. Local partners should review, correct and enrich the profiles before any use that claims comprehensive regional accuracy.

A fictional social worker named Lea connects the analysis to everyday practice. In 2050 she works in Enschede–Twente. Her story is speculative, but the pressures around her are extensions of present-day trends: heat, ageing, unequal housing, migration, digital welfare systems, labour shortages and the institutional complexity of a border region. Lea allows us to ask not only what may happen, but also what professional judgement, solidarity and public infrastructure might look like under pressure.

The reader uses three different ways of thinking about the future. Scenarios compare plausible pathways and reveal the consequences of choices. Speculative fabulation deliberately loosens the grip of dominant assumptions and makes room for voices, relationships and forms of knowledge that conventional planning can overlook. Backcasting begins with a desirable 2050 and works backwards to identify what must start by 2030. These methods are related, but they do different intellectual work (Or & Das, 2025; Robinson, 1990; Dreborg, 1996).

PLACE at a glance

The regional conversations also use a five-question orientation called PLACE. It moves from broad pressures to local exposure, existing capacities, contested choices and enabling action. At this stage, it is enough to keep the following questions in mind. Chapter 8 returns to the framework, explains its foundations and considers its limitations in more detail.

- Pressures: What large-scale changes are shaping the situation?
- Local exposure and vulnerability: Who is affected, and how was this vulnerability produced?

- Assets, access and capacities: What resources and forms of knowledge exist, and who can reach or shape them?
- Choices and co-production: Which options are available, who decides and whose knowledge counts?
- Enabling action: What must begin by 2030 to make a more desirable 2050 plausible?

Before the full framework is introduced, PLACE functions as a shared set of questions through which practitioners can compare situations without assuming that the same solution will fit every region.

The argument in brief

- Global pressures become socially consequential through particular places, institutions and inequalities.
- Regional vulnerability is never only a list of deficits; it also includes assets, relationships and capacities for collective action.
- Social work needs to connect environmental justice, responsible uses of technology and community-led support rather than treating them as competing specialisms.
- The PLACE framework offers a practical sequence for connecting pressures to regional action.
- Across every step, the quality of relationships, trust and collective responsibility is treated as a substantive outcome, not merely a means of delivering services.
- 2050 is the horizon for consequences and contrasting futures; 2030 is the horizon for decisions and first institutional commitments.

1. The future enters through everyday life

The future rarely arrives as a single dramatic event. It enters through the waiting room that is suddenly fuller, the apartment that remains dangerously hot at night, the bus route that no longer runs, the benefits portal that rejects an application, and the neighbourhood organisation that has lost its last paid coordinator. For social workers, large-scale change is experienced through ordinary situations. A heatwave becomes a question of who lives alone. Digitalisation becomes a question of who can prove their identity. Migration becomes a question of whether services cooperate across jurisdictions. Demographic change becomes a question of who provides care when families are dispersed and public systems are understaffed.

This is why a lecture about 2050 must begin in the present. Climate change, demographic shifts, inequality, displacement and digitalisation are not isolated themes waiting in the future. They are already interacting. What changes by 2050 is likely to be their intensity, frequency and cumulative effect. A region may be able to absorb one shock, yet struggle when heat, housing costs, staff shortages and political distrust occur together.

Social work is positioned at precisely this intersection. It attends to individuals and families, but it also encounters institutions, communities and policies. It works with immediate need, yet its ethical commitments point towards prevention, participation and social justice. The challenge is therefore not simply to add ‘climate’ or ‘digital skills’ to an already crowded curriculum. It is to reconsider how the profession understands wellbeing, vulnerability, agency and the environments in which people live.

Wellbeing is not a neutral measure waiting to be calculated. A region can improve an average indicator while leaving some groups less secure, less heard or less able to remain in their homes. In this reader, healthy, inclusive and liveable are treated as democratic and normative questions: who defines a good life, who shares in it, and which social and ecological costs are displaced elsewhere? Human rights provide the normative floor adopted here, while regional participation gives those commitments concrete and contestable meaning.

2. Five pressures, one social landscape

The five pressures discussed here—climate change, demographic change, inequality, displacement and digitalisation—are a purposeful selection, not a complete map of forces that may shape social work. They were chosen because each already affects access to rights, care, housing, participation and professional decision-making, and because their interaction can be examined within one lecture. Other developments may be equally consequential. Geopolitical conflict, democratic backsliding, authoritarian or far-right mobilisation, changing labour markets and the expanding influence of artificial intelligence could alter welfare institutions, public trust and the rights of marginalised groups. AI is addressed here as part of digitalisation, but its future role may extend far beyond service technology into employment, public administration, political communication and surveillance. European foresight work likewise treats technological, geopolitical, environmental and democratic change as interacting rather than isolated trends (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2025; European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2026). The selection therefore defines the scope of this reader; it does not rank all possible future pressures.

Climate change: a social multiplier

Climate change is sometimes described in physical terms—temperature, rainfall, sea-level rise—but its effects are distributed socially. The same heatwave is not the same event for everyone. A healthy person in a well-insulated home with flexible work experiences it differently from an older person living alone on the top floor of poorly insulated housing. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change emphasises that risk emerges through the interaction of hazards, exposure and vulnerability, and that these conditions differ across regions and social groups (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). Building on that risk framework, this reader treats income, health, housing, legal status, access to services, social networks, infrastructure and collective organisation as questions to investigate rather than as a fixed checklist of individual deficits.

Climate change can therefore deepen existing inequalities. It can raise food and energy costs, damage housing, disrupt employment, intensify anxiety and force movement within and across borders. It also creates new ethical questions. Who receives help first during extreme heat? How should a city reach undocumented residents during an emergency? Who is included when a neighbourhood is redesigned for climate resilience? Environmental policy can protect, but it can also exclude if costs are passed to households that have the least room to adapt.

Demographic change: more than ageing

Europe’s demographic transformation includes ageing, lower birth rates in many regions, changing household structures, internal migration and uneven population decline. The social-work implications are not limited to elder care. An older population may increase demand for long-term support while the care workforce itself shrinks. Rural communities may lose services as younger adults move away. Cities may grow more diverse while affordable housing becomes scarcer. Informal care may be stretched across long distances, and loneliness may become both a public-health issue and a question of local infrastructure.

Demography is not destiny. A region with an older population can remain vibrant if mobility, housing, health care and community life are designed inclusively. Conversely, a growing region can become less liveable when development increases segregation. The decisive issue is how institutions respond to population change and whose knowledge is taken seriously in that response.

Inequality and displacement: uneven freedom to adapt

Inequality determines who can move, who must move and who is unable to move. Some households can relocate away from risk or purchase protection. Others remain in exposed housing because alternatives are unavailable. Displacement may follow conflict, persecution, environmental change or economic collapse, but the categories overlap in lived experience. People arrive with capabilities and aspirations, not merely needs. Whether those capabilities can be exercised depends on legal status, language, recognition of qualifications, housing and the responsiveness of local systems.

Social inclusion in 2050 will thus depend on more than access to a service. It will require belonging, voice and the possibility of shaping the community one lives in. A region that welcomes labour but withholds political and social participation may fill vacancies without becoming inclusive.

Digitalisation: capacity and power

Digital systems can make support faster, more coordinated and more accessible. Translation tools may help people navigate services. Predictive models may identify patterns of unmet need. Remote consultations may connect specialists to rural areas. Yet every digital gain raises questions of power: who is represented in the data, who can contest an automated decision, and which forms of human knowledge are ignored because they cannot be easily measured?

Technology-augmented practice should therefore mean technology under professional and democratic control, not professional judgement subordinated to software. Digital access must be treated as part of social infrastructure. A person who lacks a device, stable internet, digital confidence or an accepted identity credential is not simply ‘offline’; that person may be excluded from rights that formally still exist.

Predictive child-welfare tools in Allegheny County illustrate why evaluation must include more than technical accuracy. A review published by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services summarises empirical studies of whether predictive risk models affect screening consistency, investigation decisions and disparities. Because the department also operates the system, this institutional review should be read alongside independent critical analysis. Eubanks asks whether administrative data can turn earlier contact with public systems into a proxy for future risk. Taken together, these sources neither prove that predictive tools are always harmful nor that they are necessarily beneficial. They show that legitimacy depends on purpose, data provenance, human review, appeal, distributive effects and the experience of families subjected to classification (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2024; Eubanks, 2018).

The interaction effect

The most important point is that these pressures combine. Heat affects an older population; high housing costs limit adaptation; digital-only services create barriers; staff shortages reduce outreach; displacement changes local needs; distrust makes public communication less effective. Social work in 2050 will need to recognise such interaction effects early. The profession’s distinctive contribution is not ownership of every problem, but an ability to see connections, work across boundaries and keep lived experience at the centre of institutional decisions.

3. Why regions matter

Global developments do not land on an empty map. They enter places with histories, economies, landscapes, infrastructures and relationships. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development describes place-based policy as intentionally spatially targeted and sensitive to local conditions, assets and opportunities, with multi-level and cross-sectoral governance. This matters for social work because the same intervention can work differently depending on transport, housing, administrative capacity, civic organisations and public trust (OECD, 2023, 2025).

A regional perspective occupies a useful middle ground. National policy establishes rights and funding systems, while municipalities and neighbourhoods organise much everyday provision. Regions connect these levels. They reveal commuting patterns, hospital catchment areas, rural–urban relationships, labour markets and cross-border ties. They also make visible the fact that vulnerability and capacity often cross administrative boundaries.

This is a glocal perspective: it does not treat the region as a smaller version of the world. It asks how global forces are translated through local histories, institutions and inequalities, and how knowledge from local practice can travel back into wider policy. Christensen's discussion of glocalisation and sustainability in social-work education supports this connection between global interdependence and situated learning (Christensen, 2024). In this reader, the regional scale is used as both an analytical lens and a field of political action.

The European Commission's regional resilience dashboard documents substantial differences in vulnerabilities and capacities between European regions (Heriaud et al., 2025). The broader resilience literature distinguishes persistence from adaptability and transformability: a system may cope within an existing trajectory, or it may need to create a different trajectory when existing structures become untenable (Folke et al., 2010). For social work, this shifts the question from 'How do we help vulnerable people cope?' to 'How do people, organisations and public institutions reduce vulnerability together—and which arrangements need to change?'

4. Three regional lenses

The three cases below are illustrative scenarios rather than predictions. Their points of departure are anchored in a small number of publicly documented regional characteristics; the 2050 developments and social-work situations are speculative. Their differences make comparison useful, while their shared place in the E^3UDRES^2 network provides a practical European frame. The descriptions should not be read as comprehensive accounts of the regions.

Region	Spatial profile	Illustrative 2050 pressure	Key social-work question
Setúbal, Portugal	Metropolitan and coastal	Heat, housing pressure and climate-related mobility	Who can remain safe and included as land, housing and care systems come under pressure?
Enschede–Twente, Netherlands	Medium-sized cross-border city-region	Heat, ageing, unequal housing and digitally mediated services	How can Dutch–German resources be coordinated without losing human judgement and access?
Vidzeme–Valmiera, Latvia	Rural region of small towns and villages	Population decline, distance, service consolidation and	How can essential support remain reachable when people and services are dispersed?

Region	Spatial profile	Illustrative 2050 pressure	Key social-work question
		winter/energy vulnerability	

Setúbal: the metropolitan coast

Setúbal offers a southern European lens shaped by its coastal location and its membership of the Lisbon metropolitan area. Regional adaptation planning identifies rising temperatures, more frequent heatwaves and drought, changing rainfall, flooding and coastal risks as relevant pressures for the metropolitan territory (Lisbon Metropolitan Area, n.d.). The following 2050 case extends those documented pressures speculatively into questions of water, housing and public space. The central issue is not only physical exposure, but the distribution of protection. Well-resourced households may cool their homes, work flexibly or move temporarily. Residents in insecure work or poor housing may face higher exposure and fewer choices.

A social-work response would need to link emergency outreach with longer-term climate justice. Heat plans would have to identify isolated residents without stigmatising them. Housing renovation would need protections against displacement. Newcomers could be treated as partners in resilience rather than as a burden on services. Community organisations might provide trusted communication, yet they cannot substitute indefinitely for accountable public systems.

Enschede–Twente: Lea's cross-border region

Enschede and Twente provide a different setting: a medium-sized city embedded in a wider region close to the German border. Saxion documents established Dutch–German educational cooperation and describes the border region as an important field of exchange (Saxion University of Applied Sciences, 2024). The scenario extends this cross-border starting point to employment, care and daily mobility. The border is treated as both a resource and an institutional complication: it can expand expertise and services, while eligibility rules, data systems, languages and professional responsibilities may not align automatically.

By 2050, the region may face hot summers, an ageing population, labour shortages and sharp differences between well-insulated and energy-poor housing. Digital systems may coordinate welfare, health and neighbourhood data, but residents who cannot navigate those systems may disappear from institutional view. Social work here becomes partly a practice of translation: between residents and algorithms, between neighbourhood knowledge and regional planning, and between Dutch and German institutions.

Vidzeme–Valmiera: distance as a social condition

Vidzeme represents a northern region organised through Valmiera and a network of smaller towns and villages. Official regional information describes it as Latvia's largest planning region by territory and the country's least densely populated, with 14 residents per square kilometre in 2025 (Vidzeme Planning Region, n.d.). In this setting, distance can become a social condition: it shapes whether support is timely, whether staff can be recruited and whether older people can remain independent. The 2050 scenario explores how population change and service consolidation might place additional pressure on transport, schools, health care and civic organisations. It also imagines energy vulnerability in older homes and new environmental risks under warmer and less predictable weather; these are plausible scenario elements, not established regional forecasts.

Digital services can reduce some distances but not abolish them. A video consultation cannot repair a roof, provide respite care or rebuild trust after institutional withdrawal. Community-led support may be especially valuable, but it requires stable resources and connections to professional services. The regional question is how to combine mobile provision, local knowledge and digital reach without creating a second-class service for rural residents.

5. Meet Lea, social worker in 2050

Lea is thirty-nine and works for a regional social resilience team in Enschede–Twente. The following day is a speculative teaching story. Its details are invented, but the pressures it brings together extend trends already visible today. The aim is to make a possible practice in 2050 tangible enough to question.

06:30 The night has not cooled

Lea wakes to the fourth tropical night in a row. The temperature outside is already 28 degrees. A public alert advises residents to remain indoors after noon, while the regional energy service asks organisations to reduce non-essential consumption. Before leaving home, Lea opens the duty screen on her tablet. The municipal cooling budget for her district is almost exhausted. Three demands compete for the remaining capacity: refrigerated medication in an emergency shelter, a cooled room for children in temporary housing and charging stations for home-care equipment.

The allocation system ranks the medication first. Lea accepts that recommendation, but she postpones the other two decisions. A ranking can order registered needs; it cannot decide alone which relationships and consequences matter.

08:00 A visit beyond the dashboard

Lea cycles to De Bothoven, where older housing retains the night's heat. The dashboard has marked a seventy-eight-year-old man as adequately protected because his apartment contains a cooling unit. At the door, Lea learns that he runs it for only two hours a day because of the electricity cost. In the flat upstairs, six people are sharing an apartment registered to three. The system does not know that two children sleep in the warmest room. Their mother avoids public services after an automated benefits review wrongly classified a previous payment as income.

A neighbourhood steward brings cold water and translates parts of the conversation. Lea records the immediate risks, but she also adds a challenge to the regional file: why has the same block appeared in every heat emergency since 2046 without a structural housing response?

11:30 Three regions on one screen

Lea joins a case conference through a regional learning exchange that developed from earlier E^3UDRES^2 collaboration. The exchange uses a shared five-question protocol that the partners call PLACE. It begins with pressures, but it is designed to move quickly towards local exposure, available capacities, contested choices and the action that institutions must enable. The protocol gives the practitioners a common language without suggesting that one solution will fit every region.

Marta, a community practitioner in Setúbal, reports that a cooling centre is full after residents from an overheated informal settlement arrived overnight. Ilze, coordinating a mobile team in Vidzeme, describes an older woman who has missed two remote consultations because a storm damaged the village connection and the next physical visit is seventy kilometres away. Lea presents the Enschede housing block and the

cross-border case of a woman whose Dutch and German care assessments still do not match. Under local exposure, the three cases look different. All of them, however, concern people whom services fail to reach because those services assume stable housing, reliable connections and the repeated ability to prove eligibility.

When they reach assets and access, Ilze describes an experimental, offline-first support network created outside the national welfare platform. Local social workers built it with programmers, library staff and technically skilled residents. Some of the developers had returned to Latvia after working abroad; others were newcomers whose qualifications the formal labour market had not recognised. The network can store urgent requests locally, synchronise them when a connection becomes available and route them through trusted service points. A community board determines which information may be collected, who may see it and when it must be deleted.

The network has solved a problem the central system did not address, but it has also created a new conflict. The national welfare agency offers stable funding and access to public records if the community network connects to its platform. That connection could improve continuity, yet it might also allow locally collected information to be used for eligibility checks, fraud detection or purposes the residents never approved. Under choices and co-production, the group cannot agree whether institutional integration would protect the network or absorb it.

Under enabling action, the practitioners resist the convenience of three closed cases. They agree to test a joint emergency protocol that combines local discretion, human review and a minimum right to reachable support. They also ask Ilze to bring the unresolved Vidzeme decision to the next exchange: what form of public funding could stabilise a community-governed system without transferring control of its data? PLACE has helped them identify the shared structure of the cases, but it has not removed the political and ethical decision.

14:00 The dangerous hours

Outdoor appointments stop between two and five. Lea uses the enforced pause to speak with a German colleague about the cross-border case. Each system recognises part of the woman's need, but neither accepts responsibility for the whole arrangement. While they talk, an alert reports that a resident in another heat-affected block has been taken to hospital. The address appeared on yesterday's risk list; no professional had time to visit.

For a moment, the language of resilience feels dishonest to Lea. She is tired of asking neighbours to compensate for missing staff and delayed renovation. In supervision she says so. The conversation does not remove the pressure, but it prevents professional endurance from being mistaken for a functioning system.

18:00 A decision in the courtyard

When the heat eases, residents gather in the shaded courtyard. The housing association offers temporary cooling units. Several tenants ask whether accepting them will delay renovation again. A teenager displays a hand-drawn map of the apartments that remain hottest after midnight. The map contradicts part of the official building model because it includes overcrowded and informally occupied rooms.

Lea does not turn the meeting into consultation theatre. She helps the group formulate two decisions: the units are accepted as emergency protection, and the residents' map is attached to a binding renovation review with an affordability guarantee. The immediate measure and the structural demand remain connected.

21:30 Lea records what the system missed

At home, Lea opens the shared PLACE record once more. The fields are complete, but the cases are not. Under pressures, the team recorded heat, distance, housing inequality and fragmented digital systems. Under local exposure, they identified people whom official records failed to see. Under assets, they documented the residents' heat map, neighbourhood knowledge and Vidzeme's community-built network. Under choices, the central disagreement remains unresolved: should the network accept public funding if that means connecting locally governed data to the national welfare platform?

In her private journal, Lea writes: 'PLACE helps us see the system, but it does not make the decision for us. The difficult question is which risks we are prepared to share, and which risks we continue to place on people with the least power.' She adds a second sentence before closing the file: 'A service becomes resilient when people can change its rules, not only when they learn to survive its failures.'

Lea's day expands familiar social-work practices rather than replacing them. She listens, assesses, advocates and coordinates. She also interprets environmental risk, scrutinises data, works across borders and turns repeated emergencies into evidence for institutional change. Her competence is relational, ecological, technological and political.

This day should not be read as an outcome shared by both scenarios that follow. It is a deliberately mixed vignette. Some institutions have become more democratic and responsive, yet scarcity, unequal exposure and organisational failure remain. The tension allows participants to ask which parts of Lea's practice depend on reform and which pressures would persist even in a more desirable future.

Lea looks back from 2050

In an interview recorded earlier that year, a student asks Lea which part of her work would have seemed most unusual in 2026. She does not mention the dashboard. She points instead to the regional citizens' council that can suspend an automated rule, the paid neighbourhood stewards who connect informal knowledge with public services, and the legal requirement that housing adaptation plans demonstrate both climate benefit and protection against displacement. None of these arrangements removed conflict. They changed who could enter the conflict with authority.

This retrospective introduces a modest utopian element into Lea's story. In the tradition of future-oriented social-work writing, it makes institutional alternatives imaginable without suggesting that they will emerge automatically (Aghamiri, 2024).

6. Two futures to 2050

Scenarios are not predictions. They are disciplined stories used to expose assumptions and choices. Two contrasting futures can help participants notice what is at stake. They begin from similar pressures but diverge because institutions and communities respond differently.

Three methods, three purposes

Scenario analysis explores plausible pathways; it asks what could happen under different combinations of decisions and pressures. Speculative fabulation is more disruptive. It asks whose imagination has been excluded and whether the categories used to describe the future—professional, client, nature, care, expertise—must themselves change. Backcasting is action-oriented: it selects a desirable future and traces the capabilities and commitments required to approach it. Lea's main story functions as a scenario, her

retrospective introduces a modest element of speculative fabulation, and the 2030 exercise uses backcasting (Or & Das, 2025; Robinson, 1990; Dreborg, 1996).

The Long Fall

In this pathway, no single decision destroys the social infrastructure. A sequence of emergencies, temporary measures and unchallenged exclusions gradually narrows what institutions believe they can do.

2029 The Black Summer

A record European heatwave coincides with power failures and water restrictions. Emergency social teams are deployed without additional staff or protection. In Setúbal, cooling spaces fill within hours. In Enschede, outreach lists omit people living at unregistered addresses. Vidzeme diverts its remaining mobile teams to health emergencies, leaving routine support suspended for weeks. Governments describe the failures as exceptional, so temporary crisis arrangements become the new baseline.

2033 The data push

Several governments require welfare agencies to use automated risk classifications in the name of consistency and savings. A leak reveals that one model treats address instability, missed digital appointments and previous service contact as risk indicators. These are often signs of exclusion, yet the system reads them as individual unreliability. Short-lived protests are met with minor transparency reforms; the rankings remain decisive.

2039 The exodus of helpers

Years of understaffing, surveillance and moral distress trigger coordinated strikes. Emergency staffing orders end the action without resolving its causes. Experienced practitioners leave public services, and many posts are filled through short contracts. Cross-border and rural cooperation depends increasingly on personal goodwill. When those individuals leave, their networks disappear with them.

2045 The years of climate crises

Three major floods and a prolonged drought hit different parts of Europe within twelve months. Emergency legislation restricts movement, accelerates data sharing and makes benefits conditional on documented adaptation efforts. In Setúbal, protected investment zones receive new barriers while nearby renters are displaced. In Twente, Dutch and German systems exchange data but still dispute responsibility. In Vidzeme, service consolidation leaves some villages days away from face-to-face support.

2050 The silent city

Services still exist, but access is rationed through price, data and administrative stamina. Metropolitan centres contain cooled and protected enclaves; outside them, neighbourhood groups manage recurring emergencies with diminishing support. Social work has not disappeared, but it has narrowed into eligibility control and crisis management. The long fall becomes visible only in retrospect: each temporary exclusion made the next one easier to accept.

At a neighbourhood meeting, an older resident recalls a time when a social worker could visit without first receiving an algorithmic priority score. A teenager asks whether public services had really responded simply because somebody needed help. To her, the account sounds less like institutional history than a family legend. She has never known another baseline.

This scene adapts the idea of shifting baseline syndrome. The concept was developed to explain how successive generations may accept degraded environmental conditions as normal because earlier conditions fall outside lived memory. Its use here is analogical rather than diagnostic: the scenario asks

whether expectations of welfare, rights and public responsibility can also contract when institutional decline is gradual and historical memory weakens (Alleway et al., 2023).

The Rise of Solidarity

This pathway begins with the same heat, inequality and institutional strain. The difference lies in what follows: emergencies become evidence for redesign, and solidarity is translated into enforceable rules, budgets and public infrastructure.

2029 The turning point

The same heatwave and water shortages expose unequal protection across Europe. Social workers, residents and public-health teams publish joint heat maps that include housing quality, isolation and informal occupancy. Their evidence makes it difficult to treat the deaths as a natural disaster alone. Regional assemblies in Setúbal, Twente and Vidzeme fund immediate protection and require public reviews of who was missed.

2031 A social ecological charter

Sustained pressure produces a European framework that recognises social and ecological justice as connected public obligations. It guarantees human review of consequential automated decisions, non-digital access to essential services and protection against displacement through publicly funded climate renovation. Social work receives a formal mandate to contribute evidence from practice to regional planning.

2037 The return of the commons

An economic crisis tests the new commitments. Instead of closing local provision, regions pool buildings, transport and energy systems with community organisations under public accountability. Setúbal establishes neighbourhood cooling networks. Twente funds cross-border care coordinators and resident data councils. Vidzeme combines mobile teams with permanent local service points. Residents govern priorities, while public authorities remain responsible for rights, staffing and continuity.

2044 The human resilience alliance

Universities, municipalities, professional associations and community networks form a European alliance for human resilience. They agree on open standards for public-interest technology, minimum regional access to essential services and shared learning after climate events. A practitioner exchange developed from E^3UDRES^2 collaboration links Setúbal, Enschede and Vidzeme, allowing local knowledge to travel without erasing regional differences.

2050 The era of dignity

Climate shocks and conflicts have not disappeared. What has changed is the distribution of authority and protection. Housing adaptation includes affordability guarantees. Every automated welfare decision can be challenged by a person. Children have access to climate-resilient learning spaces, and rural residents retain a right to reachable support. Social workers operate as practitioners and civic connectors, translating lived experience into planning and challenging policies that transfer risk to those with the fewest resources.

The contrast between the scenarios is intentionally sharp. Real futures will be mixed. The exercise is valuable because it directs attention to path dependency: early decisions about housing, data, education and service design can make later options easier or harder. This is why the lecture moves from 2050 back to 2030.

The same development may also be experienced differently. A regional data platform can make support reachable for a rural resident and intensify surveillance for a family with a long administrative record. A

climate renovation can reduce heat exposure and still displace tenants if rents rise. A community initiative can create voice for some residents while reproducing gendered or racialised divisions of unpaid care. The scenarios therefore provide directions of travel, not morally uniform worlds.

7. Three pathways for the profession

Green social work

Green social work links environmental change with social justice. Lena Dominelli argues that environmental crises cannot be separated from unequal power, resource distribution and community participation. This perspective expands the profession's person-in-environment tradition: 'environment' means not only family and institutions, but also housing, ecosystems, infrastructure and the material conditions of survival (Dominelli, 2012).

An ecofeminist and decolonial perspective pushes the argument further. Or and Das use speculative fabulation to question dominant assumptions in social work and to open ecofeminist, decolonial and postmaterial possibilities (Or & Das, 2025). Building on that orientation, this reader asks how gendered care, colonial histories, extraction and the separation of humans from nature shape vulnerability; whose knowledge defines the problem; and whether land, non-human life and future generations appear only as resources for present human wellbeing. These questions are an application of their orientation, not a claim that the chapter supplies a complete theory of eco-social practice.

In practice, green social work might involve heat preparedness, energy poverty, disaster recovery, climate-related displacement, food security or participation in neighbourhood redesign. Its contribution is not to turn social workers into climate scientists. It is to ensure that adaptation and transition are socially just, attentive to everyday life and shaped with affected communities.

Technology-augmented practice

Technology-augmented practice uses digital tools to extend professional capacity while preserving accountability. It can support multilingual communication, pattern recognition, remote access and coordination across organisations. The decisive word is augmented. Technology should create more room for judgement and relationship, not conceal political choices inside technical systems.

This pathway requires digital competence, but also critical data literacy. Social workers need to ask how a model was trained, what information is missing, how decisions can be appealed and whether efficiency is being achieved by transferring work to service users. They must also ask what happens to trust and whether a system creates time for meaningful contact or merely removes people from view. In situations involving trauma, uncertainty, ethical conflict and contested needs, meaningful human relationships remain a central and currently non-substitutable component of professional practice. Ethical practice includes the ability to say that a technically possible use is socially unacceptable.

Technology-augmented practice can also involve institutions that communities help to govern rather than merely systems that professionals learn to scrutinise. The speculative Vidzeme network illustrates one possibility: an offline-first infrastructure co-designed by social workers, residents and technologists, with community rules for access, retention and secondary use. Its value depends not only on technical performance, but on durable funding, legal safeguards, professional responsibility and the ability to resist the later repurposing of care data for surveillance or eligibility control.

Community-led support systems

Community-led approaches begin from the capacities and relationships already present in a place. Residents are not treated only as recipients of professionally designed services. They help define problems, govern resources and create support. This can increase relevance and trust, especially where formal institutions are distant or fragmented.

Yet community should not become a romantic label for unpaid labour. Communities contain inequalities and conflicts, and participation requires time, accessibility and resources. The strongest model is a partnership in which public institutions guarantee rights and continuity, professionals contribute expertise, and residents possess real influence over priorities and design.

Integration rather than competition

The three pathways are most convincing when combined. A community heat plan can be environmentally informed, digitally supported and locally governed. A rural support network can use technology while maintaining mobile face-to-face services. A regional data system can be designed with affected residents and evaluated for distributive effects. The strategic question is not which pathway wins, but how they correct one another's blind spots.

Environmental sustainability without community power can become technocratic. Community development without ecological awareness can protect arrangements that remain environmentally unsustainable. Technology without accountable relationships can make exclusion more efficient. Jones identifies community and environmental sustainability as a central pillar of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (Jones, 2018). Read together with green-social-work scholarship, this supports the interpretation advanced here: community wellbeing and environmental sustainability should be treated as interconnected professional commitments rather than as separate specialisms (Dominelli, 2012; Jones, 2018).

8. The PLACE framework

Lea and her regional colleagues have already used PLACE as a shared conversation protocol. We can now slow the framework down and examine what each step contributes, which intellectual traditions inform it and where its limits lie. PLACE is an adapted teaching framework developed for this lecture, not a validated diagnostic instrument and not an automated route to a correct decision. Its purpose is to help students and professionals move systematically from broad change to regional action. It draws on the IPCC's understanding of risk, OECD work on place-based policy, European evidence on regional capacities and vulnerabilities, resilience thinking, the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, green social work, ecofeminist speculative practice and the method of backcasting. PLACE is the author's synthesis of these sources; it is not presented as a framework published or validated by any one of them.

A relational question runs across all five steps: What happens to trust, mutual recognition and collective responsibility? The Global Agenda identifies human relationships as central to social work (IASSW, ICSW, & IFSW, 2020; Jones & Truell, 2012). This reader adds a critical qualification: relationships are not inherently emancipatory. They can carry solidarity, but also paternalism, dependency, discrimination and unequal power. The standard adopted here is therefore not simply more relationship, but relationships that are just, trustworthy, open to challenge and accountable to the people involved.

Step	Guiding question	What to examine

Step	Guiding question	What to examine
P — Pressures	What large-scale changes are shaping the region?	Climate, demography, inequality, displacement and digitalisation—and their interaction.
L — Local exposure and vulnerability	Who or what is exposed, and how was this vulnerability produced?	Housing, health, income, legal status, geography, care burdens, history and institutional barriers.
A — Assets, access and capacities	What strengths and forms of knowledge exist, and who can actually reach or shape them?	Services, networks, local and marginalised knowledge, ecosystems, transport, trust, rights and adaptive capacity.
C — Choices and co-production	Which pathways are available, who decides and whose knowledge counts?	Power, gendered and racialised effects, trade-offs, participation, distribution, accountability and more-than-human interests.
E — Enabling action	What must begin by 2030 to make a desirable 2050 plausible?	Commitments in education, organisations, policy and communities, with responsibilities and early indicators.

P — Pressures

The first step prevents tunnel vision. Participants identify the pressures relevant to the issue and consider interaction effects. In a regional heat plan, for example, climate is obvious, but ageing, housing inequality, migration and digital access may determine who is reached. The aim is not to create an exhaustive list. It is to identify the combination that shapes the situation.

L — Local exposure and vulnerability

The second step translates pressures into place. Exposure concerns who and what comes into contact with risk. Vulnerability concerns the conditions that make harm more likely or recovery more difficult. This framing discourages labels such as ‘the vulnerable’ from becoming fixed identities. People are made more or less vulnerable by circumstances, policies and relationships. The analysis should therefore ask why a particular group is exposed, which past planning and policy decisions produced that exposure, and who carries unpaid care and adaptation work.

A — Assets, access and capacities

A deficit-only analysis produces deficit-only solutions. Regions also contain knowledge, institutions, networks, ecosystems and physical resources. The crucial distinction is between existence, access and influence. A cooling centre is not a meaningful asset if it is far away, culturally unsafe or open only during working hours. A cross-border hospital is not fully available if reimbursement rules are unclear. Local, indigenous and experiential knowledge should count as capacity without being extracted from the people who hold it. Capacity includes the ability to coordinate, learn and adapt, not merely the number of services on a map.

C — Choices and co-production

The fourth step makes alternatives and power visible. Every intervention distributes benefits, burdens and voice. Co-production means more than consulting residents after a plan has been drafted. It involves affected people in defining the problem, comparing options and governing implementation. Analysis should test for gendered, racialised and colonial continuities, identify whose knowledge is discounted, and consider ecological consequences beyond immediate human benefit. This step also asks what should not be delegated to communities or automated systems because public accountability must remain clear.

E — Enabling action

The final step converts a preferred future into near-term commitments. The action horizon is 2030, not because transformation will be complete by then, but because institutional capabilities require time to build. Enabling action can include curriculum redesign, new professional roles, cross-sector agreements, funding models, data safeguards or community infrastructure. Each action should have an owner, a first milestone and an observable sign of progress.

9. A regional decision challenge

Imagine that each region receives a substantial but limited resilience budget. The money cannot fund everything. Participants must choose a priority and defend it using PLACE. The exercise is not about finding one correct answer; it is about showing what different choices reveal and what they leave unresolved.

Setúbal

Option A creates a network of cooled community spaces and outreach teams. Option B funds climate-resilient housing renovation with affordability protections. Option C develops a regional programme for migrant inclusion, employment recognition and emergency communication. A strong answer notices that the options are connected. Cooling spaces meet immediate need, while housing renovation reduces exposure. Inclusion measures determine whether newcomers can access either. Participants must decide where limited funding creates the greatest leverage and which safeguards prevent exclusion.

Enschede–Twente

Option A builds an integrated Dutch–German coordination service for care and social support. Option B funds neighbourhood-based renovation and heat resilience. Option C develops a transparent regional digital platform with human review, multilingual access and non-digital alternatives. The challenge is to avoid treating coordination, housing and technology as separate worlds. Participants should identify whose problem is solved first, whose data is used and which institution remains accountable when cases cross borders.

Vidzeme–Valmiera

Option A establishes mobile multidisciplinary teams. Option B strengthens local service points and community hubs in small towns and villages. Option C subsidises transport, connectivity and energy improvements for isolated households. The decision turns on reach, continuity and scale. Mobile teams bring expertise but may remain intermittent. Hubs build local presence but require staffing. Transport and connectivity expand access but do not guarantee that a suitable service exists. PLACE helps participants articulate these trade-offs without reducing the region to a list of shortages.

10. Backcasting: from a desirable 2050 to action by 2030

Forecasting begins with the present and asks what is likely to happen. Backcasting begins with a desirable future and asks what would need to happen for that future to become possible. The method is particularly useful when current trends are unsustainable or when marginal improvements will not achieve the desired outcome (Robinson, 1990; Dreborg, 1996).

In this lecture, participants imagine a region in 2050 that is healthy, inclusive and liveable. They then identify the capabilities that must already be in place: trusted local partnerships, climate-literate professionals, accessible service systems, democratic data governance, secure housing and meaningful participation. Finally, they move back to 2030 and select actions that could begin building those capabilities.

Education

By 2030, social-work education could embed eco-social analysis, regional systems thinking and critical digital literacy across the curriculum. Students would practise with cases that combine housing, health, climate, migration and technology rather than encountering them in separate modules. Field education could include regional planning bodies, community energy projects or cross-border organisations alongside traditional placements.

Organisations

Organisations could establish protocols for heat, displacement and digital exclusion; create roles that connect case knowledge to planning; and evaluate whether service redesign shifts burdens onto residents. Workforce development would include time for partnership-building and ethical reflection. Data systems would include human review, appeal routes and regular equity audits.

Policy

Regional and national policy could connect social indicators with climate adaptation and infrastructure investment. Funding could reward cooperation without making responsibility diffuse. Cross-border agreements could clarify eligibility, information sharing and professional accountability. Housing policy could ensure that environmental renovation does not cause displacement.

Communities

Communities could receive long-term support for participation, mutual aid and local knowledge-building. The goal is not to withdraw the state, but to create durable civic capacity. Participation would be designed around accessibility, compensation and real influence. Community organisations would have routes to escalate recurring problems from individual cases to institutional reform.

These actions are deliberately practical, yet they are not small. They change what counts as professional knowledge, how organisations learn and who has authority in regional decisions. Backcasting links ambition with sequence: if a desired 2050 requires trusted relationships, those relationships cannot be commissioned at the moment a crisis begins.

Backcasting also needs a power check. A desirable future cannot be inferred from average wellbeing alone. Participants should ask who defined the vision, who might pay its hidden costs and whether the proposed route reproduces the very inequalities it is meant to address.

11. What social work may need to become

The lecture's answer is not a new job title. Social work may need to become more place-conscious, more ecologically literate, more technologically critical and more comfortable acting at multiple levels. It will still require the core practices of relationship, advocacy and ethical judgement. The difference is the field in which those practices operate.

First, social work needs to treat environmental conditions as social conditions. Housing quality, temperature, mobility and access to green space are not background variables; they shape health, participation and dignity. Second, it needs to use technology without surrendering its moral and political judgement. Third, it needs to recognise communities as sources of knowledge and action while defending universal rights and public responsibility.

Fourth, the profession needs stronger routes from individual experience to institutional learning. If many residents encounter the same barrier, the problem is not a collection of unfortunate cases. It is evidence about system design. Social workers often possess this evidence, but organisations do not always create channels through which it can influence planning and policy.

This gives social work a political knowledge function. The profession does not only operate within regional systems; it produces situated evidence about where those systems fail. The Global Agenda provides a basis for connecting practice across levels and for collective professional action (Jones & Truell, 2012; IASSW, ICSW, & IFSW, 2020). This reader draws a further conclusion: turning recurring experience into organisational and policy learning is part of professional responsibility, while advocacy must remain accountable to the people whose experience gives that knowledge its force.

Finally, social work needs a regional imagination. This means seeing the relationships between city and countryside, neighbourhood and infrastructure, local practice and European change. It also means resisting one-size-fits-all solutions. Setúbal, Twente and Vidzeme may share pressures, but they require different configurations of services, participation and investment.

This ambition must be matched by institutional realism. Social workers cannot compensate indefinitely for housing shortages, inaccessible transport, weak climate policy or underfunded care. Their contribution depends on mandates, staffing, organisational freedom and durable partnerships with health services, planners, educators, environmental expertise, public authorities and civic organisations. Calling social work a transformative profession should not become a way of transferring responsibility for structural failure onto individual practitioners.

12. A practical conclusion

The year 2050 is close enough to be professionally relevant. Many students entering social work today will still be practising then. Buildings renovated now will still shape exposure. Data systems commissioned now may define access for decades. Patterns of trust, once damaged, can take years to rebuild. The future is therefore not an abstract destination; it is being organised through present choices.

The purpose of the lecture is not to make participants anxious about an unknowable future. It is to make choices visible. The Long Fall and the Rise of Solidarity are not forecasts competing for accuracy. They are mirrors held up to current decisions. The three regions show that common European challenges take different local forms. Lea's story shows that technology and professional judgement will have to coexist. The PLACE framework provides a route from global pressure to regional action.

A healthy, inclusive and sustainable region is not one in which no disruption occurs. It is one in which people can remain safe, exercise rights, participate in decisions and rely on institutions that learn. Social work cannot create such a region alone. It can, however, connect experiences that are too often separated: the household and the housing system, the digital decision and the person it classifies, the climate plan and the resident expected to live with it.

The quality of those connections matters. A resilient region needs relationships that support trust and cooperation, but it must also make unequal relationships open to challenge. The goal is not harmony at any price. It is the capacity to handle disagreement without removing rights, voice or responsibility.

The final question is therefore addressed to every participant: If this is the 2050 we want, what must we be willing to begin by 2030? The answer should be specific enough to guide action, regional enough to fit a place, and ambitious enough to change the conditions that produce vulnerability.

A note on the regional scenarios

The regional passages are teaching scenarios. The regions were selected partly because their higher education institutions participate in E^3UDRES^2, but institutional affiliation does not make the scenarios factual descriptions. A limited set of public sources anchors the initial characteristics: metropolitan climate planning for Setúbal, documented cross-border cooperation in Enschede–Twente, and official territorial information for Vidzeme. The developments projected to 2050 remain speculative. The author is based in Enschede, but has not conducted comparative regional fieldwork for this reader and has not personally visited Setúbal or Vidzeme–Valmiera. The passages should not be read as forecasts, official regional assessments or claims about inevitable local outcomes. Before publication as regional analysis, local partners and additional regional evidence would still be required.

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