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Equity-focused inclusion strategies for ageing and vulnerable populations: The role of social work in advancing regional development priorities in Romania

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Abstract: Romania's regional development strategies for 2021–2027 emphasize social inclusion, demographic resilience, and the reduction of territorial disparities, particularly in the context of accelerated population ageing, rural depopulation, and persistent vulnerabilities affecting access to essential services. Within this framework, the social work profession emerges as a key actor in supporting sustainable and equity-oriented models of regional development. Regional analyses across the country highlight recurring structural challenges: declining population trends, a rising share of older adults, uneven access to public services, limited availability of modern social infrastructure, and pronounced urban–rural disparities. At the same time, opportunities generated through European and national policies, including digitalization, improved mobility, expansion of integrated social services, and the modernization of health and social care infrastructure, provide a foundation for strengthening inclusion-focused interventions. This article proposes a sustainability-oriented framework through which social work can contribute to the implementation of regional development priorities by: Expanding and professionalizing community-based services in vulnerable territories; developing active ageing programmes and preventing social isolation; engaging social workers in digital transition processes to reduce service-access gaps; strengthening territorial cooperation and embedding social interventions within multi-level governance mechanisms. Findings suggest that aligning social work interventions with regional policy frameworks can enhance social cohesion, reduce inequalities, and reinforce community resilience. Social work thus positions itself as a central vector in Romania's transition toward sustainable and inclusive regional development pathways.

Keywords: social inclusion; regional development; ageing population; vulnerable groups; social work interventions; equity-oriented strategies

1. Introduction

In the context of the 2021–2027 programming period, regional development policies across Europe increasingly converge around the objectives of social inclusion, territorial cohesion, and demographic resilience. More specifically, this programming cycle is anchored in the European Union's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and implemented through key cohesion policy instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). These instruments define strategic investment priorities and policy orientations, which are subsequently translated into national and regional development strategies. In Romania, regional development strategies for 2021–2027 operationalize these priorities at the territorial level, functioning as policy frameworks that guide resource allocation, service development, and governance arrangements.

These priorities reflect a growing recognition that economic growth alone is insufficient to ensure sustainable development in regions affected by structural demographic change, persistent inequalities, and uneven access to essential services. In this regard, Romania exemplifies many of the challenges confronting post-transition and peripheral European states. These include long-term population decline, accelerated ageing, and entrenched urban–rural disparities, which intersect with limited institutional and social service capacity. This perspective is consistent with a growing body of research that highlights the limitations of growth-centered development models in contexts marked by demographic change and territorial inequality [1].

Regional development trajectories in Romania are characterized by significant spatial and social asymmetries, which continue to shape development outcomes despite successive waves of cohesion policy interventions. Empirical studies document persistent gaps between metropolitan growth poles and peripheral regions [1–3]. Additional disparities exist within regions, affecting rural areas, small towns, and marginalised communities. These patterns are reinforced by rural depopulation, selective migration of younger cohorts, and the weakening of local economic and administrative structures [4,5]. As a result, territorial inequalities in Romania are not merely economic in nature, but deeply social, influencing access to education, healthcare, social services, and opportunities for participation.

Within this broader territorial landscape, population ageing has emerged as a central structural challenge with far-reaching implications for regional sustainability. Romania is undergoing rapid demographic ageing, driven by declining fertility rates, increased life expectancy, and sustained out-migration of the working-age population [6–10]. Importantly, ageing processes unfold unevenly across territories, disproportionately affecting rural and economically disadvantaged areas. In such contexts, older adults are more likely to experience cumulative forms of vulnerability [10–12]. These include limited service availability, reduced mobility, social isolation, and digital exclusion. Consequently, demographic ageing must be understood as a multidimensional social phenomenon, closely intertwined with territorial disadvantage and social exclusion. This interpretation aligns with recent literature that conceptualises ageing as a socially and territorially embedded process rather than a purely demographic trend [11–13].

In response to these dynamics, contemporary regional development strategies increasingly emphasize equity-focused inclusion as a guiding principle. Unlike approaches centered on formal equality or uniform policy provision, equity-oriented strategies prioritize differentiated interventions based on need, vulnerability, and territorial context. From a sustainability perspective, social equity is increasingly conceptualized as a foundational condition for long-term resilience, social cohesion, and balanced territorial development [7]. Addressing demographic ageing and vulnerability therefore requires policy frameworks that integrate social, territorial, and demographic dimensions in a coherent manner.

Within this evolving policy environment, the role of social work warrants particular attention. While traditionally positioned at the margins of regional development debates, social work has progressively expanded its scope beyond individual and family-level interventions to encompass community-based practice,

preventive approaches, and integrated service models. Social workers contribute to mitigating social exclusion and strengthening community resilience through direct engagement with vulnerable populations, coordination of local services, and mediation between individuals, communities, and institutions. However, despite this potential, the contribution of social work remains insufficiently embedded within regional development frameworks, which often privilege economic and infrastructural priorities over social systems.

At the same time, recent policy developments at both European and national levels, particularly within EU cohesion policy priorities for 2021–2027, as well as national strategies on social inclusion, digitalisation, and integrated community services, open new avenues for integrating social work into regional development processes [3,8]. These developments are closely linked to broader governance transformations, including multi-level coordination and territorial cooperation mechanisms, which are central to the implementation of inclusion-oriented policies. The expansion of integrated community services, the growing emphasis on digitalization in health and social care, and the strengthening of multi-level governance and territorial cooperation mechanisms create opportunities for more inclusive and coordinated interventions. Digital tools hold significant potential to improve service accessibility and efficiency. However, they also pose risks of reinforcing exclusion if age-related and territorial digital divides are not adequately addressed. Similarly, territorial cooperation initiatives can enhance policy coherence and service coverage, provided that social inclusion objectives are systematically incorporated into governance structures, as emphasised in recent European policy frameworks [3,8]. Together, these trends highlight the increasing importance of digitalisation and governance capacity in shaping inclusive regional development strategies.

Against this background, the present article examines how social work can contribute to the advancement of equity-focused inclusion strategies within Romania's regional development framework. Rather than concentrating on a single regional case, the analysis adopts a cross-regional perspective. It identifies shared challenges, policy priorities, and intervention patterns across regional strategies. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how social work interventions can respond to ageing-related vulnerabilities and territorial inequalities in a differentiated and context-sensitive manner.

The article is guided by three research questions. First, how are equity-focused inclusion, demographic ageing, and territorial inequality conceptualised within Romania's regional development strategies? Second, to what extent do these strategies translate inclusion objectives into explicit, equity-oriented intervention mechanisms? Third, what role is attributed to social work within these frameworks, and how can it contribute to more coherent and socially sustainable regional development?

By integrating perspectives from regional development studies, demographic research, and social work scholarship, this article contributes to ongoing debates on the social dimensions of sustainable development [1,7,12]. It advances a conceptual framework that positions social work as a key actor in aligning regional development priorities with equity-oriented inclusion strategies. This is particularly relevant in contexts shaped by demographic ageing and persistent territorial inequality.

These considerations are further developed in the conceptual framework presented in Section 2, which provides the theoretical basis for the analytical approach adopted in this study.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

2.1. Regional development, territorial disparities, and social sustainability

Contemporary approaches to regional development increasingly frame it as a multidimensional process. In this perspective, economic performance represents only one element alongside social cohesion, institutional capacity, and territorial equity. In the European context, the 2021–2027 programming period reflects a paradigmatic shift toward development models that explicitly integrate social sustainability and cohesion objectives within territorial policy frameworks. This shift is particularly salient in countries characterised by pronounced spatial inequalities and uneven development trajectories.

In Romania, empirical research consistently documents persistent territorial disparities at multiple spatial scales, including interregional, intraregional, and urban–rural divides [1–3]. These disparities are reflected not only in economic performance indicators, but also in access to public services, social infrastructure, and opportunities for social participation. Such patterns are consistent with broader theoretical perspectives in regional development and social sustainability, which emphasise the structural nature of territorial disparities and their implications for inclusive development [1,7]. Studies on regional resilience and cohesion highlight the uneven capacity of Romanian regions to absorb shocks, adapt to structural change, and sustain inclusive development pathways [1,4].

These findings are consistent with the conceptual framework developed in Section 2, particularly the understanding of social sustainability as closely linked to territorial inequality and the role of strategically embedded social work in addressing structurally produced vulnerabilities.

Rural depopulation and the marginalization of small towns further exacerbate territorial inequalities. Peripheral and predominantly rural areas experience cumulative disadvantages associated with population decline, selective out-migration, and reduced administrative and service provision capacity [4,5]. In this context, small towns often occupy an ambivalent position, functioning simultaneously as potential anchors of regional development and as sites of structural vulnerability [6]. These dynamics highlight the need for development approaches that explicitly address social and territorial imbalances. Relying on trickle-down effects from economic growth centres is insufficient.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of social sustainability provides a useful lens for analyzing these processes. Social sustainability emphasizes the capacity of societies and territories to maintain social cohesion, equity, and well-being over time, particularly under conditions of demographic and economic change. Within regional development theory, social sustainability is increasingly linked to the

distributional outcomes of policy interventions and the extent to which development benefits are equitably shared across territories and population groups [7].

2.2. Demographic ageing, vulnerability, and territorial inequality

Demographic ageing represents a structural transformation with far-reaching implications for regional development trajectories and social policy systems. Romania is among the European countries experiencing accelerated demographic ageing, driven by declining fertility, increased life expectancy, and sustained emigration of younger cohorts [8,9]. Importantly, ageing processes are spatially differentiated, with rural and economically disadvantaged areas exhibiting higher proportions of older adults and more pronounced dependency ratios.

The intersection of demographic ageing and territorial inequality generates distinct patterns of vulnerability. Older adults residing in peripheral regions are disproportionately exposed to multiple risks. These include limited access to healthcare, social services, transportation, and community-based support [10,11]. These risks are further amplified by poverty, inadequate housing conditions, and weak local service infrastructures. As a result, ageing-related vulnerability cannot be adequately understood in isolation from territorial context.

The literature increasingly conceptualizes ageing as a multidimensional social process, shaped by cumulative life-course inequalities and spatial conditions [12]. From this perspective, vulnerability in later life reflects the interaction between individual characteristics (such as health status or income) and structural factors. These include regional development patterns and service availability. Studies on social exclusion among older adults in post-socialist contexts emphasize the persistence of structural disadvantages linked to historical legacies and uneven development trajectories [13]. In the Romanian context, the organization of residential care for older persons reflects institutional and territorial asymmetries that directly influence access, quality of services, and long-term social integration processes [14].

In response to these challenges, the concept of active ageing has gained prominence in policy and academic debates. Active ageing frameworks emphasize participation, autonomy, and quality of life in later life, while recognizing the need for supportive environments and accessible services [15]. However, critics note that active ageing policies risk reproducing inequalities if they fail to account for territorial and socio-economic constraints. Consequently, equity-oriented approaches are required to ensure that active ageing strategies are inclusive of older adults living in disadvantaged regions.

2.3. Equity-focused inclusion as a policy and analytical framework

Equity-focused inclusion represents a conceptual departure from policy approaches centered on formal equality or uniform provision. In this context, equity-focused inclusion can be understood as an operational dimension of social sustainability, translating its normative principles into policy-relevant intervention strategies. While equality implies identical treatment, equity emphasizes differentiated interventions based on need, vulnerability, and contextual factors. In regional development and social policy, equity-oriented frameworks recognize that territorially

and socially disadvantaged groups require targeted support to achieve comparable outcomes. While social sustainability provides a broader normative framework concerned with cohesion, well-being, and long-term resilience, equity-focused inclusion emphasizes the concrete mechanisms through which these objectives are pursued in territorially differentiated contexts.

Within the sustainability literature, social equity is increasingly regarded as a precondition for resilient and inclusive development rather than a secondary outcome [7,16]. Equity-focused inclusion strategies seek to reduce structural inequalities by addressing the underlying determinants of exclusion. These include spatial disadvantage, service fragmentation, and institutional capacity gaps. In the context of regional development, this entails aligning social policy instruments with territorial development objectives.

In Romania, public policy analyses highlight persistent challenges in translating equity principles into effective regional interventions [7,17]. Despite formal commitments to cohesion and inclusion, implementation gaps remain, particularly at the local level. These gaps are often linked to limited administrative capacity, fragmented governance structures, and insufficient integration between economic, social, and territorial policies [17]. As a result, equity-focused inclusion requires not only appropriate policy design but also institutional mechanisms capable of translating social sustainability principles into coordinated interventions across sectors and governance levels.

2.4. Social work, community-based interventions, and integrated services

Within this conceptual landscape, social work emerges as a critical actor in operationalizing equity-focused inclusion. Contemporary social work theory emphasizes the profession's role in addressing structural sources of vulnerability through community-based practice, preventive interventions, and integrated service delivery [16,18]. These approaches align closely with equity-oriented frameworks, as they prioritize responsiveness to local needs and context-specific solutions. The consolidation of professional social work practice requires structured methodological training and institutional clarity, particularly in contexts characterized by fragmented service provision [19].

In this article, the notion of *strategically embedded social work* refers to the integration of social work knowledge and practice not only at the level of service delivery, but also within planning, coordination, and monitoring processes of regional development. This perspective extends the role of social work beyond implementation functions and conceptualises it as a mediating and structuring component of governance systems.

From this standpoint, social work contributes to identifying context-specific needs, translating policy objectives into locally grounded interventions, and facilitating coordination between institutional actors and communities. As such, its strategic embedding enhances the responsiveness and equity-orientation of development processes, particularly in territorially differentiated and ageing contexts.

Empirical studies on social work practice in Romania underscore both the potential and the challenges associated with community-based and integrated service

models. Rural social work, in particular, operates under conditions of limited resources, high caseloads, and institutional fragmentation [20]. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that integrated community services, combining social, health, and educational support can significantly enhance social inclusion and service accessibility for vulnerable groups, including older adults [21,22].

Social work interventions targeting social isolation and community resilience further illustrate the profession's relevance for ageing populations. These interventions are understood as part of a strategically embedded professional practice. Preventive and relational approaches contribute to maintaining social ties, enhancing well-being, and reducing the demand for institutional care [23]. Moreover, social innovation initiatives demonstrate how locally adapted solutions can address complex social needs in contexts of structural disadvantage [24].

2.5. Digitalization, governance, and territorial cooperation

Recent transformations in governance and service provision introduce additional dimensions to equity-focused inclusion. Multi-level governance is understood here as the coordinated distribution of responsibilities and decision-making processes across interconnected administrative levels. These include local, regional, national, and European levels within a shared policy framework. Rather than a strictly hierarchical arrangement, it involves both vertical and horizontal interactions among institutions, policy domains, and territorial actors.

In the context of regional development and social inclusion, multi-level governance enables the alignment of strategic objectives, resource allocation, and implementation mechanisms across levels. It also creates the conditions for integrating social dimensions, such as inclusion and vulnerability, into broader development processes.

Within this framework, social work operates at the interface between governance levels, contributing to the translation of policy priorities into context-sensitive interventions and facilitating coordination between institutional structures and local needs. Digitalisation of social and health services offers significant potential to improve efficiency and accessibility. This is particularly relevant in territorially dispersed contexts. However, the persistence of digital divides, especially among older adults and rural populations, poses substantial risks of exclusion [25,26].

Within this framework, the positioning of social work becomes critical, as it operates at the interface between governance levels and facilitates the translation of policy objectives into context-sensitive interventions.

From an equity perspective, digital inclusion requires targeted support measures, including digital literacy initiatives and hybrid service models that combine digital and face-to-face interventions [27]. Social workers play a crucial mediating role in this process, facilitating access to digital services while mitigating exclusion risks.

Finally, multi-level governance and territorial cooperation mechanisms are essential for embedding equity-focused inclusion within regional development frameworks. Effective coordination between national, regional, and local actors enhances policy coherence and enables territorially differentiated interventions [14,28]. The integration of social policy objectives within territorial cooperation

arrangements strengthens the capacity of regions to address ageing-related and social vulnerabilities sustainably [19].

This conceptual framework situates equity-focused inclusion at the intersection of regional development, demographic ageing, and social work practice. By integrating perspectives from regional studies, demographic research, and social policy, it provides the analytical foundation for examining how social work interventions can contribute to reducing territorial inequalities and supporting socially sustainable development in Romania.

2.6. Analytical bridge between theory and empirical analysis

To enhance conceptual coherence, the theoretical framework is operationalised into five analytical dimensions that structure the empirical analysis in Sections 4 and 5: (1) territorial inequality; (2) demographic ageing and cumulative vulnerability; (3) explicit versus implicit equity mechanisms; (4) the institutional positioning of social work; and (5) digital and governance capacity.

To strengthen the link between methodological design and empirical findings, the analysis was guided by a set of recurring analytical questions systematically applied across all documents. These included: (a) how territorial inequalities are diagnosed and represented; (b) how demographic ageing and vulnerability are framed; (c) whether inclusion is operationalised through explicit equity-oriented measures or remains implicit; (d) how institutional responsibilities, particularly regarding social work, are defined; and (e) how digitalisation and governance capacities are integrated into inclusion strategies.

These guiding questions ensured analytical consistency across the document corpus and provided a structured basis for interpreting patterns identified in Section 4. The findings presented are therefore not descriptive summaries of policy content, but the result of a theory-driven and question-oriented analytical process. The transition from analysis to findings is based on the systematic aggregation of coded patterns. This process allows the identification of recurrent themes, structural gaps, and variations across regions. These patterns directly inform both the empirical interpretations presented in Section 4 and the construction of the intervention framework in Section 5.

These dimensions provide a consistent analytical lens for examining how regional development strategies diagnose structural challenges, articulate inclusion priorities, and assign institutional responsibilities. Section 4 applies this framework to interpret policy narratives across regions, while Section 5 reconfigures these dimensions into a sustainability-oriented intervention model.

This approach ensures a systematic alignment between conceptual assumptions, empirical analysis, and normative propositions. Together, these concepts provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how equity-focused inclusion can be operationalized. This occurs through the interaction between governance structures and socially embedded practices.

3. Methodological approach

The methodological design of this study is grounded in a qualitative, interpretative approach aimed at examining the positioning of equity-focused inclusion within Romania's regional development framework and, more specifically, at identifying the role attributed to social work interventions in addressing ageing-related and territorial vulnerabilities. Given the strategic and policy-oriented nature of the research questions, the study does not seek to measure outcomes or causal effects, but rather to analyze how inclusion, equity, and vulnerability are conceptualized, framed, and operationalized within regional development policies.

The research adopts a document-based analytical strategy, which is particularly suitable for investigating policy logics, normative orientations, and institutional priorities embedded in formal strategic documents. Policy documents constitute authoritative expressions of governmental intent and provide insight into the assumptions, values, and intervention models that guide public action. In the context of regional development and social policy, such documents are not neutral technical instruments but discursive and institutional artefacts that shape governance practices and resource allocation.

The analytical strategy combines elements of comparative policy analysis with thematic content analysis, allowing for both cross-regional comparison and in-depth qualitative interpretation. This dual strategy enables the identification of recurrent patterns across regional strategies, while also capturing variations in how social inclusion, ageing, and vulnerability are articulated within different territorial contexts. Rather than treating regional strategies as isolated cases, the analysis approaches them as components of a broader policy system operating within a shared national and European framework.

The empirical material analyzed consists of official regional development strategies and associated planning documents covering the 2021–2027 programming period. These include regional development plans, socio-economic analyses, SWOT assessments, implementation frameworks, and monitoring documents produced by regional development authorities. In addition, the analysis draws on relevant national-level policy documents and European strategic frameworks that inform regional development priorities, particularly in relation to social inclusion, demographic change, and territorial cohesion.

Document selection was guided by criteria of policy relevance, temporal coherence, and thematic pertinence. Only documents with direct relevance to regional development objectives and social inclusion measures were included, ensuring analytical focus and consistency. The temporal delimitation to the 2021–2027 period allows the study to capture contemporary policy orientations shaped by recent demographic trends and evolving cohesion policy priorities. Thematic relevance was ensured by prioritizing documents that explicitly address vulnerable populations, ageing, access to services, or territorial disparities, either as primary objectives or as transversal concerns.

The analytical process followed a thematically structured and iterative procedure, informed by the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2. Initial analytical categories were derived deductively from the theoretical framework outlined in

Section 2 and were subsequently operationalised into five core analytical dimensions (Section 2.6). These categories structured the first phase of analysis, focusing on how equity-oriented principles, inclusion mechanisms, and references to vulnerable groups are embedded within policy texts. Subsequently, an inductive phase allowed for the refinement and expansion of analytical categories based on recurring patterns, policy-specific formulations, and implicit assumptions identified in the documents.

To ensure analytical consistency with the conceptual framework, the analysis was structured around the five dimensions introduced in Section 2.6: (1) territorial inequality; (2) demographic ageing and cumulative vulnerability; (3) explicit versus implicit equity mechanisms; (4) the institutional positioning of social work; and (5) digital and governance capacity.

These dimensions functioned as a guiding analytical matrix throughout the coding and interpretation process. In the first stage, they informed the deductive coding of policy documents, enabling the systematic identification of how regional strategies diagnose structural challenges and articulate inclusion-related priorities. In the second stage, the same dimensions supported a comparative interpretation across regions, allowing for the identification of convergences, divergences, and structural gaps in the operationalization of equity-focused inclusion. This structure is summarised in **Table 1**.

This structured approach ensures a direct alignment between the theoretical framework and the empirical analysis, enhancing the interpretative coherence of the study.

The analytical structure described above is synthesized in **Table 1**, which maps the relationship between the theoretical dimensions, the operational questions guiding the analysis, the empirical indicators identified in Section 4, and their implications for the intervention framework developed in Section 5.

Table 1. Analytical framework linking theoretical dimensions, methodological questions, and empirical analysis.

Theoretical dimension	Operational question	Empirical indicators in Section 4	Framework implication in Section 5
Territorial inequality	How are disparities defined?	urban-rural gaps; peripheral areas; access to services	place-sensitive service expansion
Demographic ageing	How is ageing framed?	dependency, depopulation, care needs, isolation	inclusive active ageing and prevention
Equity-focused inclusion	Are targeted mechanisms explicit?	named groups; prioritization; differentiated access	needs-based intervention design
Position of social work	Is social work strategic or peripheral?	references to social services, coordination, outreach	embedding in planning, monitoring, governance
Digital and governance capacity	How are coordination and digital access addressed?	digitalisation, partnerships, multi-level cooperation	mediated digital inclusion and governance feedback

This mapping clarifies how the analytical dimensions are consistently applied throughout the empirical analysis and how the identified patterns inform the construction of the sustainability-oriented framework.

Particular attention was paid to the ways in which policies frame intervention responsibility and institutional roles, especially with regard to social services and

social work. This included examining whether social work is explicitly mentioned, implicitly embedded within broader service delivery frameworks, or marginalized within predominantly economic or infrastructural development narratives. The analysis also considered the coherence between stated inclusion objectives and proposed implementation mechanisms, highlighting potential gaps between strategic intent and institutional capacity.

A key feature of the methodological approach is its cross-regional perspective, which avoids privileging a single territorial case. This perspective is analytically justified by the coexistence of diverse regional profiles within a unified policy and governance framework. By focusing on shared challenges—such as ageing, service accessibility, and urban–rural disparities—the analysis identifies systemic patterns while remaining sensitive to territorial differentiation. This approach enables a more robust assessment of how equity-focused inclusion is integrated into regional development strategies at a structural level.

The study deliberately refrains from evaluating policy implementation outcomes or measuring effectiveness, as such an assessment would require primary empirical data beyond the scope of the present analysis. Instead, the methodological focus remains on policy design, strategic alignment, and conceptual coherence, which are critical for understanding the potential role of social work within regional development processes. This focus is consistent with the article’s objective of contributing to theoretical and policy debates rather than providing an impact evaluation.

Several limitations inherent to document-based analysis should be acknowledged. The reliance on formal policy texts means that informal practices, services adaptations, and implementation dynamics are not directly captured. Additionally, variations in the depth and quality of regional documents may affect the comparability of findings. Nevertheless, these limitations do not undermine the analytical validity of the study, as the primary aim is to examine policy orientations and institutional framings rather than operational outcomes.

Overall, the methodological approach provides a coherent and theoretically informed basis for analyzing how equity-focused inclusion strategies are articulated within regional development policies and how social work is positioned within these frameworks. By combining comparative policy analysis with thematic interpretation, the study offers a structured yet flexible analytical lens through which the social dimensions of sustainable regional development can be critically examined. This lens is explicitly anchored in the five analytical dimensions summarised in **Table 1**, ensuring coherence between conceptual assumptions, empirical analysis, and the proposed intervention framework. Consequently, the conclusions of the study are grounded in a structured interpretative process that links theoretical assumptions, analytical dimensions, and empirically identified patterns.

4. Regional development strategies and inclusion-oriented priorities in Romania

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is important to clarify that Romania’s regional development strategies are elaborated within the broader framework of European Union cohesion policy. These strategies are structured documents that

define development priorities, investment directions, and policy objectives at the regional level, based on common EU guidelines but adapted to national and territorial contexts. As such, they reflect both European-level priorities, such as social inclusion, digitalisation, and territorial cohesion, and region-specific challenges related to demographic change and structural inequalities.

The analysis that follows is guided by the analytical dimensions introduced in Section 2, which provide the conceptual basis for interpreting how regional strategies address territorial inequality, demographic ageing, and equity-focused inclusion. In this sense, the discussion does not merely describe policy content but examines how these priorities are framed and operationalised across regional strategies.

4.1. Structural configuration and common priority axes of regional development strategies

Across Romania's development regions, the strategic documents elaborated for the 2021–2027 programming period display a high degree of formal coherence in terms of structure, analytical foundations, and priority setting. This convergence reflects both the harmonization requirements imposed by European cohesion policy frameworks and the circulation of shared diagnostic narratives regarding territorial development challenges. Despite regional heterogeneity in socio-economic profiles, the strategic architecture of these documents reveals a set of recurring priority axes that collectively define the dominant model of regional development.

At a structural level, regional development strategies are typically organized around a combination of diagnostic components such as socio-economic analyses, demographic projections, and SWOT assessments, followed by a strategic vision articulated through thematic objectives and intervention priorities. This standardized configuration enables comparability across regions and facilitates alignment with national and European programming instruments. However, beyond formal similarity, the substantive content of these strategies reveals consistent patterns in how development challenges and policy responses are framed.

One of the most prominent common axes concerns territorial cohesion and the reduction of intra- and interregional disparities. Regional strategies consistently acknowledge the persistence of uneven development patterns, particularly the polarization between dynamic urban centers and peripheral rural or small-town areas [1–3]. These disparities are framed not only in economic terms, but increasingly through references to differential access to services, infrastructure, and opportunities for social participation. In this respect, territorial cohesion is implicitly linked to social inclusion, even when the latter is not explicitly foregrounded as a primary strategic objective.

A second recurring priority axis relates to human capital development and social infrastructure, encompassing education, healthcare, and social services. Within this axis, strategies emphasize the need to modernize service provision systems and improve accessibility, particularly in disadvantaged territories. While economic competitiveness and labor market integration remain central concerns, there is a discernible shift toward recognizing the role of social infrastructure in sustaining regional development [3,7]. This shift reflects an emerging understanding that

demographic change and social vulnerability pose constraints on development that cannot be addressed solely through economic instruments.

Demographic ageing and population decline constitute another transversal theme across regional strategies. Ageing is commonly identified as a structural risk factor, associated with shrinking labor supply, increased dependency ratios, and rising pressure on health and social care systems. Notably, ageing is rarely addressed as an isolated demographic issue; instead, it is embedded within broader narratives of territorial vulnerability, rural depopulation, and service accessibility. This framing implicitly acknowledges the spatialized nature of ageing-related challenges and the need for territorially differentiated responses.

At the same time, regional strategies reveal a degree of ambivalence in translating diagnostic recognition into targeted intervention priorities. While ageing and vulnerability are consistently identified as challenges, explicit references to inclusion-oriented measures tailored to older adults or other vulnerable groups remain uneven. In many cases, social inclusion objectives are subsumed under broader categories such as “quality of life,” “human resources,” or “social cohesion,” without a clear articulation of operational mechanisms or institutional responsibilities. This pattern suggests a gap between strategic acknowledgment of vulnerability and the explicit prioritization of equity-focused interventions.

A further common axis concerns digitalization and innovation, increasingly framed as enablers of territorial development and service modernization. Regional strategies emphasize digital infrastructure, smart solutions, and e-governance as pathways to efficiency and competitiveness [24–26]. While digitalization is frequently associated with economic innovation, its social implications, particularly regarding access to services for ageing and vulnerable populations, are less systematically addressed. This selective framing raises questions about the extent to which digital transitions are conceptualized as inclusive processes or risk reproducing existing territorial and social divides. Empirical studies on local social services in former industrial regions reveal differentiated institutional capacities shaped by economic restructuring and territorial decline [29].

Finally, governance and territorial cooperation emerge as cross-cutting priorities, reflecting the complexity of coordinating development interventions across administrative levels and sectors. Strategies frequently reference the need for integrated approaches, partnerships, and multi-level governance arrangements. However, the integration of social policy objectives within these governance frameworks varies considerably, with economic and infrastructural coordination often receiving greater emphasis than social inclusion mechanisms.

Taken together, these common priority axes reveal a strategic landscape characterized by conceptual convergence but operational ambiguity. Regional development strategies increasingly acknowledge social inclusion, demographic ageing, and territorial vulnerability as integral components of development challenges. Yet, the translation of these acknowledgments into clearly articulated, equity-focused intervention frameworks remains uneven. This tension between diagnostic awareness and strategic prioritization provides a critical entry point for examining the potential role of social work as a mediating actor capable of bridging social inclusion objectives with regional development agendas.

4.2. Inclusion, ageing, and vulnerability in regional strategic discourses

An examination of Romania's regional development strategies for the 2021–2027 period reveals a growing discursive presence of concepts related to social inclusion, vulnerability, and demographic ageing. These themes are increasingly embedded within strategic narratives, reflecting broader European policy orientations and an expanding awareness of the social dimensions of territorial development. However, the manner in which inclusion and vulnerability are articulated remains largely indirect, framed through generalized objectives rather than explicit, equity-oriented intervention logics.

Across regional strategies, social inclusion is predominantly conceptualized as an outcome of economic development and service modernization, rather than as a standalone policy objective requiring targeted action [3,6]. Inclusion-related references are frequently situated within sections addressing quality of life, human capital development, or access to public services. While these framings acknowledge the social implications of territorial disparities, they tend to privilege aggregate improvements over differentiated responses to structurally vulnerable groups. As a result, inclusion is often treated as an implicit by-product of development rather than as a process requiring deliberate institutional design.

Demographic ageing occupies a similarly ambivalent position within strategic discourses. Ageing populations are consistently identified as a major challenge, associated with labor market contraction, increasing dependency ratios, and rising demand for health and social care. Nevertheless, ageing is rarely framed as a social condition requiring integrated and territorially sensitive interventions [10–13]. Instead, it is often subsumed under broader demographic or labor market considerations, emphasizing workforce shortages and economic sustainability over the lived experiences and social risks faced by older adults.

Where vulnerability is explicitly referenced, it is typically addressed through broad categorizations, such as “disadvantaged groups,” “persons at risk of poverty,” or “marginalized communities.” Older adults appear within these categories inconsistently, often without differentiation based on territorial context, socio-economic status, or access to services. This generalized framing obscures the cumulative nature of vulnerability in later life, particularly in rural and peripheral areas where ageing intersects with service scarcity, mobility constraints, and social isolation.

The discursive treatment of vulnerability further reflects a tension between universalism and selectivity in regional policy narratives. On the one hand, strategies emphasize universal access to services and infrastructure as a core development principle. On the other hand, there is limited articulation of mechanisms designed to ensure that vulnerable populations can effectively benefit from such access. This tension is particularly evident in discussions of service accessibility, where physical proximity, affordability, and digital literacy are rarely addressed in an integrated manner.

Notably, the language of equity, understood as differentiated support based on need, is largely implicit rather than explicit [7,16]. While strategies frequently reference the reduction of disparities, they seldom employ equity as an analytical or operational concept. This absence has important implications for policy

implementation, as it limits the capacity of strategies to guide the prioritization of resources toward populations and territories facing compounded disadvantages. In this respect, equity-oriented inclusion remains more of a normative aspiration than a clearly articulated strategic principle.

The increasing emphasis on digitalization further illustrates these discursive limitations. Regional strategies often present digital transformation as a solution to service inefficiencies and territorial fragmentation. However, the social risks associated with digital exclusion, particularly for older adults and populations in poorly connected areas, are rarely foregrounded [24–26]. Digital inclusion is thus framed primarily in infrastructural terms, with insufficient attention to the social mediation required to ensure equitable access.

Taken together, these discursive patterns suggest that while inclusion, ageing, and vulnerability are increasingly visible within regional development strategies, they are not yet fully integrated into a coherent equity-focused framework. The prevailing strategic discourse acknowledges social challenges but tends to address them through indirect, aggregated, and often economistic lenses. This creates a structural gap between the recognition of vulnerability and the articulation of targeted, socially grounded interventions.

This gap is analytically significant, as it highlights the limits of current regional development narratives in addressing complex social risks associated with demographic ageing and territorial inequality. At the same time, it points to the need for actors and intervention models capable of translating abstract inclusion objectives into context-sensitive practices. It is within this space that social work can be conceptualized as a mediating and operationalizing force, capable of linking regional development priorities with equity-oriented inclusion strategies at the community level.

4.3. Positioning social work within regional development and inclusion frameworks

The analysis of regional development strategies reveals a structural gap between the recognition of social challenges, such as demographic ageing, vulnerability, and territorial inequality, and the articulation of concrete, equity-oriented mechanisms designed to address them. Within this gap, social work emerges as a potentially transformative yet insufficiently institutionalized actor in regional development frameworks. Its positioning is neither fully external to development agendas nor explicitly integrated within them, resulting in an ambiguous role that limits its strategic impact.

In most regional strategies, social work is referenced indirectly through broader categories such as social services, community support systems, or measures aimed at improving quality of life. These references tend to locate social work at the implementation periphery of development processes, rather than recognizing it as a contributor to strategic planning and policy coordination. As a consequence, social work interventions are often framed as compensatory responses to social risks, activated downstream of economic and infrastructural development decisions, rather than as proactive components shaping inclusive development trajectories.

This peripheral positioning contrasts sharply with contemporary theoretical and empirical insights that conceptualize social work as a structural mediator between individuals, communities, and institutions [16,18]. Through its embeddedness in local contexts and direct engagement with vulnerable populations, social work operates at the intersection of social policy, territorial governance, and community dynamics. This positioning enables social workers to identify emerging risks, navigate institutional fragmentation, and translate abstract policy objectives into context-sensitive interventions. Yet, regional development strategies rarely capitalize on this mediating capacity.

The marginal integration of social work within development frameworks is further reinforced by the sectoral segmentation of policy domains. Economic development, infrastructure, health, and social services are frequently addressed through parallel strategic axes, with limited cross-sectoral articulation. Within this architecture, social work is confined to the social policy domain, reducing opportunities for horizontal integration with territorial development initiatives. This segmentation constrains the capacity of social work to influence upstream decision-making processes related to service location, accessibility, and resource allocation.

At the same time, regional strategies increasingly emphasize integrated approaches, partnership-based governance, and territorial cooperation. These discursive commitments create a latent institutional opening for repositioning social work within regional development processes [3,8,24]. Integrated community services, for instance, rely on coordination across social, health, and educational sectors, an area where social work expertise is particularly relevant. However, the absence of explicit mechanisms linking social work practice to regional planning structures limits the operationalization of such integration.

The relevance of social work becomes especially pronounced in relation to ageing populations and territorially embedded vulnerability. Older adults in peripheral regions experience cumulative disadvantages that cannot be addressed through sector-specific interventions alone. Social work's holistic and relational orientation enables it to respond to these layered vulnerabilities by coordinating services, strengthening informal support networks, and facilitating access to institutional resources. When embedded within regional development frameworks, such interventions can contribute not only to individual well-being but also to broader objectives of territorial cohesion and social sustainability.

Digitalization further accentuates the need for a more explicit positioning of social work within development strategies. As regions increasingly rely on digital platforms for service delivery and governance, social workers play a critical role in mediating access for digitally marginalized populations. This mediating function extends beyond technical assistance, encompassing advocacy, empowerment, and the adaptation of services to diverse capacities and contexts. Without recognizing this role at the strategic level, digital transformation risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than mitigating them.

From an equity-oriented perspective, the limited strategic visibility of social work reflects a broader tension between universalist development narratives and differentiated social needs. Regional strategies often prioritize universal access and standardized service provision, yet social work practice reveals the inadequacy of

uniform solutions in contexts of structural disadvantage. Repositioning social work within regional development frameworks thus entails acknowledging equity not merely as a normative goal, but as an operational principle requiring differentiated, locally grounded interventions.

In Romanian scholarship, social work has been conceptualized not only as a technical profession but also as an ethical vocation grounded in public responsibility and social justice commitments [30].

Importantly, positioning social work more centrally does not imply expanding its mandate in isolation, but rather integrating its knowledge and practice into multi-level governance arrangements. This integration would enable social work to contribute to needs assessment, policy design, and monitoring processes, thereby strengthening the social intelligence of regional development systems. Such a shift requires institutional recognition of social work as a strategic partner rather than solely a service provider.

In analytical terms, social work can be conceptualized as a bridging mechanism capable of linking macro-level development objectives with micro-level social realities. Its contribution lies not only in delivering services, but in translating equity-focused inclusion into actionable practices that respond to territorial differentiation and demographic change. By embedding social work more explicitly within regional development frameworks, policymakers can enhance the coherence, responsiveness, and social sustainability of development interventions.

This repositioning provides the foundation for advancing a sustainability-oriented model of regional development in which social systems are not residual components, but integral drivers of equitable and resilient territorial transformation.

5. A sustainability-oriented framework for equity-focused social work interventions

Building on the preceding analysis, this section advances a sustainability-oriented framework through which social work interventions can be systematically aligned with regional development priorities in contexts characterized by demographic ageing, territorial inequality, and persistent social vulnerability. The proposed framework responds to the structural gaps identified in regional development strategies, particularly the limited operationalization of equity-focused inclusion and the marginal positioning of social work within development agendas. It builds directly on the analytical dimensions introduced in Section 2 and the empirical patterns identified in Section 4, translating conceptual insights into operational principles for intervention.

The framework conceptualizes social work not as a residual or compensatory actor, but as an integrative component of socially sustainable regional development. It is grounded in three interrelated premises. First, social sustainability is inseparable from territorial cohesion and demographic resilience. Second, equity-oriented inclusion requires differentiated, context-sensitive interventions rather than uniform policy solutions. Third, social work possesses a distinct epistemic and practical capacity to translate strategic objectives into socially grounded action.

At the core of the framework lies the recognition that vulnerability in ageing societies is spatially embedded and cumulative. Older adults in peripheral or disadvantaged territories are exposed to intersecting risks associated with service

scarcity, limited mobility, social isolation, and digital exclusion. Addressing these risks necessitates intervention models capable of operating across multiple scales, individual, community, and territorial, while remaining responsive to local conditions. Social work's relational and community-based orientation positions it uniquely to fulfil this function.

The first pillar of the framework emphasizes the expansion and professionalization of community-based and integrated services [16,18,21]. Rather than treating social services as isolated sectoral interventions, the framework foregrounds integrated service ecosystems in which social work coordinates and mediates access to health, social care, and community resources. Such integration enhances service accessibility for ageing populations and reduces fragmentation, particularly in rural and small-town contexts. From a sustainability perspective, integrated services contribute to preventive approaches that mitigate long-term dependency and institutionalization.

The second pillar focuses on active ageing and the prevention of social isolation, reframed through an equity lens [15,10–12]. While active ageing discourses often prioritize participation and autonomy, the proposed framework emphasizes the structural conditions that enable or constrain such participation. Social work interventions are positioned as mechanisms for addressing barriers related to poverty, mobility, and territorial isolation, ensuring that active ageing strategies are inclusive of older adults in disadvantaged regions. This approach shifts the emphasis from individual responsibility to socially embedded support systems.

A third pillar addresses the role of digitalization as both an opportunity and a risk within inclusion strategies [24–26]. The framework recognizes digital tools as potential enablers of service accessibility, coordination, and efficiency. However, it simultaneously foregrounds the risk of exacerbating exclusion among digitally marginalized populations. Within this context, social work assumes a mediating role, facilitating digital access, supporting digital literacy, and ensuring that digital service delivery models are complemented by face-to-face and community-based alternatives. Digital inclusion is thus conceptualized as a social process rather than a purely technological one.

The fourth pillar concerns multi-level governance and territorial cooperation [14,28]. The framework situates social work within governance arrangements that span local, regional, and national levels, emphasizing its potential contribution to needs assessment, policy feedback, and monitoring processes. By integrating social work expertise into territorial cooperation mechanisms, regional development systems can enhance their capacity to identify emerging vulnerabilities and adapt interventions accordingly. This integration strengthens the social intelligence of governance structures and supports more responsive and equitable policy implementation.

These pillars respond directly to the empirical patterns identified in Section 4, particularly the implicit treatment of equity, the fragmented articulation of inclusion mechanisms, and the limited strategic positioning of social work within regional development frameworks.

Importantly, the proposed framework does not advocate for the expansion of social work in isolation from existing institutional arrangements. Rather, it emphasizes strategic embedding, whereby social work knowledge and practice inform regional

development planning, implementation, and evaluation. This embedding requires institutional recognition of social work as a partner in development governance, alongside economic and infrastructural actors.

From an analytical standpoint, the framework advances a relational understanding of sustainability, in which social systems are not secondary to economic growth but integral to resilient development trajectories. By aligning social work interventions with equity-focused inclusion objectives, regional development policies can move beyond compensatory approaches toward transformative models that address the structural determinants of vulnerability.

In sum, the sustainability-oriented framework proposed in this section provides a conceptual bridge between regional development strategies and social work practice. It articulates how social work can operationalize equity-focused inclusion through integrated, territorially sensitive, and governance-aware interventions. This framework sets the stage for a broader discussion of policy implications and contributes to rethinking the role of social systems in shaping equitable and sustainable regional futures, by linking conceptual principles, empirical findings, and policy-oriented intervention strategies into a coherent analytical model.

6. Discussion

The analysis presented in this article contributes to ongoing debates on the social dimensions of regional development by foregrounding equity-focused inclusion as a central condition for sustainable territorial transformation. These findings build directly on the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2, particularly the interrelation between social sustainability, territorial inequality, and strategically embedded social work. By examining Romania's regional development strategies through the lenses of demographic ageing, territorial inequality, and social work intervention, the study advances a relational understanding of sustainability. This perspective extends beyond economic performance and infrastructural investment. Contemporary welfare transformations demand reflexive and adaptive social work models capable of responding to structural demographic and territorial shifts [31].

A first key contribution lies in highlighting the conceptual disjunction between diagnostic recognition and operational commitment within regional development strategies. While ageing, vulnerability, and social disparities are consistently identified as structural challenges, their translation into targeted, equity-oriented interventions remains limited, as demonstrated by the empirical analysis of regional strategies in Section 4. This finding resonates with broader critiques in the literature on cohesion policy. These critiques emphasise the tendency of regional strategies to prioritise competitiveness and innovation while relegating social inclusion to secondary or implicit objectives. The present analysis extends this critique by demonstrating how such patterns constrain the integration of social systems into development governance.

The proposed sustainability-oriented framework presented in Section 5 addresses this gap by repositioning social work as a strategic actor capable of mediating between macro-level policy objectives and micro-level social realities. This repositioning aligns with international scholarship that conceptualises social work as a contributor to community resilience, social cohesion, and preventive governance. This is

particularly relevant in ageing societies. However, the article adds a territorial dimension that remains underexplored in much of the existing literature, emphasizing the spatial embeddedness of vulnerability and the differentiated nature of inclusion needs across regions.

From a demographic perspective, the findings underscore the limitations of approaches that treat ageing primarily as a labor market or fiscal issue. The analysis reinforces the argument that ageing constitutes a multidimensional social process, shaped by cumulative inequalities and territorial contexts. In this sense, the study contributes to demographic and gerontological debates by situating ageing within regional development frameworks. It also highlights the need for territorially sensitive inclusion strategies.

The discussion of digitalization further illustrates the value of an equity-oriented perspective. While digital transformation is widely promoted as a driver of efficiency and accessibility, the analysis in Section 4 shows that digitalization is predominantly framed in infrastructural terms, with limited attention to social mediation and digital exclusion risks. By emphasizing the role of social work in facilitating equitable digital inclusion, the article contributes to emerging discussions on digital welfare and e-governance. In these debates, the risks of exclusion for older and vulnerable populations remain insufficiently addressed. Governance considerations constitute another important dimension of the discussion. The findings suggest that equity-focused inclusion cannot be achieved solely through sector-specific interventions but requires multi-level and cross-sectoral coordination. The proposed framework situates social work within governance arrangements. These arrangements link local knowledge with regional planning and national policy objectives. This perspective aligns with governance theories emphasizing the importance of institutional learning, feedback loops, and policy coherence in complex social systems.

Importantly, the article does not advocate for an expansion of social work responsibilities in isolation from existing institutional capacities. Instead, it emphasizes strategic embedding within development governance structures, a distinction that is critical for avoiding overburdening social services while enhancing their systemic impact. This nuanced positioning contributes to debates on professional roles and institutional design in welfare states undergoing demographic and territorial transformation.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that regional development strategies would benefit from more explicit articulation of equity principles and clearer mechanisms for operationalizing inclusion. Integrating social work expertise into needs assessment, strategy formulation, and monitoring processes could enhance the responsiveness and social intelligence of development policies. Such integration is particularly relevant in contexts characterised by ageing populations and persistent territorial disparities. In these contexts, uniform policy instruments are unlikely to produce equitable outcomes.

Finally, the discussion highlights the broader relevance of the study beyond the Romanian context. Many European regions face similar challenges related to demographic ageing, rural depopulation, and uneven access to services. The conceptual framework advanced in this article offers a transferable analytical tool. It

can be used to examine the role of social systems in regional development across diverse territorial settings.

Overall, the discussion integrates the theoretical assumptions presented in Section 2, the empirical findings from Section 4, and the intervention logic proposed in Section 5, highlighting the need for more coherent and operationally grounded approaches to equity-focused inclusion.

7. Conclusions and policy implications

This article has examined the role of social work in advancing equity-focused inclusion within Romania's regional development framework. The analysis is situated at the intersection of demographic ageing, territorial inequality, and socially sustainable development. The conclusions are grounded in a qualitative, document-based methodological approach (Section 3), which enabled a systematic comparison of regional strategies and the identification of recurring patterns in how inclusion and vulnerability are framed. By adopting a cross-regional and policy-oriented perspective, the study demonstrates that regional development strategies increasingly acknowledge social challenges. However, their capacity to operationalise equity-oriented responses remains limited. This gap between diagnostic recognition and strategic implementation constitutes a central constraint on inclusive and resilient regional development.

The analysis highlights three overarching conclusions, derived from the empirical patterns identified in Section 4 across regional development strategies. First, demographic ageing and vulnerability are not merely demographic or sector-specific issues. They are structurally embedded phenomena shaped by territorial context, service availability, and governance arrangements. Treating ageing primarily as a labor market or fiscal challenge obscures its social and spatial dimensions and limits the effectiveness of policy responses. Second, equity-focused inclusion requires differentiated, context-sensitive interventions that go beyond universalist policy framings. Uniform development instruments are insufficient to address compounded vulnerabilities affecting older adults and marginalised populations in peripheral territories. Third, social work represents a strategically underutilized resource within regional development systems, possessing both the professional capacity and contextual embeddedness necessary to translate inclusion objectives into socially grounded practice.

By advancing a sustainability-oriented framework, the article contributes to theoretical debates on regional development and social sustainability. The framework repositions social work as an integrative actor within development governance, capable of mediating between macro-level policy objectives and micro-level social realities. This contribution extends existing literature by explicitly linking social work practice to territorial development processes. It also foregrounds equity as an operational principle rather than a normative aspiration.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest several implications. Regional development strategies would benefit from more explicit articulation of equity principles, including clear criteria for identifying vulnerable populations and disadvantaged territories. Embedding social work expertise into regional planning

processes—such as needs assessment, strategy design, and monitoring—could enhance the responsiveness and adaptability of development policies. Furthermore, strengthening integrated community services and ensuring that digitalization initiatives are accompanied by targeted inclusion measures would reduce the risk of reinforcing existing inequalities.

At the governance level, the integration of social work within multi-level and cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms emerges as a critical condition for socially sustainable development. Such integration would facilitate policy coherence across economic, social, and territorial domains. It would also support more effective responses to demographic ageing and territorial vulnerability. Importantly, this does not imply expanding social work mandates in isolation, but rather embedding social work knowledge and practice within existing institutional frameworks.

The article also has broader relevance beyond the national context examined. Many European regions face comparable challenges related to ageing populations, rural depopulation, and uneven access to services. The analytical framework proposed here offers a transferable lens for examining how social systems can contribute to equitable and resilient development across diverse territorial settings.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is based on policy and strategic documents and does not assess implementation outcomes or lived experiences of beneficiaries. Future research could complement this approach with empirical studies exploring how equity-focused inclusion strategies are enacted at the local level and how social work interventions influence outcomes for ageing and vulnerable populations.

In conclusion, advancing socially sustainable regional development requires moving beyond economically driven policy paradigms toward frameworks that integrate social equity, territorial sensitivity, and demographic realities. By positioning social work as a central actor in this process, regional development policies can more effectively address vulnerability and enhance social cohesion. This also supports more resilient regional futures in ageing societies.

Overall, the conclusions reflect the alignment between theoretical assumptions, methodological design, and empirical analysis, demonstrating how equity-focused inclusion can be operationalised within regional development through socially embedded and territorially sensitive interventions.

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