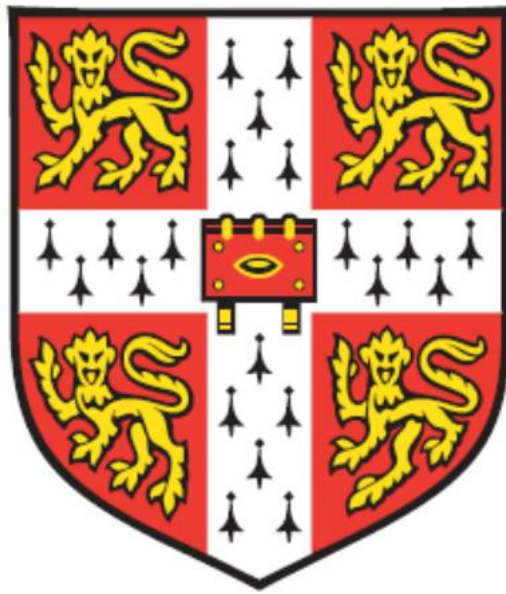


**Engines, Paramedics, and Urban Madmen:  
Grounded theory study of engagement of NGOs in  
inclusive education reform in Central Asia**



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August 2023

This thesis is submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

### **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this report is the result of my own independent work, except where otherwise stated, and the views expressed here are my own. The sources of which I have availed myself have been acknowledged in the body of the report and in the bibliography.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Education Degree Committee.

Signature:     [Signature redacted]    

Date: 23 August 2023

## Abstract

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**Title:** Engines, Paramedics, and Urban Madmen: Grounded theory study of engagement of NGOs in inclusive education reform in Central Asia

This doctoral thesis investigates the engagement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the reform of inclusive education (IE) within Central Asian countries. While UN agencies and international organisations call for increased NGO involvement in IE reform, empirical evidence and a comprehensive understanding of their effects have remained limited. The research addresses this gap by focusing on domestic grassroots NGOs' engagement in the IE movement, examining the context of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as examples of progress in Central Asia.

The study adopts a grounded theory approach, delving into multiple data sources, including national policy documents, two-stage interviews with domestic NGO representatives, and discussions with international donor organisations. The data was analysed in line with Katy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory guidelines and validated through conversation circles with key stakeholders from across Central Asia.

The study results in the development of a comprehensive 'NGO Engagement in IE Framework' consisting of four tiers: functional roles and outputs of NGOs (Tier 1), employed strategies to successfully engage in IE development (Tier 2), barriers to the engagement (Tier 3), and driving motivations behind NGOs' efforts (Tier 4). The framework encapsulates NGO-driven responses to questions surrounding their roles and engagement in IE reform.

At the functional level, NGOs are found to contribute to policy advocacy, teacher training, widening pathways for inclusion, research, and more. To achieve their best results, NGOs build partnerships with multiple stakeholders including governmental and local authorities, international organisations, businesses, and other NGOs. Yet, they face barriers related to competition for limited funding, lack of consistent political will of the states to promote IE, weak organisational capacity of NGOs, and their limited autonomy.

Motivations behind NGO engagement centre around their belief in their role as agents of change. NGOs fill the gaps where governments fall short and emphasise the "nothing about us without us" principle, designing and advocating for IE tailored to their contexts.

The framework emphasises the intricate interplay between NGOs and their countries' socio-political context. The study concludes that grassroots NGOs influence the implementation of IE and shape its essence within their societies.

This research holds implications for education policymakers, civil society, educational researchers, and NGOs. It informs strategies to reassess and enhance NGO engagement in IE, especially in the Central Asian context.

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To my family, for their belief, understanding, and love. I dedicate my academic achievements to my mother, father, and sister.

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This work would not have been possible without the collective efforts, encouragement, and inspiration of these remarkable individuals and organisations. To everyone who has contributed to this dissertation, directly or indirectly, I extend my deepest appreciation. May this research stand as a testament to our shared commitment to enhancing inclusive education and fostering positive change.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **Prologue**

This dissertation represents the culmination of my ten-year-long history of work in the field of education. In 2012, I became a volunteer and later the president of a volunteer-based charity organisation. One of its largest projects was the provision of academic support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those from low-income families, as well as to learners with special needs and disabilities. After four years of running this initiative, I wanted to take it to the next level in terms of sustainability and impact. Guided by this desire, I enrolled in the Master's programme in Educational Leadership with Inclusive Education track at Nazarbayev University. It was a newly launched programme of strategic importance to boost educational reforms in Kazakhstan. I graduated with an enriched academic understanding of reformation and leadership through research, and I soon became the founder and leader of a not-for-profit public association promoting inclusive education. My organisation provided education to out-of-school students including those with disabilities and special needs who were denied access to mainstream school. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the NGO's loss of financial stability, which eventually became inactive in 2021 after three years of operation. Despite such a quick demise, the experience of running the NGO introduced me to other NGOs working towards inclusive educational reform. These were both large and small regional NGOs often run by people with disabilities and parents of children with special needs, who shared astonishing stories about their struggle to make inclusion happen. I was surprised, while doing my Master's and reading dozens of articles, that I did not find significant studies of such organisations, their roles, and voices in Central Asia. As I identified this gap in the current state of knowledge, my primary motivation was to contribute to the field by developing a theory that would explore and explain the roles these organisations play in the current process of inclusive educational reform.

This personal story led me to realise, while researching NGOs, that I must be constantly aware that I may have biases and may not be fully impartial, since I once worked as an NGO leader. Specifically, I believe in the potential of NGOs to be agents of meaningful social change. Hence, I must continuously reflect on my own practice to navigate subjectivity. This is why I relied on the help of my supervisor, academic advisors, and assessors to challenge me at every point of this research journey. This is also why I conducted theory validation meetings with other researchers in the area who would provide a critical opinion on the results of my study. I feel that my work has a methodological rigour

and integrity in representing the NGO contribution to the development of inclusive educational reform, and an awareness of my biases encouraged and challenged me to be more mindful and reflective of the results presented in this paper.

The reader should treat this acknowledgement of my motivation and past involvement in the subject of this research as an introduction to the mind of the researcher and my attempt to build an honest discussion hereafter.

## **Background & Context of the Problem**

In recent decades, the field of education has undergone a paradigm shift towards greater inclusivity, acknowledging the inherent value of providing quality education to every individual regardless of their socio-economic, cultural, or cognitive background (UN, 2015). This transformative endeavor, known as the inclusive educational movement, seeks to dismantle barriers to learning and foster an environment where diversity is embraced and accommodated (UNESCO, 2020). While this movement has gained traction on a global scale, its interpretation and implementation manifest in diverse ways, reflecting the contextual complexities of individual regions. One such region of particular interest of mine is Central Asia, a vast geographical expanse with historical, cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity. The five nations that constitute Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan - have a shared historical legacy, yet simultaneously exhibit unique pathways of development since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Silova, 2011). This region stands as a point of intersecting influences, wherein the dynamics of globalization intertwine with post-Soviet legacies as well as reviving indigenous traditions, presenting a set of challenges and opportunities for to the pursuit of inclusive education.

The pivotal role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in shaping and driving societal change is widely recognized. These entities, operating independently of governmental structures, possess the flexibility and innovation required to address complex social issues (Boulding, 2014). In the context of Central Asia, the rise of NGOs is a relatively recent development in the light of the collapse of the Soviet Union and consequent emergence of the civil society (Buxton, 2011). Exploring their roles and engagement within inclusive educational movement not only enriches our understanding of the dynamics at play but also offers valuable insights for educational policy formulation, practice enhancement, and further research.

For inclusive educational movement, several global framework documents are key. Among those stands out the Salamanca Statement, issued during the World Conference on

Special Needs Education in 1994 in Salamanca, Spain. The statement represents a collective commitment to promoting and implementing inclusive educational practices worldwide, evident immediately in its opening lines of the Preface:

More than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations met in Salamanca, Spain, from 7 to 10 June 1994 to further the objective of Education for All by considering the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs... The Conference adopted the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action. These documents are informed by the principle of inclusion, by recognition of the need to work towards “schools for all” – institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs. (UNESCO, 1994)

This document is internationally recognised as the breakthrough point for the inclusive educational movement (Ainscow & César, 2006; Vislie, 2003). Despite varying interpretations and implementations of the term “inclusive education”, which will be more widely explained in the following chapter, at its core it serves as an alternative to special education, where schools become less reliant on traditions of segregation and more open to the diversity of students (Vislie, 2003). Students with disabilities and special needs are often especially highlighted in the discourse around inclusive education (Nilholm & Göransson, 2014).

The Salamanca Statement not only shifts the paradigm of thinking about schools’ responsibility to students with special needs, but also puts increased responsibility on the government and community to implement the changes to educational systems ensuring their accessibility, equity, and quality (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). In the text of the document, a chapter of its own is dedicated to the community involvement in this process, and NGOs are among the actors widely mentioned in this section. For example, the Statement acknowledges the unique position of voluntary associations and NGOs, recognizing their freedom and capacity to respond more readily to expressed needs (UNESCO, 1994, pp. 39-40). By recognising NGOs as catalysts and innovators, the Statement acknowledges their role in broadening the range of educational programs available to local communities.

Critical to the discourse is the recognition of organizations of people with disabilities, meaning those organizations in which they themselves have the decisive influence, as agents of change. With their experiential understanding, these organizations should be pivotal in identifying needs and priorities, overseeing service administration, assessing outcomes, and advocating for transformative reforms (ibid, pp. 39-40). This perspective underlines the essential role that NGOs of this nature play in shaping policies and programs that respond to the needs of the community they represent.

The assertion is also made within the Salamanca Statement, that governments should play a leading role in fostering parental involvement (UNESCO, 1994, p. 38). In this context, the development of parents' associations is advocated, with their active participation in designing and executing programs geared toward enhancing the education of their children. These suggestions are indicative of the Statement's recognition of NGOs as instrumental voices that can offer insights from lived experiences. Thus, the Statement makes a loud call for a participatory, community-based approach to educational reform with the engagement of national NGOs, especially parental associations and organisations for people with disabilities.

Other global framework documents on inclusive education similarly highlight the roles of NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) more broadly in relation to ensuring equity and justice in education. For example, The Dakar Framework for Action, adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, is a collective commitment to ensure reaching and sustaining the Education For All goals and targets. This document reaffirms the vision of the World Declaration on Education for All adopted years earlier in 1990 by the delegates from 155 countries and representatives of some 150 governmental, non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand. In point 8 of the Dakar Framework For Action (2000), the governments, organisations and other agencies present at the Forum pledge themselves to ensuring “the engagement and participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development”. Point 16 further highlights:

Each National EFA Plan will... be developed by government leadership in direct and systematic consultation with national civil society.

The Dakar Framework for Action comes with an Expanded Commentary in four chapters. Chapter IV proclaims an increased role for civil society organisations, including NGOs, in educational development:

Learners, teachers, parents, communities, non-governmental organizations and other bodies representing civil society must be granted new and expanded political and social scope, at all levels of society, in order to engage governments in dialogue, decision-making and innovation around the goals of basic education. (p.18)

...at all levels of decision-making, governments must put in place regular mechanisms for dialogue that will enable citizens and civil society organizations to contribute to the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of basic education. This is essential in order to foster the development of accountable, comprehensive and flexible educational management frameworks. (p.19)

In general, it is worth noting that the entire document of the Dakar Framework for Action, including the expanded commentary and six regional frameworks, has 18 mentions of NGOs and 52 mentions of civil society, including seven mentions of the civil society organisations. The engagement of NGOs in ensuring inclusive, accessible, and equitable education is proclaimed to be an important prerequisite.

Another example is The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), which dedicates Article 24 to the theme of education, obliging signatory countries to ensure that people with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system and can access an inclusive quality education. Article 32 on International Cooperation and Article 33 on National Implementation and Monitoring, both mention civil society organisations as essential participants in the realisation of the purpose and objectives of the convention. For example, point 3 of the Article 33 adds:

Civil society, in particular persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, shall be involved and participate fully in the monitoring process. (UNCRPD, 2007, p. 25).

It should be acknowledged that these calls, made in the Salamanca Statement and the Dakar Framework for Action and the UNCRPD, are normative in their narrative nature rather than analytically grounded. In other words, these documents outline the ideal vision rather



than the account of the existing reality. Even though instinctively people tend to think that the voice of the citizen matters when it comes to shaping educational services (Mundy et.al., 2008), it is questionable to what extent this ideal has been fulfilled. Yet, as the prominence of NGOs has been increasing, so has the reaction to it in debates about the roles they can and should play in society and politics (Boulding, 2014).

Despite normative statements made by the UN agencies and other international organisations in support of increased participation and the roles of civil society in reforming inclusive education (IE), the research into its effects is still quite limited. The systematic literature review by Schuster and Kolleck (2021) indicates that NGOs are increasingly influential actors, which become involved in the development of capacity and policy, and the implementation of IE in practice globally. Despite these positive results, the same review reveals that most studies on this topic are methodologically presented as single case studies using phenomenological design, and the results of such research usually do not go beyond acknowledging and describing the various functions that NGOs perform without looking deeper into their motivations, purposes, mechanisms of work, networks and balance of power, or perceptions. The phenomenological case studies are a strong starting point to make sense of NGOs' experiences and impact, but no successful attempt has yet been made to take it further to evaluate the outcomes of NGOs' work in this area, to capture best practices, or to conceptualise this phenomenon on the basis of shared experiences and the meaning of NGOs. In general, even though UNESCO recognizes NGOs as "crucial partners" in promoting the "Education For All" agenda, the actual role of NGOs in IE development and, specifically, in the inclusion of students with disabilities, has been under-researched globally (Mundy et.al., 2008; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Singal, 2020).

The role of NGOs has been especially highlighted in the context of developing countries, where normally mass schooling is delivered through a top-down approach, and marginalised youth may have limited access to such schooling (Mundy et.al., 2008; Global Partnership for Education, 2022). Yet most research into and knowledge of the topic of inclusive education is generated and disseminated by some of the most "developed" Western states, including the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada and Spain (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). Other productive countries are Brazil and South Africa with more than 200 publications each (ibid).

The region of Central Asia has not been the most researching or researched region even though, since 2012, its countries have been actively developing reform of inclusive education. For example, Kazakhstan acknowledges almost 65% of its schools having

established conditions for inclusive education (Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020). Its state programme for education development (2020-2025) sets the bar to make 100% of schools inclusive by 2025. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan is implementing its Programme of Inclusive Education Development 2019-2023. Tajikistan's National Strategy of Education Development until 2020 outlines a goal to transition to inclusive education (Golubeva, 2018). Uzbekistan's Concept of National Education System Development until 2030, adopted in 2019, sets a goal to improve inclusive educational development. Lastly, Turkmenistan recognises the principle of inclusive education in its Law on Education, even though it has not adopted any other national programmes or policies to implement this principle. Therefore, all five countries that fall into the geographical definition of Central Asia are currently undergoing a historic transition to implement the principles of inclusive education. Whether their official policy rhetoric and promises match the reality is a question worth studying. Meanwhile, these countries, with the probable exception of Turkmenistan, experience a growth of national NGOs both numerically and in terms of capacity (ICNL, 2017). Therefore, it is only timely and relevant to research the engagement of national NGOs in planning and implementing the reform of inclusive education.

To explore a phenomenon so common and increasing, yet so vaguely understood, this study uses a grounded theory approach with the purpose of generating a new theory and an explanatory framework of the role of NGOs in IE development in the context of Central Asia.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Limited research into the contribution of NGOs to inclusive educational developments, in combination with the limited guidance on how to achieve the ideals of international agreements and conventions to increase engagement, and the role of NGOs in ensuring Education For All, create a need for more grounded studies exploring not only what NGOs do regarding IE reform but also how and why.

Considering both the scarcity of research investigating the involvement of national NGOs in the development of IE globally, and the topic of inclusive education in the countries of Central Asia, this study enables several gap areas to be filled at once. It asks not only what the actual experience of NGOs is in the context of developing countries, but also tries to understand the specifics of the countries in this region that are actively developing the reform of inclusive education based on the post-Soviet system of student segregation and standardisation of the educational process.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how local NGOs in Central Asia engage in the development of inclusive education (IE) by exploring in depth the perceptions and experiences of NGOs and building a theory or framework explaining what NGOs do and how they achieve their best results.

The objectives of my research encompass four main dimensions. Firstly, it aims to enhance the existing body of research on this topic, which largely comprises case studies concluding some of the functional contributions of NGOs to IE reforms. Secondly, this research endeavours to enrich the landscape of regional thematic studies, specifically within the context of developing nations. Thirdly, a pivotal aspiration of this research is the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining the engagement of NGOs in IE in the context of Central Asia. Through this effort, the study aims to provide a structured perspective for comprehending the motivations, mechanisms, and outcomes associated with NGO engagement in IE. Lastly, this research envisions the formulation of practical guidelines for regional NGOs suggesting strategies for increasing their engagement in IE developments based on the best shared practices and the framework developed as a result of this study.

## Research Questions

With the purpose of this study in mind, the main question is:

How do domestic NGOs engage in the development of inclusive education in the Central Asian (CA) region?

Subquestions include the following:

1. **What** do NGOs do to support IE development? Meaning, which roles do they play?
2. **How** do NGOs support IE development? Meaning, which strategies do they rely on to achieve the best results?
3. **Why** do NGOs get involved in IE development? Meaning, what are the driving factors behind this?
4. **What meaning** do NGOs attribute to their work regarding IE?

## **Research geography**

Due to the limited scope, resources, and time frame of this research study, it did not appear possible to conduct data collection in all five Central Asian countries without losing data richness. Therefore, a selection of two countries seemed more plausible. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have shown profound efforts to realise reform of inclusive education (Lapham & Rouse, 2013) and to expand its civil society organisations (ICNL, 2017).

All five CA countries are defined as consolidated authoritarian regime states and ranked as “not free” in terms of political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2022). Yet, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have the highest scores in the rankings for civil liberties among other Central Asian countries (ibid). The civil liberties include freedom of expression, assembly, and speech, among other liberties and rights. In addition, there exists the political will to strengthen civil society by creating favourable conditions for the opening and running of non-profit organisations and allowing NGOs to gain different sources of funding including state grants, international donor support, and self-funding initiatives (ICNL, 2017).

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were selected for this research as countries more open to the work of NGOs, where they could be recruited to partake in the research with fewer risks for researcher and share richer data. A humble ambition is that the findings of this study could inform the governments of other more closed Central Asian states about the potential benefits of collaborating with NGOs to strengthen inclusive education. Therefore, these two countries were chosen as the ones offering best practice to share in this study.

The theory validation stage of the study included participants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who contributed to enriching the study results and ensuring that the resulting framework is relevant to the NGOs in these countries. Even though the results are most representative of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, NGOs from other Central Asian states can find many commonalities in their experience and reflect on the state of inclusive educational development in their respective countries. A more detailed account of the selection of data collection sites is presented in the following chapters.

## **Significance of the Study**

To achieve the goals of this study and answer its research questions, a grounded theory methodology was selected. It enabled such a broadly defined research question to be answered by the collection of rich data and construction of a theory/framework explaining what, how, and why NGOs deliver when it comes to the development of inclusive education

in their countries. An extended description and justification of the research methodology is proposed in Chapter 3.

This study is significant not only because it challenges whether the rhetoric of international agreements and conventions matches the reality and whether the Salamanca statement made good its promises, but also because it offers a deeper insight into the minds and voices of NGOs. What they experience in their work regarding inclusive education and how they go about it was documented and theorised to produce a working model of NGOs' engagement in the process of reforming IE. Looking at the policy documents, talking to NGO leaders and front-line workers, and validating the theory through a set of conversation circles with key informants and stakeholders allowed the creation of a deeper, more profound, and collective approach to theory generation.

This study also contributes to the greater visibility of the Central Asian region in research and academic discourse. There are not many locally conducted studies on the development of inclusive education. Therefore, a local study exploring the experiences of domestic NGOs in their own region and capturing some of the best grass roots practices could be valuable to the researchers and practitioners in Central Asia.

Lastly, the NGOs matter when it comes to ensuring a change of policy. Whether reform of inclusive education is implemented by the governments upon the imperative of intergovernmental organisations (top-down approach) or by the grass roots organisations upon the imperative of civil society (bottom-up approach) is important when examining whose voices and agendas are involved. Studying the engagement of the NGOs contributes to a deeper understanding of the grass roots initiatives in this process. More so, since what is borrowed from Western educational ideology is often not accepted by local stakeholders, a participatory approach to educational reform is important to ensure that these changes towards an inclusive educational system will be sustainable (Le Fanu, 2013).

To sum up, this study aimed not only to make a theoretical and methodological contribution to the field but also to contribute to the capability of national NGOs to engage in inclusive educational development.

## **Thesis Structure**

This dissertation comprises six chapters, each constructed to contribute to a comprehensive exploration of the role of NGOs in the development of inclusive educational reform, with a specific focus on their engagement in Central Asia.

### Chapter 1: Introduction

The opening chapter sets the scene by problematising the positioning of NGOs within development of inclusive educational reform internationally, with special emphasis on the context of Central Asia. The purpose and points of interest of the research are defined as well as my motivations as the researcher conducting this study.

### Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following chapter is dedicated to reviewing the literature contributing to a deeper understanding of the subject studied. Chapter 2 explores the literature surrounding NGOs' engagement in education and, more specifically, inclusive educational reform globally as well as in the countries of Central Asia. Relevant case studies, reports, and other scholarly work are presented. The chapter also offers an overview of the theoretical literature exploring civil society theory, systems theory and constructivism, which contributed to the researcher's thinking. Gaps in the existing knowledge are discussed, and a case is made for the proposed research questions and grounded theory methodology.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 serves as a methodological compass, charting the course of the research study. The research design, data collection procedures, participant selection, process of theory generation, and other analytical strategies are explained in detail. Ethical considerations, essential in the context of research involving human subjects, are also discussed, ensuring a comprehensive and ethically sound methodology. The grounded theory method is rigorously detailed, revealing how its logic and tools facilitated the emergence and validation of the resulting theory.

### Chapter 4: Research Findings

The subsequent chapter provides a detail account of the research findings. Four overarching themes that emerged during the data analysis phase are methodically presented, offering a granular perspective on the role of NGOs in Central Asia's inclusive educational reform. The culmination of this chapter is a theory/framework developed as a result of the study's exploration.

### Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 5 continues with a summary of the emergent theoretical framework. At the same time, the chapter offers a discussion of the research findings within the context of wider literature on NGO engagement in inclusive education globally, thereby enriching the discourse surrounding this topic.

### Chapter 6: Conclusion

The concluding chapter serves as an intellectual point from which the research journey is retrospectively assessed. It offers reflections on the chosen methodological pathways, contributions made to the existing body of research, and prospective avenues for future research. Acknowledgment of study limitations underscores the integrity of this investigation.

### **Chapter Summary**

Major global framework documents on inclusive education, including the Salamanca Statement for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) and the Dakar Framework for Actions (2000), among others, call for the increasing engagement of national non-governmental organisations in implementing inclusive educational reform. Specifically, the role of parental associations and organisations of persons with disabilities is viewed as important in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of the educational inclusion of students with special needs and disabilities. Yet there is not enough evidence and research to evaluate to what extent these promises match the reality, especially when it comes to developing countries with a weaker representation of NGOs. This chapter presents background information on this problem and justifies the need for further research.

A grounded theory study of national NGOs' engagement in inclusive educational development was envisioned in the context of the Central Asian countries with a specific focus on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The study aimed at capturing and conceptualising the experiences of domestic NGOs to understand what roles and meanings they attributed to their work, which strategies they relied on and why they did it. Finally, this chapter presents the structure of the thesis.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **Chapter Introduction**

The grounded theory design conventionally discourages a comprehensive literature review prior to data collection due to its emphasis on developing a theory grounded in data rather than verifying existing theories or hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The approach advocates for an open-minded and unbiased exploration of the research problem without preconceived notions or assumptions that may be influenced by prior literature or theoretical frameworks. This literature review is not intended to present existing theories and direct the research question's development. Instead, it first and foremost provides contextual information that can help understand the research problem. Hence, this literature review chapter provides a context to the study of the engagement of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in promoting inclusive education reform in Central Asia.

While there is a growing body of research on the role of NGOs in education reform globally, there needs to be a greater understanding of how local NGOs are engaging in inclusive education development in Central Asia. Central Asia's distinct history and culture may impact how local NGOs operate and engage with inclusive education reform. Therefore, this literature review chapter also aims to present this gap in the literature by exploring what is known about the engagement of local NGOs in inclusive education reform in Central Asia. I divided the chapter into several subheadings.

The first section provides definitions of the key concepts at the heart of this discussion: inclusive education, civil society, and non-governmental organisation.

The following section presents an overview of the role of NGOs in education reform, including how local NGOs are engaging in inclusive education reform in other regions of the world. This section identifies some of the best practices and successful examples of local NGOs engaging in inclusive education reform globally.

The third part of this review focuses specifically on inclusive education in Central Asia, providing an overview of the historical and cultural context of inclusive education development in the region, describing the current state of inclusive education in each country, and identifying any significant policies or initiatives that have been implemented to support inclusive education.

The next section discusses what is already known about the roles that local NGOs play in inclusive education reform in Central Asia. This section identifies any known challenges or barriers local NGOs face in engaging with inclusive education reform.



The literature review then moves on the theoretical perspectives on NGOs and education reform, which have influenced the researcher's choice of grounded theory design. This section also critically examines some of the critiques of NGOs.

Finally, the chapter concludes by summarising the literature review's key points, identifying the literature gaps, and justifying the grounded theory research design.

## **Definitions**

Since both terms 'inclusive education' and 'non-governmental organisation' are central to this research and quite complex in their definitions, this subsection provides an account of varying interpretations and explains which definitions are employed in this study.

### ***Inclusive education***

Reading the literature on inclusive education is striking due to the various perspectives on the concept. Some scholars view inclusive education from a perspective of ethics and a moral principle of justice (Gajewski & Forlin, 2017; Lipsky & Gartner, 1999; Peters & Besley, 2014), while others use human rights rhetoric and the framework of law (De Beco, Quinlivan & Lord, 2019; Gordon, 2013). It has often been discussed from the perspective of a pedagogical and instructional approach (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Gibson, 2015) and referred to all learners or special groups of learners such as students with disabilities. Another way in which it has been approached in the literature and educational forums is through a systems' thinking lens (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021; Robinson-Pant, 2020), meaning inclusive education is viewed as a complex system with its purpose of interacting elements – institutions and actors – and mechanisms for their collaboration, which are studied in relation to educational outcomes. Systems thinking has been at the foundation of this research, and the present chapter will discuss it in more depth.

As per definitions, inclusive education is a complex concept with varying meanings (Slee, 2011; Nilholm, 2021). International organisations have attributed a broad meaning to this concept, suggesting that inclusive education aims to ensure equitable access to quality education for all children, considering their differences within a learner-centred approach aimed at leaving no child behind (UNESCO, 2009; UNICEF, 2017). At a national level, this definition can vary depending on which groups are at risk of exclusion locally and which issues receive more attention or support.

There is no single definition of inclusive education adopted and shared by Central Asian states. However, it is fair to generalise that the dominant narrative around inclusive

education in the region focuses on access to general schooling for children with disabilities and special needs (although it may not always be clear how special needs are defined). In Tajikistan, in April 2013, the government adopted the “Concept of Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities,” implying that students with disabilities were at the core of the current reform of IE. The concept outlined the measures for ensuring access for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to special and mainstream schooling. When introducing the concept of inclusive education for children with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan in 2018, the minister of education and science of the Kyrgyz Republic, Gulmira Kudaiberdiyeva, commented that this concept highlighted the purpose of inclusive education, namely, to ensure equitable educational access for all children, including children with special needs, to a general mainstream school environment with their peers (UNICEF, 2018).

In Kazakhstan, most state documents define inclusive education broadly, mentioning some other vulnerable groups such as migrant children, children from low-income families and orphans, in addition to children with SEND. However, the marginalisation of children with SEND is often highlighted as a significant area of deficiency (NAE, 2015). Uzbekistan also adopted the concept of inclusive educational development with a focus on “integrating” children with special needs and disabilities into mainstream schools (Education without Borders, n.d.). Lastly, the Law on Education in Turkmenistan 2013 (amended in 2018) defined inclusive education as creating conditions for citizens with disabilities to receive education in mainstream educational settings. Therefore, considering that disability discourse is at the heart of inclusive educational narratives in the region, a disability-focused definition is generally employed and implied in this study (unless otherwise stated), admitting the presence of much broader definitions elsewhere.

How children with SEND are defined is another puzzle, as it is unclear what ‘special educational needs’ entail in the context of each country. This study did not explore this issue and used the term as used by respondents, documents, and authors cited here. For future studies, exploring the meaning of the term SEND would be valuable in building a better understanding of the field.

### *Civil society*

Before introducing the concept of ‘NGO’, it is helpful and necessary to mention yet another related term. The term ‘civil society’ has varying definitions but generally refers to formal and informal associations and networks reflecting the interests of the public and often helping mobilise people to participate in politics (Boulding, 2014). Civil society

organisations are public associations, independent from government and business, that bring together people or particular social groups with common interests to take collective action (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009). Some examples of civil society organisations include volunteering groups, the church, non-governmental organisations and charities, among many others (Boulding, 2014). Social groups representing civil society often include vulnerable populations and minorities, such as women, migrant populations, persons with disabilities, opposition groups, parental communities and many others (ibid). How civil society is active and effective depends on multiple factors, such as the political regimes, economic and social conditions, legal frameworks for civil participation, and the form and mandate of the civil society organisation (CSO) itself (Lang, 2012).

Among the different types of CSOs, this research was concerned with non-governmental (NGOs). The policy documents or respondent answers cited here often speak of civil society organisations (CSOs) or public organisations in general. This term usually includes NGOs, as NGOs are one type (in fact, most common type) of CSO. Therefore, attention was paid in this research to when CSOs were mentioned in policy texts, as it contributes to the understanding and positioning of NGOs.

### ***Non-governmental organisation (NGO)***

There is a problem in defining NGOs as there is no single straightforward definition but a substantial degree of overlap with other close terms such as civil society organisations (CSOs), third-sector organisations, and non-state actors (Boulding, 2014; Josselin & Wallace, 2001; Simmons, 1998). There are also synonymous terms used in the literature, such as non-profit (or not-for-profit) organisations, public associations, and foundations, among many potential others, depending on the context and legal terminology of different countries. There is a great diversity among NGOs regarding their scope and goals, which adds to the problem of definitions (Frantz, 1987; Gemmill & Bamidele-Izu, 2002; Josselin & Wallace, 2001).

Generally, NGOs are voluntary associations formally organised as private initiatives and operated under national law but independent of the government (Charnovitz, 2007; Frantz, 1987; Josselin & Wallace, 2001). Formal, non-profit organisations aim to amass financial, technical and/or other resources to meet socially identified needs (Frantz, 1987). NGOs can be international, national, or regional/local, organised around a single issue and aim or a diverse spectrum of activities, and funded through various sources (ibid). Unlike informal associations, NGOs stand out as stronger CSOs due to their activities' formalised, legal and structured nature (Rollan & Somerton, 2019). They usually have a mandate, budget,

leadership structure and membership policy to represent a specific group. Boulding (2014) highlights NGOs as problem-oriented CSOs that have grown in number and influence in developing countries since the 1980s and represent minorities and excluded members of society. NGOs often commit to solving systemic social problems such as human rights violations, environmental degradation, or poverty. NGOs reach out to politically excluded people and address politically undervalued issues (ibid).

NGOs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are mainly registered as public associations and public foundations.

### **Types and functions of NGOs**

NGOs emerge when a group of people organizes itself into a social unit "that was established with the explicit objective of achieving certain ends... and formulating rules to govern the relations among the members of the organization and the duties of each member" (Blau and Scott, 1970 as cited in Frantz, 1987, p.122). Even though most NGOs work in areas of public development, such as human rights activism, environmentalism, issues of social justice and equity (including gender-related issues), healthcare, education, and democracy promotion, the goals of NGOs are very diverse. Some NGOs have a clearly defined goal and a target audience, while others take a broader perspective on the populations they represent and the objectives they achieve (Frantz, 1987).

There are multiple views on the roles of NGOs. For example, Simmons (1998) claims that NGOs have four essential functions. These are:

1. setting policy agendas by raising important issues with the public and government,
2. negotiating outcomes of policies or treaties by evaluating and offering alternative outcome options,
3. conferring legitimacy on authorities such as governments or international institutions, and
4. implementing solutions that sometimes governments cannot or will not undertake.

Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu (2002), in their paper on global environmental governance, described five roles of NGOs and other civil society groups:

1. Spreading and analysing information
2. Contributing to setting policy agendas and consulting
3. Performing operational functions and implementing solutions

4. Evaluating environmental conditions and monitoring the implementation of environmental agreements
5. Advocating environmental justice.

The literature commonly mentions that NGOs are relevant in policy, from setting the agenda through awareness-raising and information sharing to holding governments accountable for policy implementation and evaluating outcomes. Additionally, the literature widely mentions how NGOs engage with practices, for example, by becoming service providers or providing support. Finally, there appears to be a degree of symbolism in the work of NGOs as they manifest democratic values.

It is essential to acknowledge that NGOs' goals, functions, target audiences, resourcefulness, and influence depend on the type of NGO. There are international NGOs (INGOs) and domestic NGOs. Domestic NGOs operate at local, regional, and national levels and work directly with target populations or through collaboration with the government. In contrast, international NGOs aim for international development and support governments or domestic NGOs in different countries. Thus, domestic NGOs work in the field, at a local level, and have direct access to beneficiaries, making them appear more effective, even though they may be less resourceful and impactful than INGOs (Macarchuk, 2018). Another relevant distinction is between NGOs and governments.

NGOs are often presented as counterbalancing and essentially opposite to state governments. For example, Frantz (1987) explains that governments have a broader reach than NGOs because they target society through national policies, legislation, and national service providers. However, they can experience difficulties with flexibility, efficiency, and accounting for minorities due to a generalized approach to work and a more complex administrative structure and bureaucracy. In this regard, NGOs stand out for their ability to target local groups and act more rapidly, directly, and effectively (*ibid*). Nevertheless, Frantz agrees that NGOs are most effective when collaborating with the state.

The literature demonstrates that authors mostly agree that a collaborative approach is more effective than a resisting one when NGOs act as oppositionists and antipodes of the state. However, the cooperation between the government and the civil society is possible mainly in democratic governments that respond to the interests of the social groups represented by NGOs.

There are several models of the mechanisms NGOs employ to promote their agenda on the state level. Longhofer, Schofer, Miric, and Frank (2016) mention three views of NGO policy advocacy schemes using the example of environmental NGOs:

1. The bottom-up perspective highlights the role of domestic NGOs.
2. The top-down view emphasizes the influence of international NGOs.
3. The interactive model stresses the cooperation and reinforcement dynamics between domestic and international NGOs.

The bottom-up perspective suggests that policy development starts from grassroots movements through the mobilization of NGOs setting the agenda for the state. This approach is sympathetic to NGOs. Nevertheless, the authors' research suggests that the data supports the idea that top-down perspectives are more effective, meaning that international organizations exert more significant influence over setting national environmental policies and NGO work. Nation-states which desire to fulfil their international commitments incorporate suggested issues into their domestic policy agenda, involving domestic environmental NGOs. Additionally, INGOs can directly influence domestic NGOs by providing them with funding. The third model, the interactive one, stands somewhat in the middle, suggesting that the cooperation of domestic and international NGOs ensures the promotion of environmental policies. All three models support a systemic view of inclusive education, as they all suggest the interrelations of governments, INGOs, and domestic NGOs as crucial elements for achieving set goals.

### **Engagement of local NGOs in inclusive education reform globally**

In recent years, an increasing amount of development resources have been directed towards NGOs in all sectors, driven by the common belief that NGOs can provide social services where the government has failed to do so (Lang, 2012). Civil society has become more supported by international donors, leading to the explosive development of local NGOs in many countries. This pattern is also present in the education sector, where donor agencies have expanded the resources allocated to NGOs to implement educational programmes (ibid). NGOs have been involved in education reform for decades, working alongside governments and other stakeholders to improve access to education and the quality of education. Today, they are critical in advocating for education reform, providing services to marginalised students, and contributing to policy development (Vally & Perozzi, 2021). NGOs have been involved in various education activities, from supporting school infrastructure to providing teacher training and advocating for policy changes (Dharani, 2016).

More recently, there has been a shift towards promoting inclusive education, emphasising the importance of ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have access to quality education (Barnes & Mercer, 2019). NGOs have been

instrumental in promoting this shift towards inclusive education, with many organisations working to support marginalised students, such as those with disabilities, in accessing education (Ainscow, 2019; Singal, 2020). While governments are responsible for providing quality education to all students, NGOs can often help address gaps in the education system (Sulimani-Aidan & Poyrazli, 2017). The literature suggests that these organisations are often driven by a solid commitment to social justice and equity, seeking to improve educational opportunities for marginalised and disadvantaged groups (Ainscow, 2019). The involvement of NGOs in promoting inclusive education has been crucial in regions where governments may not have the capacity or resources to fully support inclusive education initiatives (Barnes & Mercer, 2019).

Examples of successful engagement by local NGOs in inclusive education reform can be found in many parts of the world. The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report's background paper by Nidhi Singal highlights the significant role of disability NGOs in promoting inclusive education globally from two perspectives, the supply side and the demand side. From the perspective of supply, disability NGOs serve providers of education, working in and with mainstream schools, supporting special school provision, and providing alternative educational opportunities for youth with disabilities. From the demand side, NGOs advocate for IE by bringing about change in national and international agendas, raising awareness and monitoring the implementation of IE, and creating knowledge and evidence by undertaking research. This perspective was proposed as a result of reviewing the existing literature, and it successfully summarised some of the critical functions of disability NGOs in promoting IE.

Local NGOs have been involved in promoting inclusive education in different regions of the world, with varying levels of success. For example, in South Asia, there is evidence of NGOs working alongside the governments in enacting inclusive education. NGOs have initiated many project-based and multidimensional programmes on inclusive education since the 1990s, especially in rural and remote communities. For example, the NGO BRAC is a major supporter of inclusive education in Bangladesh, employing over 100,000 people and reaching more than 126 million individuals across the country (Begum et.al., 2019). BRAC employs various strategies for inclusion, including a "boatschool" for children in remote areas, schools for children with disabilities, and providing assistive devices like hearing aids and Braille materials. BRAC advocates for inclusive education through community engagement, explaining rights and laws for people with disabilities, while also raising awareness about the social stigma surrounding disabled children. The organization offers

training to teaching staff, conducts parent meetings, creates friendly learning environments, and educates teachers on inclusive teaching methods and assistive technologies (ibid).

A collection of stories from educational coalitions in the Asia Pacific showcases different strategies and actions by regional civil society organisations (CSOs) to advocate for inclusive education reform. These strategies include awareness-raising through media and the internet, research, government consultancy, and many more to increase their participation in educational policy and budget (Rollan & Somerton, 2019). For example, education-focused NGOs and youth groups in Timor-Leste, Nepal, and the Philippines monitor the implementation of SDGs, including SDG 4 on ensuring equitable access to quality education, through a partnership with the government (ASPBAE, 2019). In Bangladesh, the government has provided space for the meaningful participation of civil society in SDG processes by organising consultations with NGOs (ibid). In Mongolia, since 2017, the Ministry of Education has been arranging annual national conferences on SDG 4 in cooperation with UNESCO and local NGOs to evaluate the progress and challenges of the goal implementation (ibid). Therefore, NGOs serve as independent watchdogs for governmental commitments and policy implementation. These examples validate the views presenting NGOs as contributors to educational policy and laws (Mundy et al., 2008) and as partners to the government (Lang, 2012).

There are also cases where the role of NGOs has been limited and unrecognised. In Papua New Guinea, the government provided no formal space and little opportunities for local NGOs to engage and participate in the SDG4 rollout and monitoring (ASPBAE, 2019). Some NGOs used informal platforms for raising awareness about minority issues in education, such as the National Coalition for Education in Nepal, which collected more than 150 narratives from women and girls who faced difficulties in accessing education and published them in books (ASPBAE, 2012).

In many cases, NGOs have successfully promoted inclusive education by working closely with governments and other stakeholders to identify gaps in the education system and develop solutions to address these gaps. In Serbia, NGOs were members of a special expert committee involved in producing The Serbian Ministry of Education report of 2003 analysing the current situation of education for children with special needs and making proposals for inclusive education reform (Radomana, Nanob & Closs, 2006). NGOs were subsequently involved in resulting practical measures to strengthen inclusive education development in the country, partnering with schools as advisors. In Albania, NGOs have piloted programs for inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream schools, incentivising the teachers with



the right for extra pay, extra non-teaching hours, or a reduced number of pupils in class (ibid). In addition, Albanian NGOs have been supporting schools via training of teachers and staff (ibid).

There is the need for NGOs to understand the local context and cultural norms deeply. It is essential when working to promote inclusive education, as cultural beliefs and attitudes towards disability and inclusion can vary widely across different regions and communities. For example, in Afghanistan, the NGO Swedish Committee for Afghanistan has successfully promoted inclusive education by working closely with local communities and religious leaders to address cultural barriers to education for children with disabilities. Through its engagement with these stakeholders, the NGO has developed culturally appropriate interventions grounded in the local context (Mehri, 2020). Another example is Turkey, where there is a recognised role of NGOs in meeting the needs of Syrian refugees and contributing to the social integration process in Turkey (Seyidov, 2021). It includes educational integration efforts to support learning of migrants and refugees in Turkey.

In Africa, local NGOs have been widely involved in promoting inclusive education. Braun (2022) mentions that historically, special education in Africa was introduced by religious organisations and NGOs such as the European Christian missionary movement of the 19th century. The involvement of NGOs remains profound, with many international and local NGOs providing educational services to students with disabilities and collaborating with the Tanzanian government to develop inclusive schools. In Kenya, for example, the NGO Light for the World has been promoting inclusive education by supporting schools and advocating for policy changes (Light for the World, 2021). Another successful example of local South African NGO engagement in inclusive education reform is the Zero Dropout Campaign, a coalition of NGOs working to reduce the high school dropout rate in the country. It has successfully advocated for policy changes and increased government funding for interventions to keep students in school. The campaign has also worked to shift the public narrative around school dropouts, framing the issue as a systemic problem rather than an individual failing. It has helped to build public support for policy changes and increased investment in dropout prevention programs (Smith, 2021). Case studies in Burkina Faso, Mali, Tanzania, and Kenya revealed that local NGOs construct and equip schools in deprived areas, provide literacy training for students and capacity development for teachers and school administrators, and advocate for child protection, gender equity, and inclusion of marginal populations (nomadic, refugee) (Mundy et al., 2008).

Sarkar (2023) in their thesis on inclusive education implementation in India explores the partnerships between inclusive education NGOs and schools. NGOs (their names were anonymised) implement inclusive education programs on the basis of mainstream schools, supporting school leaders, teachers, and students in this transition process. Schools hire NGOs to undertake teacher professional development that can improve the rigor of the school, the teachers, and the students. Vishwakarma and Sthapak (2017) also explored the contribution of NGOs to ensuring the education of students with SEND in India. One of the ways they explain the success of NGOs is by referring to Lang (2000), who emphasised the diversity of NGOs ranging from small community organisations to international scope entities. They claim that NGOs, by working on the ground in small locations, often ensure a more inclusive impact than the government, which aims to address the needs of the majority. Another reason for NGOs' fruitfulness is their greater flexibility and room for innovation in curriculum design, teacher education, and networking. The authors mention in their literature review Chakraborty's study (2015) on the role of NGOs in strengthening the inclusion of visually impaired students in West Bengal. Even though NGOs in this region provided various schemes to support the beneficiaries, they did not entirely use these schemes because NGOs can be technically incompetent and have a minor role than government agencies. Some studies support the effectiveness of NGOs, while others reveal their weaknesses. However, authors acknowledge that education is experiencing a rise in NGO involvement which aims to compensate for the state failures in education delivery (Literacy Watch Bulletin, 2000).

A grounded theory study of adoptive parents of children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in the US revealed four dimensions of advocacy that the parents engage in (Duquette et al., 2012). The first one is raising awareness about their children's presence and needs. The second one is information seeking, which is investigating what conditions their children require, finding experts available to help and consult, researching educational programs that would suit their children best, and assessing school options. The third contribution is presenting the case of their children in order to advocate for individual accommodations in education. Lastly, the parents take the initiative and leading role in monitoring to ensure the proper implementation of either policies or Individual Education Plans (IEPs). It is important to note that US legislation requires parents to participate in special education policy-making to ensure democratic governance. In most other countries, it is not required by the law to attract parents to planning and implementing the educational policies for children with special needs. However, parental groups often show high involvement regardless of having or not

having an official invitation. For instance, in Romania, parental NGOs serve as promoters for inclusive education, raising awareness about children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and suggesting legislation changes to ensure their children's rights (Cretu, 2015). This example suggests that Romanian parental NGOs engage in building inclusive policies as well as promoting inclusive cultures.

Examples from the Middle East provide diverse perspectives on NGOs engagement in IE. In Israel (Kasler & Jabareen, 2017), due to complex ethno-cultural differences, there are examples of NGOs protecting equal rights for education for marginalised populations. For example, Adalah, an NGO representing the Arab community, has challenged the Israel Education Ministry to provide academic enrichment programmes equally to Arab and Jewish students. However, responding to the requests of such NGOs is problematic due to the legacy of Palestinian citizens' experience as a marginalised and powerless community. In Lebanon, the education of students with disabilities in mainstream schools gained traction in the second half of the 20th century, mainly in private and special schools supported by NGOs. However, today, NGOs continue to partner and influence schools in implementing inclusive education, often overpowering the voices of parents and students and promoting their own vision of inclusion (Khochen-Bagshaw; 2023). Similarly, examples from Oman suggest that the advocacy of NGOs has negatively affected IE development in Oman. According to Mohamed Emam (2016), several NGOs launched specialised centres to provide educational services. Although this service is appreciated by families of children with disabilities, it negatively limited the educational opportunities of those children in public schools by convincing the public that it is more appropriate to use the specialised NGO-led centres instead. The examples show the complexity of evaluating the role of NGOs in IE development, as socio-cultural context matters greatly.

These examples provide evidence of the critical role that local NGOs can play in promoting inclusive education policies and practices, mainly through their partnerships with governments and other stakeholders. Although some NGOs are limited in their opportunities to instil change due to the lack of the political will, there are also examples of organisations that effectively leverage the government by providing consultancy services and examples of advocacy where NGOs demand to be noticed using both formal and informal paths. In some cases, NGO involvement is seen as negative since they overpower individuals such as parents of children with special needs and shape the inclusive education reform landscape without consultation with the wide public. Thus, NGOs in different international contexts have capacities to influence educational reform to varying degrees. However, it is important to

recognise that Central Asia's context may differ from other regions and that strategies that have been successful elsewhere may not directly apply to the Central Asian context. The following sections of this chapter will explore the context of inclusive education in Central Asia and consider how local NGOs currently engage in this issue in the region.

## **Inclusive Education in Central Asia**

### ***Historical and political context of Central Asian states***

Located in the centre of the Eurasian continent, Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, are closely related, sharing a nomadic history. The countries share a Soviet legacy and the hardships associated with transitioning to independence. Furthermore, each country has set its course to democratise and strive for economic and social prosperity.

Having a shared Soviet legacy means many similarities in institutional, cultural, and linguistic heritage. The countries were forced to adopt socialist economic model, which was no longer adequate after the collapse of the Union. After gaining independence in 1991, the countries were left with poorly developed political, economic, and social institutions. The educational system and curricula based on the Soviet model are still heavily influenced by the Russian language and pervasive mindset (Buyers, 2003; Ferrando, 2012; Silova, 2011).

Each of the five states has, to varying degrees, implemented policies to revive ethnocultural nationhood defined by pre-Soviet values and norms (Akyildyz, 2013). Derussification, both in language and culture, is familiar to many former Soviet countries, including the Central Asian states (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019). For example, the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, built policies to exclude Soviet historical, cultural, and linguistic legacies by introducing Milli Galkynysh Hereketi (National Revival Movement) aimed at cultivating a so-called 'turkmenification' of social spheres (Silova, 2011). As part of this process, he introduced policies ranging from strengthening Islam and favouring ethnic Turkmen in employment to enforcing traditional Turkmen dress codes in schools and teaching Ruhnama at school and university levels. Ruhnama was an ideology created by Niyazov that comprised his interpretation of Turkmen history, the spiritual and moral code for the nation, and his cult of personality (ibid). To contrast such a radical nationalistic course, Kazakhstan has arguably been developing softer 'kazakhization' policies. The official position of the Kazakhstani government has been to preserve diversity and friendly relations among different ethnic groups (Burkhanov, 2018). It has been

highlighted by the first president Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose personal beliefs and values shaped the current socio-political systems of Kazakhstan, including a system of education. More recent history of Kazakhstan after Tokayev has been appointed as president demonstrates more vocal commitment of the state and the civil society to revive Kazakh language and culture (Kuzembayeva, 2023). Overall, there is a shared trend of rebuilding own identity as well as social and political institutions in the countries of Central Asia.

The four states in the region, excluding Uzbekistan with a population of 36 million, are comparatively underpopulated; however, the population has been rising since gaining independence. To date, Kazakhstan estimates to have 19 million people, Kyrgyzstan - 6 million, Tajikistan - 10 million, Turkmenistan - 6 million, and Uzbekistan, as previously mentioned, 36 million (Population Pyramid, 2023). The region has been experiencing an increase in migration flow. Primarily, Kazakhstan became a transit country and the destination of external migration in the region, as labour forces from other Central Asian countries moved to the big cities in Kazakhstan, hoping for better incomes (IOM, 2018). Due to family migration, often, children are affected by movement and might face difficulties in accessing essential services, including education (IOM, 2018).

Politically, Central Asian states were subject to considerable shifts after gaining independence. These changes touch upon all spheres of state functioning, including economy, politics, and social and educational policies (Buyers, 2003; Silova, 2011). Rumer (2005, p.3) defined post-independence CA states in the following way:

The social and political structures in the Central Asian countries have acquired a broadly similar character. They have established regimes, with varying degrees of authoritarianism, behind a formal quasi (or pseudo) democratic façade. These regimes range from a relatively moderate regime (by regional standards) in Kyrgyzstan to full-blown despotism in Turkmenistan.

Even though countries differ in their socio-economic conditions, political regimes, education and some other characteristics, several commonly shared similarities suggest a justification behind discussing the region as a whole. Despite its geopolitical centrality between the superpowers of Russia and China and the Middle East and its strategic value as a bridge between the West and the Asian East, the region of Central Asia remains a comparatively under-researched region (Silova, 2011). Educational policy-making, in particular, also has not received much attention in Central Asia's research (Rose & Lapham,

2013). Some scholars suggest the existence of the so-called “post-socialist education reform package” among Central Asian states, which includes such trends as “fostering student-centred learning, the introduction of curriculum standards, decentralisation of educational finance and governance, privatisation of higher education, standardisation of student assessment, liberalisation of textbook publishing, and many others” (Silova, 2011). Despite these similarities, educational transformation processes in each country are complex, multidimensional, and uncertain because of historical, political, cultural, and social differences (ibid).

All these countries ensure the right to free compulsory primary education, yet quality and equal access issues remain open. Among recent trends in the educational policy realm within the region is the introduction of inclusive education. Some countries signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), while others adopted national Concepts on Inclusive Education, claiming their commitment to implementing inclusive education.

### ***The dominant approach to educating children with SEND in Central Asia***

All countries demonstrate a so-called correctional approach to treating and educating children with SEND. Despite the extensive critique of the international human rights institutions about the terminology, such terms as “correction” and “defectology” are still widely used in legislation and daily practices (Bridges, 2014). It suggests that special education approaches with a medical model of disability and an array of specialised institutions define the reality of teaching children with SEND today in most former Soviet CA countries. The medical model of disability, in general, implies that disability can be diagnosed, cured, or rehabilitated (corrected) by medical professionals (Jackson, 2018). Therefore, people with disabilities often are viewed as patients rather than ‘normal’ people, and the implication is that with specific interventions assigned, a person with SEND can be integrated into the society and environment without a need to alter that society or environment itself. To a certain extent, the medical model justifies institutionalising persons with disabilities (ibid).

Psychological-medical-pedagogical consultations (PMPC), formerly referred to as psychological-medical-pedagogical commissions, are institutions preserved after the Soviet era with the function of identifying the educational needs of children with disabilities and suggesting appropriate accommodations to the extent of suggesting the type of school that a child should benefit from the most (Bridges, 2014). In their recent reports on Kazakhstan

(2019) and Kyrgyzstan (2020), the Human Rights Watch concluded from interviews with key informants, including parents of children with disabilities, that PMPCs present a critical barrier to children with SEND studying in mainstream schools. PMPCs are organised under local departments of education or the Ministry of Education and Science/ Ministry of Enlightenment and typically involve doctors, speech therapists, psychologists, and other specialists. They assess children with disabilities and issue a referral recommending whether a child should study in a mainstream school, special school for children with disabilities, or at home, as well as the types of rehabilitation and support services to which the child is entitled. Even though the referral is not legally binding and is a mere recommendation, many schools refuse to enrol a student with SEND without the PMPC's decision. Human Rights Watch (2019, 2020) concludes that PMPC often blocks children's access to mainstream schooling. However, some parents, when able to access alternative information from an NGO, parent groups, or online forums, could enrol their children in schools despite PMPC referral to a special school or home education. Parents who lacked alternative information reported feeling compelled to follow the referral, resulting in the segregation of their children either in special schools or at home. Such an approach demonstrates the contemporary presence of the medical model of disability in action. Several studies have shown low quality of teaching at special schools and other specialised institutions (such as boarding schools or residential care facilities) (OECD, 2009; HRW, 2019; HRW, 2020). Legislation and historically established practices in the Central Asian region excluded children with disabilities from mainstream schooling, making this group of children particularly vulnerable in this region (UNICEF, 2019a).

As an alternative to the medical model, the charity approach to disability has become dominant, as many local charity foundations, such as DARA and Bolashak Charity Association, among others, in Kazakhstan promote inclusion-related programs. In Uzbekistan, the funds to equip inclusive schools were collected by a public foundation via a charity marathon "Join It!" ("Prisoyedinyaisya!" / "Birga bo' l!") (podbrobno.uz, 2013). Both the medical model and the charity approach are problematic for inclusive education development because they do not address the underlying systemic barriers that limit the participation of learners with disabilities in education (Jackson, 2018).

### ***Inclusive education reform in Central Asia***

Rose and Lapham (2013) described Central Asian policies and practices as reflecting "institutional and professional inertia," meaning that instead of implementing reasonable

reforms, the states continue historically established educational system functions. It may not be as accurate for all Central Asian states, as some have shown a commitment to major educational reforms. Nevertheless, new values are not quickly penetrating the region's educational politics ethos. Within the last decade, the governments in the region have taken steps to transform educational policies around inclusion and to widen access to education for marginalized groups.

All states in the CA region acknowledged the need for change and development to ensure equitable provision of education and signed several foundational framework documents about people with SEND. All five countries signed and/or ratified the UNCRDP and Table 1 below summarized which countries are the signees with the respective timelines. UNCRC also outlines the right of all children to access and receive quality education, including children with disabilities and special needs, and all Central Asian countries ratified the convention. In their national legislation, all countries reflect the commitment to protect the rights of people with SEND and their access to education. Constitutions of all five states claim the right of all citizens to free compulsory secondary education (Constitution of Kazakhstan, article 30; Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, article 46; Constitution of Tajikistan, article 16; Constitution of Turkmenistan, article 55; Constitution of Uzbekistan, article 41).

Among the major state laws on inclusive education is the Law on Education. The Laws on Education of all five states recognize inclusive education. The Kazakhstani Law on Education 2007 (with its recent amendments) outlines IE as a principle of equal access to education for all children, considering their individual differences while also drawing attention to ensuring access to children with SEND and other specified categories such as children without parental care and children who are orphaned. The law claims that education curriculum state standards must be developed following inclusive education principles (ibid, article 56). The Law on Education of Kyrgyz Republic 2003 (with its recent amendments) defines IE as ensuring equal access to education for all learners, considering the diversity of educational needs and individual capabilities. It also mentions that inclusive, special, and home education are accessible options for learners with disabilities. Table 1 further summarized how the Law on Education positions inclusive education in the respective countries.



*Table 1. Legislative framework for inclusive education in Central Asian countries*

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Constitution	Protects the rights of all citizens to access free compulsory secondary education				
Laws of Education	Law on Education recognizes IE for all learners	Law on Education recognizes IE for all learners	Law on Education recognizes IE for all learners	Law on Education recognizes IE for learners with disabilities	Law on Education recognizes IE for all learners
Conventions	UNCRPD signed 2008 and ratified 2015  UNCRC ratified 1994	UNCRPD signed 2011 and ratified 2019  UNCRC ratified 1994	UNCRPD signed 2018  UNCRC ratified 1993	UNCRPD ratified 2008  UNCRC ratified 1993	UNCRPD signed 2009 and ratified 2021  UNCRC ratified 1994
Other policy documents	Conceptual approaches to inclusive education development adopted in 2015 and enacted by the decree of the Ministry of Education and Science (currently – Ministry of Enlightenment) (NAE, 2015); State program for education development (2020-2025) sets the bar to make 100% of schools inclusive by 2025	National concept of inclusive education development 2019-2023 adopted in 2019	National concept of inclusive education adopted in 2013; National strategy of education development until 2020 outlines a goal to transition to inclusive education (Golubeva, 2018)	No other policy documents were identified	Concept of national education system development until 2030 adopted in 2019 sets a goal to improve inclusive education development

Several international organisations and agencies operate in the region with inclusive education development as part of their agenda. For example, in Kazakhstan, UNICEF has lately been involved in a program to prevent school dropouts, focusing on children at homeschooling (McLaughlin, Yakovets, & Winter, 2019). European Union funded projects on inclusive education development in Tajikistan, partnering with local NGOs (Asia Plus, 2018). International NGOs such as the Soros Foundation realise projects around facilitating the development of inclusive societies and education across Central Asian states. The foundation organised training on parental advocacy for parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which ultimately resulted in the establishment of one of the most active NGOs in Kazakhstan aimed at protecting the rights of children with ASD and their access to foundational services, including education (Rose & Lapham, 2013). In Kyrgyzstan, the Soros Foundation has mapped inclusive education as one of their top regional priorities for development (Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan, n.d.). Therefore, efforts to promote inclusive education are evident at the level of the state, civil society, and international organisations.

### ***Common barriers to inclusive education reform***

The lack of access to quality education for the most marginalized children and adolescents remains one of the critical challenges across Europe and Central Asia (UNICEF, 2019a). Despite high enrolment rates for primary and lower-secondary education, such vulnerable groups as migrant children, children from ethnic minority groups and those with disabilities and special educational needs often drop out of school and remain invisible to the educational data (ibid). According to UNICEF data, out of more than 5 million children with disabilities in Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia, at least 75% are not covered by quality inclusive education and largely remain in special schools or with no formal schooling whatsoever (ibid).

Early identification, referral, and intervention practices for children with SEND in Central Asia are significantly underdeveloped (OECD, 2009). A UNICEF Situation analysis in Kazakhstan (2019b) reveals that many children with developmental delays, specifically those having “mild to moderate” disabilities, are often not identified until they reach school age. Possible causes include child development screening programs focused mainly on health-related issues and not accounting for developmental delays, insufficient health workers’ knowledge about development assessment, ineffective communication and counselling skills, and stigma and discrimination (ibid). For example, in Uzbekistan, some

parents might not refer their children to specialists for fear that identification of disability might negatively affect their lives and rights, such as the right to vote or get married (Nam, 2019).

Early childhood education and care (ECCE) participation rates are comparatively low for all children, not just those needing additional support and accommodations. Since the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy, after gaining independence, countries of Central Asia have witnessed a decline in ECCE attendance, and the problem of low attendance and participation persists (Habibov, 2012). For children with SEND, it is even harder to access inclusive preschools in these conditions, and there is a shortage of ECCE services available for them (OECD, 2009). As a result, by the time children enrol in primary school, they might have never received any training before, which might ultimately reinforce the misconception that students with SEND are less capable of studying alongside their peers, increasing the risk of dropout (Temple, Reynolds, & Miedel, 2000).

The weak cooperation of the education and healthcare ministries on the early identification of SPED is evident, at least in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as the OECD report (2009) suggested. Also, the countries experience difficulties with reliable data on the prevalence of school dropouts and inclusion (UNICEF, 2019b).

Among approaches to disability, it is most common to express feelings of pity towards individuals with certain conditions (UNICEF, 2018). In Tajikistan, most adult respondents, constituting 82% feel pity when they see a person with a disability. This charity approach to disability, on par with the medical approach, poses a paradigmatic barrier to inclusion.

The countries in the Central Asian region share misconceptions and mythological beliefs about disability. In Tajikistan, for example, 37% of respondents claimed that disability is caused by God's punishment, spell, curse, or phone or computer use (UNICEF, 2018). Such beliefs are much more common among rural populations. Rose and Lapham (2013) suggested that children with disabilities are often "hidden" at home because a family might feel ashamed of these children, especially in rural areas. Nam (2019) explains that in Uzbekistan, families often hide their children with disabilities from the general public and their friends and relatives, fearing their social status being diminished and their reputation loss. These perceptions mainly form the foundation of the wide stigmatization of persons with special needs and disabilities (SEND) in the region, which ultimately affects the prospects of implementing the inclusion of students with SEND into the mainstream

classroom environment. Parents of children without identified special needs often resist efforts to promote inclusive education in their schools.

An unwelcoming attitude towards children with SEND based on stereotypes also affects the psychological readiness and willingness of pre-service teachers to create favourable conditions for inclusive education development, as the study of Kazakhstan and Turkey suggests (Baimenova, Bekova, & Zhubakova, 2015). Teachers can view inclusive pedagogy as an additional workload rather than professional responsibility. It might be partially due to another significant problem experienced by the education sector in the CA, which is the low incentivization of teachers due to low salaries, low teacher status, and a heavy workload burden (OECD, 2009). A study on teacher status in Kyrgyzstan (UNICEF, 2014a) reveals that teachers often have 36 hours of classroom teaching time per week because their pay depends on the workload.

Finally, the scarcity of resources, including infrastructural, material, and human resources, are among the significant barriers to quality education for children with special educational needs and disabilities (OECD, 2009). There is a shortage of trained staff and training programs in inclusive pedagogies for pre-service and in-service teachers (Rose and Lapham, 2013). Teachers have to teach in multi-level classes with limited instructional resources (Nam, 2019). Instructional materials for students are also limited, as there are almost no textbooks in Braille or assistive technologies available to accommodate the learning needs of students (OECD, 2009).

Infrastructural inaccessibility of schools and transportation make it impossible for students with mobility-related conditions to attend general schools. Lack of lifts and wheelchair ramps, narrow doors, and no tactile paving, among other obstacles, is common for most schools. Therefore, children with psychical disabilities are often educated at school and not included in mainstream schools (Bridges, 2014; Nam, 2019; OECD, 2019). Therefore, inclusive education reform is challenged at not only policy and cultural levels but also practical ones due to limited resources.

### **Engagement of local NGOs in inclusive education reform in Central Asia**

The Central Asian states share many similarities regarding post-Soviet educational transformations and inclusive education reform development. As described earlier, all countries share post-Soviet legacies of political centralisation and a recently taken course to ensure inclusive education, among other similarities. Nevertheless, implementing inclusive

education reform faces significant institutional and cultural barriers due to cultural traditions of segregation and institutionalisation, medicalised approach to disability, and a lack of proper resource provision for inclusive schooling (Rose & Lapham, 2013). Promoting inclusive education by civil society can be challenged by political regimes in CA countries, as they represent varying degrees of authoritarianism (Tugsbilguun, 2013).

Traditionally, the role of NGOs in promoting social justice and inclusion has been high (Markova & Sultanalieva, 2013). Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Kazakhstan are becoming more engaged in social issues and collaborating with various governmental institutions (Asian Development Bank, 2007). After Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, the number of registered NGOs was around 400 (ibid). It started growing due to the financial support of international donors and new legislation governing their activities. By 2011, there were 36,815 registered NGOs in Kazakhstan, including 8,134 public associations, 4,831 foundations, and 1,288 associations of legal entities, among other organisations. (USAID, 2011). Education is one of several highlighted areas where NGO activism is very high, and 42% of NGOs operate in social spheres such as education and public health (Kabdiyeva, 2015). Although there is numerical data on the growing number of registered NGOs, there is little evidence on how these NGOs facilitate inclusive education development, which tools they use, which barriers they face, and whether they participate in policymaking or any other dimensions of inclusive education.

Rollan and Somerton (2019) conducted a study on NGO activism in inclusive education in Kazakhstan, presenting the findings of interviews conducted with NGO representatives in the two largest cities. The findings revealed that NGOs actively set legislation reform agenda by leveraging with the government and ministries through round-table discussions. They also conduct activities to improve inclusive pedagogical practices by offering training courses for pre-service and in-service teachers. Lastly, they engage with awareness-raising campaigns ensuring inclusive culture facilitation. However, these activities, especially in political realms, often remain unnoticed due to the state's centralised nature (ibid). Since the state signs the policy documents, it often remains unclear who contributed to the policy development. Therefore, this study shed light on less explicit ways NGOs engage with IE reform policy. This study has been one of the most comprehensive studies on NGO engagement with the IE in Kazakhstan but only looked at the context of the two largest cities without providing a regional variation of the sample.

Rose and Lapham (2013) present several Central Asian case studies of NGOs and individuals promoting social and educational inclusion of children with disabilities. The NGO

“Ashyk Alem” case study presented a clear example of the activism of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Kazakhstan. The authors used interviews, observations, and two focus groups to collect data about the interaction between the NGO and an existing system of services for children with special needs. The study revealed that “Ashyk Alem” conducted advocacy activities, including publishing reports on state services for children with ASD, sending formal inquiry letters to the Prime Minister with a request to provide statistical data on children with autism, organising press conferences and art exhibitions, taking part in talk shows, and conducting fundraising activities. Therefore, they attracted the attention of the general public and the governmental officials, the Ministry of Education and Science (currently – the Ministry of Enlightenment), and the Parliament. Parent members of Ashyk Alem became a resource to schools. Markova and Sultanalieva (2016) provide an example of a parent who invited teachers to training seminars organised by Ashyk Alem, which equipped them with additional skills to ensure they could include a boy with autism in their classes. This case shows that despite stigmatising individuals with autism in Kazakhstan, the organisation contributed to legislative, practical and cultural change for inclusive education. It was possible primarily due to the support of the government, which held a cooperative attitude towards Ashyk Alem, and the support of other organisations, such as the Soros Foundation, which provided initial financial aid to this association of parents (ibid).

These cases that describe bottom-up initiatives suggest NGOs’ potential to contribute to inclusive education in Kazakhstan. However, more research is needed in other CA countries in this regard.

After gaining independence, Tajikistan slowly started to notice an increase in NGO activities. In the 1990s, NGOs mostly engaged in helping children with disabilities and humanitarian aid during wartime (Tajikistan had a civil war right shortly after gaining independence). Once the political and economic situation in the country improved and international donors started supporting local civil society development, the engagement of NGOs in educational development became more noticeable. Civil society organisations focus primarily on the education and social services sectors (Firdoos, 2014). Examples include NGOs like Javshan and Parvin that provide literacy and educational courses for girls, ensuring their access to primary and higher education (ibid).

In Tajikistan, parental NGOs play a special role in inclusive education and have two primary goals: awareness-raising and legal aid provision (Whitsel & Kodirov, 2013). Informing parents of children with disabilities about the importance of inclusion and their

rights contributes to de-stigmatisation and empowerment. Providing legal aid can help resolve specific cases of child exclusion and build inclusive schools.

The most prominent is the Association of Parents of Disabled Children in Dushanbe. Since its inception in 2007, the Association has been immensely successful. It has consulted with close to 2,000 families (ibid). Consultations consisted of a range of support and advice on social and legal issues and the rights of disabled children and their families. The Association regularly hosts social events and activities for families. They are very active with the media, sharing the basic message of inclusion for all children and promoting the value of all children. Sabohat regularly held meeting with officials advocating for change at many levels. Although based in the capital city, the organisation has conducted several seminars in various regions of the country. A network of several similar parent organisations now exists in regional centres because of the Association's work (ibid).

The inclusion of children with special needs in public schools in some cities of Kyrgyzstan initially represented a “top-down” approach, as the initiative to implement inclusive education was a result of partnerships between the Ministry of Education of Kyrgyzstan and the USAID-funded project (Hartblay & Ailchieva, 2013). Further investigation revealed a couple of cases of public-NGO partnerships created to build more inclusive school environments and access to education for children with mobility and sensory impairments in a provincial town. Step by Step Community Foundation in Kyrgyzstan has been engaged with decreasing institutionalisation, increasing social inclusion, and enforcing the right to education for all. Umut Rehabilitation Centre, founded by civil society activists, provides special and rehabilitation services to children with disabilities, including individualised learning programs, among other services (Kokina & Bagdasarova, 2013). Although it does not directly influence the inclusive education policy, it plays a significant role in service provision and support to families with children with special needs. Therefore, limited research shows that although not much is known about the influence of the NGO sector in IE development, some cases of NGOs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan show a strengthening capacity of civil society to influence this reform.

Studying NGO and civil society activism has been challenging in two Central Asian states - Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - due to the authoritarian political regimes. The Uzbekistani government has little trust in independent NGOs and promotes “open civil society” instead. This initiative entailed the re-registration of all NGOs in 2004, which resulted in many NGOs being pressured by state officials to get closed (Masaru, 2006). Those whose registration was confirmed after close monitoring could coordinate with the

government. It implies a potential lack of independent pluralistic NGOs. No data on NGOs working on inclusive education was found in this literature review, making it hard to draw any conclusions on the non-profit sector's role in this reform.

Similarly, Turkmenistan is known as a more authoritarian country in the Central Asian region, and NGO activities may be affirmative to the state rather than independent or oppositionist. Under Niyazov's rule after Turkmenistan's independence, the educational approach was based on political indoctrination, critical thinking prevention, and ideology uniformity (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). Civil society and other actors, such as schools and parents, were viewed as surrogates of the Ministry of Education, fulfilling the state's agenda rather than representing pluralistic interests. No studies on inclusive education development by civil society efforts were identified as part of the literature review.

Overall, the engagement of NGOs in inclusive education development across Central Asian countries has been an emerging topic in the research. There is limited knowledge of what outcomes NGOs produce based on successful case studies, but more is needed to explore why and how they engage in inclusive education.

As Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and especially Turkmenistan are relatively more closed-off and challenging to access for research purposes compared to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it could make it challenging to gather reliable data on the engagement of NGOs in inclusive education development in these countries. These countries have stronger authoritarian political environment, which limits the space for civil society and NGOs to operate independently (Freedom House, 2022). It can impact the engagement of NGOs in inclusive education development, as they may face restrictions and challenges in their activities. Due to the anticipated issues in gaining access to NGOs and receiving transparent and realistic information about civil society, it seems reasonable to conduct data collection in more accessible contexts of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

### **Theoretical perspectives on NGOs and education reform**

When contemplating an appropriate research methodology to explore the engagement of local NGOs of Central Asia in inclusive education development, I went through certain phases as a researcher. I considered taking a phenomenological design approach before deciding to do Grounded Theory, and this thinking development will be further explained in the Methodology chapter. Applying the Grounded Theory methodology discourages theoretical framing of the study to ensure impartiality and inductive reasoning. However, it is also argued that theoretical or philosophical frames influence the researcher's thinking



despite their awareness (Mitchell, 2014). Since the decision to apply a grounded theory methodology was not immediate, there was an evolutionary process when various theoretical perspectives on NGOs and education reform were considered.

The purpose of this subchapter is to present the development of thinking in terms of theoretical perspectives and how it has evolved throughout the research process. I initially considered civil society theories as well as systems' theory as potential theoretical frameworks to analyse the NGOs' role in education reform. However, the literature review suggested that none of the existing theories fully captured the complexity of the NGOs' role in education reform in the specific context under study. Therefore, I decided to acknowledge my wider positionality within the constructivist school of thought and apply a constructivist grounded theory approach to the study, which involves constructing a theory grounded in the data collected from the fieldwork. Although I did not ultimately use civil society theories or systems theory as the theoretical framework for the study, they were a significant part of the idea development process. Thus, this sub-chapter provides an account of these theoretical perspectives on NGOs and education reform, even though they do not reflect the established scope of the study, as the study aims to follow the tradition of a more inductive, constructivist inquiry.

### ***Civil Society Theory***

There has been a sensible interest in theories of civil society since the very question of this study concerns the work of the civil society sector in the education sector. An NGO is a type of civil sector organisation, so theories of civil society lie within NGO-centred studies. One of the reasons for my interest in NGO studies, or more broadly studying civil society, is because the notion of "nation-state" has been dominating the history of schooling. According to a classical narrative, schools have been founded, regulated, certified, financed and evaluated primarily through the governance of the central state, which is a unitary actor or power (Rockwell & Vera, 2013). Therefore, educational studies also tended to focus on the nation-state as a unit of analysis. This trend has been shifting in recent decades to recognise a variety of social actors and organisations that account for the growth and diversification of education (ibid).

The approach was challenged by theorists including de Tocqueville, Gramsci, and Foucault, who proposed that state dominance requires consolidation with civil society. In Foucault's view, power is disseminated throughout society, and the less powerful – women, the urban poor, or school pupils – can exercise power through organised negotiation and

resistance (ibid). This organised society engaging in the dialogue with the state is referred to as a civil society and can take different forms, including the one of a non-governmental organisation. The theoretical perspectives of these figures claim that despite state dominance over schooling structures, social actors still matter.

Among theorists of civil society, two dominant views in Western political philosophy were suggested by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Tocqueville represented a liberal line of thinking, drawing conclusions from assessing the 19th-century civil society in the US, seeing the civil society as a counterweight to the state, which ensures democratisation by voicing social and political demands of the society (Edwards, 2001). He envisioned civil society as a liberal structure, holding that the more CSOs exist, the more vital democracy and freedom are. Therefore, the primary role of civil society is democratising and representing the issues of society.

For de Tocqueville, the civil society serves as a counterbalance to expanding powers of the state, allowing to build a constructive dialogue of the state with the individuals (Whaites, 2000). Therefore, civil society is associated with constructive actions of altruistic nature rather than with selfish motives (ibid). One of the key examples is anti-slavery movements that brought together thousands of underprivileged people under a common cause. A civil society that represents “small issues” such as the provision of health care or education, rather than primordial attachments such as ethnicity, language, or religion, may have tremendous potential to serve as change agents (ibid).

Gramsci proposed a more Marxist view on civil society, pointing at class relations. He highlighted the fluidity of the state and civil society relations. He argues that civil society operates within ideological contexts and under national and international influences (Edwards, 2001). Therefore, ideas, the state, and the international community create contextual conditions for civil society, which cannot be perceived as a completely independent institution. Cooperation with the state and other political and ideological frameworks is what can support the advocacy potential of civil society while representing it as a counter-actor to the state is unrealistic (Edwards, 2001).

The Tocquevillian perspective might look like one romanticising civil society, unlike the Gramscian view. Whether CSOs can serve as agents of drastic change or agents of dialogue with the state is an ongoing theoretical debate. Over the years, the dominant narratives around CSOs have been shifting. Kofi Annan, in 2003, expressed a view that CSOs and, in particular, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are the new superpower. In the discourse offered by the UN, NGOs are presented as significant change agents, despite

scholars' scepticism (Whaites, 2000). NGOs are commonly perceived as the most powerful CSOs and as the "cornerstone of stable, moderate civil society in developing countries" (Boulding, 2014, p.21). However, civil society theorists continue to argue whether "NGOization" is a formula for socio-political success or a myth. Civil society theories offer us different loci for evaluating the role and influence of NGOs among other civil society organisations. This study is considerate of this theoretical debate and takes an observing position acknowledging that one way or another, NGOs have become visible actors worth our attention, but criticality is necessary when researching their role.

### *Critique of NGOs*

As other essential actors – states, intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), corporations, etc. – NGOs have been subject to scrutiny and critical analysis that revealed their numerous pitfalls. Many studies of NGOs since the 1990s revealed that NGOs have problems ensuring the sustainability of their activities and outcomes, often not bringing significant improvements in socio-economic conditions and political empowerment. The critique of NGOs offered by Raimann (2005) focuses mainly on humanitarian aid and democratic advocacy NGOs.

He explains that the rise of NGOs occurred in the 1980s and the 1990s when there was a rise in international funding and political support available for advocacy NGOs, especially in environmentalism, human rights activism, women's issues, and democracy promotion. Large international donors such as Canadian and European aid agencies were generously funding advocacy NGOs internationally, especially in developing countries. Such an increase in funding signified a policy shift among international donors away from supporting state-based institutions towards supporting NGOs presented as bottom-up civil society. Also, the United Nations, as well as other international elite institutions, spread the portrayal of NGOs as a highly significant and valuable civil society component in the global political arena and as organisations giving voice to underrepresented, marginalised groups, promoting real democracy. These shifts in funding and status led to the rapid growth of NGOs worldwide. Following this trend, in the late 1990s and 2000s, in response to that, criticism of NGOs emerged. According to Raimann (2005), five principal lines of NGO critique are the following:

1. NGO performance and effectiveness in achieving their set goals;
2. The problem of accountability and transparency;

3. The question of autonomy and dependence on external funding;
4. Commercialisation and rise of competition among charity organisations;
5. Critique of Western ideological and political influence imposed on NGOs.

Pillay (2010), on the example of the Ethiopian NGO sector, argues that an increased presence of international NGOs (INGOs) in developing countries can lead to neo-colonial penetration of the country by reproducing externally driven educational policy. Unlike grassroots organisations, INGOs collaborate with and in the socio-political interests of the upper echelons of the state, higher education institutions and multilateral development agencies. This trend also suggests that domestic NGOs, funded externally by international donor organisations, can become agents importing Western policy into their home country, affecting languages, cultures, and educational prospects in the country (ibid).

The critique of NGOs suggests that sources of input, such as resources that NGOs gain from donors, whether government or an international organisation, can affect the autonomy and impartiality of NGOs' outputs. Instead of following their agenda, they can become carrying agents of their donors' vision. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully consider the interdependency of NGOs with other. Another significant area of critique is the issue of the effectiveness of NGOs. This critique is important to reflect on the roles on NGOs critically.

### ***Systems Theory***

The systemic role of NGOs, in relation to other actors and forces in the education system, is another theoretical lens considered early in the study. A scientific account of a system was offered in 1968 by Bertalanffy in his book "General Systems Theory". He offers examples of systems theory thinking in biology, mathematics, physics, psychology, and education, among other areas, explaining it as a science of complex interaction of components (Nicolescu & Petrescu, 2016). Ghitescu (cited in Nicolescu & Petrescu, 2016) defined a system as a set of interconnected and interacting functioning elements achieving a common goal.

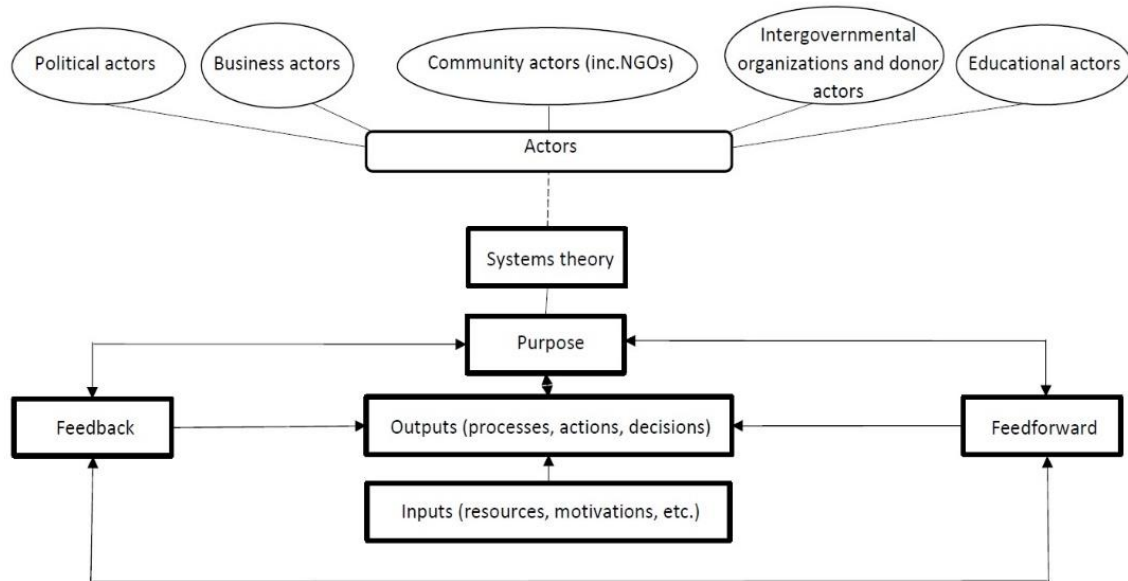
Social systems, unlike general systems in physics, biology, or some other natural sciences, require the presence of social actors. Actors define social system goals, invest inputs, produce outputs, and provide feedback. Belonging to a system, these numerous actors are interconnected and have various roles (Burns, Machado & Corte, 2015). The systems approach captures the interactions between actors within a broader system. That is especially

true of complex systems theory and chaos systems theory rather than linear theory. The linear theory views a system as closed, predictable, and straightforward, and it can often be relevant in natural sciences. In contrast, education is instead viewed as a nonlinear, complex, or chaotic system because it is dynamic, diverse in terms of its elements and interconnections, and often unpredictable and evolutionary (Mason, 2008, p. 19).

The main elements in general systems are inputs, outputs, and feedback (Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014; Meadows & Wright, 2008). Inputs are mainly resources invested in a system or expended to achieve the desired output. The resources include funding, information, people, or raw materials. Motivations, values, and incentives can also be viewed as inputs as different actors bring them into the system (Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014). In this context, outputs could be the results of the system, including processes, actions, and decisions made by different actors chasing their goal(s). Feedback is the mechanism of interaction between actors to negotiate desired outputs and, subsequently, to revise inputs accordingly. This approach suggests the interconnections of different elements that together form a system. Therefore, studying an element requires considering a system as a whole.

Among education system actors are international, national, or local stakeholders, public or private, formal or informal organisations, groups or individuals. Depending on a country's context, the list of actors can vary and expand. Robertson, Mundy, Verger, and Menashy (2012) described various hybrid public-private partnerships that emerged in education after the 2000s. Such partnerships include combinations of state and non-state actors engaged in different activities in the education sector. Partnerships differ across scales through interactions between local, regional, and national governments, intergovernmental organisations, business companies, NGOs, philanthropies, and other community actors (*ibid*). To connect the systems theory with the account of education system actors, I drafted a diagram below as part of my theoretical reflection process:

**Figure 1.** *Systems theory model (author's model)*



Educational applications of the systemic perspective suggest that certain elements, interconnections, and purposes form a system of education (Meadows & Wright, 2008). Following this logic, this study at its early stages considered applying the systems theory to inclusive education. Inclusive education has already been studied from a systemic perspective (Ainscow, 2005; Robinson-Pant, 2020), even though NGOs were not the central actors in such research. The benefit of systems thinking remind me as a researcher to evaluate the engagement of NGOs in inclusive education not only in terms of their direct contributions, but also in terms of their interaction with other actors in education.

Although systems theory could provide a valuable lens to this study, it would not fully capture the complexity of the NGOs' role in education. As systems theory suggests evaluating the role of NGOs from the perspective of their interaction with other actors through a feedback mechanism, it limits us in looking deeply at driving factors behind NGOs' work, their visions, perspectives, struggles or concerns, and other dimensions of engagement. It neglects the historical and contextual dimensions of education systems. In addition, system theory does not successfully offer ways to effectively apply it to analysing various social phenomena (Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2014). The theory is quite broad to guide a research inquiry systematically and coherently, yet oversimplified and technical (ibid). Despite holding a position that inclusive education operates as a system and evaluation of the role of NGOs in IE are plausible when examined in relation to this system, the methodology could not be directed by this framework. In order to approach the exploration of NGOs'

engagement, this research acknowledges a more fundamental paradigm that influences the choice of the methodology of this study, the paradigm of constructivism.

### *Constructivism*

Constructivism, both as an epistemology and a research paradigm, strongly influenced this study's research approach and methodological design. Constructivism is not a theory as it does not explain social phenomena, but it is a way of studying social phenomena and relations. In the most fundamental sense, constructivism is the viewpoint that human beings are social beings, and social relations construct people's thoughts, behaviours, and actions (Onuf, 2012). In other words, constructivism maintains that humans construct their understandings or knowledge by interacting with their beliefs and social experiences (Ültanır, 2012). Through social interactions and relations, through our words and actions, we create the world as it is (Onuf, 2012). Therefore, social constructivists seek to make sense of the social objects constructed and organised by humans by analysing social discourse from recorded data (Bogna, Raineri, and Dell, 2020). Data are gathered through natural discourses (observations, interviews, focus groups) where the researcher is an observer and recorder (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). In contrast, the researcher allows for an interpretation of the world as research participants see it (Bogna, Raineri, and Dell, 2020).

Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) offer an account of the system theory from a constructivist perspective as a theoretical foundation for research on inclusive education. The theoretical perspective should help different actors in the educational system identify and reflect on how they are conversing and what types of communication they are constructing so that they can understand how they contribute to inclusion.

While there are some similarities between systems theory and constructivism, they operate on different levels of analysis. Systems theory emphasises the interdependence and dynamic interactions between actors in the system, while constructivism emphasises the subjective interpretation and context of actors' understanding of inclusive education. When applied to the study of NGOs' engagement in inclusive education development, the systems theory would focus on analysing the relationships between NGOs and other actors in the system, such as governments, schools, communities, and other stakeholders. It would frame the exploration of NGOs' engagement in IE into examining how NGOs interact with these actors, the feedback mechanisms involved, and the overall impact on the system.

In contrast, constructivism is a paradigm that focuses on the importance of subjective interpretation and context in learning and knowledge acquisition. When applied to the study

of NGOs' engagement in inclusive education development, constructivism suggests analysing how NGOs construct their understanding of inclusive education, how their experiences and context shape this understanding, and how this influences their behaviour and decision-making. Thus, this research and its methodology were further driven by a constructivist lens to ensure a more fundamental and broader account of NGOs' roles.

Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 105) further define a research paradigm of constructivism as “the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in the choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways”. The constructivist paradigm “assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p.32). This epistemological stance best reflects the philosophical positioning of me as a researcher. This research assumes that inclusive education is a social construct, an idea of just and equal educational opportunism, which humans created in the light of the era of social modernisation and larger rights-based discourses. The research further holds that non-governmental organisations, as part of the more extensive civil society development, are socially constructed institutions that also develop in modernisation (Onuf, 2012). Thus, researching the engagement of NGOs in IE is an attempt to deconstruct or, instead, reconstruct the multiple realities of NGO agents, their constructions of IE, and their engagement in IE by analysing how they communicate about those.

## **Chapter Summary**

The Central Asian states are in a historical transition to inclusive education reform, although numerous commonly shared barriers persist and require a deeper understanding and evidence-based decisions. Studying inclusive education development in the Central Asian region is justified for several reasons. Firstly, this is a relatively under-researched area and region in education studies and presents a particular gap in the scholarly literature (Rose & Lapham, 2013). Secondly, the countries share many similarities in their struggle for inclusive schooling. Each country claimed a commitment to promote and strengthen inclusive education. It is evident from signing the UNCRPD and the UNCRC and recognising inclusive education in the national Laws on Education and the Concepts for Inclusive Education. However, the countries face such struggles as cultural stigmatisation, the Soviet institutional legacy of specialised education, limited expertise in this area and scarce resources.



More research is needed to understand how to overcome these shared barriers and inform policy development. Exploring the efforts of stakeholders who contribute to developing inclusive education is important because even though the government issues the laws and policies to support inclusive schooling, barriers at the societal level and the school level persist. Research that addresses how these obstacles are dealt with could inform decision-makers and other stakeholders about gap areas and evidence-based recommendations for improving inclusive education reform.

The role of NGOs in this regard has been an overlooked topic in research in general. We have limited knowledge of what outcomes NGOs produce based on isolated case studies, but more is needed to explore why and how they engage in inclusive education, particularly in the countries of Central Asia. Exploring this phenomenon in depth would allow evaluation of the impact of NGOs on inclusive education in the region. Lastly, the present research would contribute to a larger body of knowledge on the Central Asian context and could contribute to more meaningful discussions in international education policy.

At last, this chapter discusses the influence of constructivism as an epistemology and research paradigm on a study of NGOs' engagement in inclusive education development. Constructivism is seen as a way of studying social phenomena and relations, with the viewpoint that humans construct their knowledge through social experiences. A constructivist lens drove the research methodology to ensure a broader understanding of NGOs' roles in this area.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter presents the grounded theory (GT) methodology, its core principles, procedures, as well as its philosophical underpinnings, which were employed to address the study's research questions and aims. According to Charmaz (2014), the grounded theory method offers systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing research data in order to generate a theory explaining a social phenomenon. Here I explain exactly how I applied the constructivist GT method proposed by Charmaz and why.

In this chapter, emphasis is placed on the methodological stages of data collection. Specifically, there were three stages including the initial analysis of national policy documents on inclusive education in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the following and the most essential two-stage interviews with national NGOs, as well as interviews with international donor organisations. After explaining these stages in depth, this chapter further explains how coding and data analysis procedures were applied for the purpose of theory generation.

Finally, this chapter presents an account of the theory validation approach as well ethical issues related to the study and how they were managed.

### **Methodology Rationale**

The nature of the issues and aims of this study immediately suggested the use of a qualitative methodology. A qualitative research design generally aims to gather data concerning human events and experiences which would, if reduced to numerical form, lose most of their important meaning for research (Coolican, 2017). Though there could be great benefit in employing a quantitative approach to test or measure the engagement of NGOs in IE, this research had the particular aim of exploring the qualitative factors behind this phenomenon. Specifically, the goal was to understand the contribution of NGOs to IE through their actions, agendas and strategies, as well as to explore the meaning NGOs assign to their work on IE. Also, this study began with no hypothesis, as the research on this subject was fractured and insufficient for making meaningful causal links. Therefore, there was a need to employ a qualitative inductive methodology.

Grounded Theory (GT) approach was identified as the most appropriate qualitative inductive methodology for the purpose of this study. Grounded Theory is a qualitative methodological approach aimed at generating a theory that explains a social phenomenon (Birks & Mills, 2015; Gelling, 2011).

Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves...

Grounded theory begins with inductive data, invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods, and keeps you interacting and involved with your data and emerging analysis. (Charmaz, 2014, p.1). GT often include various data sources that contribute to theory development.

Commonly used data sources include interviews, observations, document analysis and, sometimes, quantitative data. The analysis process is rather inductive, iterative, and uses comparison (Kinnunen & Simon, 2012). The outcome of a GT research design is a well-supported and rigorously developed theory that can be used to explain and understand the experiences, behaviours and motivations of the people being studied (ibid). The purpose of GT design aligned with the purpose of this study.

Before explaining in detail why GT was identified as the most appropriate methodology, I would justify the choice of GT using reductive reasoning.

As the experience of NGOs was at the core of this inquiry, a researcher could immediately lean towards a phenomenological design or interpretivist phenomenological analysis (IPA). In fact, during the early stages of constructing a thesis proposal, this methodological and philosophical approach was considered. Phenomenology is concerned with exploring the lived experiences of humans (Schutz, 1967). A phenomenological design for this study would enable an understanding of how NGOs experience their work in regard to inclusive education. In fact, this approach seemed very similar to the purpose of the present research study. However, two arguments emerged which militated against the use of a phenomenological design. Firstly, it would not offer the strongest possible explanation, thus limiting this study to a descriptive or interpretive account of the personal experiences of those involved in NGOs. Though personal lived experiences would be crucial to answer the research questions of this study, they may not have been enough to fully explain and conceptualise how and why NGOs engage and succeed, or fail, in their efforts to advance IE in selected countries. Therefore, the application of this methodology would require a revision of research questions and purposes. Secondly, phenomenological design would limit the use of interviews as the principal data for analysis. However, to explain how and why NGOs engage in IE reform may need more data points than personal interviews. Since phenomenology did not offer the strongest methodological approach to answering the

research questions, GT was identified as the most appropriate and flexible qualitative methodology for this inquiry.

GT allows theories concerning social issues to be constructed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 2008). As there was a scarcity of literature explaining how and why NGOs engage in IE development, the need for theory generation became evident. The aim to generate a theory, model, or framework positioning NGOs within inclusive educational reform was the primary reason for choosing GT methodology. In addition, GT begins with general research questions rather than narrowly framed or preconceived hypotheses (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 2008). The nature of my wide and openly framed research question aligned with the GT method of application.

Though the choice of methodology was guided by the research question and purpose, it is fair to acknowledge the influence of my stance as a constructivist as well. For example, I could not envisage a positivist way of understanding how and why NGOs engage in the inclusive educational process. Positivists believe that reality is external and independent of our perceptions, and that it can be studied and understood through objective, systematic observation and analysis (Armstrong, 2013). In contrast, constructivists believe that reality is not fixed or objective, but is constructed through our interactions with others and our social and cultural environments. This means that our understanding of the world is influenced by our experiences, beliefs and values, and is constantly being negotiated and constructed through our interactions with others (ibid). In my understanding, NGO engagement in IE addresses a complex social phenomenon which may depend on how NGOs navigate their historical and political contexts, what meaning they assign to their work, which networks and partnerships they rely on, how they interpret their own role, and other possible questions. In other words, the engagement of NGOs is not a static fact to be discovered empirically but rather a dynamic process to be interpreted and constructed primarily through individual voices, interpretations and the experiences of the NGOs. This positioning within a constructivist paradigm is important as it was the first step in designing a grounded theory study because it affected the data selected and the methods employed (Birks and Mills, 2015). The following section will address the theoretical position in greater depth.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

There are several recognised theoretical schools of thought, or approaches, to the grounded theory. Originally, these differences emerged from the disciplinary traditions of post-positivism held by Barney Glaser and interpretivism held by Anselm Strauss (Birks &

Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). Both sociologists are considered to be the fathers of the GT method, which they produced in a successful collaboration before publishing "The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research" (1967). Both models are considered the most common GT models and overlap significantly. What united the two was the idea that by means of a systematic method of collecting qualitative data, a researcher can develop a new theory of social science. Yet there are philosophical as well as procedural differences that impact research design and data analysis (Cooney, 2010).

Howard-Payne (2016) summarised the ontological differences between the two schools of thought. Glaser's GT approach took an ontological position of critical realism, which held that reality could be seized to develop a grounded theory that resided in the data. This contrasts with Strauss's approach within pragmatic relativism, which viewed facts and knowledge as "restricted in the established consensus of a particular period, a consensus that is founded in multiple outlooks regarding a certain phenomenon" (ibid, p.52). This philosophical contradiction explains the subsequent divergence between the two sociologists. For example, whereas Glaser regarded a researcher as distant or detached from the data, Strauss envisaged the role of the researcher as being engaged and actively interpreting the data (Sebastian, 2019). Here is where another dominant school of thought emerged, the constructivist GT, represented largely by Kathy Charmaz, who assigned the researcher a role as constructor rather than discoverer of the knowledge (ibid).

The constructivist approach treats research as a construction but acknowledges that it occurs under specific conditions - of which we may not be aware and which may not be of our choosing. (Charmaz, 2014, p.13).

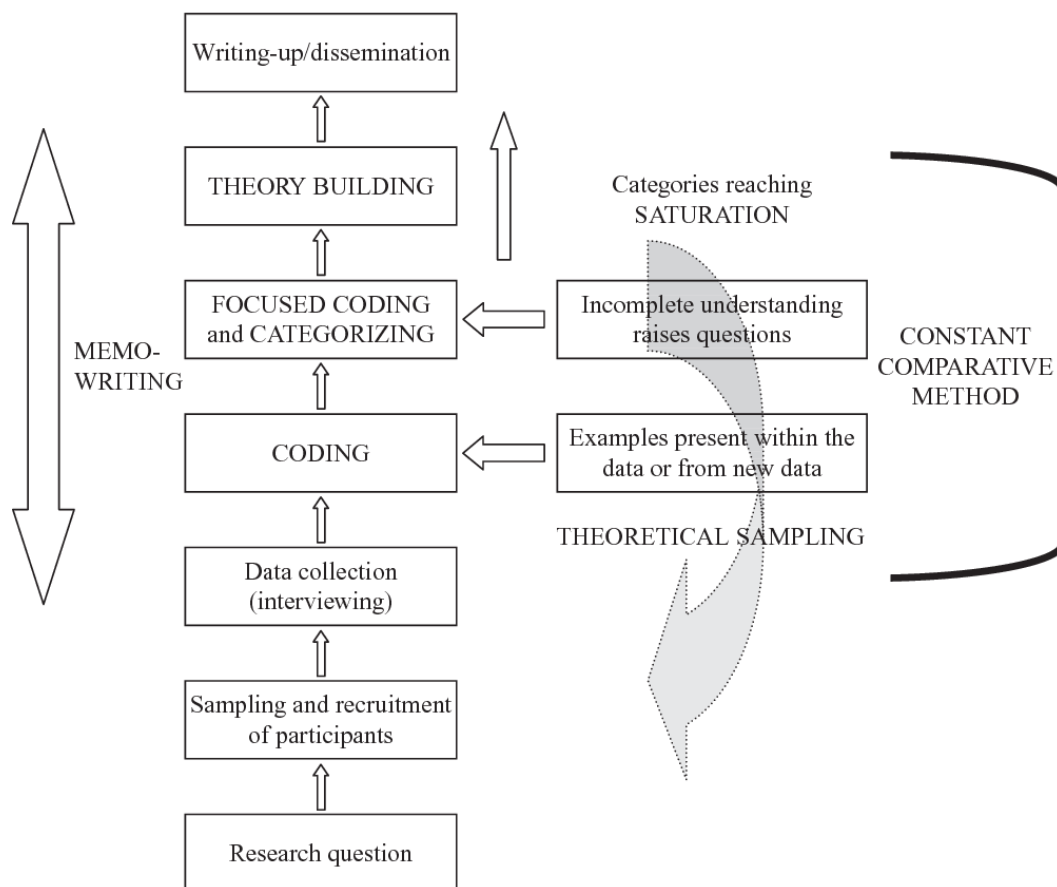
In other words, a constructivist perspective holds that knowledge is constructed by individuals through their interactions with the world around them, and that the researcher's role is to help reconstruct and interpret the meaning that is embedded in the data. This stance aligns with my personal position as a researcher in education. As a social scientist, it is my belief that knowledge and 'facts' are social constructs, and the emergent theory resulting from this study would be a construct as well, built by me and the participants in the study. By contrast, this research is not expected to conclude in a formal generalisable theory that could be tested for its validity in larger contexts, as per classic Glaser ideals. The ambition to theorise NGO engagement in IE reform in the countries of Central Asia would be limited to the construction of a context-specific conceptual blueprint representing the multiple realities

of the research participants and data. This application of the constructivist lens shaped the research design in line with the methodological guidelines of Kathy Charmaz.

### Research Design Overview

Adopting a constructivist GT, the key elements of this methodology were implemented. The figure below briefly summarises the GT method in application.

**Figure 2.** A visual representation of a grounded theory (Tweed and Charmaz, 2011, p.133)



Firstly, the method commenced with a broadly defined research question. As was stated in the earlier sections, this study framed the following research question:

How do domestic NGOs engage in inclusive educational development in the Central Asian (CA) region?

Secondly, sampling and recruitment followed the theoretical sampling approach. This method involves selecting study participants or research sites based on their relevance to the developing theory, rather than using random or representative sampling methods. The data was further collected and the participants recruited based on initial analysis and emerging concepts to achieve theory generation (Charmaz, 2014). In other words, it was a purposive sampling used repeatedly, based on the analysis of existing data. This study followed theoretical sampling and culminated in a three-stage data collection process to be discussed in the following subchapter.

Thirdly, data collection and analysis took place simultaneously. There was no clear point when the data collection ended and the analysis began; instead I relied on the constant comparative method. It enables the generation of codes and themes at any and every stage of the data collection.

Fourthly, the analysis was conducted in a three-stage coding process including initial, intermediate and advanced coding. A detailed account of every coding stage is presented in the following chapter. The coding allowed extrapolation of the most significant themes and processes explaining the engagement of the NGOs in IE, which would further be categorised into a theoretical framework.

Lastly, the theory was emergent, meaning that every stage of data collection and analysis contributed to the development of the theory. The theory was finalised when data sufficiency point was identified.

These essential GT techniques, briefly summarised in this section, are at the foundation of this research design and presented in this chapter in more detail.

## **Data Collection Process**

In accordance with the GT method, I did not anticipate certain data sets and respondents at the onset of the data collection. Instead, I relied on theoretical sampling, allowing my inception data and analysis to guide my approach to further inquiry and data collection.

Acknowledging the value of data for the purpose of comparison and category development, this study collected several data types from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan:

- Governmental policy documents on IE
- Transcripts of interviews with NGO representatives
- Transcripts of interviews with international organisations' (IOs) representatives

The use of several types of data allowed the capture of a range of perspectives and provided richness of data. In fact, data to be used in a grounded theory study can take many forms including but not limited to interview transcripts, memos, governmental and organisational policy documents, images, scholarly literature, etc. (Birks & Mills, 2015). Yet participant interviews are the most common sources of data to be used as part of a grounded theory study, which often attempts to understand the perspectives of an individual or a group (Birks & Mills, 2015). This is especially justified from a constructivist standpoint, as the knowledge is believed to be constructed by the participants in focus and the researcher (Charmaz, 2014). The three stages of the data collection and analysis are presented below.

### ***Stage 1: Collecting Policy Documents***

Data collection at the inception stage was aimed at understanding how NGO engagement was framed by policy. This would allow an initial idea to be gained of the roles of NGOs at the national level and questions to be drawn up for the following interviews with NGOs. Therefore, policy documents on IE in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were initially analysed on the presumed or acknowledged engagement in and the roles of NGOs in the reform of IE in these countries.

In general, analysis of policy documents often supplements data collection in qualitative research to add rigour to a study (Cardno, 2018). Thus, documentary evidence can serve as a data source, in addition to interviews or participant observations, if it is relevant and feasible (Cardno, 2018; Charmaz, 2014). This is not the most common type of data to be included in GT studies, which tend to focus on conversational texts rather than the formal ones (Richards & Farrokhnia, 2016). Yet in this study, the policy analysis will help to explain the local context of the development of inclusive education and the politically defined roles of local NGOs to influence this process.

Even though domestic NGOs are supposed to be autonomous organisations independent of the nation-state, they are still registered under national laws and operate within the country. Governments generally believe that it is their legitimate right and responsibility to control what happens in their country (Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, & Wolf, 2002). Education is, in principle, an issue of social and political importance, so government regulation of NGOs to work in this field is understandable (ibid). The amount of space allowed to NGOs in any given country is determined by policies and laws regulating the right to license, permitted area of operation, and other standards (Cardno, 2018; Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, & Wolf, 2002). The legal and political contexts matter when



evaluating NGO engagement in the reform of inclusive education. Therefore, I decided to analyse the policy texts of strategic-level national documents on IE. This analysis would promote initial understanding of both the vision for the development of inclusive education in Central Asian countries and the position of NGOs within this vision.

The following table summarises the policy documents considered and selected for analysis. The list includes major laws, policies and state programmes regulating the implementation of inclusive education in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which have been implemented at the moment of writing, as well as some documents that expired within the last decade though are still relevant in the current context.

**Table 2.** *Selected policy documents for analysis*

Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan
Law on Education dated 27 July 2007 (with amendments as of 12 January 2023)	Law on Education dated 30 April 2003 (with amendments and additions as of 15 February 2023)
State Programme for the Development of Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011–2020	State Programme for the Development of Education in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2021–2040
State Programme for the Development of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2016–2019	State Programme for Inclusive Education Development in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019–2023
State Programme for the Development of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2025	Concept of Inclusive Education Development in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019–2023
Conceptual Approaches to the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015	Action Plan for Inclusive Education Development in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019–2023
Amendments and Additions to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Inclusive Education dated 26 June 2021	

## ***Stage 2: Conducting interviews with domestic NGOs***

Understanding and reconstructing the engagement of NGOs in IE seemed impossible without hearing the opinions of the staff themselves. Therefore, semi-structured interviews with domestic NGO representatives served as the primary method of data collection in this study. In-depth interviews enabled the staff to voice their feelings about the roles they fulfilled in the reform of inclusive education.

In general, a semi-structured interview is a flexible and interactive form of data collection, well suited to GT studies, that allows a topic to be explored in depth while some control is maintained over the direction of the conversation (Conlon et al., 2015). I found it useful because it allowed me to probe for more information and follow leads that emerged from the data, while still pursuing lines of inquiry that were relevant to the emerging theory. Semi-structured interviews provided rich and detailed data that was well-suited to the inductive analysis central to grounded theory.

**Sampling procedures.** I started planning interviews with the staff by sampling. In the GT method, theoretical sampling is an iterative process that involves selecting participants or data sources based on their relevance to the research question and the emerging theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014). In other words, I used the data collected from previous participants or sources to inform the selection of subsequent participants or sources, to continually refine and develop the theory. Since analysis of policy documents showed early evidence of how NGOs are positioned in the development of IE reform, interviews with the staff were quickly identified as the next relevant data points. Yet, which NGOs did I need to interview? To collect the data from relevant NGOs, I defined the basic criteria for inclusion as the following:

- Should have had experience engaging in projects, discussions, or campaigns around inclusive education;
- Should have been active for more than one year to have at least minimal experience in this sector in order to be able to inform the study;
- Must be domestic, not international, as the literature review establishes clear differences between these two types of organisations.

When reflecting on who should represent the NGOs in the interviews, it became clear that there were different voices within each NGO. In order to allow more voices to be heard, interviews with each NGO were conducted in two stages with two types of respondents, front line workers as well as leaders/founders. Such interviewing methodology allowed me to gain

richer data and a broader understanding of the NGOs' engagement in the development of inclusive education.

Criteria for inclusion of the study respondents representing NGOs were the following:

- Must have been employed by the NGO for more than six months to have at least minimal experience in this sector to be able to inform the study;
- Should be knowledgeable about the activities of NGOs, especially the content and organisation of work. For example, an accountant unaware of the day-to-day operation of an NGO would not be a suitable interviewee;
- Must be willing to take part in the interview rather than be coerced by the leadership.

The ethics section contains more details of the study subjects and their treatment and protection.

Most NGOs were contacted via e-mail or the phone number available on their website or social media page. There were two NGO leaders who were reached personally via Facebook Messenger since public contact details had not been found. When domestic NGOs were approached, they were informed of the purpose of the study and its methodology. I also introduced myself as a PhD student researcher from the University of Cambridge as well as a former NGO worker from Kazakhstan, which would potentially help build rapport between me and the participants. Furthermore, I explained that interviewing would be conducted in two stages to add more information to the data. The first stage served the purpose of collecting the data regarding the NGOs' activities on the ground, so as to to unveil their action-based contribution to inclusive educational development. The second stage was concerned with more systemic questions regarding the work of NGOs, to understand their motives, vision, partnerships, etc. The participants were able to be appointed by the NGO staff themselves as they were trusted to know best who would be the most informed interviewee. In the introduction message, I would attach the PDF files including the information sheet as well as an informed consent form (refer to Appendix 1). Every NGO I reached out to replied to my e-mail, call, or message, and agreed to proceed with scheduling the interviews.

**Participants.** Six NGOs in each country were interviewed, making it twelve NGOs and twenty-two respondents in total. One respondent among NGO leaders (NGO04) decided not to take part in the interview without explaining why. Another respondent (NGO10\_R1) decided to speak as both the leader and frontline worker due to the wide nature of her work. Some NGOs operated in large cities such as the capitals, while others worked in non-

metropolitan regions and more remote areas. The table below introduces the NGOs by location and assigned research code names to the participants.

**Table 3.** *Interviewed NGO representatives*

NGO	Country	Region of operation	Interview with a frontline worker	Interview with a leader
NGO1	Kazakhstan	Almaty city	NGO1_R1	NGO1_R2
NGO2	Kazakhstan	Nationwide	NGO2_R1	NGO2_R2
NGO3	Kazakhstan	Almaty region	NGO3_R1	NGO3_R2
NGO4	Kazakhstan	Nationwide	NGO4_R1	NO
NGO5	Kazakhstan	Nationwide	NGO5_R1	NGO5_R2
NGO6	Kazakhstan	Pavlodar and nationwide	NGO6_R1	NGO6_R2
NGO7	Kyrgyzstan	Nationwide	NGO7_R1	NGO7_R2
NGO8	Kyrgyzstan	Nationwide	NGO8_R1	NGO8_R2
NGO9	Kyrgyzstan	Nationwide	NGO9_R1	NGO9_R2
NGO10	Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	NGO10_R1	NO
NGO11	Kyrgyzstan	Osh, Jalal-Abad	NGO11_R1	NGO11_R2
NGO12	Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	NGO12_R1	NGO12_R2

**Interviews.** Before interviewing, I considered how to establish a rapport with my participants in order to gather sensitive data about the NGOs (e.g. their relationship with other gatekeepers in IE or funding issues). Consequently, I referred to my own background as a former NGO member to explain that I empathised with the experiences of other NGOs. I also introduced myself as an independent researcher to show I had no vested interests or agendas. Being open and transparent about the purpose of my study, being polite in all communications, respecting the comfort and privacy of my participants, and ensuring strict confidentiality, were among my prioritised strategies to establish a rapport.

For the first stage, to obtain data about the initiatives, activities and projects of the selected NGOs, it was appropriate to interview the most knowledgeable staff members who worked directly on the project implementation. These could be frontline workers, project managers, or experts. A specific person was identified by the NGO staff themselves to partake in the interview. They were asked about activities that their NGO ran, how they saw their engagement in inclusive education in their communities, who they thought were their

main partners, and which enabling conditions and barriers to their work they identified. The interview was loosely semi-structured with open questions and a strong reliance on probing, with additional questions arising from each interviewee's narrative.

At the second stage, in order to learn about the systemic factors and larger vision behind the NGOs' work, it was useful to incorporate the views of NGO leaders such as a director, founder, or a chairperson. Therefore, similar semi-structured interviews were conducted with the person who had leadership/authority status. This two-stage interview process allowed richer data to be gained about the roles of domestic NGOs as well as multiple perspectives of the stakeholders at different levels in the organisations.

Below, I include initial interview questions (without probes) derived from my interview protocols for NGO frontline workers as well as NGO leaders. These questions were later refined several times at various stages of data analysis. However, the table below provides a look at some initial thinking at the onset of GT data collection:

**Table 4.** *Interview questions (without prompts) for NGO respondents*

Interview questions for NGO frontline workers	Interview questions for NGO leaders
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please tell me about your NGO. How long has it been active? What purpose does it serve?</li> <li>2. What is your role in the NGO? How long have you been involved with it?</li> <li>3. Why does your NGO work towards inclusive education? What is your mission in this respect?</li> <li>4. Can you describe the main project/activities your NGO carries out in inclusive education?</li> <li>5. How do you evaluate the outcomes and the impact of your NGO's work?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please tell me about your NGO. What is the scope of your work?</li> <li>2. What is your role in the NGO? How long have you been involved with it and why?</li> <li>3. What are the main goals and motivations behind the NGO's work? Why was it founded?</li> <li>4. What is your NGO's vision for developing inclusive education in your country?</li> <li>5. The law on IE in your country frames the role of NGOs as primarily involved in monitoring and evaluating IE development. Do you think your NGO's scope of work fits</li> </ol>

<p>6. How do you ensure the best results in your NGO's work? Which mechanisms, strategies and platforms do you rely on in your work?</p> <p>7. Who are your main partners in this work?</p> <p>8. What are the bottlenecks and barriers you face in your work?</p> <p>9. What would your NGO need to deliver better results?</p> <p>10. How do you understand your NGO's role in IE development?</p>	<p>within the framework outlined by the policy?</p> <p>6. What resources do you employ or need to achieve your goals? Could you share where you obtain these resources?</p> <p>7. To what extent do your funders have an influence on your work?</p> <p>8. Which actors form your main networks in work concerning IE?</p> <p>9. How would you evaluate effectiveness of the NGO's engagement in IE?</p> <p>10. What are the enabling factors contributing to your success as well as major barriers you face?</p> <p>11. How would you define your NGO's role in IE development? Think of your influence, success and limitations.</p>
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### ***Stage 3: Conducting interviews with international organisations***

As I was halfway through collecting the interview data, it became clear that many NGOs had close relationships with their international partners. These international organisations (IOs) often provided funding and capacity-building opportunities to the NGOs.

The international organisations have the capacity to influence the agendas of governments and domestic civil society through binding agreements and funding provision (Macarchuk, 2018). In Kyrgyzstan, international organisations have been the primary funders of local NGOs (ICNL, 2017). In Kazakhstan, the primary source of funding for domestic NGOs is state funding in the form of 'social orders' and grants (ICNL, 2017). Yet, international donors come second, while other sources of funding such as business support or self-funding are less commonly sought (INCL, 2017; Kalymzhanova, 2019). Therefore, it seemed reasonable that to evaluate the role of domestic NGOs in the development of

inclusive education, this research should include interviews with international non-state actors who serve as funding providers and capacity-building institutions locally.

**Sampling procedures.** As soon as I started to map out potential IO participants based on the interviews with the NGOs, it became clear that there is a broad variety of non-state donors. There are international NGOs (INGOs) such as the Soros Foundation or the SOS Children's Villages. There are also IGOs (intergovernmental organisations) such as the UN agencies, OECD, etc. In addition, there are international financial institutions (IFIs) and funding platforms such as the World Bank and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Lastly, there are international diplomatic missions, embassies, international corporations and other international organisations (IOs). The purposive sampling of IOs was guided by the narratives of the NGO participants, in that six key IOs were repeatedly mentioned. All six were contacted via e-mail with an introduction by the researcher and the research study; five replied and agreed to partake in the study.

**Participants.** The following table summarises the types of international organisations interviewed.

**Table 5.** *Interviewed IO representatives*

IO	Country Office	Type of organization
IO1	Kyrgyzstan	INGO
IO2	Kazakhstan	INGO
IO3	Kyrgyzstan	IFI
IO4	Kazakhstan	IO
IO5	Kazakhstan	IO

Overall, five international donor organisations, which operate in the Central Asian region and fund the inclusive educational initiatives of domestic NGOs, were interviewed. As some organisations have offices in both countries, it was possible to interview two respondents even though they represented a single organisation. This happened with the participants IO1 and IO2, who represent one international organisation.

**Interviews.** There was one round of interviews with the respondents working at such organisations and running projects regarding inclusive education. The selection of the most informed participant was made in each IO without the active intervention of the researcher. A separate interview protocol was designed for IO participants. The specific questions addressed to them are laid out in the following interview protocol:

**Table 6.** *Interview questions (without prompts) for IO representatives*

Questions for IO representatives
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Could you introduce your organization? What purposes does it serve?</li> <li>2. What role do you think you play in inclusive education development in the CA region?</li> <li>3. What is the role of domestic NGOs in inclusive education development?</li> <li>4. How could you describe your collaboration with these domestic NGOs? How do you influence one another?</li> <li>5. What kind of funding opportunities do you offer to NGOs? Do you know of other funding sources available to them?</li> <li>6. Could you give examples of your collaboration with NGOs in IE?</li> <li>7. Do you think inclusive education reform is initiated and governed from the bottom-up or from the top-down? Why?</li> <li>8. Who are the most important actors in this process? How would you place NGOs within this actors' network?</li> <li>9. There is an argument that as INGOs fund NGOs, the latter become somewhat dependent on the former and lose a degree of autonomy. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement and why?</li> </ol>

The main questions concerned the influence donors can have on NGOs, funding opportunities provided, the mechanisms of interaction and cooperation, and the perceived role of the domestic NGOs in inclusive education. All interview transcripts were analysed in line with the GT method, and the procedures for analysis are reported below.

### **Data Analysis**

One advantage of the GT method is that it utilises a systematic framework for data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By fracturing the data into codes and categories, identifying patterns in the data, and establishing plausible connections between conceptually



labelled themes, I was able to generate a theoretical framework in response to the research questions.

Coding is a common approach in qualitative analysis, but the grounded theory method relies heavily on specific coding procedures. Thus, Charmaz (2014) offers three levels of coding: initial, focused and theoretical. Another distinction of the GT method is that the codes emerge from the data rather than from preconceived conceptual frameworks or literature. Below, I explain how my codes emerged and were further analysed for the purpose of theory generation. I start the description of my data analysis with the account of NVIVO software and memo writing process, which were both instrumental in coding.

### ***NVIVO***

For data storage, management, coding and analysis, I relied on NVIVO software. Early on, I started uploading each policy document and interview transcript to NVIVO and assigning it to a relevant folder, helping me to store the files systematically. I had folders for policy documents, interviews with NGOs, and interviews with IGOs.

I used in-vivo and thematic coding functions to generate a set of ‘nodes’, which would then be merged together, split, structured as parent-child nodes, revised, or deleted. It is worth mentioning that I may use the words ‘code’ and ‘node’ interchangeably, since a node is a term used to define codes in NVIVO. For the purpose of analysis, I also downloaded Codebook, which is a list of all codes/nodes generated and sorted within NVIVO software, available for downloading in a single word document. Thus, NVIVO was instrumental in data management, analysis and interpretation, contributing to the generation of an evidence-based, theoretical framework.

**Figure 3.** *Snippet of NVIVO use for this research*

The screenshot shows the NVivo 12 Pro interface. The main window displays a list of nodes under the 'Nodes' tab. The nodes are organized into a table with columns: Name, Files, References, Created On, Created By, Modified On, and Modified By. The nodes are listed in a hierarchical manner, with some nodes expanded to show sub-nodes. The 'Files' column shows the number of files associated with each node, and the 'References' column shows the number of references. The 'Created On' and 'Modified On' columns show the dates and times when the nodes were created and last modified, respectively. The 'Created By' and 'Modified By' columns show the user who created and last modified the nodes.

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
autonomy of NGO questioned	2	2	09.06.2022 10:33	KR	10.06.2022 15:52	KR
Building networks with a variety of actors	22	133	13.05.2022 11:10	KR	14.06.2022 10:23	KR
Complexing organizational structure	18	80	03.05.2022 9:43	KR	27.05.2022 13:21	KR
Defining beneficiaries	10	30	05.05.2022 10:17	KR	26.05.2022 9:41	KR
Defining enabling conditions for NGOs work	15	37	13.05.2022 11:23	KR	10.06.2022 15:45	KR
Donors as catalysts for positive change	1	1	09.06.2022 13:22	KR	09.06.2022 13:22	KR
Facing barriers to work	19	74	13.05.2022 10:07	KR	13.05.2022 11:43	KR
Highlighting outputs (functions) of NGOs	25	390	13.05.2022 11:20	KR	28.05.2022 13:37	KR
IGO roles	2	2	09.06.2022 13:01	KR	14.06.2022 11:16	KR
IGOs as capacity builders in IE, training teachers	1	1	09.06.2022 12:14	KR	09.06.2022 12:14	KR
Impact of COVID-19	7	12	04.05.2022 17:46	KR	14.06.2022 11:25	KR
Indirect inclusion agenda	2	3	09.06.2022 12:08	KR	09.06.2022 20:10	KR
Initiative of NGOs	1	3	13.06.2022 18:07	KR	14.06.2022 10:10	KR
Initiative taken by the parents	9	26	03.05.2022 9:57	KR	14.06.2022 11:08	KR
IOs setting international development trends	2	2	10.06.2022 15:51	KR	14.06.2022 11:08	KR
Motivational inputs	21	226	12.05.2022 16:05	KR	14.06.2022 11:08	KR
National priorities and strategies in agenda	3	5	09.06.2022 12:17	KR	14.06.2022 11:55	KR
NGO&IGO mutual dependency	2	2	09.06.2022 13:17	KR	14.06.2022 11:08	KR
Not primary drivers but drivers along the way	2	2	10.06.2022 15:50	KR	14.06.2022 11:08	KR

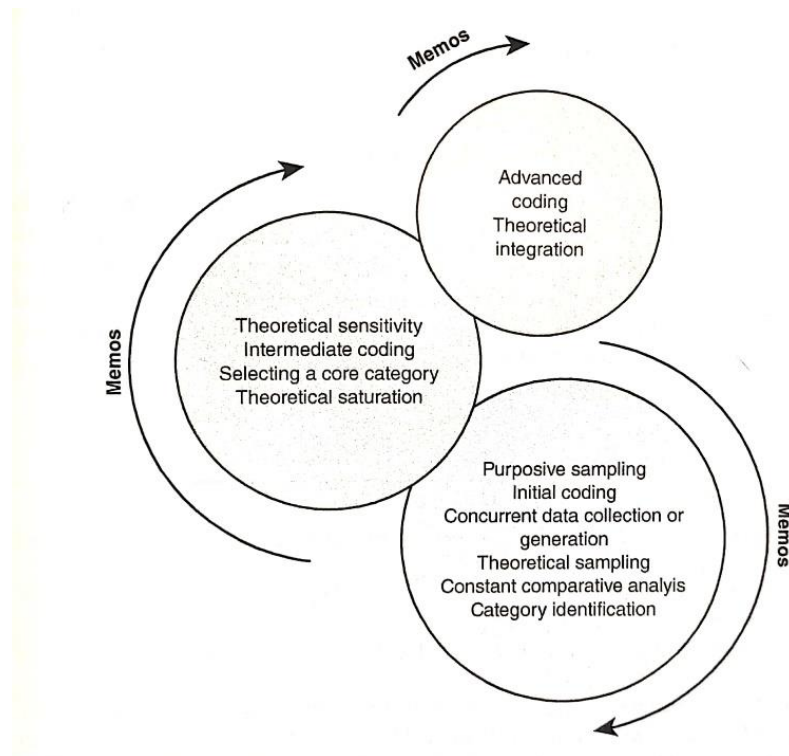
While NVIVO was an instrumental software for data analysis, there was another analytical support I relied on throughout the process, i.e. memos.

### ***Memoing and constant comparative analysis***

Birks and Mills (2015, p.11) defined memos as “written records of a researcher’s thinking during the process of undertaking a grounded theory study”. Writing memos is an ongoing activity that helps build a researcher’s intellectual assets and achieve grounded theory findings (ibid).

Memoing was a key aspect of my constructivist grounded theory, as it allowed me to capture my thoughts, insights and observations throughout the research process. Memos were short written reflections that I used to record ideas, connections and interpretations of the data as they emerged. Memoing could take many forms, and I used typed notes, which I would regularly log into a word document file throughout the research process. Memos contributed greatly to a concurrent or continuous data generation. The figure below demonstrates that memos are produced at every stage of the GT method (Birks & Mills, 2015).

**Figure 4.** *Essential grounded theory methods (Birks and Mills, 2015, p.13)*



Overall, I produced seven written memos logged into a single word document file. Below is a short excerpt from one of my memos serving as an example.

**Table 7.** *Example of memoing*

Memo 2 (written after conducting first six interviews with NGOs)
<p>Identifying some of the gaps in the current data set allows reflection on further data collection. Which is why before moving onto ongoing data collection, I asked myself a question: "What is not present in the data at the moment?" and made the following notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The experience and motivations of NGOs run by the parents of children with SEND have not yet been captured as none of my respondents themselves were parents of children with SEND, even though they all spoke about the initiative coming from this group. Recruiting participants from this group could enrich my understanding of their position and roles.</li> <li>- More inputs would be helpful to understand the relationship between NGOs and state institutions as many participants point to the barriers to cooperating with the state while everyone somehow partners with state institutions anyway.</li> </ul>

- In the upcoming interviews, it would be advisable to inquire more of the role of social media.

- There have been a couple of mentions regarding the role of business partnerships in the work of NGOs, but not enough to extrapolate any meaningful reflections at this point, so including questions about it may help.

Based on these notes, I would like to modify my original interview questions...

This example demonstrates how I was relying on memos to capture my ideas and further analytical progression. By keeping a regular record of my interpretations, I was able to analyse the data in a more structured and rigorous way, and to maintain a reflexive approach to my coding and analysis.

Writing memos was based on my reflections on the data collection and analysis as well as on the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method is a process described by Glaser and Strauss (1968) and used in grounded theory (as well as in other qualitative research methods), in which a researcher draws comparisons between the data (or certain codes/categories) to contradict, expand upon, or support the existing data. It is quite a common-sense strategy for analysis, which aids the generation of a theory that is cohesive, consistent, and close to the data. I relied on this analytical strategy continuously, as captured in my memos.

**Table 8.** *Memo excerpt: constant comparative method*

Memo 3 (written after conducting twelve interviews with NGOs)
<p>After writing the second memo, I continued interviewing respondents 7-12. Mainly, during the interviews, I wanted to see how common the themes extrapolated at the first round of interviewing were for other NGOs.</p> <p>The procedures for data analysis were like those in the first steps, that is the data was associated with pre-defined nodes or otherwise recorded under new nodes. After coding, overall number of 195 nodes under 11 subcategories were recorded. No new subcategories appeared, and the new nodes could be easily attributed to one of those subcategories.</p> <p>During coding of the transcripts, certain themes were reinforced and expanded while several new nodes also emerged. For example, the theme of “governmental reshuffles” perceived as one of the barriers to cooperation with the state and promoting policy change was repeatedly brought up by the respondents.</p>

Now that I introduced NVIVO and memos as my analytical support tools, I would like to provide a detailed account of the data analysis procedures.

### ***Familiarisation with the Data***

The first step in the data analysis was familiarisation, or immersion into the raw data. It is a crucial step in the GT method, as it helps the researcher to develop a deep understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). Each policy document and, later, interview transcript, was actively read at least twice prior to the coding. Active reading implies questioning and reflecting on the content, implications, connections and language used in the text. When a piece of data was read, I considered some of the following questions:

- What are the key ideas and recurrent themes in the text?
- Are there any outstanding ideas or themes?
- How do ideas in the text connect with one another?
- What does the text say explicitly versus implicitly?
- What assumptions are made in this text?
- What is left unsaid?
- What language is used and why?
- How does this text answer my research questions?

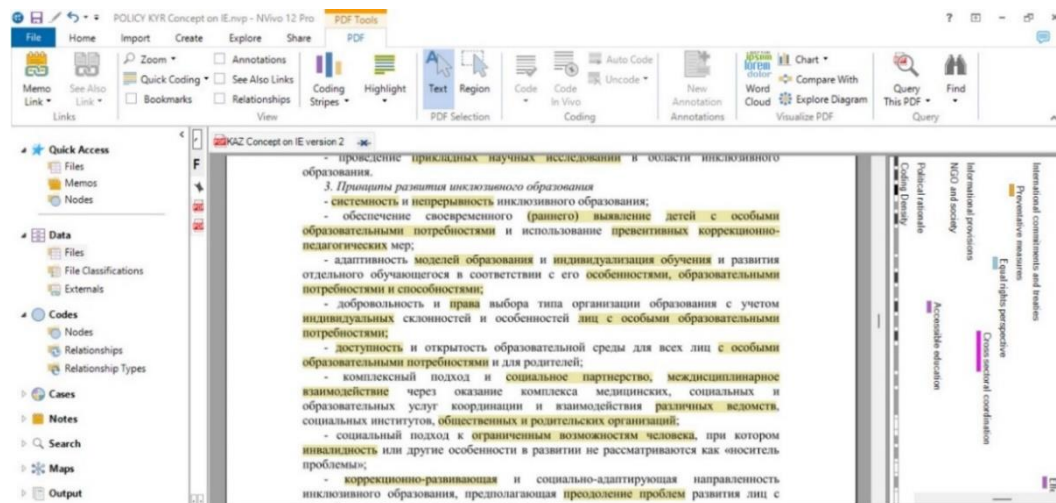
Asking such questions meant I was interacting with the data, interpreting and assigning meaning to it. These questions were helpful to make sense of the data during coding, especially in its later stages. Also, answering these questions often enabled the compilation of a list of questions for the following interviews. During the earlier stages though, there was a higher degree of reliance on open line-by-line coding without much ambition to immediately identify recurrent themes. The purpose of early data familiarisation was to make sense of the data and eventually construct the initial codes. Ultimately, how we make sense of the data shapes the ensuing analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

### ***Initial coding***

Once the data was gathered and familiarised with, the process of data analysis started with constructing the initial codes (Birks & Mills, 2015). The difference between the initial coding and the other stages of coding is in sticking closely to the data without applying pre-existing categories (Charmaz, 2014). I relied on line-by-line coding using a mix of thematic

and in-vivo coding techniques with a stronger reliance on the latter to capture language used by the participants.

**Figure 5.** Example of NVIVO-assisted analysis in practice



**Table 9.** Example of initial coding (text retrieved from NVIVO)

Initial line-by-line codes	Policy text (translated from Russian)
	3. Principles of development of inclusive education
systemic approach	- systemic approach and continuity of inclusive education;
early identification of SEN	- ensuring timely (early) identification of children with
preventative correctional pedagogical measures	special educational needs and the use of preventive
adaptability of education	correctional and pedagogical measures;
individual approach	- adaptability of education models and individualisation of
educational needs & abilities	training and development an individual student in
rights-based approach	accordance with their characteristics, educational needs and
aptitudes and specialities	abilities;
persons with SEN	- voluntariness and the right to choose the type of
accessibility	educational organisation, taking into account individual
persons with SEN	aptitudes and specialities of persons with special
complex social partnership	educational needs;
	- accessibility and openness of the educational environment
	for all persons with special educational needs and for
	parents;

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<b>interdisciplinary</b>	- a complex approach and social partnership,
<b>interaction</b>	interdisciplinary
<b>coordination and</b>	interaction through the provision of a complex of medical,
<b>interaction</b>	social and educational services, coordination and
<b>public &amp; parent</b>	interaction of various departments, social institutions,
<b>organisations</b>	public and parent organisations;
<b>disability rhetoric</b>	- a social approach to disability, where disability or other
<b>developmental</b>	developmental specialties are not considered as a
<b>‘specialties’</b>	“troublemaker”...
<b>‘troublemaker’</b>	

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I carefully read the text of each policy document and, later, interview transcripts to identify the main words, groups of words, or themes and labelled them, constructing codes. This interactive process resulted in the creation of the first codes, or nodes as they are referred to in the NVIVO programme. Initial coding was provisional because I remained open to other analytical possibilities. I was renaming, revising, merging, or deleting initial codes if they would best fit the data or capture its meaning.

When carefully reading the subsequent interview transcripts, new data in the form of words or quotes were linked to these initial sets of codes, if relevant, or recorded as new codes/nodes. Even though at some point most of the newly emerging data could be attributed to one of the existing codes, the process of line-by-line coding was applied to every piece of data. Only once no new codes appeared was it possible to conclude the data saturation and move onto the more complex categorisation of data and intermediate coding (Birks & Mills, 2015). Therefore, inductive coding was not only grounded in the data and provisional, but also comparative, as constant comparison was crucial to establish analytic distinctions and to either link new data with the existing codes or construct new codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I briefly summarised this procedure more casually in my early memo:

**Table 10.** *Memo excerpt: initial coding*

Memo 2 (written after conducting first six interviews with NGOs)
<p>Early Memo 2 - Coding procedures</p> <p>After the first interview transcript had been coded and the codes were then revised/edited, 52 initial codes emerged. I did not find this sufficient to make meaningful connections and to engage with the theory development at this stage, and continued with collecting more data via interviews. Every interview proceeded with open line-by-line coding of the transcripts using NVivo software, and the process relied heavily on the constant comparison method as the new nodes were compared against and, if possible, matched up with the codes derived at earlier stages. If matching was not possible, then a new node would be recorded. For example, after coding the second interview transcript, 30 new nodes were derived. The very first transcript was read again and compared with the codes developed from the second transcript, and some information was matched with those latter codes. In such a way, the number of codes assigned in the first transcript increased from 52 to 57. I am glad I am using NVIVO to help me sort and organise these codes, because there is no way I'd be able to keep track of them manually...</p> <p>After continuous coding and comparison of the first six interviews with the local NGOs, the list reached 160 codes. At this stage, the number of new nodes started visibly decreasing as more information could be matched up with the previously defined codes. This was the point when as a researcher, I decided to pause and analyse the codes, my process of creating them, and potential relationships between them...</p>

***Focused coding***

Focused coding was the next major phase in data analysis, when initially constructed codes were carefully studied and compared to decide on the most significant and/or frequent codes. At this stage, I would refine some codes, merge them, or even code the codes. Similar to the initial coding, focused coding calls for use of the constant comparative method to assess and compare the initial codes and distinguish those with a stronger analytical power (Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, I used those analytically most sensible codes to analyse and conceptualise larger segments of data.

I had certain struggles around focused coding, described in the memo below:



**Table 11.** *Memo excerpt: focused coding*

Memo 2 (written after conducting first six interviews with NGOs)
Carefully reading the initial codes allowed links to be made between visible categories, and I firstly defined six thematic subcategories: Actors, Conditions, Functions, Motivations, Roles and Tools. During this process, I identified a problem of coding and categorising into general themes linguistically presented as nouns. Focusing on themes instead of actions and processes was moving me in the direction of descriptive analysis instead of being analytical/critical. This is where I decided to reconsider my coding strategy, come back to initial codes, and use focused coding strategy as proposed by Charmaz instead (2006). Specifically, I started analysing codes under each category and unwinding them to understand what exactly these codes were explaining. I was asking myself: “What process or actions do these codes describe?” and moved away from coding for themes to coding with gerunds (Charmaz, 2006)...

Focused coding for processes and actions allowed me to move from the level of codes (NVIVO: nodes) to the level of categories (NVIVO: parent nodes). Categories, also referred to as focused codes (Charmaz, 2014), are conceptual groupings of codes established in order to make meaningful connections in the initial data and to reduce the number of different pieces of data in the analysis.

**Table 12.** *Example of focused coding (text retrieved from NVIVO)*

Focused codes	Interview transcript retrieved from NVIVO
<b>building networks with stakeholders (governmental and international) demonstrating best practices building networks with stakeholders (NGOs) role as a change-maker engaging in legislation reform building networks with stakeholders (NGOs and governmental) role as a change-maker engaging in legislation reform providing methodological recommendations improving regulatory framework</b>	<p>R: There are so many. For example, in 2015 we held the first conference on autism, where foreign experts, government agencies and other stakeholders were invited. Then we wrote the first resolution for the government. In those years, Dariga Nursultantovna was Deputy Prime Minister, and we passed this resolution on to her. It turned out so fortunate that she visited the school where we implemented our project. We showed her a regular classroom attended by a student with special needs ‘accompanied by’ an assisting teacher. And then back in 2015, I created an expert council on the topic of inclusive education. There were NGOs that dealt with issues of autism, inclusive education, but they were scattered. At the same time, there was a need to change the legislation. I realized that there is a need and possibility to unite NGOs for certain goals and objectives. So, in 2015 I created an expert council, where I included representatives of state bodies from the Ministry of Health, Social Protection, Education, PMPC, Department of Education, that is, all key parties, including other NGOs. There were the Dara Foundation, Kasiyet Zholy, the Utemuratov Foundation, many parent organizations and so on. We've made a lot of changes.</p> <p>For example, by common efforts we have ensured that children with autism can study according to individual educational programs. I don't remember in which particular governmental decree... but it was adopted. We also worked a lot with by-laws, made methodological recommendations, and improved the regulatory framework. We promoted the introduction of an assistant teacher in the 77th resolution.</p>

These focused codes represented significant findings in the data but did not constitute wider conceptual connections or theoretical explanations yet. This theory-generating power appeared as a result of the following stage, the theoretical coding.

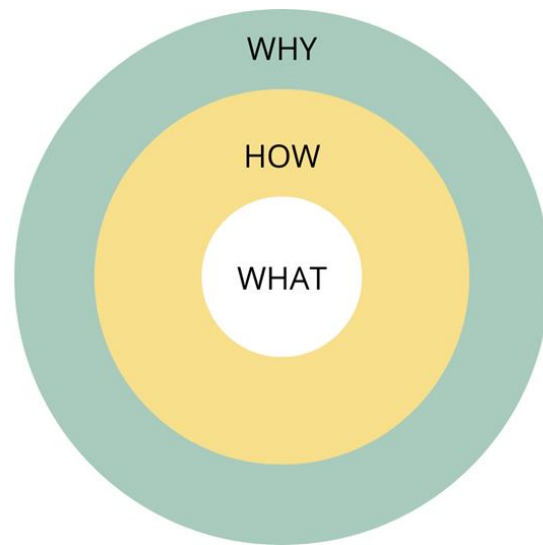
### ***Theoretical coding***

Birks and Mills (2015) referred to the final stage of a coding process as advanced coding. Charmaz (2014) rather used theoretical coding term. Despite terminological differences, the authors generally agreed that this sophisticated level of coding allows for theoretical integration of the data, which provides a comprehensive explanation of a phenomenon questioned. Thus, the goal of theoretical coding was to identify the key concepts or ideas that are present within the data and to use these to build a theoretical framework or conceptual model that explains the phenomenon being studied. I was doing it by asking myself the following questions:

- In which categories do my focused codes fit? What is the overarching (larger-picture) narrative?
- Which conceptual links do I trace among my focused codes? In what way are those codes linked?
- Which concepts can I derive that would have the power to ***explain*** the phenomenon of NGOs' engagement in IE in greater depth?

I found theoretical coding to be a highly reflexive and intellectually challenging process. I used mind mapping and diagramming as instruments to help me structure my analytical conclusions. For example, early on I derived the following diagrammatic framework, which allowed me to position and visually display the theoretical codes and their connections.

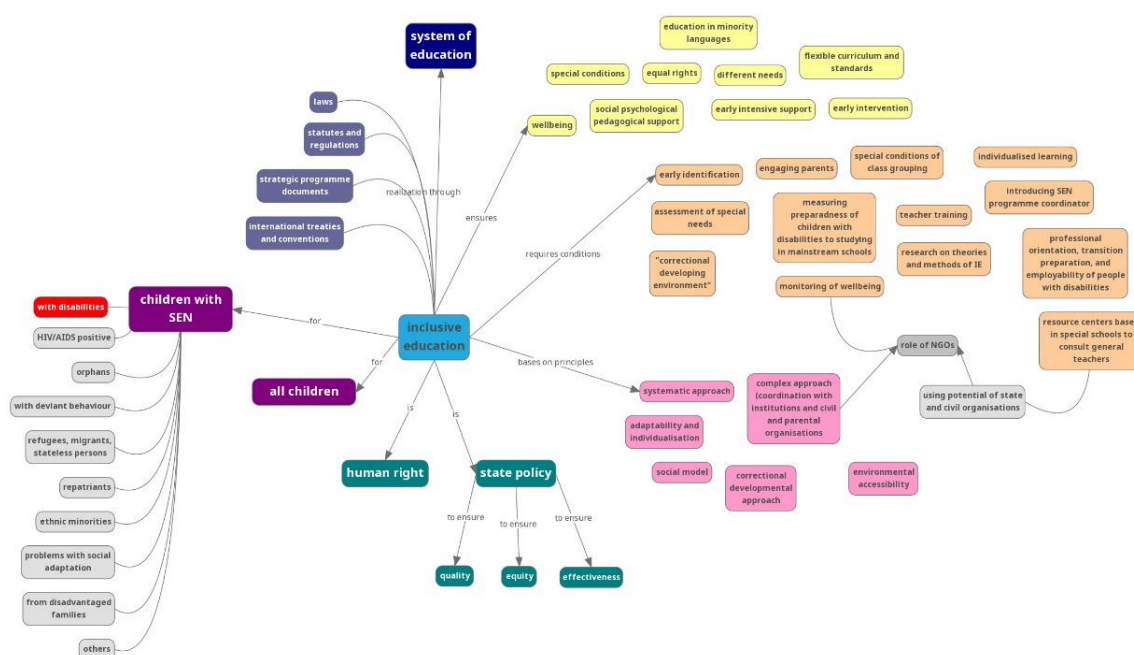
**Figure 6.** *The early-stage foundation for emergent theory*



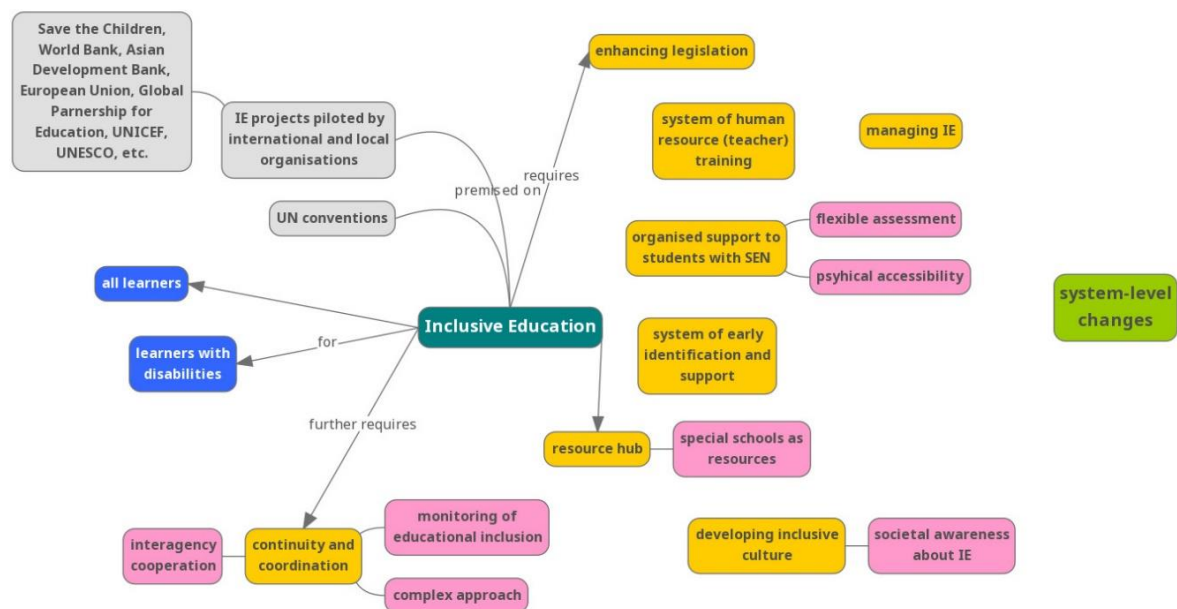
This simple diagram was based on my research questions, and it helped me to start thinking about my theoretical codes and the connections among them. I envisioned to connect themes regarding the roles that NGOs play in the central circle, themes regarding the strategies NGOs rely on in the middle circle, and themes about driving factors behind NGOs' efforts in the outer circle. I was aware that this simplification was dangerous to limit my analytical perspectives, but it eventually helped to sort and visualise the dozens of emerged themes in a manageable way.

Before using this diagram for theoretical coding, I ensured careful work with the themes in NVIVO, my memos, and various mind maps helping to establish connections between themes. Below are some examples of my mind maps from the policy analysis stage.

**Figure 7.** Mind mapping for analysis on the example of the Kazakh Concept for IE



**Figure 8.** Mind mapping for analysis on the example of the Kyrgyz Program for IE Development



Further results of theoretical coding are to be presented in the following chapters. Overall, this level of coding allowed me to develop a rich understanding of NGO engagement in IE in the selected countries, and to identify connections and relationships that might not have been apparent from the initial data analysis.

### ***Data Saturation***

Since GT is an emergent methodology, meaning it emerges during the iterative process of data collection and analysis, it was impossible to presume at which point the data collection would be finalised. The decision to terminate data collection in this study was guided by a principle of ‘theoretical sufficiency’. However, this is not the most common principle adopted by the grounded theorists, who historically favoured the idea of data saturation. For example, Charmaz (2014) argued that the data gathering should “stop when the properties of your theoretical categories are ‘saturated’ with data”. Saturation refers to the point at which new data does not spark any new theoretical insight and does not add more understanding to the theoretical categories, their properties and interconnections (ibid). In other words, data saturation refers to the point at which full theoretical understanding and complexity is reached in response to the research question. Charmaz (2014) herself pointed out that few studies satisfy such criteria of theoretical complexity, reach and level of abstraction.

My problem with reaching theoretical saturation involved three issues. Firstly, I might have been unable to access all the data I wanted to collect. My data collection depended largely on whether the study subjects were able and willing to participate in the study in the given data collection period. For example, I failed to arrange one follow-up (second-stage) interview with an NGO participating in my study simply because the representatives stopped replying to messages. Another respondent I tried to recruit refused to participate in the interview for personal reasons. Therefore, I was mindful of potential complications in aiming to reach data saturation.

Secondly, the resources of a PhD researcher are finite, especially when it comes to financial and time limitations. Collecting too much data can be time consuming and costly and can also lead to the need for extensive data management and analysis. Within a specified time-frame and research capacity, I might have had to ‘proclaim’ data saturation, once my resources were exhausted, rather than actually ‘reach’ it. Similarly, Wiener (2007) stated that saturation is not only a judgement but also the decision for ending the research, such as

running out of time or money. As a doctoral student without a research team and fund, I predicted that reaching data saturation could have been unrealistic. On the other hand, collecting too little data can result in a lack of depth and richness in the findings, and can make it difficult to develop a robust and comprehensive theory. Overall, the key challenge with data saturation in grounded theory is that it requires the researcher to strike a balance between collecting enough data to fully understand the phenomenon being studied, while avoiding collecting too much data that is irrelevant or unnecessary. This could have been a difficult balance to achieve, especially in the context of limited research resources.

My last concern with the theoretical saturation was how I viewed my relationship with the data. My categories and theoretical frameworks would be developed on the basis of my interpretation of the data. Therefore, I would have to make an interpretive judgement as to whether my data was saturated. Would my judgement of reaching ultimate data saturation be legitimate? How could I know for a fact that I had exhausted every possibility to ‘saturate’ my data? To avoid the burden of uncertainty and superficial judgement, I decided to aim for the more realistic idea of *data sufficiency* rather than *data saturation*. In other words, I gave up the attempt to reach ultimate data saturation in favour of collecting *sufficient* data to construct theoretical categories and the linkages between them.

In line with my own ontological stance, Dey (1999) suggested that the ambition to achieve theoretical saturation or the state of ‘knowing it all’ is imprecise and rather metaphorical. Instead, he proposed the term ‘theoretical sufficiency’, meaning a researcher is to stop data collection once a sufficient or adequate depth of understanding has been reached. Therefore, once I had reached an adequate depth of understanding and the point at which no new significant codes were emerging from the data, I terminated the iterative process of data collection and analysis (at the 27<sup>th</sup> interview) to focus on theory generation.

## **Theory Generation**

Since the final product of a grounded theory study is a theory, model, framework, or other product that provides a comprehensive explanation of an investigated phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014), theory generation is an essential process. Theory generation is the process of developing a theoretical explanation or model based on the collected data as well as emerging patterns and relationships in the data. To generate a theory, I had to look at my focused codes, theoretical codes, and the emerging relationship among them carefully and to compare those against my research questions again. Based on theoretical coding, I was able to construct a version of a conceptual framework that would explain the engagement of

NGOs in IE in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, my framework would cover what NGOs in these countries do concerning IE development, how they do it, and why. The results of my theory generation are presented in the following chapters.

Theory generation in GT methodology is an iterative process, and the theory that is developed may be modified and refined as more data is collected and analysed (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). I continuously engaged in theory generating in several ways. Firstly, during focused and theoretical coding, I conducted a theoretical sorting (Charmaz, 2014), which meant I was establishing the logic for organising my analysis and for building theoretical links among categories. Later, once I had reached the point of data sufficiency and completion of the theoretical coding, I continued generating my theory more deeply and drafted my first theoretical framework as a result of my data analysis. Finally, once the theoretical framework was constructed, I finalised theory generation with theory validation.

### **Validating the Findings**

On generating the theory, it was sensible to question the validity of constructed theory. Despite the contribution of participants, the process of theory generation is essentially undertaken by the researcher with a reliance on their own interpretation.

All research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feeling about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Some beliefs may be taken for granted, invisible, only assumed, whereas others are highly problematic and controversial. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.22 – in Birks & Mills, 2015).

Validating theory is a way to test whether the researcher's interpretation and generated explanation are relevant and valid and to discuss applicability of this theory/model/framework to other contexts (Adamy, et.al, 2018). Validation can also allow for the introduction of modifications, additions of new elements, or other improvements to the interpretation of an investigated phenomenon (ibid). There are several methodologies used to validate a theory. This study employed the method of conversation circles described in: "Validation in grounded theory: conversation circles as a methodological strategy", by Adamy, Zocche, Vendruscolo, Santos, and Almeida (2018). Conversation circles became more commonly used in constructivist educational research and were described as "a collective resonance method, consisting in creating spaces for dialogue in which people express themselves, listen to others and to themselves..." (ibid, p. 3122). Conversation



circles in grounded theory validation aim to construct a theory along with the study subjects by creating a space for a collective dialogue, open conversations, critical questions, opinion sharing and reflections on the study findings among relevant participants and stakeholders.

I used conversation circles as an opportunity to present and discuss my emergent theory with other stakeholders who were not included in the actual data collection process. The idea was to see if (1) the derived model would apply to the context of other NGOs, including NGOs from the Central Asian states other than Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and (2) would be perceived as valid by non-NGO actors and experts in the development of inclusive educational reform. Therefore, two conversation circles were conducted. The first one included NGOs from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The second one included non-NGO actors such as academic researchers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, a policy maker from Kazakhstan, and a non-donor IGO in Kazakhstan. The table below summarises the content of both conversation circles.

**Table 11**

*Overview of conversation circles*

	Conversation Circle 1	Conversation Circle 2
Objective	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To confirm whether the study findings and the derived model reference the experience of other NGOs working in inclusive education that were not included in the original data collection.</li> <li>2. To explore whether the study findings and the derived model would relate/transfer to the experience of NGOs from Central Asian states other than Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To understand whether the study findings and the derived model would be perceived as valid by non-NGO experts in the field of inclusive education and civil society from central Asian states</li> </ol>
Key question for discussion	To what extent does this model reflect the experience of your NGO in IE development?	To what extent does this model seem valid to you in terms of capturing the role of NGOs in IE development?

Number of participants	Five	Four
Profile of participants	<p>Leader of NGO focused on promoting social and educational inclusion of all children including those with disabilities in Kazakhstan</p> <p>Leader of NGO focused on promoting inclusive education in a region of Tajikistan</p> <p>Leader of NGOs run by parents of children with disabilities in Uzbekistan</p> <p>Leader of NGO advocating for the rights of people with disabilities in Uzbekistan</p> <p>Leader of NGO from Uzbekistan focused on development of inclusive education in Central Asia</p>	<p>Educational expert from UNICEF, Kazakhstan</p> <p>Civil society expert from Ministry of Information and Public Development, Kazakhstan</p> <p>Researcher in disability studies, inclusive education and development studies, Uzbekistan</p> <p>Researcher in disability studies, inclusive education, and social work, Kyrgyzstan</p>
Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation of the objectives of the study to the conversation circle</li> <li>• Self-introductions and greetings from each participant</li> <li>• Presentation of the methodological approach to the study</li> <li>• Presentation of preliminary study results and developed model</li> <li>• Open discussion of the results and model with minimal facilitation from the researcher</li> <li>• Summary of the comments and suggestions made during the meeting</li> </ul>	

Each conversation circle took over an hour and included self-introductions to establish a sense of knowing one another and having a friendly discussion, presentation of the research results by the researcher with a brief account of the research questions and methodology, and an open discussion session of about 45-50 minutes. The first conversation circle was conducted with NGOs and mainly concerned the applicability/transferability of the research

results. The second conversation circle posed the key question as the following: “To what extent does this model seem valid to you in terms of defining the role of NGOs in IE development?”

The participants, as experts and practitioners working with NGOs to promote inclusive education, provided a number of recommendations for improvement to increase the validity of the model in the manner of constructive criticism

## **Research Ethics**

Careful consideration of the ethics and well-being of respondents in the research was essential. Most participants in this study worked in inclusive education. Their work might have required working directly or indirectly with individuals and children with special needs and disabilities, with those whose rights for education had been violated or not fully fulfilled, with the parental communities and other marginalised social groups at risk of exclusion. They might also have interacted with the government and other authoritative power structures, which could have been a coercive factor in their work. The participants themselves might have been members of educationally and socially excluded groups; and taking in part in this study could have posed a risk of psychological retraumatizing or exposure to social and political threats if confidentiality was infringed. This section primarily outlines the approaches and steps that were taken to protect the well-being, safety and privacy of the study participants. These considerations are in line with the ethical guidelines for educational research of the British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018).

### ***Consent and voluntary participation***

The participants took part in the study with their informed consent. Potential study participants were contacted by the researcher online through e-mail, or other contact information available. At the first contact, I introduced myself and the purpose of the study and invited the NGO to consider taking part. Potential participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose and primary ethical considerations of the proposed research before deciding whether they would like to participate. The participants also received an informed consent form. After each participant had read the information sheet and the consent form, and if agreeable to partake in the study, were able to sign the consent form before the interview. In some cases, a signature was deemed unnecessary for whatever reason, but oral consent was provided before the interview. No recordings at any point were performed

without the informed consent of the participants. Every participant agreed to the interview being recorded.

The information sheet and the consent form (attached to the appendices) contained information on the voluntary participation of the subjects and their right to withdraw at any point. The participants were informed that they did not have to answer all the questions, and were free to skip any question or to withdraw altogether without providing a reason. They were able to withdraw their consent after giving the interview. The consent form contained the contact information of the research supervisor in case the participants felt concerned about the study or their rights as participants and wanted to discuss with or report to the supervisor. The researcher was fully committed to being transparent with the participants.

### ***Data and confidentiality***

The data collection and treatment secured confidentiality of the participants as no names or organisations were revealed in the stored data and reportage. Instead, a numerical code was ascribed to each participant. This did not guarantee anonymity of the participants, though, primarily due to some sampling techniques. Some subjects were recruited via the snowball technique, implying that some participants might have been familiar to others. The conversation circle participants were also not protected by anonymity due to the nature of these focus group discussions. The participants were informed about this potential risk and secured by confidential treatment to minimise the likelihood of identification.

The interview recordings and transcripts, numerically coded, are securely stored on the personal Google Drive account of the researcher, in a separate folder with no shared access. Only the researcher is able to access the data, and the data is only to be used for the purpose of the research. The data will be stored for up to five years after the thesis submission. The results of the study are to be shared with the participants if they so wish.

### ***Risks, benefits and risk mitigation***

There were risks associated with the vulnerability of the study participants, who could have been parents or family members of children with special needs or children at risk of school expulsion, individuals with special needs, members of a minority group, or victims of social and educational exclusion. It was a reasonable assumption that NGOs advocating for inclusive education could have had employees or representatives directly affected by exclusion and segregation. The participants could have felt emotional talking about their

experiences. On top of that, NGO participants could have felt uncomfortable or unsafe, replying to questions about their relationship with the government and authorities. Therefore, the participants were informed of the potential risks and sensitivities around this research. They were reminded that they could have skipped any question or withdrawn at any time. As a contingency plan, had a participant felt uncomfortable but willing to proceed with the interview, they would have been invited to take a break, have a drink of water, return to a question later, or take other steps to release the tension. No participant expressed such needs.

Apart from the possible risks associated with the participation in the research, it was also reasonable to discuss the possible benefits. Although there were no direct benefits associated with their involvement, the participants were informed that their contribution could increase awareness in wider communities of the role and work of NGOs. They would be able to increase the visibility of civil society in educational research and general discourse.

### ***COVID-19 considerations***

The present study was conducted between 2019 and 2023, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This context required certain adjustments to the data collection procedures in line with the university regulations and worldwide travel restrictions. Thus, this research met the COVID-related Tier-2 research project categorisation of the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education at the time. The tier-2 category meant that this research required remote contact with the participants (using video or audio calls via ZOOM or other preferred platforms) with no travel obligations for the researcher or participants.

Special risks associated with the COVID-19-related context included increased screen time and having to work from home and, thus, being interviewed at home. The increased screen time could have been caused by the need to read the information sheet and consent form on the screen, and by the need to join a video call for the interview. Working from home might have been disruptive to the participants as they could have been interrupted by family members, house-related duties, or other events. They might also have had to work longer hours when working away from the office. For the research itself, the associated risk was, possibly, a lower quality of replies due to such potential interruptions.

The actions to mitigate risk included providing clear and detailed information on the potential risks for the participants and making sure they gave informed consent. To reduce the screen time, an audio call was offered as an alternative, and several participants preferred this mode of communication. The participants were able to choose an appropriate time for the

interview to ensure they planned their work time accordingly. In the case of significant interruptions occurring during the interview, they were invited to take a break, reschedule, or withdraw. One participant halted the interview halfway through and asked to reschedule due to house-related issues. This interview was completed another day.

Overall, there were no cases of withdrawal or complaints about the research procedures. Every participant provided written or oral consent. Most interviews were conducted via ZOOM, with five participants preferring an audio call instead. Every participant replied to each question to the best of their ability without skipping any or reporting any related discomfort. When necessary, the interview was rescheduled to allow a participant to choose the most appropriate time. Most participants seemed enthusiastic about the study and showed interest in learning more about the results.

## **Chapter Summary**

To summarise, the grounded theory approach and methodology laid the foundation of the design for this study's research. The main purpose of using these methods was to develop a theory/framework driven by the data. The theory would explain how and why NGOs in Central Asia engage in developing inclusive education in their respective countries. The data was selected via theoretical sampling, meaning any new piece of data was expected to contribute to the formation of the theory.

The data was collected in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, countries which have achieved more progress in the field of inclusive education in Central Asia. Firstly, national policy documents on inclusive education were analysed to ascertain the position of NGOs as a starting point for further inquiry. Secondly, two-stage interviews with domestic NGO representatives, including both the senior leadership and front-line workers, were conducted as the main source of gaining information about the experiences and perceptions of their engagement in IE work. Thirdly, a set of interviews with international donor organisations based in both countries were conducted to gain multiple perspectives on the roles of NGOs in IE as well as explore the interaction between international donors and domestic NGO beneficiaries. Data was generated and analysed simultaneously until data sufficiency had been reached, when no more theoretical insights and codes would be added. Once data sufficiency was achieved, I stopped collecting data and completed my analysis, using NVIVO software.

The model, or rather framework, was validated through the use of conversation circles with the participation of the key stakeholders and experts in the fields of inclusive education and civil society. Two rounds of conversation circles with key informants from four Central Asian states allowed me to finalise the framework, which will be presented in the following chapters. Finally, the chapter explained some of the ethical considerations that emerged before and during the study.

## **Chapter 4. Research Findings**

### **Chapter Introduction**

Chapter 4 brings together the research findings on the participation of Central Asian NGOs in inclusive education, drawn from various complementary sources of data. Given the emergent nature of the methodology and theory formation, this chapter first presents the intermediate results of each stage of data collection in chronological order, providing a detailed explanation of the reasoning behind the conceptual basis of my response to the research question. The chapter also highlights the outcomes of the theory validation meetings that influenced the final theoretical framework.

To provide concrete examples and support for the emerging theoretical categories, I include selected quotes from the interview transcripts. The selection of quotations from policy documents and interviews with respondents is based on their relevance, frequency and distinctiveness, showcasing the significance and variation in the data.

The chapter starts with a table summarising all themes emerged as a result of the data collection. It is a helpful visualisation of the findings, which are addressed in detail further in the chapter. As a reader may find it complex to navigate in the volume of text, the selected parts of the table are also added under relevant sub-chapters to assist navigation and comprehension.



**Table 13. Results - themes**

<b>Data Source</b>		
<b>Policy Overview</b>	<b>Interviews with NGOs</b>	<b>Interviews with IOs</b>
Partnership with parental and public organisations for IE	NGOs' self-perceptions	Engagement of NGOs in IE development
	Disability representation	
Parents and NGOs in raising awareness of SEND and IE	Parental leadership	NGOs as beneficiaries of IOs' support and funding
	Systemic leadership	
NGOs in monitoring the implementation of IE	NGO's Functions	Autonomy of NGOs
	Training teachers, specialists and organisations in IE	
NGOs in the establishment of resource centres for IE	Developing methodologies and IE classroom models	
	Delivering supplementary and alternative education	
	Consulting and supporting parents of students with SEND	
	Raising awareness and advocating for IE	
	Partaking in policy making and monitoring the implementation of IE policy	
	Enhancing school accessibility and enrolment of students	
	Conducting and taking part in research on IE	
	NGOs employed strategies	
	Strengthening organisational structure	
	Leveraging financial and human resources	
	Building partnerships with key stakeholders	
	Government and Local Level Authorities	
	Government turnover	
	Political will	
	State funding	
	NGOs	
	Business partners	
	International organisations	

## **Policy Overview**

During the initial phase of data collection, I analysed texts from the policy documents on inclusive educational development in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to gain an early insight into the ways in which NGOs are involved and positioned, and to inform my emergent research design. As a result of the open and, later, focused coding, a list of central themes was developed in response to the research question:

- Cross-sectoral partnerships with parental and public organisations for IE development;
- Parents and NGOs in raising awareness of special needs and inclusive education;
- NGOs in monitoring the implementation of IE;
- NGOs in the establishment of resource centres for IE.

The following sub-sections discuss each of these themes in depth.

### ***Reliance on cross-sectoral partnerships for IE development***

The envisaged role of NGOs could be traced from the idea of cross-sectoral interaction, coordination, and partnership. The NGO role was often described in the rhetoric of a 'complex approach' to inclusive education. For example, the Conceptual Approaches to the Development of Inclusive Education in Kazakhstan of 2015 referred to public, parental, and non-governmental organisations. Section 2 of this Concept mentioned that the complex approach was one of the strategic directions of IE development:

- a complex approach and social partnership, interdisciplinary interaction through the provision of a complex of medical, social, and educational services, coordination and interaction of various departments, social institutions, public, and parent organisations.

Similarly, the Concept of Inclusive Education Development in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023 in section 5, "Principles of inclusive education", referred to the complex approach to IE, although it did not specifically mention NGOs or public organisations. Yet, it outlined the need for cooperation between different services and specialists by stating the following:

A complex approach: the inclusion of students with special educational needs in the learning process in the general educational system requires the implementation of a set of measures carried out by various departments, services, and specialists...

Although sometimes NGOs were not mentioned directly, both concepts emphasised the importance of cross-sectoral coordination at all levels. For example, the third section “Goals, objectives, and stages of implementation of the Concept” of the Kyrgyz Concept stated:

Implementation of the Concept for the Development of Inclusive Education provides for... cross sectoral coordination at all levels to ensure coordinated and comprehensive social support for students with special educational needs, especially those with disabilities, at the stage of their identification, integration, and successful learning in the education system...

In addition, the State Programme for Inclusive Education Development in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023 in its first section reinforced the vision that for the development of inclusive education in the Kyrgyz Republic, it was necessary “to have comprehensive interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral interaction”.

These examples demonstrated that the policies on IE in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan emphasised the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation and interaction. The involvement of public organisations and NGOs among other stakeholders was seen as essential to ensuring that all children, including those with special needs, had access to quality education. Further on, the policies made an emphasis on the role of the parental community. For example, section 4 of the Kazakhstani Concept on IE, “Expected results and stages of implementation of the Conceptual approaches to the development of inclusive education”, claimed to create various conditions for the educational inclusion of students with special needs and among them mentioned “involvement of parents, expert communities and public organisations in the development of inclusive education”.

The idea that parents could serve as partners in the implementation of IE was mentioned in both Concepts. For example, in the Concept for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023, section 5, “Principles of inclusive education”, among the five principles, the following was noted:

3. Involvement of the family and community in the implementation of inclusive education: parents/family are valuable *partners* in the implementation of the educational process. They have the right and responsibility for the implementation of the right of the student to receive a quality education. Parent/family and community involvement improve the quality and effectiveness of education...
- 4.

The policy encouraged parents to be active participants in the education process, including advocating for their child's rights and providing feedback to schools. The policy acknowledged the work that NGOs do in promoting IE in the community. The policy also encouraged collaboration between NGOs and the government in implementing IE programmes. The following themes provide insight into the three recognised functions or roles of parents and NGOs, which are raising awareness, establishing resource centres and monitoring.

***Relying on parents and NGOs to raise awareness of special needs and inclusive education***

Information support and raising awareness of inclusive education and special needs appeared to be one of the primary functions of NGOs, as envisaged by the policy. Section 3 of the Kazakh Concept emphasised the role of NGOs in raising awareness and ‘tolerance’ in relation to special needs, and among the mechanisms it mentioned “the formation of a tolerant attitude of society towards persons with special needs through the involvement of the public and non-governmental organisations...”

As some NGOs could be led by parents, it was worthwhile looking at the role of parents in information sharing. Parents seemed to play a role in ensuring that their children’s needs were met at school as they could provide insights into the specific needs of their children and work with teachers and school to develop appropriate strategies to support their education. This was exemplified in the Kyrgyz Concept and its section 5 on principles of inclusive education:

... Parents become more aware, share information with teachers about the characteristics of students, cooperate with the school, and implement initiatives to promote inclusive education.

Therefore, reliance on parents and the NGOs to share information and raise awareness was among the main principles and the mechanisms of IE policy. By relying on their expertise and support, the states set an agenda to ensure that inclusive education was developed in a collaborative and responsive way and to foster welcoming attitudes to persons with special needs in society.

### ***Involving public organisations in the establishment of resource centres for IE***

Another function of public organisations was to contribute to the establishment and development of so-called resource centres on inclusive education. The definition of a resource centre was not given in any identified policy document. Section 4 on expected results and stages of implementation of the Kazakh Concept suggested creating “a system of multi-level resource centres to ensure inclusive education using the potential of special educational organisations, other state and public organisations”. Similarly, the introductory chapters of the Kyrgyz Concept, section 2, “Achievements and challenges in the field of inclusive education”, mentioned:

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, together with the public sector and partners for development, is taking a number of measures to develop inclusive education, including...

- four resource centres for inclusive education have been created...

Based on the policy texts, it seemed that both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan recognised the importance of involving public organisations in setting up resource centres. While Kazakhstan's policies aimed to achieve this outcome, Kyrgyzstan's Concept indicated that this involvement has already been a measure taken. For the following data collection, these results suggested the need to interview NGOs to gain insights into their level of involvement in the establishment of resource centres, as well as to understand how these centres operate.

### ***Relying on NGOs to monitor the implementation of IE***

According to the policy texts, NGOs and other public organisations had an additional function of monitoring the implementation of IE. While most codes and themes were shared between the policy texts of the two countries, this particular function was unique to the Kyrgyzstani documents. Section 9 of the Programme for IE in Kyrgyzstan, titled “Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the programme measures”, stated that the implementation of activities under the programme would be monitored through reports from

the ministries and administrative departments of the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as information received from international partners and other stakeholders. Specifically, this section mentioned the involvement of NGOs:

... An independent assessment of a cross-sectoral expert group with the participation of representatives of state bodies, the non-governmental sector, and international organisations is also expected.

Section 10, “Favourable conditions and challenges/risks” of the Programme for IE in Kyrgyzstan, mentioned that in order to avoid possible risks during the implementation of the programme, “the active involvement of all partners (state structures, international foundations and public organisations) in the implementation of the programme, its evaluation and monitoring will be envisaged”.

The fact that the Kazakhstani policy documents did not mention NGOs in their monitoring framework for IE does not necessarily mean that the Kyrgyzstani policy envisaged a wider role for NGOs. In fact, the Action Plan for the implementation of the Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023 included a table of tasks, responsible parties, and deadlines for the implementation of measures for the development of IE. Among the actively involved and responsible parties there were ministries, international organisations, a psychological, medical and pedagogical consultation, as well as a medical and social expert commission. The role of NGOs was not mentioned in the plan. These findings suggested the need to further explore the degree to which and ways in which NGOs in both countries engaged in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of inclusive educational policy.

### ***Implications for further data collection and analysis***

Studying the content of the state policies on IE in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan allowed the following to be summarised. The states envisaged the public sector to be involved in the implementation of inclusive educational reform, especially highlighting the role of parents, public organisations, and NGOs specifically. Within their functions, the policies mentioned raising awareness of special needs, supporting the establishment of resource centres, and the monitoring and evaluation of the policy implementation. The states seemed to acknowledge that one of the major benefits of cross-sectoral participation is the pooling of resources and

expertise of public organisations. By collaborating with the NGOs, the states looked to provide a more comprehensive and coordinated support system for students. In addition, NGOs could use their platforms to promote a more inclusive society and to break down the barriers that prevented children with special needs from accessing quality education.

The findings at this point suggested that further data collection was needed to investigate whether the reality matched the policy rhetoric and to deepen our understanding of the role of the public sector in the successful implementation of inclusive educational policies in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It was necessary to explore the methods or mechanisms used to raise awareness of special needs as well as the strategies used to support the establishment of resource centres and how these centres were being utilised to improve the quality of inclusive education. Furthermore, it was important to explore the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms used to assess the implementation of inclusive education as well as the impact of international partners and other stakeholders on the monitoring and evaluation of the policy implementation. Interviewing the NGOs seemed the most reasonable and relevant strategy for continuing this exploratory study.

### **Interviews with NGOs**

After coding the policy texts on inclusive education and drawing the initial results, the following interviews with the NGOs were conducted in two stages. The interview transcripts were analysed leading to the following results. Three constructed supra-categories were *NGOs' self-perceptions, functions* and *strategies*. Below table fragment summarised the findings of the interviews with NGOs to help readers navigate through multiple and complex themes.

**Table 14.** *Results – themes from interviews with NGOs only*

Interviews with NGOs
NGOs' self-perceptions
Disability representation
Parental leadership
Systemic leadership
NGO's Functions
Training teachers, specialists and organisations in IE
Developing methodologies and IE classroom models
Delivering supplementary and alternative education
Consulting and supporting parents of students with SEND
Raising awareness and advocating for IE
Partaking in policy making and monitoring the implementation of IE policy
Enhancing school accessibility and enrolment of students
Conducting and taking part in research on IE
NGOs employed strategies
Strengthening organisational structure
Leveraging financial and human resources
Building partnerships with key stakeholders
Government and Local Level Authorities
Government turnover
Political will
Funding
NGOs
Business partners
International organisations

Each overarching supra-category with its themes is presented below.

### ***NGOs' self-perceptions***

The NGOs' self-perceptions, meaning their beliefs and attitudes about their role and purpose, appeared to be an essential aspect that influenced their actions and behaviour towards promoting inclusive education. A strong sense of identity and purpose help NGOs to overcome obstacles and persevere in their efforts to achieve their goals. Three underlying themes falling under this supra-category of self-perception were disability representation, parental leadership, and systemic leadership.

**Disability representation.** Every NGO representative taking part in this study discussed the challenges faced by children with disabilities in accessing education, and how the awareness of issues of disability was essential to their work. Thus, the perception of their



work around inclusive education is commonly focused on disability. For example, one participant mentioned children with autism in regard to inclusive education:

In 2015, we were approached by a group of parents whose children with autism had been excluded from school. At that time there was no inclusive education in the country, to speak. This is how we launched our project on inclusive education. – NGO2\_R1

Another participant NGO6\_R1 similarly spoke of children with disabilities when commenting on the implementation of inclusive education. The participant explained that most schools in their city were not inclusive as they were not accessible to children with disabilities. This is reflective of a larger debate around the conceptualisation of inclusive education. Most NGOs addressed inclusive education through the disability-focused rhetoric.

Both NGOs mentioned above were not led by disabled persons or parents of children with disabilities, unlike some other recruited NGOs. Yet their beliefs about disability were the basis of their motivation to work on inclusive educational development. Below is just another example of that:

Our motivation is based on volunteering, the desire to help, especially after we delved into the problems of children with disabilities. – NGO11\_R1

Four disability NGOs took part in the interviews, meaning those NGOs were led by the disabled persons or parents of children with disabilities. Interestingly though, non-disability NGOs which adhered to a wider definition of inclusive education and special needs would still highlight children with disabilities when discussing their work:

I: You mentioned that you worked with children with special needs. What definition of special needs did you employ?

R: We see it in a wide way, meaning all vulnerable children. And we have some kids with disabilities as beneficiaries. – NGO3\_R1

We work to protect and promote the rights of children. Including children with disabilities. – NGO9\_R1

NGOs predominantly perceive their engagement in IE through the lens of disability, meaning their goal seems to be expanding the educational inclusion of children with disabilities. The focus on disability as a driving factor for their work was prevalent among many participants, although it is worth noting that many NGOs adhere to wider perspectives and definitions of inclusive education and special needs. Nonetheless, the NGOs' beliefs about disability play a significant role in motivating their efforts towards promoting IE, and this perception could shape their approach to advocacy and action planning.

**Parental leadership.** Following the policy analysis results, a recurring topic mentioned by the majority of the respondents was the leadership of the parental community as founders or key actors in the work of NGOs. Two categories of parents were commonly mentioned: *mothers* and *parents of children with disabilities*. For example, there were NGOs founded and led by the parents of children with disabilities:

We are a public association of parents of children with disabilities, and our organisation was founded in 1995 as a response to the existing needs of parents of children with disabilities. In the post-Soviet space, it was believed that there were no people with disabilities, so there was no support policy for people with disabilities, except for residential institutions for the blind and hearing impaired, and disability benefits. We wanted to highlight their concerns and raise public awareness. – NGO7\_R1

We are a public association of parents of children with autism...I myself am the grandmother of a child with autism; my grandson will be 14 this year. We created this organisation because 10 years ago there were no services at that time, and doctors didn't really know what autism was. – NGO10\_R1

When I had a child with Down's Syndrome, I found myself in an information vacuum. I began to reach out to families through various sources, giving my contacts to doctors so that they could connect us with other parents of children with Down's Syndrome... And the idea came to establish a public association to support and communicate with each other. – NGO12\_R2

Although some NGOs were not led or founded by parents of children with disability, they could be motivated or driven by the parental contribution. For example, one of the

largest NGOs in Kazakhstan leading the efforts towards IE development was driven by parental activism:

The main reason [for introducing inclusive education into our agenda] was the parental community, who came to us and showed that this problem was a blind spot. – NGO2\_R1

The above example echoed the results of the policy analysis, which highlighted that the policies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan envisaged the role of the parental community in raising awareness of the issues of IE and children with special needs. This role was fulfilled by the NGOs as there had been a gap which they could have filled or had to fill by means of their own leadership. As one of the respondents summarised, parental NGOs are driven by their own unmet needs and committed to IE development without compromise:

... No one deals with these topics in the same way as parental NGOs, because it directly concerns them. They will engage in inclusive education under any conditions. – NGO8\_R2

Another respondent shared the story of their NGO's founder who was a mother of children without disabilities. The founder decided to start promoting IE due to her own positive experience:

[Name of an NGO's director] is a mother of neuro-typical children, and she saw how such children change after interacting with children with special needs. It is change for the better. Therefore, she got interested in building an inclusive school. - NGO1\_R1

The respondent then continued to explain her own motivation to join the NGO as a staff worker. She shared her feelings of dissatisfaction with conventional mainstream schooling for her own children:

... I have four children who are home schooled because we think conventional schooling is ineffective... I wanted my children to be in an inclusive environment, to develop their empathy and human qualities in such an environment..." - NGO1\_R1

Both parents (the respondent and the founder) were mothers of children without identified special needs or disabilities, but they believed that socialising with diverse students would bring ‘change for the better’ for their children. The above examples showed different representations of parental leadership for inclusive education. While some NGOs were founded and led by the parents of children with disabilities, others were exposed to the idea of inclusion by the parental community. In general, every second NGO taking part in this study mentioned the role of parents and their leadership in raising awareness about children with SEND and the need for IE.

**Systemic leadership.** When reflecting on their own role and contribution to inclusive educational development, NGOs participating in this study communicated a strong leadership perspective. Several NGOs referred to the ‘systemic’ angle of their work:

In general, we are the only NGO in Kazakhstan that systematically implements inclusive education in the country. Other foundations also help, but only we work systematically and with such difficult children. – NGO2\_R2

Same time was when inclusive education started to be a commonly raised topic. There were some efforts before by different organisations, but never on such a wide systemic level. Our foundation took a course to support and showcase best practices of different schools and NGOs that are exemplary of inclusive education implementation. – NGO8\_R2

NGOs perceived themselves as systemic leaders, meaning they could recognise and navigate the complexity of the IE approach, including various stakeholders and the processes involved. Their systemic leadership involved looking beyond individual people, departments, or organisations to see the big picture and to prioritise building relationships with all stakeholders across the area. For example, when asked to expand upon their understanding of ‘systemic’ work, the leader of the NGO2 explained:

That means we cooperate with all major stakeholders in the inclusive education process. With the ministries, departments of education, city councils, schools, teachers, families, students, media, donors, and so on. We have a big picture, that is our goal to promote inclusive education, and we have mechanisms of how to

implement this goal. This means, we work at all levels and with all main actors, so we work systematically. – NGO2\_R2

Some respondents appreciated how NGOs were perceived had been subject to change over time:

...the moment has come when we moved from being perceived as urban madmen to becoming an expert community. We began to be invited to all sorts of working groups on inclusion to draft laws... - NGO1\_R1

This quote suggests that the interview respondent witnessed a shift in how their engagement was perceived. They indicated that their NGO members were once viewed as "urban madmen", which implies that they were not taken seriously or respected. However, they now see themselves as an "expert community" and are being invited to participate in working groups on the development of inclusive educational policy. This shift in perception suggests that there has been a growing recognition of the importance of inclusive education and the expertise that the NGOs bring to the table.

When it comes to self-perceptions, the respondents also used such metaphors as “paramedics” and “engines” to label themselves. For example:

First of all, we are paramedics. We identify the problem and show a model and an example how to solve it... sometimes we replace the functional duties of the state: we conduct research, provide services, etc. Even the concept of development of inclusive education was developed largely by NGOs... Only thanks to NGOs, research is being carried out, projects are being implemented, and resource classes are being opened... – NGO11\_R2

NGOs are the engines of this reform. The ministry does little on its own. Numerous non-governmental organisations initiate the creation of documents, legal acts, programmes, so to speak, "kick" the ministry so that everything is pushed and is signed. That is, NGOs complain, demand, offer, and the ministry responds. Today, I believe that NGOs are the driving force behind the reform of the IE. – NGO12\_R2

The analogy of paramedic suggests that NGOs responded to the most pressing needs of the development of IE system. Their roles were multifaceted. Firstly, the interviewee saw NGOs as, metaphorically speaking, medical professionals diagnosing the problems in education and offering treatments. In other words, NGOs were actively engaged in addressing issues related to IE, including identifying barriers to access and developing strategies to overcome them. In addition, the respondent suggested that NGOs sometimes replaced the functional duties of the state, indicating that there might be perceived gaps in the government's response to IE. NGOs might be stepping in to provide services and support where the state was not fulfilling its obligations. Also, the interviewee highlighted the role of NGOs in the development of the concept of IE itself, shaping the discourse around it. Finally, the quote emphasised the crucial role that NGOs played in carrying out research, implementing projects, and opening resource classes. This indicates that NGOs were not only involved in advocacy and policy development, but also in practical activities for the realisation of IE.

The metaphorical self-representation of NGOs as “engines” suggested that the respondent believed that NGOs were a driving force behind the reform of IE, taking the lead in initiating the creation of legal acts and programmes. They suggested that the ministry responsible for IE did little on its own, and that NGOs were the ones who pushed for change by “kicking” or complaining, demanding, and offering solutions. Similarly to the previous respondent, it implies that the government was perceived not to be fully engaged in the development of IE policies and programmes, and that NGOs was filling this gap. Despite the implied criticism of the government, the quote suggests that the ministry might be responsive to the demands of NGOs, which could indicate that the relationship between NGOs and the government was collaborative.

In summary, the self-perceptions of NGOs were positive and confident, as they viewed their engagement in IE as pivotal, systemic, and irreplaceable in the current context. NGOs were driven by their values around disability, educational, and social justice, their distrust of and disappointment with the government, and their parental identity and leadership potential. Respondents used some powerful metaphors to label themselves, suggesting that their work brought a disruptive positive change to IE development as well as the powerful drive for reform.

### ***NGOs' functions***

The engagement of NGOs in the development and implementation of inclusive education is wide. Through interviews with NGO representatives, it was found that NGOs play multiple functional roles in promoting and advancing inclusive education. Their work in teacher training, piloting and suggesting models of inclusive schooling, raising awareness of special needs and inclusion, engaging in policy formation and implementation, supporting students and parents, and enhancing school accessibility was critical to the achievement of IE in the region. Below I expand on every functional role and provide supportive evidence from the data.

**Teacher training, specialists and organisations in inclusive education.** The responses of NGO representatives suggest that NGOs were actively involved in providing training and professional development for educators and other professionals in the field of inclusive education. The training was delivered to schools, including both public and private, kindergartens and teacher training institutions:

I regularly conduct pedagogical trainings for schools, that is, we are carriers of useful information for them. We are also friends with private schools, we have partner programmes with them, we conduct trainings and workshops for them. For Orleu, a teacher training centre, I was also a lecturer and conducted trainings... – NGO1\_R2

And we conducted training for the teaching staff of these schools and kindergartens, as well as for parents, because parents had to accompany their children themselves.” – NGO10\_R1

NGOs conduct training programmes in various regions of the country. They also develop training materials and modules for educators, including those working with children with special needs:

Speaking of training specialists, we are expanding our activities in the regions. For example, we recently travelled to the most remote regions of the country and gave training on autism and methodological approaches to working with children in kindergartens. We have gathered more than 40 specialists in Jalalabad... – NGO11\_R2

Also, we did a project implemented by the World Bank in Chu region. We developed teacher training materials about inclusive education and working with children with special needs. We also had training modules for the PMPCs... – NGO8\_R2

The responses suggested that some NGOs focused on developing a system of training and certification for specialists in inclusive education. They conducted competitive selection processes and offer certification courses, which could help to ensure that professionals in the field were well-trained and had the necessary skills to work effectively with students with disabilities. One of these organisations was NGO2 from Kazakhstan:

We have outperformed the state when it comes to training specialists, and we have built a system of how to train specialists using the example of behavioural specialists... Every one of our offices are a mini-factory for producing specialists. – NGO2\_R1

The common conclusion that could be derived from these responses is that NGOs were playing a significant role in building capacity in the field of IE. They were filling a gap that might exist in the state's ability to provide adequate training and resources for educators. NGOs were also sharing best practices and building networks of professionals committed to IE. Overall, one of the primary functions of NGOs was the provision of training and professional development for educators and specialists in the field of inclusive education.

**Developing methodologies and IE classroom models. Delivering supplementary and alternative education.** The analysis revealed that NGOs took an active role in developing methodological approaches to IE as well as modelling how IE should look in the policy and the classroom. It might imply that there were gaps in the knowledge of methodological approaches to inclusive teaching and learning among policy-makers and teachers, since NGOs reported taking a lead in developing educational standards, methodological guidelines and teacher training materials among knowledge-enhancing initiatives:

We have developed an educational standard, a pre-school preparation programme, opened a resource methodological centre for the development of children with multiple forms of disabilities, where we work on the principles of early development and individual programmes for each child. – NGO7\_R1



For example, we developed educational and methodological guidance with the support of the World Bank. So, we introduced an annual programme to prepare children who did not go to kindergarten. We developed an educational and methodological complex, trained 3,500 teachers, and all the methodological materials that we developed included issues of inclusion and diversity. – NGO8\_R1

Some NGOs offered supplementary or alternative schooling in the form of establishing their own private schools and kindergartens, private resource centres, or school-based resource classrooms. These spaces were used to pilot different approaches of inclusive teaching and learning, and the successful practices could then form the foundation of the NGOs' policy recommendations. For example, NGO1 used their inclusive school as a platform to test different interventions:

[Name of an NGO's director] is a mother of neuro-typical children, and she saw how such children change after interacting with children with special needs. It is change for the better. Therefore, she became interested in building an inclusive school. From her experience the formula for classroom composition was born: 30% of special needs children and 70% of neuro-typical children for effective learning and interaction. – NGO1\_R1

Now we are trying different models of interaction between the students. For example, when neurotypical children are peer-mentors to special children, they are actively involved in learning activities and become more self-confident. – NGO1\_R1

The NGO1 director's experience with her neurotypical children interacting with special needs children led her to develop a proportion-based formula for an effective inclusive classroom environment. This approach in combination with peer mentoring ensured that children with special needs had opportunities to interact with their neurotypical peers and vice versa, promoting social and emotional development and inclusive learning.

Another example was NGO7, which run a private learning centre for children with special needs and disabilities. The centre offered supplementary academic and skills-based training and helps students to prepare for attending a school. To give some context, for children with learning difficulties and disabilities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan it may be

necessary to receive a consultation from a local pedagogical/medical/psychological consultation (PMPC) body to be able to attend such a school (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2020). My respondent referred to receiving a positive recommendation and referral to school from the PMPC as “passing the PMPC commission”. Their centre offered support for this purpose:

Our centre helps to prepare children to pass the PMPC commission, as many children do not pass this commission because they lack some skills. We teach children basic skills so they can go to school... There are children who, after our education, go to schools, but there are also those who are sent to study at home... – NGO7\_R1

The respondent continued explaining how their work in the private centre helped standardise the work of similar private learning support centres in the region:

Previously, centres working with children with disabilities, like ours, worked on their own with no clear regulations... In 2008, we opened our centre and developed a standard for the operation of such centres as part of a partnership project with several other organisations... Thanks to this, all centres are now working in accordance with their statutory documents and with common standards. We share our documents with other NGOs, especially with new organisations that work in the regions. – NGO7\_R1

Thus, the respondent believed that their developed approach to teaching and general operations was an example of good practice. The collaboration between NGOs and sharing of best practices was claimed to lead to improved services across similar learning centres and better outcomes for children with disabilities. Another respondent from NGO11 shared that their resource centre mostly focused on the provision of support to parents and educators, rather than directly working with children:

The resource centre for inclusive education is a methodological centre, in my understanding. At our centre, we have a library with useful literature, with collected laws regarding inclusive education, so that specialists and parents can come to us. A teacher can come to us if looking for help in individualising the educational process or in other methodological support. – NGO11\_R1

These findings supported the results of the policy analysis conducted earlier. To remind the reader, the analysis of relevant laws and policies on IE in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan revealed that both states recognised the importance of involving public organisations in setting up resource centres. The Kyrgyzstan's Concept on IE development indicated that the resource centres established by NGOs were among the best accumulated practices in the country, and the interview stage of this study confirmed these findings. In fact, several NGOs from Kyrgyzstan, including the latter two quotes above, run their resource centres.

What was not clear from the policy review, though, was the explanation as to how these centres operated and what kind of services they delivered. The interviews showed that while some resource centres provided methodological support and advice to teachers and parents, others focused on working directly with children, providing them with supplementary learning and training. Therefore, the lack of standardisation of the resource centres' operations could be inferred and was confirmed by the respondent NGO7\_R1. Yet the respondent also suggested that their NGO recognised this issue and worked on addressing it via creating standard operating procedures for resource centres.

NGOs in Kazakhstan focused rather on establishing school-based resource classrooms. For example, NGO2 promoted its best practice of running inclusion support offices to the policy level. They started establishing school-based resource rooms, referred to as inclusion support offices, across the country. The model was based on international practices and piloted in Kazakhstan. The essential novelty of this model was the introduction of teaching assistants referred to as tutors:

The inclusion support office is a room where the child receives additional assistance and is accompanied by a tutor... Each child has a tutor, an inclusion support teacher, a behavioural programme curator, a behavioural specialist and a supervisor, that is, a specialist with whom the curator consults... - NGO2\_R1

The respondent highlighted the importance of having a comprehensive support system in schools that involved a range of specialists to ensure that children with disabilities were provided with the assistance and support they needed to thrive in a classroom setting. The establishment of inclusion support offices in schools and the introduction of a teacher-assistant or tutor were NGO-based initiatives that further laid the foundation of their policy recommendations. These recommendations were considered, and the profession of a tutor

was introduced to the country at a legislative level, according to the response of the NGO staff.

Thus, NGOs used their flexibility and resources to run supportive or alternative learning spaces and to pilot the different modalities of inclusive teaching and learning practices in classrooms. The best practices in some cases were scaled up to national level.

**Consulting and supporting parents of students with SEND.** Provision of support to parents and families of children with disabilities was another functional role of NGOs. The support ranged from organising safe communication spaces to offering training programmes and moral support for parents. For example, NGO10 highlighted that they conducted training for the teaching staff and parents. It indicated that the NGO were actively working towards building capacity among educators and parents to support inclusive education:

And we conducted training for the teaching staff of these schools and kindergartens, as well as for parents, because parents had to accompany their children themselves. – NGO10\_R1

Another example was NGO6 which offered free consultations and online support for parents. The NGO provided accessible and affordable support to parents who might require assistance:

We offer parents advisory, informational, and moral support. We provide free consultations for parents both online and offline. There is also a chat where you can ask your question if you need some short advice. And if detailed information is needed, then I personally work with parents online. – NGO6\_R2

NGO8 took a unique approach to promoting IE by opening a school for parents. This approach indicated that the NGO were trying to address the issue of inclusive education from a different perspective. By educating parents about the value of childhood and working with children, the NGO were laying the foundation for a supportive and inclusive environment. However, the respondent admitted that the results of this work were considered underwhelming:

For parents, we even opened a school for parents, where we talked about the value of childhood, working with children and, among other things, inclusive education and culture. I can't say that we achieved something big there, but we tried. – NGO8\_R2

The examples demonstrated different approaches to promote IE, including building capacity between educators and parents, providing accessible and affordable support to parents, and educating parents about the value of IE among other things. Although the results of some of these initiatives might not always have been as expected, the efforts of NGOs to provide support and promote inclusive education were commendable and continuous.

**Raising awareness and advocating for IE.** Apart from training teachers and specialists and supporting parents, NGOs also contributed to raising awareness of inclusion and inclusive education among the general public. The responses suggested that NGOs used various methods to raise awareness of disability and IE, including offline and online media platforms, social media, public events and exhibitions, and concerts and contests, etc.

Speaking of raising awareness about the rights of children with special needs and disabilities, we are constantly working with the media. We have accounts on social networks, including the foundation's account and my personal one. We mainly work on Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. We also have a YouTube channel... And the children acted as hosts themselves... – NGO12\_R2

[One of our projects is] an annual competition for media coverage of the topic of inclusive education. Not only journalists, but anyone can participate in it. Participants are offered the nominations: “Best Television Work”, “Best Print Publication”, “Best Social Media Post”, and “Best Online Publication”. – NGO2\_R1

Both quotes highlight the importance of using a diverse range of media recognising the importance of engaging with different audiences and platforms to raise awareness of the rights of children with SEND, as well as promote IE. Apart from the media, some NGOs also relied on in-person events such as exhibitions, concerts, or even disability-awareness classes in schools.

These results aligned with the results of the policy document analysis, as NGOs were envisaged to perform the function of raising awareness. The interviews confirmed that NGOs did view this as one of their key functional roles.

**Partaking in policy making and monitoring the implementation of IE policy.** One of the contributions most commented on was NGOs in their role of promoting and advocating for the enhancement of IE policy. NGOs worked with government agencies and other stakeholders to develop policy documents and legislative initiatives such as the Concept for

IE development, the Law on IE, and by-laws. They participated in round tables, expert councils, and working groups under the Ministry of Education, the Parliament, and the Supreme Council to engage in policy development work. Almost every participant mentioned the experience of their respective NGOs in policy development work:

We also often attend all sorts of round tables and discussions on the development of inclusive education in the country, along with these other NGOs. We can lobby interests and advance the agenda of inclusive education. At the level of public policy, we are involved as experts. For example, when developing an education development strategy, our director is invited as an expert.. – NGO8\_R1

Over 25 years of work, we have been able to develop educational standards for children with disabilities, have become members of working groups to improve the regulatory framework, have become no longer a service organisation but an expert and advocacy organisation that conducts research, cooperates with the state and offers solutions. – NGO7\_R1

The participants shared multiple examples of how the NGOs were involved in lobbying interests and advancing the agenda of inclusive education. They cooperated with the state and offered solutions including changes to the regulatory framework and scaling up successful practices. For example, NGO2 viewed cooperation with the state and national bodies as a strategic step in scaling up their model of inclusive education based on applied behavioural analysis in Kazakhstani schools:

We work with the government, parliament, party and so on within the framework of our project. Because our goal is to transfer our model to the state so that it works without us. To do this, we are working on by-laws of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan... A few years ago, the Ministry of Education and Science was against specialists in applied analysis and such courses in Kazakhstan, and now the government is asking us how to do it, where to buy services, and so on. – NGO2\_R1

The respondent mentioned that their goal was to transfer their model to the state, which suggested that NGOs were working towards a sustainable solution to inclusive educational policy in Kazakhstan. The quote also suggests that the government acknowledged

the importance of the expertise provided by NGOs in the development of IE policies. The example of NGO6 also supported the findings on governmental recognition of the NGOs' expertise and value. Thus, the NGO was involved in a specialist commission under the leading political party in Kazakhstan, Nur-Otan (recently renamed Amanat), and had access to meet with local authorities such as city councillors (akim):

Just recently, I was included in the Pavlodar commission on educational and healthcare organisations of the Nur-Otan party. We, as NGO, monitor and make recommendations for the adaptation of schools. A couple of weeks ago we had a meeting where the head of the education department gave a report on inclusive education. I also had a meeting with the deputy akim of the city about accessibility issues...– NGO6\_R2

In general, many NGOs took a collaborative approach to policy making and advocacy, working with various stakeholders including parliament, ministries, political parties, local authorities and NGOs, among others. The example of NGO2 showed that collaborative action seemed to be associated with positive outcomes of the policy development work. The respondents related the particular results of their efforts including the introduction of assistant teachers in the "Resolution #77 of the Government of Kazakhstan on the Approval of the Model Staffing of Employees of State Educational organisations" as well as the introduction of the administrative liability of schools to accept all students for education:

Back in 2015, I created an expert council, where I included representatives of state bodies from the Ministry of Health, Social Protection, Education, PMPC, Department of Education, that is, all key parties, including other NGOs... We've made a lot of changes. For example, by common efforts we have ensured that children with autism can study according to individual educational programmes... We promoted the introduction of an assistant teacher in the 77th resolution. – NGO2\_R2

Recently, the president of the country signed a law on inclusive education, and our director was a member of the working group on its creation, gave corrections and suggestions. One of our proposals was to impose administrative responsibility for not accepting a student with special needs in an educational institution. That is, for refusing to accept a child, a fine may be imposed on the principal. – NGO2\_R1

Overall, the quotes demonstrated the significant role NGOs play in promoting and advocating for inclusive education in Kazakhstan. They engaged with the government and other stakeholders to develop policies and legislative initiatives, work to introduce changes in the regulatory framework, and attend various forums and discussions to advance the agenda of inclusive education. Their participation in round tables and other advisory platforms confirms the NGOs' role in monitoring and commenting on the implementation of IE policy. These results supported and further built upon the findings of the policy analysis stage, as one of the envisaged roles of NGOs in IE policy was monitoring the policy implementation.

**Enhancing school accessibility and enrolment of students.** NGOs contributed to promoting educational access and inclusion not only through policy making and advocacy, but also directly working with schools and families to remove barriers to schooling and enhance school accessibility. For example, several NGOs supported schools in improving the physical accessibility of the school buildings:

One school received more than 6 million tenge last year and asked me for advice on installing a vertical shaft lift. They contacted me late in the installation of this lift... my consultations helped to correct some of the shortcomings. It's in a village near Pavlodar, and there are two students in a wheelchair. And now they can go to school.  
– NGO6\_R1

I have already given a number of recommendations, for example, to music schools in our region... And these schools have already begun the purchase of additional things for accessibility, according to my recommendations. – NGO6\_R1

We also implemented a project to equip two schools with ramps and other physical adjustments. – NGO11\_R1

Other NGOs worked with schools opening inclusion support offices or resource classrooms, which offered specialist support to students with special needs attending mainstream schools. There were examples when NGOs opened their own school or other supplementary or alternative learning spaces. For example, NGO10 opened their private pilot resource class, where students with special needs received learning support. After such alternative schooling, some children were able to achieve the required attainment level to enrol in a formal school. Thus, NGOs directly support students in accessing education:



We were given permission to create [a resource classroom] in a special school, and six children studied there. We prepared a teacher on how to work with children with special needs and a tutor from among senior psychology students to accompany the children. And so, our children began to study. After the first year, our children began to be admitted to special schools and kindergartens according to the PMPC. Then they began to accept some students into resource classes, private schools, and kindergartens. – NGO10\_R1

Another NGO highlighted the important role that NGOs could play in enhancing school accessibility by identifying and addressing gaps in access to resources and skills. The NGOs helped to remove barriers to education and empower students to succeed in school and beyond:

During the lockdown, we heard the news that there are many school children without computers. And... we decided to launch this thing. In the beginning, it was just collecting computers and giving them to children... The main criterion is that children have special educational needs or are under guardianship. When we started to develop the project, it dawned on us that most children and parents do not have any computer skills at all. That is, after just distributing laptops, now we are focusing on online education in basic digital literacy for schoolchildren and parents. – NGO3\_R1

In this case, NGO3 identified a lack of access to computers among schoolchildren, particularly focusing on those with special educational needs. By collecting and distributing computers to children, the NGO helped to remove a significant barrier to their ability to learn and succeed in school during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to distance learning. They also recognised that simply providing computers was not enough, as many of the recipients lacked basic digital literacy skills. To truly enhance school accessibility, the NGO shifted its focus to providing training on basic digital literacy for both schoolchildren and their parents. By providing digital literacy training, the NGO empowered students, including the most vulnerable ones, to access online education at the time of the pandemic-related disruption.

The findings highlight the efforts of NGOs to enhance school accessibility, particularly for vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities. The NGOs undertook several projects, including equipping schools with ramps and other physical adjustments, creating a pilot resource class, and providing computers according to children's needs, among

other efforts. These initiatives were aimed at removing the barriers to education, including but not limited to the physical accessibility aspect. The NGOs provided consultations to schools on how to improve accessibility and recommended the purchase of additional items to make education more accessible. Overall, the NGOs demonstrated a commitment to enhancing accessibility in education by acting in a localised, direct, and timely manner.

**Conducting and taking part in research on IE.** The final functional role revealed during the interview analysis was conducting research into IE or participating in the relevant research as respondents. Several NGOs in Kyrgyzstan reported that they had conducted studies either together with or for the mayor's office of different cities:

We also engaged in research on the accessibility of transport, schools, universities, theatres, that is, the physical environment. This study was sent to the mayor's office of Bishkek. A working group on ensuring public accessibility was created, but three vice-mayors changed over a year, so the work that had been started remained stagnant. – NGO7\_R2

The Mayor's Office invited us to conduct a joint study in the city of Osh to identify children who are not covered by education in order to potentially include them in inclusive schools, as well as to identify 3 schools with best practices for inclusive education to improve them so that they serve as an example for other school. - NGO11\_R2

NGO7 engaged in research related to the physical accessibility of public spaces including schools and universities. They took the initiative to send the results of their research to the Mayor's Office in Bishkek, even though the implementation of their findings remained delayed. NGO11 collaborated with the Mayor's Office in Osh to conduct a joint study to identify children who were not covered by education and to improve the existing inclusive schools to serve as examples for other schools. While these NGOs exemplify how the organisations took the initiative to conduct research, there were other instances when NGOs rather participated in studies upon request. For example, NGO12 participated in the study initiated by the Human Rights Watch:

We haven't initiated any research ourselves, but we are participating in it. We participated in a Human Rights Watch study on access to education. In general, we participate in research upon request. I don't remember now, but we were invited several times. – NGO12\_R2

The NGOs actively engaged in research related to IE, both independently and in collaboration with government agencies and international organisations. They were working towards promoting IE by identifying areas that need improvement, highlighting successful models to serve as examples for other schools, and collecting and documenting other evidence and data related to inclusive education.

### *NGOs employed strategies*

The results suggest that NGOs relied on a number of strategies to fulfil their functional roles, goals, and agendas in IE development. To ensure the best results as well as sustainability, NGOs created complex organisational structures, continuously leveraged resources, and built partnerships across sectors and stakeholders.

**Strengthening organisational structure.** The interviews revealed that many NGOs created complex organisational structures in order to ensure sustainability. For example, an NGO registered as a non-profit foundation but at the same time worked as a private entity/businesses providing paid services or working as a training centre or school. Some NGOs opened resource centres or school-based inclusive educational support offices. Therefore, the organisational structures could be multilayer. A desire to ease bureaucratic processes and to generate income as a business to ensure sustainability seemed to be the explanatory factors for this behaviour.

... Separately from the public foundation, I run my inclusive kindergarten as well as an inclusive school group for children with special needs... If I ran the kindergarten as part of the foundation's work, this would mean that all members of the association have a right to it... These are bureaucratic subtleties, which is why I keep these projects separately. The kindergarten operates separately as a private business, but in close collaboration with the foundation... We have a mixed model of work. –

NGO12\_R1

We have a complex internal structure. We have a non-profit organisation... And this foundation previously had a small training centre, which has now grown into a school... – NGO1\_R1

Registering a non-profit organisation such as a public foundation or public association while also opening a for-profit company seemed to be common among NGOs. This arrangement involved employees who worked officially in one legal entity but could also deliver tasks for another one. This allowed for flexibility and collaboration within the organisation, while also maintaining distinct entities with their own governance structures. NGO1's example also demonstrated how NGOs could grow and change over time, and the importance of adapting organisational structures to meet new needs and challenges. Another example is NGO8, which had to reregister another non-profit legal entity due to the organisation's expansion and transformation:

The foundation itself was opened as an academic project... And then it was re-registered, because new projects began to arrive, and the foundation already found new resources. – NGO8\_R1

Overall, the results demonstrated that NGOs carefully considered their organisational structures, taking into account factors such as legal requirements, funding streams, and the specific needs of the populations they serve. A so-called 'mixed model of work' when the founders of an NGO registered a for-profit company and shared the tasks and employees between the two entities could be an effective approach but requires careful management to ensure clear lines of accountability and effective communication between the different entities within the organisation.

**Leveraging financial and human resources.** A sub-category of its own was dedicated to how NGOs funded their work. They relied on multiple sources of funding including delivering paid services by NGOs for the purposes of self-funding, organising donor events to raise money, attracting private sponsors including individuals and businesses, applying for the project funding offered by international donor organisations, and working with the state in two ways – through direct contracting and state social order. Yet not every participant among the NGO staff members had knowledge of the various sources of funding and the relationship between the donors and the recipient NGOs, which is why it seemed feasible to continue interviewing the NGO leaders.

**Building partnerships with key stakeholders.** NGOs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan reported that they relied on building partnerships with various stakeholders, including government agencies, schools, international donor organisations, civil society organisations, and private sector companies, to promote inclusive education. Respondents who believed

they succeeded in their mission to promote inclusive education and perceived their engagement with enthusiasm and optimism commonly reported that they had wide networks of partners across sectors. Below, the findings in regard to the various partners of the NGOs are presented.

***Government and Local Level Authorities.*** One of the main stakeholders in inclusive educational development is the government. Government includes various institutions, such as the parliament, ministries, parties, as well as agencies, departments and other entities responsible for making and enforcing laws, and regulations and policies at a state, regional and local level. Every NGO participant acknowledged their cooperation with the government. The quote of the first respondent from NGO10 from Kyrgyzstan included a list of different national level stakeholders that NGOs typically engaged with:

... We receive a state social order from the Ministry of Social Development... We have special cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Health. For example, we have achieved a revision of the clinical protocol for the treatment of autism, conducted training for psychiatrists and paediatricians, and so on. We coordinate our efforts with the Ministry of Education. We also work with them through working groups. We worked with the Republican PMPC, for whom we conducted training on working with children with mental disabilities. And we always invite representatives of the Ministry of Education to our events to highlight inclusion. – NGO10\_R1

A respondent from a Kazakhstani NGO2 also highlighted the NGO's strategic approach to influencing change within the government through long-term collaboration. Since their NGO piloted ABA (applied behavioral analysis) services in inclusive classrooms, they decided to transfer their experience and practices to the state for nation-wide dissemination. The respondent acknowledged the need for cooperation with the government to achieve this end:

We work with the government, parliament, party and so on within the framework of our project. Because our goal is to transfer our model to the state so that it works without us... System changes require a lot of time. A few years ago, the Ministry of Education and Science was against specialists in applied analysis and such courses in Kazakhstan, and now the government is asking us how to do it, where to buy services, and so on. – NGO2\_R1

The quote above provided an example of how the government's perspective on collaboration with NGOs had shifted over time. Partnership between the state bodies and NGOs was a key mechanism behind the success of NGOs in promoting their efforts in IE development. The outcomes of such partnership were explained earlier in the account of functions that NGOs perform in IE development and included successful implementation of policy initiatives, teacher training, and research projects among other deliverables.

While many NGOs established collaboration with the government and achieved specific goals, others faced difficulties while trying to work with state bodies, especially with the local departments of education. Some NGOs found it difficult to find allies among civil servants, as the latter were burdened with work and often not motivated to help. The lines of communication between the NGOs and the officials also seemed to be weak. Thus, there was a tendency of the *akims* (i.e., city councilors or mayors) to delegate work to their deputies, who may not always work with the NGOs.

We decided that it would be good to cooperate with state bodies, with the education department. But it turned out that this is an additional burden for employees of the education department, and they are not always motivated to help NGOs... It is difficult to find allies among civil servants because of their workload and low wages... - NGO3\_R1

R: Akims also tend to be less cooperative. They give instructions to their deputies, and there the work is interrupted. Deputies report, but in fact they often do not work with us. There are many mechanisms for cooperation, but the state is focused on reporting and not on systemic work. They do not listen to us, there is no established communication with local authorities, and there is a lack of highly professional competencies of akimat employees. – NGO6\_R1

To summarise, while some NGOs successfully established collaboration with the government and local authorities to promote IE, others faced challenges due to the lack of political will, absence of established communication channels, and the low motivation of government officials. NGOs highlighted the need for government to focus on systemic work rather than just reporting, and to improve the competencies of government employees to facilitate effective collaboration. Yet, among the most common barrier to cooperation with

the government was the high turnover of staff in the government and the lack of political will among some staff.

***Government turnover.*** Staff turnover in the civil service seemed to create the main barrier to sustainable cooperation between the NGO sector and government, as the lines of communication and mutual trust were continually disrupted and needed to be re-established.

The minister is constantly changing, so it's difficult to retell and prove every time, because of this, everything constantly slows down and stops. If the government had not changed so often, perhaps the development of inclusive education would have gone on long ago. And then they adopted the concept of inclusive education, but nothing worked due to a change of power. And NGOs even burn out from it. Constantly planting seeds there where it will not grow... – NGO9\_R1

These sentiments were shared by most respondents. Despite conveying the same message, I included several quotes to showcase how common these sentiments were:

[The ministries] keep inviting us to take part in discussions and round tables on inclusive education, but I have already stopped coming because the minister changes every year, and we have to start all over again. Every new minister says: "I don't know anything about it." We were included in the development of this plan for inclusive education, but we were not included in the monitoring group to assess the implementation of this plan... Because the minister and minister's adviser changed, and with that everything changed... – NGO12\_R1

We had a problem when we started working with the Ministry of Labor. We cooperated well with the vice minister, made joint plans, but he resigned, and another minister came in with different views. And so, cooperation with them did not work out. When an official is replaced, there is no continuity, and it is so hard to work. – NGO6\_R1

These quotes highlighted the frustration and disappointment that NGOs experienced due to the high turnover rate of government officials, especially at the ministerial level, which disrupted their ongoing efforts and initiatives. As a result, NGOs often had to start over and build new relationships repeatedly, which was time consuming and inefficient. The lack of

continuity also made it difficult to implement long-term strategies and plans for inclusive educational development.

Despite these challenges, some NGOs were able to build partnerships with local authorities, depending on the human factors involved, as they explain. Some local officials were more open to change and willing to work with NGOs to improve inclusive education in their regions. However, there were still issues with low wages and heavy workloads for civil servants, which limited their ability to support NGO initiatives.

Overall, building partnerships with the government could be a difficult and unpredictable process for NGOs working on the development of IE development. Another dimension of this challenge was the political will of the governmental and local authorities.

***Political will.*** Support among key decision makers played a crucial role in the success of NGOs. They needed the support of government to advance their agendas, and political leaders who prioritised inclusive education could significantly help in achieving their goals.

Our advocacy and lobbying potential have increased also because we were able to attract the attention of the president by getting to a meeting with him and conveying this problem and agenda to him. He expressed his support. Thanks to such communications and the development of state policy in the face of the president, we were able to advance this situation... – NGO9\_R2

On the contrary, NGOs were weaker if the state did not fully use them as a resource, and if the state was afraid of the political consequences of NGOs' widening engagement in socio-political affairs. This lack of trust limited the participation of NGOs in decision-making processes, hindering their ability to make a real impact.

Sometimes there is no political will around the causes that we support. For example, we met with the vice minister of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. There can be situations when there is certain criticism of how the ministry works in a certain area, and the ministry does not always want to hear this. So, we had a negative experience and sometimes couldn't cooperate. It can be different though when we speak about a local level, so working with local authorities in some regions can be more successful. It all depends on a human factor though. Some akims are ready for changes and improvements, and others are unreachable. – NGO4\_R1



These findings reinforced the understanding that the governments did not consistently demonstrate the political will towards NGOs' engagement in IE. Instead, there was a great reliance on the support of individuals within the ministerial or local levels. This was especially problematic due to the high turnover rate, so the reliance on individuals proved unsustainable. On the other hand, those NGOs which were able to establish rapport with highly influential decision-makers such as the president enjoyed the fruits of the political support. Nevertheless, there was one more problem revealed with the state-NGO relationship: funding.

***State funding.*** The respondents mentioned governments' mechanisms to control NGOs, including the concept of the state social orders, which are state funding bids. The majority of NGOs in this context appeared to rely on state orders for funding and support. This suggests that the state might have implemented strategies to influence or constrain the activities of NGOs to align with its interests. This reliance could compromise the independence and autonomy of these NGOs, as they might need to align their actions with the state's priorities to secure funding.

I also want to say that our NGOs are weaker than those abroad, because the state also does not fully use us as a resource, because they are afraid of political consequences, a coup, so they do not let us participate in all processes. They came up with mechanisms to keep us on the ropes: the state social order. There are few NGOs on grants from business or international donors. Most of our NGOs are relying on state orders. There is no free competition and alternative sources not to depend on the state. And then people also think that if an NGO is sponsored by the state, then they will do as the state says. Another way of state manipulation is appointing more or less active people with disabilities or NGOs to governmental positions. I was also appointed head of one structure, and now I cannot speak independently. From the non-governmental sector, we were made governmental. – NGO5\_R2

The absence of free competition and alternative funding sources apart from the state further reinforces the notion of dependency. This dynamic could hinder innovation and limit the diversity of perspectives within the NGO sector. The quote above also highlighted the state's manipulation by appointing individuals from NGOs or people with disabilities to governmental positions. This tactic might be used to co-opt these individuals and organizations, potentially stifling their ability to advocate independently for their causes.

Sometimes international donor organisations allocated funding to state governments, which then released state social orders for NGOs. Thus, NGOs had to access donor funding through the state, so state funding became a common or ‘classical’ way of ensuring financial sustainability of NGOs.

The barrier is a classical model or traditions of NGOs dependent on grants. We don’t support this model and try to move away from it. It surprises me that multilateral organisations grant millions, but they work through the government rather than community organisations directly. – NGO3\_R2

The funding model for NGOs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan needs to change to ensure greater independence and sustainability. Yet, the results suggested that overall, collaborative relationships between the NGOs and the authorities were vital to NGOs’ success.

**NGOs.** Cooperation between NGOs promoting inclusive education could be an effective strategy for improving access to quality education for children with disabilities and special needs. By sharing resources, expertise and best practices, these organisations worked together to create a more inclusive and supportive educational system. Kyrgyzstan’s NGOs showcased an outstanding example of collaboration through an informally established NGO network called Zhanaryk, which united at least 44 organisations representing the interests of children with SEND and their parents. One of the NGOs, reported to be an initiator of the effort to establish the Zhanaryk network, brought together the first six parent organisations from different areas:

In 2011, we founded the Zhanaryk network.... We first brought together six parent organisations from different areas. We even helped to open similar organisations to ours. Today, there are already 44 organisations in the network, and together we lobby for the interests of parents and their children. Organisations of the Zhanaryk network participate in all government programmes, discussions of the problems of children with disabilities, the development of inclusive education, and a lot of other issues. – NGO7\_R2

Zhanaryk was not governed by any one NGO but rather presented as the platform for all public organisations to unite efforts in their advocacy work. For example, NGO9 respondents shared how they relied on cooperation within the Zhanaryk network. They once

brought together members of the network for a meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister to voice the problems of children with disabilities and to establish the council, which was later engaged in developing framework documents on inclusive education:

We are part of the Zhanaryk network, they invite us to their events, and we invite them. That is, we are in close cooperation, especially when lobbying for legislative changes and appeals to the government, we do everything in a coordinated manner together. – NGO9\_R1

I gathered all members of the Zhanaryk network for a meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister in 2016 so that they could voice the problems of children with disabilities, and then a council was created to develop a concept and plan for the development of inclusive education 2019-2023. – NGO9\_R2

Similarly, NGO10\_R1 highlighted the importance of partnering with other NGOs to lobby for the adoption of the concept of inclusive education along with the programme and action plan to implement this policy:

I realised that it is difficult to promote something separately for children with autism. Therefore, together with other organisations, we lobbied for the concept of inclusive education for all children with disabilities to be adopted. We have created a working group under the Ministry of Education, I was also in this working group. And two years ago, this concept of inclusive education was adopted along with the programme and activities to implement this programme. – NGO10\_R1

Based on the responses provided by the interviewees, it was evident that NGOs engaged in partnerships and collaborations with other NGOs for various causes, including lobbying for the rights of persons with disabilities, developing legal framework documents such as concepts and laws on inclusive education, and implementing government programmes. However, there were also instances of competition for recognition and funding between NGOs, which hindered cooperation. Multiple responses of the Kazakhstani NGOs exemplified barriers to cooperation among NGOs. There were no established networks for NGOs in Kazakhstan similar to Zhanaryk in Kyrgyzstan, so the efforts of NGOs seemed to be fragmented and independent of one another. Numerous quotes below are a proof of that:

It seems to me that NGOs do not know how to work together and pursue common goals. If there was cooperation, it would be possible to promote inclusive education more effectively. But it seems to every NGO that only they are doing something right and good. And the competition for recognition and funding is taking its toll. When you offer something, other NGOs say: “Yes, we have already done all this before you!” – NGO1\_R2

When we just started working in Pavlodar and won a grant, I turned to an organisation for people with disabilities with an offer to work together. They said that since we won the grant, they would not cooperate with us. That is, public organisations of the disabled persons receive a state social order, and do not work outside of this funding. – NGO6\_R1

Respondent: I created an expert council, where I included representatives of state bodies from the Ministry of Health, Social Protection, Education, PMPC, Department of Education, that is, all key parties, including other NGOs... We've made a lot of changes...

Interviewer: Does this council work now?

Respondent: No. It was a tool to influence government bodies and for us to be heard. When you speak alone, you are not heard. And now our NGO is so ‘authoritative’ that our opinions are considered. I can directly call any vice minister and discuss any law that we don't like or use other lobbying platforms. – NGO2\_R2

NGO1 highlighted that NGOs did not know how to work together and pursue common goals as they experienced competition for recognition and funding. Similarly, NGO6 pointed out that public organisations competed for state social orders and did not partner with other NGOs receiving this funding. Nonetheless, NGO2 recognised the need to unite NGOs for common goals and to be heard. For this purpose, an expert council was established, and it resulted in positive outcomes as several policy-level initiatives were promoted by the joint effort. However, the respondent added that once their NGO gained enough authority and power to act single-handedly, their incentive to cooperate with other NGOs decreased and the council ceased to exist. Despite these rather unpromising results, there were Kazakhstani NGOs acknowledging the will to collaborate with other public organisations:

By working together, organisations can build a collective voice and advocate for more significant policy changes and funding for inclusive education programmes.

Now we are preparing an application in partnership with another NGO, that is, cooperation has been established. Most of our partners are NGOs of persons with disabilities. – NGO5\_R2

Overall, responses from Kazakhstan suggested that while NGOs engaged in partnerships and collaborations for various reasons, there were still challenges such as competition for recognition and funding, making it difficult for some NGOs to work together effectively. Therefore, there is a need for more strategic partnerships and collaboration to promote inclusive education effectively. The “Zhanaryk” self-organising association of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan served as an example of good practice to build sustainable partnerships across NGOs. NGOs united under the Zhanaryk network effectively lobby and advocate for the rights and needs of children with SEND as well as promote inclusive education by enhancing relevant legislation.

***Business partners.*** There was a notable level of collaboration between NGOs and private business organisations, particularly in terms of financial support and training programmes. The partnerships between NGOs and businesses varied in terms of the type and level of support provided. NGOs relied heavily on donations and fundraising events to support their work, and many businesses contributed to this effort by providing monetary donations or sponsoring events. For example, NGO2 and NGO11 held winter charity balls and relied on business donations to support their work. In addition to financial support, some businesses also offered in-kind donations or services. For example, NGO3 received a donation of 60 iPads from an unnamed business, which they then distributed to a school in need.

When it comes to donation and fundraising, every year we hold a winter charity ball, the funds from which allow us to do all our work. That is, business gives us donations. – NGO2\_R2

We held charity balls among other fundraising events. Then the business helped us by giving its donations. – NGO11\_R2

One large business organisation, which asked not to be named, donated 60 iPads to us. We found a school in the village of Bayserke, where they have factories, and through the administration of the school and social teachers, we handed it over to the most needy children. – NGO3\_R1

In addition to financial support, the respondents mentioned that NGOs could gain valuable expertise and experience through partnerships with private businesses. For example, NGO5 participated in the soft skills training programme provided by the largest airline company in Kazakhstan. This suggests that private businesses provided valuable resources and expertise that help NGOs to build their capacity and enhance their services.

We increase the potential of our team by partnering with business structures. For example, we participate in AirAstana's soft skills training programme. We have a permanent technical partner - "Vilda", who specialise in training programmes, and they are our experts. – NGO5\_R2

We work well with other organisations and businesses. For example, one of the business partners, the Chocolife company, contacted us and offered to conduct free training on team development. – NGO5\_R1

However, partnerships between NGOs and businesses were not always smooth. As noted by NGO7, in Kyrgyzstan, there were no tax incentives for businesses to cooperate with NGOs, resulting in a lack of interest from businesses. Furthermore, the lack of a regulatory framework means that businesses often provided one-time help rather than engaging in a long-term partnership. NGO9 also noted that some businesses only provided support for the sake of their public relations, rather than from genuine interest in supporting the NGO's cause.

PPP, public-private partnership, does not work in Kyrgyzstan. We do not have any tax breaks for businesses when cooperating with NGOs, except for income tax rebates, so businesses have no interest in working with us. They help us with a one-time help. Our centre is helped by one hotel, which sometimes helps us with food and so on. But we and our colleagues work with business only occasionally. Business does not get anything from cooperation with us because of the regulatory framework. – NGO7\_R1

There is one-time help provided to us, probably for the sake of their PR. That is, there were cases when businessmen helped, but there was no systematic support. –

NGO9\_R1

The results suggest that collaboration between NGOs and private businesses could be a fruitful partnership, particularly in terms of provision of financial support and expertise from private donors to NGOs. However, the level of support varied, and it appeared that not all private businesses were willing or able to aid NGOs. There seemed to be little incentive for businesses to support NGOs, as nothing was mentioned about the benefits delivered to business partners. Nevertheless, partnerships between NGOs and private businesses could be a valuable strategy for both sectors to achieve their goals and create positive social impact.

***International organisations.*** The results suggest that NGOs often depend on international organisations for funding, and the agenda of the donor organisation may have a significant influence on the projects and activities that the NGO undertakes. A respondent from NGO8 noted that Kyrgyzstan's scarcity of resources available to NGOs meant that their projects were often financed by international donors. This dependency on external funding could limit an NGO's independence and flexibility in terms of choosing the projects they undertake.

In our country, even the state depends on the donors' agenda. We have a weak legal culture, and we do not have enough resources. All our projects are financed by donors, and donors allocate funds for certain topics. We have the opportunity to refuse projects, but we are quite flexible. We are like those animals that can go to sleep and hibernate until a new opportunity arises. I don't know how to get out of this addiction.

– NGO8\_R2

When an international donor organisation announces a grant competition, they put forward calls for proposals with requirements for topics, tasks, target group, and main activities. Meaning, they establish criteria for participation in the competition and announce the agenda. – NGO4\_R1

However, not all NGOs felt that external funding limited their independence. NGO1 noted that if they did not fall into the stated grant category, they simply did not apply. This

suggests that NGOs have the choice to select which funding opportunities to pursue and are not necessarily forced to compromise their values or mission to secure funding.

I: It is often said that external funding forces an NGO to stick to the donor's vision, limiting its independence. Have you faced such difficulties?

R: No. If we don't fall into the stated grant category, we simply don't apply. We did not have situations where we had to make a deal with conscience – NGO1\_R2

In summary, partnerships between NGOs and international organisations played a significant role in providing funding for NGOs, but they could also possibly limit an NGO's independence and flexibility. NGOs need to carefully consider the funding opportunities they pursue and ensure that they align with their values and mission. At the same time, international organisations should strive to provide funding that supports the long-term sustainability and independence of NGOs, rather than imposing their agenda. Due to the different views of these NGOs, the findings on the partnerships between NGOs and international donor organisations were inconclusive. It was decided to continue interviewing international organisations to learn further about the relationships between them and the NGOs, and to what extent these relationships can affect the NGOs' agendas.

### **Interviews with international donor organisations**

After policy analysis as well as the interviews with domestic NGOs, interviews with international donor organisations were conducted as the final stage of data collection in the grounded theory research. There were two main purposes in this last stage. Firstly, in order to triangulate and enrich the data, it was necessary to explore whether international organisations (IOs) perceive the scope and significance of the NGOs' engagement in the development of inclusive education, how the national policies express this and how NGOs perceive it. Secondly, the purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the relationships between international donor organisations and local domestic NGOs with a focus on the power dynamic. The need for this understanding emerged from the inconclusive findings from interviews with NGOs in order to evaluate whether their agendas and activities are shaped by donors and whether sponsorship affects the autonomy of NGOs. The results of the interviews with the IOs suggested are presented in three subsections:

- Engagement of NGOs in IE development



- NGOs as beneficiaries of support and funding from IOs
- Autonomy of NGOs.

### ***Engagement of NGOs in inclusive educational development***

Interviewed international donor organisations working in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan perceived local NGOs as important partners in the development of inclusive education. They viewed NGOs as more than just recipients of funding but as active participants in the process of project development, with whom they collaborated closely to expand and implement initiatives.

The role of NGOs is huge. We position ourselves not only as donors, but as partners. We develop projects together. For example, an NGO comes to us with a project, we observe, discuss, and share our vision. We sit down at the negotiating table and decide how all this will be implemented. And during the implementation of the project, we are constantly working together; we do field trips, and we go to the locations where the projects take place. – IO4

International organisations also recognised that NGOs can play different roles, such as advocates and policy influencers, depending on their areas of focus and target beneficiaries. Domestic NGOs were seen as important contributors to the development of methodologies for working with children with special needs, and respondents suggested that NGOs often possessed more methodological expertise than formal institutions such as pedagogical/medical/psychological consultancies (PMPCs). In addition, international donors recognised the role of NGOs in monitoring the implementation of programmes on IE. These findings support and echo the results of the prior analysis of interviews with local NGOs as well as the policy analysis.

Most common contribution is creating, piloting, and proposing methodologies of working with children with special needs. For example, when it comes to how to work with children with ASD, NGOs often are more competent than PMPC. – IO1

There are NGOs that play the role of advocates who increased awareness about the rights of the citizens for education. There are also trouble shooters which work in a specific region with a specific category of beneficiaries such as people with

disabilities. There is a growing tendency now that NGOs engage with policy making.

– IO5

Depending on the project, monitoring formats are different. And often a third party is chosen for this, and it is public organisations that have experience in social research and monitoring experience. - IO3

Donor organisations also acknowledged that NGOs contributed to raising awareness of the importance of inclusive education and served as guest speakers in teacher training programmes, sharing their knowledge and experience. These findings also support the results of interviewing the representatives of NGOs and analysing policies on inclusive education in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

They sometimes can take part in teacher training as specialists. Maybe, not in formal teacher training organised by institutes of professional development but in informal activities. For example, CSO representatives are sometimes invited as guest speakers by other specialists or organisations that train teachers to share their knowledge. – IO1

Overall, the international donor organisations interviewed recognised the crucial role of local NGOs in the development of inclusive education and viewed them as active and valuable partners in achieving their goals. These findings are consistent with the previous stages of the research.

### ***NGOs as beneficiaries of support and funding from IOs***

There were three main types of support which IOs provide to local NGOs engaged in inclusive education: capacity-building, scaling up, and funding. Donors aimed to enhance the competencies of NGOs and helped them grow through capacitational activities such as providing training to NGOs and inviting them to critical discussions and thematic projects. In particular, parental NGOs received support, as they were viewed as the most motivated segment of civil society organisations involved in inclusive education.

How did we support inclusive education? There were many projects, but the key focus was to support NGOs, to contribute to the development of the capacity of NGOs that promote the rights of children with disabilities to access quality education... 80% of NGOs working in the area of inclusive education are parental NGOs, so we focused

on developing their capacity. For these parental associations and NGOs, we provided training activities, invited foreign specialists for experience sharing about different models of inclusive education, and explained the role of the civil society in this. – IGO2

If our missions and values align with those of some NGOs, we are ready to collaborate. We involve them into our educational programmes such as training the trainers, recruiting them as volunteer experts or paid contractors, consulting with them when planning our project, including into the list of respondents when we conduct research, and we also can rely on them in evaluation of some project outcomes. – IO5

IOs also helped NGOs grow through scaling-up efforts by elevating their best practices to the policy level through partnerships with government. For example, IO1 took a comprehensive and strategic approach to supporting inclusive education in Kyrgyzstan. It focused on exploring the best practices around IE in the country and supported the escalation of these best practices, helping the NGOs to expand their coverage and strengthen their competencies. In addition, the IO aimed to elevate these best practices politically, getting them supported at the level of state educational policy.

We started supporting inclusive education by supporting civil society organisations and their initiatives that showcased best practices around inclusive education. Most often, the founders of such organisations are parents of children with disabilities; it is a very motivated segment of the civil society. They were implementing different practices in Kyrgyzstan. At first stages, we were focused on exploring these practices, showcasing them, and supporting their escalation so that the organisations could grow in width (meaning the coverage of regions) and in depth (meaning developing their competencies or learning to implement new methodologies). Later, when the best practices were identified, we started thinking how we can elevate these insulated practices to a political dimension, that is to get them supported on a state educational policy level. – IGO1

Lastly, international organisations provided various forms of financial support to local NGOs engaged in IE development in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This support took the form of grants, joint projects, subcontracting, competitions, or contracts for research and

monitoring. For example, NGOs could apply for grants to fund their projects and activities related to IE. These grants covered various expenses, such as equipment, training, research, and monitoring.

We are implementing IE with [name of NGO] and [name of NGO]. With these NGOs, we had projects to equip special resource classrooms for inclusive educational organisations. These NGOs, with our help, equipped classrooms and resource centres in several schools in Nur-Sultan, and also developed methodological manuals for teachers working with children with special needs. – IGO4

Some international donors provide indirect funding to NGOs through partnerships with government or other executing agencies.

I: Do I understand correctly that the [the name of the IO] does not directly sponsor NGOs, but eventually they receive funds through various types of partnerships, such as competitions or contracts for research and monitoring. That is, they are indirectly recipients of your sponsorship?

R: Absolutely correct conclusion. Through the channels of executing agents, they participate and receive assistance. Moreover, since the level of the ministry's terms of reference must be agreed with the [the name of the IO] advisory team, the selection process is closely monitored by us. – IO3

Overall, international donor organisations provided funding to local NGOs engaged in the development of IE in various ways, including grants, subcontracts, partnerships, and competitions/contracts. These funding mechanisms enabled NGOs to carry out their projects and activities, build their capacity, and contribute to promoting IE in their communities.

### ***Autonomy of NGOs***

The findings on the relationships between NGOs and donor organisations suggest that there was a complex dynamic between NGOs and international donors, with both parties having some level of autonomy and influence in the relationship.

On the one hand, international donors had a certain amount of power in terms of determining which NGOs received funding and on what terms. For example, IGO2 noted that they had to reject requests for certain types of funding, such as support for institutional

expenses, in order to maintain the focus on supporting specific ideas and projects that align with their mission and values. Additionally, as IGO3 pointed out, many local NGOs might have felt limited in their options for development due to the fact that funding from international donors was often the most accessible source of financial and technical support.

Whoever pays the money orders the music. But NGOs coming to us share our values. There were cases when NGOs came to us with their applications, and we could not support these applications. They asked for computers, payment for office rent, and so on. We tactfully said that only 10% of the grant could go to institutional support for the organisation. But we support ideas and projects. We are still visited by those who share our mission and values... – IGO2

No international organisation can forcibly restrict the activities of NGOs. If an NGO agrees with the agenda of an international organisation, then it voluntarily gets involved. And due to their own limited resources, local NGOs receive financial and technical assistance from international donors for the benefit of capacity building and development of local NGOs... But there is always a choice. Another question: do local NGOs have any other choice for their development? Are they forced to agree to the terms of the donors? Unfortunately, most of our funding comes from international donors. It is more accessible, so to speak, "low-hanging fruit". – IGO3

However, the responses suggested that NGOs had some level of autonomy. For example, IO5 noted that NGOs preferred to work with international organisations precisely because they were more flexible than government, suggesting that NGOs had some choice in deciding who they partnered with. Additionally, IO4 emphasised that their work with NGOs was a partnership based on collaboration and cooperation, and that they encouraged NGOs to focus on sustainability so that their projects could continue beyond the period of donor funding. Thus, NGOs had some degree of control over their own project design and planning, and that they were encouraged to build their own capacity and resources.

Probably, in any mutual relationship, the parties adapt to each other... I cannot say that our NGOs have become dependent on us. In the first stages of the discussion, we discuss sustainability so that after our funding, NGO projects continue to exist regardless of the donor. For example, the [name of an NGO] and [name of another

NGO] foundations are starting to offer training on a paid basis, that is, they are looking for a way to make their project and organisation independent of donors. Our work with NGOs is partnership, collaboration, and cooperation. In general, we depend on them. Our reputation and projects depend on NGOs, because we have entrusted NGOs with our money and our good name. So, we depend on how well they do the project. – IO4

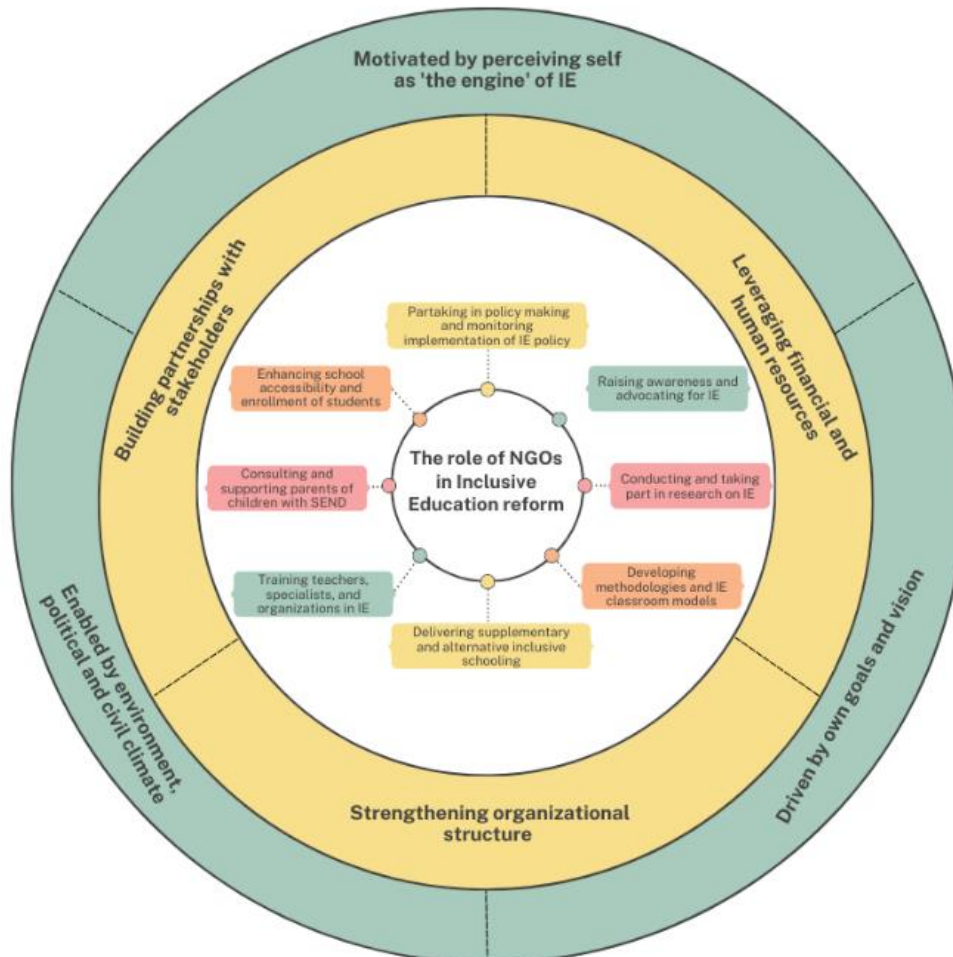
Overall, the results suggest that international donor organisations perceived NGOs as important partners in the development process, particularly in the areas of education and social inclusion. NGOs were seen as playing various roles, including as advisers, capacity builders, implementers, and advocates for IE. NGOs were appreciated because of their expertise, strong motivation, and ability to implement change on the ground. However, some NGOs had to agree with the strict requirements of international donors in order to receive financial assistance, and they had limited alternative funding sources.

### **Generation of Categories and Emergent Theory**

In an effort to comprehend the roles and engagement of NGOs in the development of inclusive education, the data and themes generated from this study were synthesised into a unified framework of NGO engagement in IE. The emergent framework was originally broken down into three levels or tiers: the WHAT's, the HOW's, and the WHY's. Themes resulting from the data analysis found their place under each tier, and the below framework was drafted in the midst of the theoretical integration.

## Graph 7

*First draft of NGOs' engagement in IE framework*



The centred WHAT level corresponded with the findings on the functional roles and engagement of NGOs in inclusive education described earlier in this chapter. Eight main outputs delivered by these organisations were derived, including the following:

- Partaking in policy making and monitoring the implementation of IE policy
- Enhancing school accessibility and enrolment of students
- Consulting and supporting parents of children with SEND
- Training teachers, specialists and organisations in IE
- Delivering supplementary and alternative inclusive schooling
- Raising awareness and advocating for IE
- Conducting and taking part in research on IE
- Developing methodologies and IE classroom models.

The strategies employed by NGOs in their work regarding IE, including self-reported strategies as well as the findings from the interviews with IOs, made up the yellow HOW tier. The motivations, goals, and self-perceptions were to be positioned within the green WHY tier. This framework attempted to capture NGO-driven and NGO-centred response to the quest to learn about the roles and engagement of NGOs in inclusive educational reform. However, this early version was only a draft to be further discussed and refined at the theory validation stage. To avoid repetitions, I am not discussing each tier and theme in connection to the overarching framework in this chapter. Instead, I present the theory validation outcomes below and re-introduce the final framework in the Chapter 5, Discussion.

### **Theory Validation**

Following the emergence of the grounded theory, conversation circles were conducted to present and discuss the emergent theory with other stakeholders who were not included in the actual data collection process. Two conversation circles were conducted. The first one included NGOs from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan with the aim of confirming whether the study findings and the derived model were comparable with the experience of other NGOs working in inclusive education. Another aim was to explore whether the study findings and the derived model would be similar to the experience of NGOs from Central Asian states other than Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The second conversation circle included such non-NGO actors as academic researchers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, a policy maker from Kazakhstan, and a non-donor IGO in Kazakhstan specialising on IE, to learn whether the study findings and the derived model would be perceived as valid by non-NGO experts regarding the question of inclusive education and civil society in Central Asian states.

As the first conversation circle was conducted with the NGOs and mainly concerned the applicability/transferability of the research results, the main question was "To what extent does this framework reflect the experience of your NGO?" The response to this question was very positive, as the respondents from all countries confidently confirmed the applicability of the framework to their contexts. For example, a Tajik NGO provided their positive feedback:

Even though the data was collected in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this model well connects with the experience of NGOs in Tajikistan. For example, speaking of the role of parental organisations, we have an informal coalition of 40 parental organisations, and despite varying levels of their capacity... almost all 8 functions you've mentioned are the directions where our organisations work as well.



Despite a general acknowledgement that the model applied to the experience of NGOs participating in the conversation circles, a number of suggestions were offered and summarised in the table below.

The second conversation circle posed the key question: “To what extent does this model seem valid to you in terms of capturing the role of NGOs in IE development?” The participants, being experts and practitioners working with NGOs promoting IE, also provided recommendations for improvement to increase the validity of the model, in the manner of constructive criticism. The major suggestion for the researcher was to highlight the barriers to the work of NGOs in IE development. The results of both conversation circles are summarised in the table below:

**Table 15.** *Conversation circles for theory validation - results*

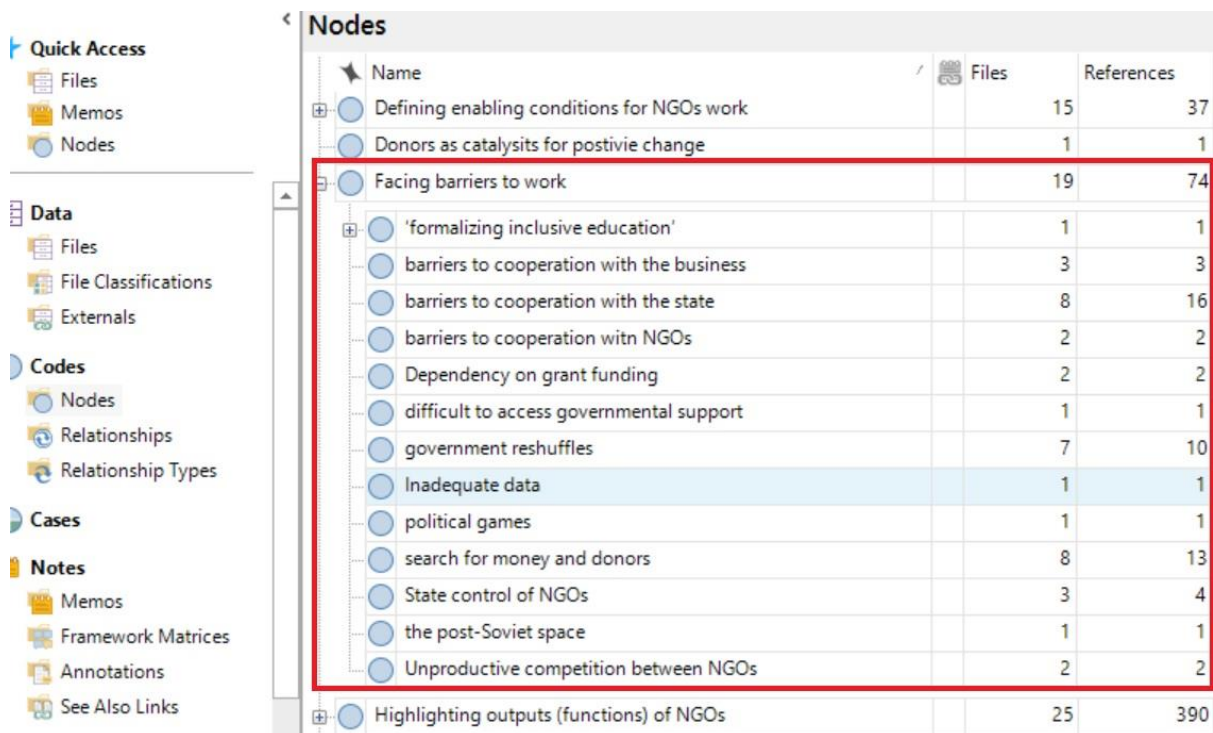
Comments/suggestions/criticism	Action point summarised by the researcher and approved by the conversation circle participants
Conversation Circle 1	
-The participants reflected on the issue of government turnover, which makes it hard to maintain and continuously develop relationships and cooperation between NGOs and the state. Respondents asked to integrate this barrier into the model.	-To add one more level to the model that would reflect the barriers to the work of NGOs in IE.
-It would be beneficial if the model explained the issue of NGOs having to compete for funding and recognition.	-To add one more level to the model that would reflect the barriers to the work of NGOs in IE.
-It was advised that the ‘Eastern’ cultural specifics should be added to the model to make it more representative of the Central Asian context.	-To reflect on the cultural specifics of this model and research findings in the Findings/Discussion section.

Conversation Circle 2	
<p>-Two participants were concerned about the differences between Central Asian countries which were not clearly shown in the study results. For example, in Uzbekistan, “the state of civil society and grass-root NGO capacity is lower than in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.” In Kyrgyzstan, “there is a preference for non-intervention by the state in the work of disability NGOs, unlike in Kazakhstan”.</p> <p>-It was difficult to agree with some of the positive self-representations of NGOs, being a non-NGO actor. The results present the voices of NGOs but don’t represent the views of other stakeholders.</p> <p>-The participants discussed barriers to IE development and to the work of NGOs in Central Asia.</p> <p>-The study results were suggested to be transformed into a guideline document to be shared with key stakeholders involved in this topic because.</p>	<p>-To expand the section on cross-country similarities and differences in the literature review section to ensure the researcher gives an in-depth account of differences between the countries.</p> <p>-To continue the discussion on cross-country differences in the discussion section to avoid misleading generalisations.</p> <p>-To reflect in the discussion section on this model being NGO-centred. Even though the voices of IOs and other stakeholders are mentioned in the results section, this model gives an in-depth account of the predominantly NGO-driven perception of the NGOs’ role in IE.</p> <p>-To add a barrier grading to the model mentioning some of the difficulties that NGOs experience, in order to avoid an overly optimistic model.</p> <p>-To include recommendations and/or guidelines for key stakeholders in the discussion and/or conclusion sections.</p>

What was similar in both discussion circles was the account of the factors causing the barriers that limited the ability of NGOs to engage in IE reform and explained why some NGOs failed to bring any meaningful change. As a result of these discussions, the diagram model was updated with the addition of another layer, named ‘WHY NOT’ and representing the barriers to NGOs’ engagement in IE.

Different barriers were mentioned by the participants in the validation circle, but to properly understand the factors causing the barriers, the researcher had to rely on previously gathered data. Therefore, I went back to my NVIVO nodes and themes and carefully analysed the “Facing barriers to work” category as pictured below.

**Figure 9.** Snapshot from NVIVO highlighting codes related to barriers faced by NGOs in their work



Name	Files	References
Defining enabling conditions for NGOs work	15	37
Donors as catalysits for postivie change	1	1
Facing barriers to work	19	74
'formalizing inclusive education'	1	1
barriers to cooperation with the business	3	3
barriers to cooperation with the state	8	16
barriers to cooperation withn NGOs	2	2
Dependency on grant funding	2	2
difficult to access governmental support	1	1
government reshuffles	7	10
Inadequate data	1	1
political games	1	1
search for money and donors	8	13
State control of NGOs	3	4
the post-Soviet space	1	1
Unproductive competition between NGOs	2	2
Highlighting outputs (functions) of NGOs	25	390

Analysing once more the most common barriers faced by NGOs, the model was expanded, and the final version is presented in the following chapter on discussion.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the study on the engagement of local NGOs in the development of inclusive education in Central Asia. As the research question aimed to examine the participation of NGOs in the development and implementation of inclusive educational policies and practices in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this grounded theory study

utilised policy analysis, interviews with NGOs, and international donor organisations to draw relevant results.

The policy analysis revealed that the states recognised the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration in promoting inclusive education, and NGOs were acknowledged as key actors in this process. The policy documents mentioned the involvement of parents, public organisations, and NGOs in raising public awareness of inclusive education, establishing resource centres, and monitoring and evaluating the implementation of inclusive educational policy. However, it was necessary to investigate whether the reality matched the policy rhetoric and to increase the understanding of the role of the public sector in the successful implementation of IE policies in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The interviews with NGOs shed light on their self-perceptions, functions, and strategies. The results suggested that the self-perceptions of NGOs were closely tied to their motivations and envisaged goals. NGOs predominantly perceived their engagement in inclusive education through the lens of disability, meaning their goal seemed to be the expansion of inclusion in education for children with disabilities. The focus on disability as a driving factor for their work was prevalent among many participants, although not all NGOs perceive their engagement solely from this perspective.

Most importantly, NGOs defined their role as the driving force behind inclusive educational reform and development, as there was a shared belief that governments were failing to fulfil their promises to ensure access to quality education for the most vulnerable children. The failures of government were further explained by NGOs as limited political will at the level of individual civil servants, high staff turnover and, as a result, difficulty in establishing trust and sustainable partnerships between the public organisations and the state.

At the same time, limited political will along with the broad partnerships of NGOs with diverse stakeholders and the leveraging of financial and human resources were recognised as the main enablers, as well as the strategies that allow certain NGOs to achieve the best results in their work to promote inclusive education. In general, NGOs played multiple functional roles in promoting and advancing inclusive education, including partaking in policy making and monitoring the implementation of IE policy, enhancing accessibility to and enrolment in schools, and developing inclusive pedagogies and curricula among other functional roles.

The results of the interviews with international donor organisations supported the findings that NGOs, especially parental organisations, were the most self-motivated segment of society when it came to inclusive educational development, as the problems of educational

access affected parental communities directly. International donors recognised the functional roles and engagement of NGOs, as revealed during the interviews with NGO representatives, but they did acknowledge that the autonomy and capacity of NGOs could be limited by the strict conditions of the donors. The scarcity of other funding opportunities was one of the barriers to the wider and more sustainable engagement of NGOs in IE development.

The findings of this study implied that NGOs provided expertise and resources to support the successful implementation of inclusive educational policies. The self-perceptions of NGOs played a significant role in motivating their efforts towards promoting inclusive education. Finally, the study highlighted the importance of recognising the multiple functional roles of NGOs in promoting and advancing inclusive education in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These results were synthesised in the emergent theoretical framework of NGO engagement in inclusive education, and the framework was presented at two validation meetings using the methodology of conversation circles. The validation confirmed the applicability of the framework to the wider Central Asian context, as well as suggesting a means of expanding the framework by adding an additional level of inquiry. The grounded theory framework is to be further presented and discussed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter discusses the 4-Tier Framework of NGO Engagement in IE, which has emerged as a result of this study. The chapter starts by considering the model produced holistically and then discusses the links between the unique study findings emerging from the close analysis of data and the existing body of knowledge. The discussion ends with a summary of the implications of the research for inclusive education policy and practice in Central Asia.

Although the findings are consistent with the existing knowledge on the functions and roles of NGOs in inclusive education development, the thesis does add a new framework to support a deeper analysis of processes. The deep reflection on functions and processes has helped to identify key drivers, barriers, and mechanisms at work while NGOs carry out their role.

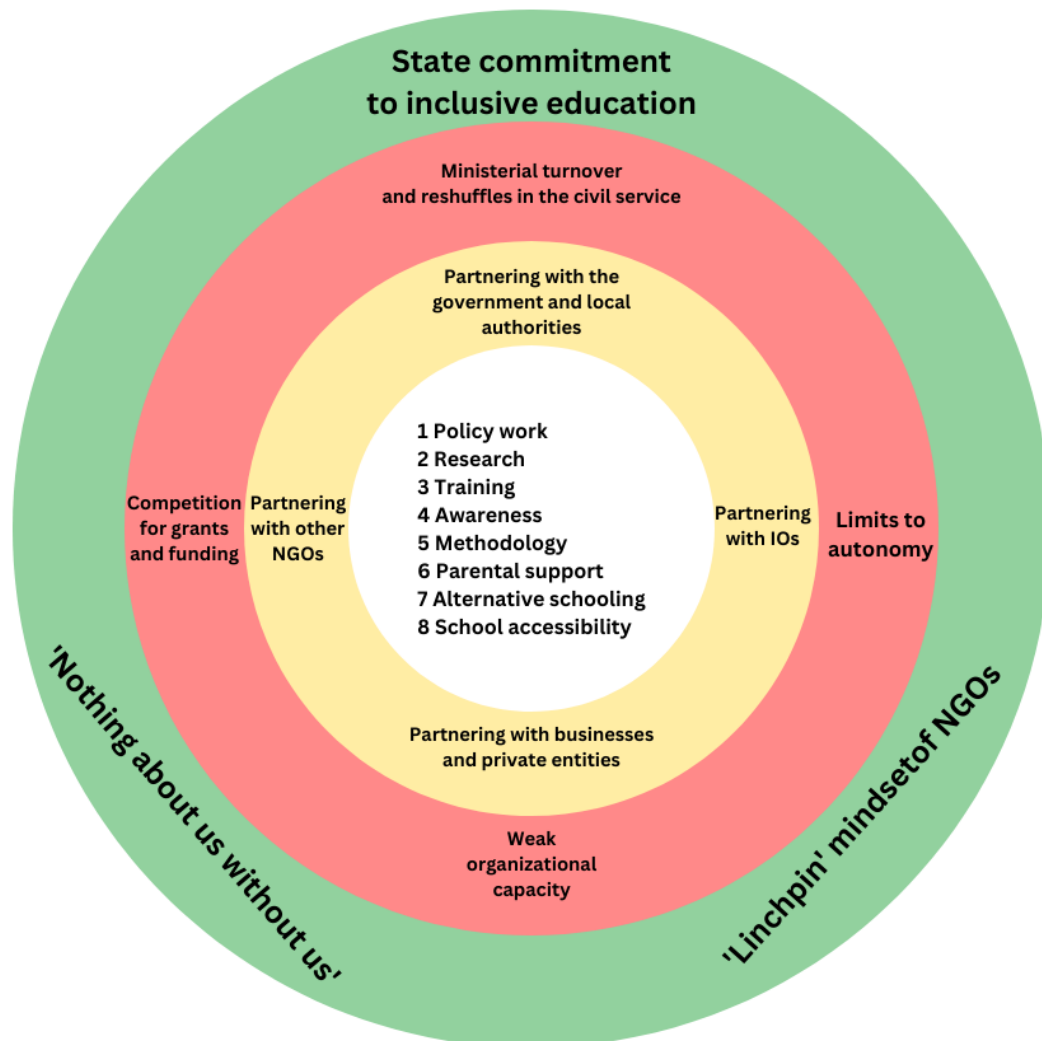
Furthermore, these findings extend understanding of the complexity of NGO engagement in inclusive education in Central Asian. The work explains why some NGOs succeed in their goals while others fail.

Finally, implications of this research provide evidence-based recommendations for NGOs and policy makers in the region to utilise the knowledge and capacity of NGOs to support challenges of implementing IE.

### **4-Tier Framework of NGO Engagement in IE**

The central outcome of this study is a theoretical model, which was constructed in consultations with the participants of the study as well as the participants of the theory validation meetings. As a result of the theory validation, the model was subject to change until a consensus was reached among the key stakeholders taking part in the study. Figure 9 below demonstrates the final constructed framework:

**Figure 10.** *4-Tier Framework of NGO Engagement in IE*



Since comprehending the role of NGOs in the development of IE is a dynamic process, this framework should also be considered not the universal model, but rather a snapshot of the current realities shared by NGO representatives and other key stakeholders involved in the study. Below is a discussion of each of the tiers of this framework.

### ***Tier 1 – the WHATs***

In the centre of the emerged theoretical framework, there are eight functional roles that NGOs play in inclusive education development. The findings are consistent with the literature that suggests that NGOs are crucial actors in promoting inclusive education.

NGOs in Central Asia play a crucial role in *policy making and monitoring the implementation of inclusive education (IE) policies*. The respondents admit that they actively collaborate with government agencies, ministries, parliament, and other stakeholders to shape policy development. NGOs engage in the development of policy documents and legislative initiatives. They use their advocacy skills to promote the agenda of inclusive education and lobby for the interests of children with disabilities. These findings are in line with the wider literature discussing NGOs as contributors to educational policy and laws and as partners to the government (Lang, 2012; Mundy et al. 2008; Rollan & Somerton, 2021; Schuster & Kolley, 2021; Singal, 2020).

NGOs also conduct research and offer solutions to improve the regulatory framework. Through their active participation in policy discussions and forums, NGOs are able to influence policy decisions and emphasize the importance of inclusive education. Singal (2020) similarly described the contribution of NGOs from the demand side, suggesting that NGOs bring about change in national and international agendas and create knowledge and evidence by undertaking research. Therefore, the findings of this study fit into the wider research on how NGOs advocate for IE. This collaboration between NGOs and the government aims to achieve sustainable solutions for inclusive education policy in Central Asia. For example, NGOs have influenced policy changes by introducing teaching assistants and tutors at a legislative level in Kazakhstan.

NGOs in Central Asia engage in *raising awareness and advocating for inclusive education reform*. They utilize various methods such as media platforms, social media, public events, exhibitions, concerts, contests, and awareness classes to raise awareness among the general public about disability and inclusive education. NGOs collaborate with different media outlets and maintain social media accounts to disseminate information and interact with the audience. They organize events and competitions to educate the public and promote tolerance, understanding, and knowledge about inclusive education. Even though these findings are well in line with the pertinent literature (Schuster and Kolley, 2021), the use of social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and even messengers such as WhatsApp for awareness raising about inclusive education is a unique finding in the context of Central Asia. This implies that NGOs are adapting to the changing communication



landscape and leveraging digital platforms to reach a wider audience. These findings highlight the importance of utilizing technology and social media as effective tools for advocacy and education in the region.

Central Asian NGOs actively participate in *research on inclusive education*. They conduct independent studies or collaborate with government agencies and international organizations to promote inclusive education and identify areas for improvement. In addition, NGOs play a significant role in *developing methodologies for inclusive schooling and designing inclusive classroom models*. They establish and develop educational standards, resource centres, and methodological materials to support individualized programs for students with SEN and inclusive pedagogical approaches. Some NGOs establish private schools, kindergartens, and resource centres, where they can also pilot different models of inclusive teaching and learning. Some of the successful practices become the foundation for further policy recommendations. This is an important finding showcasing how grassroots NGOs in Central Asia serve as pioneering experts defining how IE looks like in a classroom in practice.

Hence, Central Asian NGOs also *deliver supplementary and alternative inclusive schooling*. They run private learning centres that offer supplementary training to children with disabilities and learning difficulties. These centres deliver as well as contribute to improving services across similar learning centres. Some NGOs establish resource centres and inclusion support offices within schools to provide methodological support, advice, and additional assistance to children with special needs who attend mainstream classrooms. These findings echo Singal's analysis (2020) of supply functions of disability NGOs, meaning NGOs internationally are known for providing alternative educational opportunities for students with SEND. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan recognise this function of NGOs on the governmental level too, as the state laws specifically envision the contribution of NGOs to resource centre development.

NGOs in Central Asia play a significant role *in training teachers, specialists, and organizations in the field of inclusive education*. They deliver training programs to educational institutions and parents, equipping them with knowledge and skills related to inclusive education. NGOs contribute to the development of training materials and modules for educators and establish a system of training and certification for specialists in inclusive education. Therefore, they actively engage in capacity building, sharing best practices, and fostering professional networks. Schuster and Kolleck (2021) in their systematic review of the involvement of NGOs in IE mapped capacity development as the most discussed

contribution of NGOs in the literature. In this way, Central Asian NGOs in IE reflect the international trends.

Central Asian NGOs provide *consulting and support to parents of students with special educational needs and disabilities*. They offer training programs, consultations, and online support to empower parents and create a network of support. Some NGOs even open schools for parents, focusing on educating them about childhood and inclusive education. Although the pertinent literature discussed the activism of organizations of parents of children with disabilities (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Singal, 2020), the results of this study highlight how parents themselves seek for support and receive it from NGOs. Interestingly, Markova and Sultanalieva (2013) in their case study of a Kazakhstani NGO founded by parents of children with autism spectrum disorders mention that there is no cultural tradition of parental activism in Kazakhstan. Yet, the results of this grounded theory study suggest that parental NGOs actively engage in activism to promote inclusive education and disability rights. These NGOs also empower the wider parental community, consulting and supporting the needs of parents.

Lastly, NGOs in Central Asia actively engage in *enhancing school accessibility and promoting the enrolment of students with special needs and disabilities*. They work with schools and families to remove barriers to schooling and improve physical accessibility. NGOs address gaps in access to resources and skills (for example, by collecting and distributing computers and providing digital literacy training). Several NGOs explained that they help students with SEND get enrolled in mainstream schools by providing them support in passing PMPC evaluation. Another way to facilitate student enrolment is by directly enrolling a student through NGO rather than through a school system. This is possible because NGOs create inclusive learning spaces within schools by opening inclusion support offices or resource classrooms.

Overall, Central Asian NGOs play vital roles in inclusive education development. They participate in policy making, raise awareness, conduct research, develop methodologies, deliver supplementary and alternative schooling, train teachers and specialists, consult and support parents, and enhance school accessibility. These efforts contribute to promoting inclusive education and creating equal educational opportunities for all children in Central Asia.

## ***Tier 2 – the HOWs***

The success of NGOs in promoting inclusive education in Central Asia is closely tied to their ability to establish partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders. These partnerships play a crucial role in providing resources, expertise, and support for NGOs' initiatives. The research findings highlight four key groups of stakeholders that NGOs in Central Asia commonly partner with: government and local level authorities, businesses, international organizations (IOs), and other NGOs.

*Government and local level authorities* emerge as crucial partners for NGOs in promoting inclusive education. Government institutions at various levels hold significant influence over policies and regulations related to education. Collaborating with the government allows NGOs to advocate for inclusive practices, revise protocols, and coordinate efforts through working groups. The state funding also serves as an additional support to NGOs. Partnerships with the Ministry of Education, in particular, have been instrumental in driving inclusive education reforms. In the previous research on Kazakhstani NGOs working on inclusive education development, Rollan and Somerton (2021) highlighted the cooperative relationships between NGOs and the state bodies as an important pre-requisite for successfully promoting policies around inclusion. The present research further reinforces this understanding of partnership between NGOs and government as well as local authorities as a key strategy how NGOs achieve best results in their efforts to promote inclusive education.

Partnerships with *international organizations* are essential for NGOs' financial sustainability and capacitation. The findings suggest that partnering with IOs is a strategy that NGOs rely on to leverage influential networks, develop their capacities, and ensure funding for their activities. Therefore, this partnership allows NGOs to engage in inclusive education development more effectively. On the other hand, the agenda of the donor organization plays a significant role in shaping the projects and activities of NGOs. While some NGOs feel that external funding limits their independence, most NGOs exercise agency by selectively pursuing funding opportunities that align with their values and mission. Striking a balance between accessing external funding and maintaining independence is crucial. These findings also reflect wider research on NGOs in IE globally (Nuth, 2018; Singal, 2020) as scholars argue that the dependency of NGOs on international donor organisations can undermine the autonomy of the former to drive their own agenda. However, the partnership between NGOs and IOs remain an important imperative for NGOs' capacity to drive change.

Partnerships with *businesses* also help NGOs in advancing inclusive education initiatives. NGOs admit that they rely on financial support from the private sector through donations, fundraising events, and in-kind contributions. Although the partnerships between non-profit and private sectors are only emerging now, businesses already contribute to NGOs' efforts by providing monetary support, resources, and expertise. Collaboration with businesses not only addresses resource constraints but also enables capacity building and access to specialized knowledge. For example, private companies offer non-profit organizations skills training courses. While the literature on the involvement of businesses in the IE policy development is scarce, businesses are recognised as active participants in IE networks together with NGOs (Schuster & Kolleck, 2021). Meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships are crucial to ensure businesses align their support with NGOs' goals and values.

Finally, the results demonstrate that collaboration among *NGOs* is vital mechanism for promoting inclusive education. The case of the Zhanaryk network in Kyrgyzstan demonstrates the benefits of collaboration and resource sharing. NGOs working together can amplify their voices, advocate for policy changes, and secure funding for inclusive education programs. Therefore, the findings reinforce the existing literature that emphasizes the significance of collaboration among NGOs in advancing inclusive education (Gaventa & Mayo, 2009; Rollan & Somerton, 2021; Schuster, 2021). However, challenges such as competition for recognition and funding can hinder collaboration among NGOs, which was especially highlighted by participants representing Kazakhstani NGOs. These challenges need to be addressed to foster effective collaboration and maximize the collective impact of NGOs in advancing inclusive education.

In conclusion, partnerships with diverse stakeholders play a critical role in the success of NGOs working on inclusive education in Central Asia. These partnerships provide financial support, resources, expertise, and a platform for advocacy. While challenges exist, fostering effective collaborations requires increased political will, improved communication channels, meaningful partnerships with businesses, funding models that support independence, and strategic collaborations among NGOs. By leveraging partnerships effectively, NGOs can contribute significantly to the advancement of inclusive education in the region.

### ***Tier 3 – the WHY NOT's***

The findings indicate that NGOs play a crucial role in advocating for and implementing inclusive education initiatives, but they encounter various challenges that hinder their progress and impact. These barriers are multifaceted and interrelated, encompassing aspects such as policy and legal frameworks, resource constraints, and institutional capacities. Specifically, this study revealed four most highlighted barriers, which are to be discussed below. According to the theory validation sessions' participants, understanding these barriers is essential for developing effective strategies and policies to overcome them, ensuring that inclusive education becomes a reality for all children in the region.

**Autonomy.** The findings on the autonomy of NGOs in relation to their status as beneficiaries of funding from international organizations (IOs), state as well as business reveal a complex interplay between NGOs and donors. Since historically most fundings has been coming from international organisations, the controversy about NGO-IO relations is most prominent. Arguably, international donors hold power in determining which NGOs receive funding and under what conditions. This control is evident in their ability to prioritize specific projects and ideas that align with their mission and values. This controversy has been also raised by other scholars in IE (Nuth, 2018; Singal, 2020).

The dependence of local NGOs on international donors is acknowledged by most study participants. Due to limited resources, local NGOs often rely heavily on international funding for financial and technical assistance. The accessibility of international donor funding makes it a primary source for development activities. This dependency raises questions about the extent of choice local NGOs have in shaping their own development trajectories and whether they are compelled to align with donor requirements.

However, the findings also indicate that NGOs possess a certain degree of autonomy in their relationship with international donors. NGOs may actively choose to work with IOs because of the flexibility they offer compared to the government, as mentioned by some study participants representing IOs. This suggests that NGOs have agency in deciding which partners to collaborate with, implying a level of autonomy in their decision-making processes.

Moreover, the quotes from participants emphasize the importance of partnership and cooperation between NGOs and international donors. The emphasis on sustainability and project continuity beyond donor funding indicates that NGOs have some control over their

project design and planning. The encouragement of NGOs to build their own capacity and resources reflects a recognition of their independent role and the need for long-term viability.

Overall, the findings suggest that while international donors hold influence over NGOs through funding decisions, local NGOs still maintain some autonomy in their relationship with donors. NGOs are not entirely dependent on international organizations, and they possess agency in choosing partners and shaping their own development paths. The nature of the partnership between NGOs and international donors is based on collaboration and cooperation, with both parties recognizing the importance of sustainability and long-term impact. However, the limited alternative funding sources for local NGOs underscore the significance of international donor funding for their operations and the potential challenges associated with maintaining independence.

**Turnover.** The findings on ministerial turnover and reshuffles of civil servants as barriers to NGOs engaging in inclusive education development in Central Asia shed light on the challenges faced by NGOs in their collaboration with the government. The high turnover rate of government officials, particularly at the ministerial level, disrupts the continuity of relationships, communication channels, and mutual trust between NGOs and the government. This constant change hampers progress and forces NGOs to repeatedly establish connections, slowing down the development of inclusive education initiatives.

The sentiments expressed by multiple respondents indicate that these challenges are widespread and impact various aspects of collaboration. The quotes illustrate the frustration and disillusionment experienced by NGOs as they encounter new ministers who lack familiarity with inclusive education initiatives. This lack of knowledge hinders the implementation of existing plans and the inclusion of NGOs in monitoring and assessment processes. The constant personnel changes disrupt the momentum of ongoing projects and create a sense of futility among NGOs, leading to burnout and disengagement.

One significant consequence of the high turnover rate is the lack of continuity, which makes it difficult to pursue long-term strategies and sustain progress. The absence of consistent leadership and institutional memory undermines the efforts made by NGOs and prevents the efficient utilization of resources and knowledge gained through previous collaborations. Consequently, the potential benefits of inclusive education development may not be fully realized, and opportunities for meaningful change are missed. The existing literature on inclusive education development does not explore or address this challenge, making this finding especially important.

Another related challenge highlighted by the findings is the lack of political will in some instances. When government officials are resistant or indifferent to the work of NGOs, cooperation becomes more challenging. Criticism of the government's practices or suggestions for improvement may be met with resistance, hampering collaborative efforts. This lack of openness can impede the development of inclusive education programs and initiatives.

However, the findings also indicate that partnerships with local authorities offer some potential for progress. Depending on the human factor involved, NGOs may find more receptive local officials who are willing to engage in positive change and work collaboratively towards inclusive education development. These local-level collaborations may provide valuable opportunities to overcome the barriers presented by the high turnover rate and lack of political will at the national level.

It is worth noting that the disruptive effects of ministerial turnover and civil servant reshuffles are exacerbated by external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as mentioned by a couple of the respondents. The diversion of attention and resources towards emergency responses, such as online education during the pandemic, further diverted focus from inclusive education initiatives.

To summarise, the findings highlight the significant barriers faced by NGOs in engaging in inclusive education development in Central Asia due to ministerial turnover and reshuffles of civil servants. This is a particularly important finding as it has not been addressed by the scholars in the field of inclusive education before. The lack of continuity, disrupted communication, and diminished mutual trust inhibit sustainable cooperation between NGOs and the government. Overcoming these challenges requires addressing the high turnover rate, fostering political will, and creating mechanisms for institutional memory and knowledge transfer on inclusive education. Collaborative efforts between NGOs and local authorities may offer a more promising avenue for progress in the face of these barriers.

**Capacity.** Most grassroots NGOs working on IE in Central Asia experience difficulties in maintaining and strengthening their organizational and human capacity. One significant challenge identified is the struggle to attract human resources. NGOs often face obstacles in recruiting qualified individuals due to various factors. One notable barrier is the inability to offer competitive pay and guarantees of sustainable employment. Many NGOs operate with limited financial resources, making it challenging to provide attractive compensation packages for potential employees. Moreover, the prestige associated with working for NGOs is often lower compared to other sectors. Consequently, many NGOs

heavily rely on volunteers who work part-time and juggle their volunteer responsibilities with their primary paid work. While volunteers bring valuable contributions to the organization, this reliance on part-time volunteers may limit the organization's ability to allocate sufficient resources and time to effectively implement inclusive education programs.

In addition to human resource challenges, the study also uncovers difficulties in leadership and organization management within Central Asian grassroots NGOs working on inclusive education. The research reveals that most of these NGOs lack a board of directors or other executive governing bodies that can provide strategic leadership and decision-making support. Instead, the organizations tend to be tightly connected to individual leaders, relying heavily on their expertise and guidance. This over-reliance on individual leaders and the absence of formal governance structures can make NGOs vulnerable in terms of sustainability and efficiency.

In addition, many NGOs create complex organizational structures to ensure sustainability. One common approach observed is the registration of NGOs as non-profit foundations, while simultaneously operating as private entities or businesses that provide paid services or function as training centers or schools. An explanation for this behavior is the desire to ease bureaucratic processes while generating income as a business through paid services, which can be used to support their inclusive education initiatives and other projects. In some cases, interviewees described their decision to keep certain projects separate from the main foundation due to bureaucratic intricacies. For example, one interviewee mentioned operating an inclusive kindergarten and an inclusive school group independently from the foundation to maintain control over the projects. While these decisions may provide flexibility and autonomy for the NGO's operations, they also introduce additional complexity in operating an NGO.

These limitations in leadership and human resource capacity highlight the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms for grassroots NGOs working in inclusive education. Efforts should be made to address the financial constraints that hinder competitive remuneration and sustainable employment opportunities. Encouraging the establishment of formal governance structures, such as boards of directors, can help distribute leadership responsibilities and facilitate strategic decision-making processes. Additionally, providing training and mentorship opportunities to enhance the leadership skills of NGO personnel can contribute to their overall effectiveness and long-term sustainability. Addressing the barriers related to human capacity and organizational leadership within NGOs is critical for ensuring their success in promoting inclusive education. By investing in these areas, NGOs can



enhance their ability to attract qualified professionals, develop sustainable human resource strategies, and strengthen their overall organizational resilience and efficiency.

**Competition.** The research findings indicate that competition for funding and recognition among NGOs serves as a significant barrier to collaborative work in promoting inclusive education. While some NGOs recognize the value of working together and acknowledge the need for cooperation to achieve common goals, there are instances where competition prevails, leading to fragmentation and repetition of efforts.

Some respondents highlighted the lack of cooperation among NGOs, emphasizing that each organization believes it is the only one doing things correctly. For example, when one NGO proposes an idea or initiative, others may dismiss it by claiming that they have already accomplished the same tasks. This kind of competition creates an unproductive environment where NGOs are more focused on outdoing one another rather than sharing knowledge and experiences to advance inclusive education collaboratively.

Furthermore, competition for funding can impede collaboration. Some respondents explained that public organizations, which receive state or international funding, are reluctant to partner with other NGOs and share funds. This situation not only limits the potential for collaboration but also perpetuates a narrow focus on their own specific areas of work, hindering the development of comprehensive and coordinated efforts in promoting inclusive education.

In light of these findings, it is clear that competition for funding and recognition undermines the potential for effective collaboration among NGOs in the field of inclusive education. This competition leads to fragmentation, duplication of efforts, and a lack of collective action. To overcome this barrier, NGOs should recognize the value of strategic partnerships and collaboration, pooling their resources and expertise to create a stronger collective voice. Emulating successful models like the "Zhanaryk" association of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan can serve as a good practice to build sustainable partnerships and advocate for inclusive education at a policy level.

Commonly, the literature addressed the barriers to inclusive education development itself, including social stigma on special needs and disability, teachers' unpreparedness to include students with SEND, and poor methodological provisions in Central Asia among other challenges. (HRW, 2019; HRW, 2020; OECD, 2009; Rollan, 2021; UNICEF, 2014a; UNICEF, 2014b). However, this study reveals additional systemic barriers that NGOs must overcome in order to engage in inclusive education development. Overall, the study reveals that NGOs in Central Asian encounter multifaceted challenges in their work around inclusive

education development, including limited autonomy, high turnover rates among the state officials, organizational and human capacity constraints, and competition for funding and recognition. Understanding and addressing these barriers are vital for developing effective strategies and policies to promote inclusive education. By mitigating challenges related to autonomy, turnover, capacity, and competition, NGOs can work collectively to advance inclusive education initiatives in Central Asia.

#### ***Tier 4 – the WHYs***

**State commitment to IE.** The research findings demonstrate that state educational programs and strategic documents, as well as signed and ratified international conventions and declarations, declare the commitment of Central Asian countries to inclusive education reform. This commitment creates favourable conditions enabling NGOs to engage in IE development.

The signing of relevant UN conventions and world declarations, such as Education For All, the UNCRC, and the UNCRPD, signifies the alignment of Central Asian countries with global efforts to promote inclusive education. Additionally, national documents like the Law on Education in Central Asian countries explicitly recognize and use the term "inclusive education," indicating a formal acknowledgement of the concept and its importance. These policy frameworks and commitments create an enabling environment for NGO engagement in inclusive education. Rather than being contrary to political will, the work of NGOs is supported by and aligned with the state's commitment to inclusive education reform.

The policy analysis findings reveal specific measures that reflect the dedication of Central Asian governments to inclusive education and the recognition of the crucial role of NGOs. The emphasis on cross-sectoral partnerships highlights the importance of collaboration between the government, NGOs, and other stakeholders. This collaborative approach recognizes that inclusive education requires the involvement of multiple actors and sectors to create a comprehensive and inclusive system. The policy frameworks emphasize cross-sectoral partnerships, involvement of parents and NGOs in awareness raising and advocacy, establishment of resource centers, and engagement of NGOs in monitoring and evaluation.

In summary, the commitment of Central Asian countries to inclusive education reform, as reflected in state educational programs and strategic documents, serves as a key

enabler for NGO engagement. The alignment of the state's political will with the work of NGOs creates an environment conducive to collaboration and joint efforts.

**Nothing about us without us.** Most of the study participants were NGOs of persons with disabilities and NGOs of parents of children with SEND, which represented the interests of the beneficiaries of IE reform, namely, learners with SEND. Engagement of these NGOs in IE development is well manifested in expression coined by Charlton (1998), “Nothing about us without us”.

The "nothing about us without us" principle, associated with the disability rights (among other minority rights) movement, emphasizes the importance of meaningful participation and involvement of individuals with disabilities in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Charlton, 1998). In the context of inclusive education, this principle advocates for the active inclusion of students with disabilities in discussions, policies, and practices related to their education (Luthuli & Wood, 2020).

The driving principle of "nothing about us without us" behind engagement of NGOs in inclusive education reform in Central Asia is evident in the study. NGOs perceive their engagement in inclusive education as an essential way to expand educational inclusion for children with disabilities. This disability focus is prevalent among many participants, although not all NGOs perceive inclusion through the lens of disability. Nonetheless, NGOs' beliefs about disability play a significant role in motivating their efforts towards promoting inclusive education. The results suggest that being driven by their own agenda of securing their rights and expanding opportunities for learners with disabilities, the NGOs in Central Asia survive the multiple barriers they face and disrupt the existing realities with their voices and presence.

Parental leadership is another key aspect highlighted in the study. The majority of respondents mention the leadership of the parental community as founders or key actors in NGOs' work. Some NGOs are specifically founded and led by parents of children with disabilities, driven by the need to address the existing gaps and raise awareness. Other NGOs, even if not led by parents of children with disabilities, are influenced by parental contributions and the desire to create inclusive educational environments for their own children or the community at large. The involvement of parents and their leadership in raising awareness about inclusive education and children with special needs is emphasized in the policies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Their commitment stems from their personal experiences and the belief that inclusive education benefits all children, regardless of disability or special needs.

In summary, the principle of "nothing about us without us" is exemplified in the engagement of disability NGOs in inclusive education reform in Central Asia. NGOs prioritize disability issues and are motivated by the need to create inclusive educational environments. Parental leadership, whether through NGOs founded and led by parents of children with disabilities or by parents advocating for inclusive education, plays a crucial role in raising awareness and promoting the inclusion of children with special needs.

**Linchpin mindset.** Despite a number of barriers faced by NGOs in their activities, they continue to work actively to improve the IE. Some NGOs admit that they are experiencing significant financial difficulties yet continue to work on a volunteer basis. To understand what motivates and drives NGOs to work in such adverse conditions, it is worth taking a closer look at their self-perception. The research results indicate that NGOs engaged in inclusive education reform in Central Asia hold a linchpin mindset, perceiving themselves as indispensable actors in the development of inclusive education. This mindset is a key driving factor behind their engagement. Several aspects of their self-perception support this argument.

Firstly, NGOs view their work as systemic, emphasizing their role in coordinating and collaborating with various stakeholders involved in inclusive education. They see themselves as the only organizations that systematically implement inclusive education in their respective countries. By working with ministries, departments of education, schools, teachers, families, students, media, donors, and other actors, NGOs believe they can navigate the complexity of inclusive education and promote it effectively.

Secondly, NGOs consider themselves as bridging communities with the government and supporting community integration. They act as intermediaries, facilitating dialogue between communities and the government, raising concerns, and advocating for inclusive education on a broader scale. NGOs are seen as trusted entities that can structure the demands and complaints of the community and bring them to the attention of policymakers and other stakeholders.

Thirdly, NGOs perceive themselves as 'paramedics' or 'engines of change'. The paramedic analogy highlights their role in identifying problems, providing solutions promptly, and addressing the pressing needs of the inclusive education system. They claim to have overtaken certain functional duties of the state by conducting research, delivering services, and implementing projects. NGOs are seen as proactive agents that drive the reform of inclusive education, initiating the creation of legal acts, programs, and policies.

Moreover, the positive shift in how NGOs are perceived over time further supports their linchpin mindset. They have transitioned from being disregarded as "urban madmen" to being recognized as an expert community. This shift indicates a growing acknowledgment of their expertise and the importance of their contribution to inclusive education development. The linchpin mindset of NGOs is rooted in their values, including a commitment to disability, educational, and social justice. They are driven by a sense of duty and a desire to fill gaps in the government's response to inclusive education.

In conclusion, the linchpin mindset of NGOs in Central Asia is a key factor driving their engagement in inclusive education reform. They perceive themselves as systemic leaders, indispensable actors, and catalysts for change. Their self-perception is characterized by confidence, a sense of purpose, and a commitment to creating a more inclusive education system. By understanding their pivotal role, stakeholders can collaborate with NGOs to create sustainable and inclusive educational environments for all children in the region.

### **Implications for NGOs**

The study results emphasize the multifaceted roles that NGOs play in the development of inclusive education in Central Asia. These roles align with the global efforts to promote inclusive education and are reinforced by state commitments and international conventions, creating a conducive environment for NGO engagement. NGOs contribute to policy development, research, and raising awareness, thereby fostering a supportive ecosystem for inclusive education initiatives. Their efforts in providing supplementary schooling and training educators are instrumental in meeting the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities, while their focus on enhancing school accessibility improves the overall inclusivity of educational institutions in the region.

Despite their significant contributions, NGOs in Central Asia confront several challenges that impact their endeavours in advancing inclusive education. These challenges need to be understood and addressed to enhance the effectiveness and long-term impact of their initiatives.

- **Autonomy and Funding Dependency:** The study reveals that NGOs often rely on funding from international organizations, governments, and businesses to finance their inclusive education projects. While this financial support is vital for initiating and sustaining their initiatives, it can also lead to a compromise in their autonomy. To ensure that NGOs can effectively pursue their goals and maintain their independence,

it becomes imperative to strike a balance between financial support and the preservation of their organizational autonomy.

- **Turnover and Political Will:** High turnover rates among government officials in Central Asia create challenges for NGOs in establishing and maintaining sustained relationships with relevant stakeholders. As political landscapes change, NGO initiatives may face uncertainties and disruptions. To overcome this challenge, NGOs must actively establish collaborative partnerships with receptive local authorities and leverage their expertise to advocate for consistent inclusive education policies.
- **Capacity Building and Leadership:** The study underscores the significance of qualified human resources and effective leadership in bolstering the sustainability and impact of NGOs. Attracting and retaining skilled personnel, investing in capacity building initiatives, and formalizing governance structures are essential steps for NGOs to strengthen their organizational capacities.
- **Competition and Collaboration:** Competition for funding and recognition among NGOs may hinder collaborative efforts in advancing inclusive education. To maximize their collective impact, NGOs should emphasize strategic partnerships, share best practices, and foster a collaborative approach to tackle common challenges and achieve their shared goals.
- **Linchpin Mindset:** While perceiving themselves as indispensable actors in the inclusive education system can be a driving force for NGOs, it also entails significant responsibility. Striking a balance between proactive action and collaborative efforts is crucial for sustainable progress. By actively involving individuals with disabilities and parents of children with special needs in decision-making processes, NGOs can ensure the relevancy and inclusivity of their initiatives.

To capitalize on the contributions of NGOs and address the challenges identified in the study, several recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthening Advocacy and Collaborative Efforts:** NGOs should continue their advocacy efforts and cultivate strong collaborative partnerships with government agencies, international organizations, businesses, and other NGOs. By working collectively, NGOs can amplify their voices, influence policy decisions, and pool resources to achieve more significant impact.
- **Emphasizing Sustainability and Capacity Building:** NGOs should prioritize building sustainable models by seeking diversified funding sources, attracting qualified human

resources, and establishing formal governance structures. Additionally, investing in capacity building initiatives and strategic partnerships can help NGOs enhance their capabilities and navigate challenges effectively.

- Embracing the "Nothing about Us Without Us" Principle: Actively involving individuals with disabilities and parents of children with special needs in decision-making processes is essential for designing inclusive initiatives that cater to the specific needs of beneficiaries.

The study results underscore the critical role of NGOs in advancing inclusive education in Central Asia and highlight the challenges they face in doing so. By addressing these implications and adopting the recommended strategies, NGOs can amplify their impact and contribute significantly to the international inclusive education movement. The collaboration between NGOs, government agencies, international organizations, and other stakeholders will be crucial in creating a sustainable and inclusive education ecosystem in the region. Through collective efforts and continuous growth, NGOs can be at the forefront of transformative change, promoting an inclusive educational landscape that leaves no one behind.

### **Implications for policy makers**

The study results have significant implications for policy makers in Central Asia, as they shed light on the crucial role of NGOs in promoting inclusive education (IE) and the challenges they face. Policy makers can use this information to recognize the valuable contributions of NGOs and potentially collaborate with them more effectively to achieve inclusive education goals. The findings of this study have several implications for inclusive education policy and practice in Central Asia:

- Supporting Autonomy and Diverse Funding: To promote the autonomy of NGOs, policy makers should explore funding mechanisms that provide sustainable and diverse sources of financial support. This could involve incentivizing private sector contributions, creating endowments, or establishing public-private partnerships.
- Investing in Capacity Building: Recognizing the importance of human resources in NGO effectiveness, policy makers should invest in capacity-building programs for NGOs. Offering training, workshops, and professional development opportunities can enhance the skills and expertise of NGO staff.
- Encouraging Collaboration and Resource Sharing: To overcome competition among NGOs for funding and recognition, policy makers should encourage collaboration and

resource sharing. Providing platforms for knowledge exchange, creating consortiums, and supporting joint projects can foster a sense of collective purpose and efficiency.

- **Ensuring State Commitment:** Policy makers should reaffirm and reinforce the commitment of Central Asian countries to inclusive education through policy documents, strategic plans, and the ratification of international conventions. This commitment should be backed by adequate funding and support for inclusive education initiatives.
- **Implementing the "Nothing About Us Without Us" Principle:** Policy makers should actively involve learners with disabilities, their parents, and other stakeholders in the decision-making processes related to inclusive education. Consulting and engaging with these stakeholders can lead to more inclusive and relevant policies and practices.
- **Fostering a Supportive Environment:** Policy makers should create a supportive and inclusive policy environment that encourages NGOs to thrive and contribute to inclusive education development. This can involve providing technical assistance, recognition of NGO efforts, and ensuring transparent and accessible communication channels.
- **Scaling Up Successful Models:** Identifying and scaling up successful models of NGO collaboration and inclusive education initiatives can serve as a blueprint for policy makers. Learning from best practices and replicating successful approaches can accelerate progress in inclusive education.

In conclusion, the study's results highlight the critical role of NGOs in advancing inclusive education in Central Asia and underscore the importance of collaboration, autonomy, and capacity-building for their effective engagement. Policy makers have a significant responsibility in creating an enabling environment that supports NGOs' efforts and aligns with the commitment to inclusive education. By recognising and addressing the challenges faced by NGOs, policy makers can harness their potential as linchpins of inclusive education reform and pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable education system in the region.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discusses the emergence of a 4-Tier Framework of NGO Engagement in Inclusive Education (IE) based on research conducted on Central Asian NGOs. The first tier focuses on the functional roles that NGOs play in inclusive education development. These roles include policy making, awareness raising, research, delivering supplementary



schooling, training teachers and specialists, providing consulting and support to parents, and enhancing school accessibility.

The second tier explores the partnerships that NGOs establish with various stakeholders, including government and local authorities, businesses, international organizations, and other NGOs. These partnerships provide resources, expertise, and support for NGOs' initiatives in promoting inclusive education.

The third tier addresses the challenges faced by NGOs, including limited autonomy due to funding from international organizations, turnover of government officials, capacity limitations, and competition for funding and recognition. These challenges can hinder the progress and sustainability of inclusive education initiatives.

The fourth tier examines the underlying motivations and beliefs of NGOs engaged in inclusive education. The findings highlight the state commitment to inclusive education, the principle of "nothing about us without us" guiding NGOs' work, and their linchpin mindset as indispensable actors in the development of inclusive education.

The implications of the research for NGOs emphasize the importance of collaboration, partnership, and capacity-building. NGOs should prioritize working together, sharing resources, and enhancing their program design and evaluation skills. The findings also have implications for policymakers, emphasizing the critical role of local NGOs in promoting inclusive education and the need to recognize their contributions.

Overall, this chapter provides valuable insights into the roles, partnerships, challenges, and motivations of Central Asian NGOs engaged in inclusive education, highlighting their potential to contribute to the development of more inclusive education systems in the region.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

### Summary

Reflecting on the significance of this research study, I am reminded of the journey undertaken to explore the engagement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in inclusive education (IE) reform within the context of Central Asian countries. Rooted in my personal experiences as an NGO founder and leader in Kazakhstan, and motivated by the global vision set forth by major framework documents on equitable and inclusive education, this study sought to shed light on the role and impact of grassroots NGOs in shaping the trajectory of inclusive education in this region.

While international organizations and UN agencies advocate for increased NGO participation in IE reform, the empirical evidence and deeper understanding of their effects remained limited. For example, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education of 1994 put higher responsibility on the government and community to implement the changes to education systems to ensure equitable access to quality education for all (Forlin, 2006; Vislie, 2003). A chapter of its own in the Statement was dedicated to the community involvement and the role of NGOs including parental and disability organisations. UNESCO (2012) recognized NGOs as “crucial partners” in promoting “Education For All” agenda, yet the actual role of NGOs in IE development was under researched globally (Mundy et.al., 2008; Hernández-Torrano et.al., 2020; Singal, 2020). Thus, despite statements made by the UN agencies and other international organisations in support of increased participation of NGOs in IE reform, the research on its effects was partial. The landscape was characterized by numerous case studies that captured specific functions and activities of NGOs (Schuster & Kolleck, 2021), yet there was a noticeable gap in conceptualizing their motivations, barriers, and strategies in a holistic method.

Exploring the engagement of domestic grassroots NGOs in IE movement, especially in the context of developing countries, would allow understanding to which extent the ideals of NGO engagement were fulfilled and the key factors contributing to success or failure of NGO-driven efforts in inclusive education movement.

In response to this gap, the grounded theory approach was embraced, allowing for an immersive exploration of this complex phenomenon. By engaging with various data sources, including policy documents, interviews with domestic NGO representatives, and discussions

with international donor organizations, the research delved into the multi-dimensional aspects of NGO engagement.

The focus on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as beacons of progress within Central Asia, offered a lens through which to examine the intricacies of inclusive education efforts within Central Asia. Firstly, national policy documents on Inclusive Education were analysed on the subject of NGO positionality as an inception point for further inquiry. Secondly, two-stage interviews with domestic NGO representatives including both the senior leadership and the front-line workers were conducted as a main source of information about the experiences and perceptions of their engagement in IE work. Thirdly, a set of interviews with international donor organizations based in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was conducted to explore the interaction between international donors and domestic NGO beneficiaries. At every stage of the data collection, a continuous analysis was performed until reaching the data saturation point.

The framework developed as a result of this inquiry was finally validated via 2 conversation circles. The participants of these validation meetings included representatives from not only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also other Central Asian states – Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, who confirmed applicability and relevance of these findings to their country contexts as well.

The results of the study allowed for the emergence of a 4-Tier ‘NGO Engagement in IE Framework’ which described the role of domestic NGOs at four levels of inquiry: the functional roles and outputs delivered by NGOs (Tier 1 – the WHAT’s), the strategies employed by NGOs in their work around IE (Tier 2 – the HOW’s), the barriers that NGOs face in their engagement in IE (Tier 3 – the WHY NOT’s), and their motivations, goals, and driving factors (Tier 4 – the WHY’s). This framework attempted to capture an encompassing NGO-driven and NGO-centred response to the quest about the roles and engagement of NGOs in inclusive education reform.

At the functional level, the framework illuminated the diverse outputs delivered by NGOs, ranging from policy advocacy and teacher training to inclusive schooling initiatives and research endeavours:

- Partaking in policy making and monitoring implementation of IE policy
- Enhancing school accessibility and enrolment of students
- Consulting and supporting parents of children with SEND
- Training teachers, specialists, and organizations in IE
- Delivering supplementary and alternative inclusive schooling

- Raising awareness and advocating for IE
- Conducting and taking part in research on IE
- Developing methodologies and IE classroom models.

Delving deeper, the motivations and driving factors behind NGO engagement were uncovered, revealing a shared belief in the pivotal role of NGOs as engines of change and a dedication to represent the interests of the individuals with SEND. A shared opinion that the governments were failing on their promises to establish equal education for all, especially for students with disabilities and special needs, served as the primary motivation for most grassroots to engage in activism and advocacy. The linchpin mindset shared among NGOs made them believe they are indispensable actors in this reform. NGOs embraced the ‘nothing about us without us principle’. They advocated for and promoted own agendas to ensure the voices of the disabled people were heard. Thus, NGOs not only supported IE implementation but primarily designed how it looked in the context of each country.

The framework further underscored the intricate interplay between NGOs and the socio-political context of their respective countries, emphasizing the significance of the political climate in influencing their efficacy.

As this study unfolded, it became evident that grassroots NGOs not only influenced the implementation of inclusive education but also shaped the very essence of what inclusive education meant within their societies. To achieve their best results, a study further provided a list of recommendations to grassroots NGO. The implications of these findings are to be used by policymakers in the areas of education and civil society to plan/revise strategies to enhance NGO engagement in IE, especially in the context of Central Asia, by educational researchers to embark upon further exploration of this topic, and by NGOs themselves to explore ways to advance/revise their engagement in IE process. This research can be best positioned within education policy, education leadership, and international development studies and contributes to the interests of the ‘Knowledge, Power & Politics in Education’ research group at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

### **Reflections on Methodological Approach**

Having no prior experience with the grounded theory research approach, it has been a challenging journey to conduct this study. Grounded theory implies a structured and planned yet emergent approach to data collection and analysis. It is structured in a way that there is a set of essential grounded theory methods to be followed: initial coding and categorization of

data; concurrent data collection and analysis; theoretical sampling; writing memos; constant comparative analysis; focused and theoretical coding; and theoretical integration or theory generation (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). At the same time, it is emergent in a way that sampling, coding, and theoretical integration require flexibility and responsiveness to the data, allowing the theory to emerge as the researcher interacts with the data in an iterative manner (*ibid*). Several consequences follow.

Firstly, the absence of a fixed roadmap meant that I had to adapt and modify my data collection approach as new insights emerged. On one hand, this adaptability allowed me to capture the rich and nuanced aspects of the phenomenon under study. On the other hand, it required a continuous reassessment of my research strategies, which could at times feel disorienting. There were moments of uncertainty when I questioned whether I had missed important dimensions of the analysis, or whether I was prematurely settling on certain concepts.

In addition, it was not possible to predict how long the data collection would take, as there was no way of definitively predicting a data saturation point. While doctoral research program has its timelines (corresponding to the funding terms), the uncertainty about data collection length caused much anxiety. Conducting the research during the COVID-19 pandemic made it even more unpredictable and problematic in terms of accessing the participants as well as evaluating the relevance of my research in the moment of global health and socio-economic crisis. The iterative and emergent nature of grounded theory required a level of patience and resilience that tested my research stamina.

Secondly, I found the role of the literature review problematic. There is an ongoing debate among grounded theorists regarding the timing and the role of the literature review in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). A dominant school of thought insists that the researcher should commence the data collection without prior theoretical presumptions and influences, and thus, the literature review should be conducted only after the data analysis is completed (*ibid*). However, I found it sensible to conduct some literature review before the data collection. One reason for it is to justify the rationale for conducting the study. Another reason is to get familiar with the background context of the countries chosen for this study. Lastly, as a doctoral student, I needed to provide a research proposal and the registration report, and both normally require the overview of the literature as an evidence of my research skills. However, I also draw connections between my final results and the existing literature after completing my theory generation in order to validate my

findings through the literature review as well as to clarify the study's contribution to existing knowledge.

Lastly, the challenge of maintaining reflexivity was another aspect that stood out in this methodology. The role of a researcher in the grounded theory is key. Charmaz defines constructivist grounded theory as follows: "Constructivism means seeking meanings – both respondent' meanings and researchers' meanings" (2000, p524). Therefore, the main principle of constructivist grounded theory is that researcher must adopt a reflexive approach to comprehend their contribution to the emergent theory. I actively engaged in co-construction of the emergent theory, relying on my interpretations of the data. Having past experience working as an NGO leader myself, I utilised my insider's position when guiding the interviews, evaluating the responses, and constructing the theory. I was cautious of being presumptuous in this process, so I also called upon the voices of external experts partaking in the theory validating conversation circles. Presenting my emergent theory and giving a space for other NGO representatives as well as experts to comment, critique, and reflect on the findings allowed me to gain greater confidence in finalising the grounded theory.

Ultimately, this journey illuminated the complex interplay between structure and emergence, providing a unique lens through which to explore and comprehend complex phenomena of inclusive education movement. As I stand on the cusp of concluding this study, I am reminded that the challenges I faced have not only enriched my research capabilities but have also contributed to a deeper appreciation of the dynamic and transformative nature of qualitative inquiry.

### **Reflections on Research Contribution**

This study has made significant contributions to the existing knowledge surrounding the role of non-governmental organizations in the inclusive education movement, particularly within the context of Central Asian countries. By employing a grounded theory approach and delving into the intricate dynamics of NGO engagement in IE reform, this research has expanded the scholarly understanding in several impactful ways:

- **Holistic Framework of Engagement:** The development of the 4-Tier 'NGO Engagement in IE Framework' provides a novel and comprehensive lens through which to examine the multifaceted involvement of NGOs in IE. This framework not only captures the functional outputs delivered by NGOs but also delves into their motivations, strategies, barriers, and overarching role. This comprehensive framework

enriches the discourse by presenting a holistic perspective that goes beyond isolated case studies.

- **Contextual Understanding of Barriers:** The identification and exploration of barriers faced by NGOs in their engagement with IE reform add a layer of context and complexity to the existing knowledge. By acknowledging the socio-political climate and the interplay between NGOs and the broader environment, this study sheds light on the challenges that can hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education initiatives. This perspective enhances our understanding of the real-world challenges that NGOs navigate.
- **Localized Implications for Policymaking:** Through the investigation of NGO engagement within the context of Central Asian countries, this study offers region-specific insights that have the potential to inform and shape policymaking. The recommendations provided can serve as valuable guidelines for policymakers, education leaders, and civil society stakeholders seeking to enhance and effectively utilise the role of NGOs in IE reform. This localized perspective contributes to the practical application of research findings.
  - **Contribution to Inclusive Education Scholarship:** While existing research has acknowledged the importance of NGOs in the IE movement, this study takes a step further by offering a conceptualization of their roles and dynamics. The utilization of the grounded theory approach within the context of IE and NGOs is itself a noteworthy methodological contribution. By filling the gap between fragmented studies, this research enriches the inclusive education scholarship with a structured and grounded in data conceptual model that captures the various dimensions of NGO engagement. This exploration contributes to understanding the driving forces, barriers and enablers behind grassroots activism and advocacy in the realm of inclusive education.

Ultimately, by shedding light on the intricate intersections between NGOs, inclusive education, and socio-political dynamics, this study not only adds to the body of knowledge but also contributes to the ongoing efforts to ensure equitable access to quality education for all. The social and theoretical relevance of this work is reflected in the implications of the findings for NGOs, policy makers, and scholars studying inclusive education movement globally. This research has a potential to catalyse meaningful change. Policymakers, educators, and civil society leaders can draw upon the insights presented in the framework to

refine strategies and enhance the engagement of NGOs in IE reform. This study can also serve as a catalyst for further research endeavours, encouraging scholars to explore the dynamics of NGO participation in education within diverse contexts. The journey of this research was challenging, enlightening, and transformative, leaving behind a trail of insights that hold the promise of positively impacting education systems and societies in Central Asia and beyond.

### **Reflections on Future Research**

Reflecting on future research, there are potential avenues that could further enrich our understanding of the complexities surrounding NGO engagement in the IE movement, especially in developing countries. I would like to specifically suggest the further areas of exploration:

- **Comparative analysis:** While the current research centred on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, future studies could expand the geographical scope to include a wider range of developing countries, enabling a more comprehensive cross-country comparative analysis. This would facilitate the identification of commonalities and variations in NGO engagement strategies, barriers, and outcomes, providing a more nuanced understanding of how socio-political contexts influence NGO-driven efforts in IE reform across different regions.
- **Stakeholder perspectives:** While this research puts a special emphasis on the partnerships established by NGOs, future research could delve deeper into the perspectives and experiences of these various stakeholders. Understanding the perspectives of government officials, local authorities, businesses, international organizations, and other NGOs would provide a comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics, and collaboration strategies involved in NGO engagement in inclusive education. Investigating power dynamics, negotiation processes, and the extent to which NGOs influence policy decisions would provide insights into the complexities of stakeholder interactions. Understanding how these interactions shape the trajectory of IE reform and the allocation of resources could inform more effective strategies for achieving inclusive education goals.
- **Longitudinal studies:** Conducting longitudinal studies would offer a dynamic perspective on the evolution of NGO engagement in IE over time. By observing the long-term outcomes and impacts, researchers can assess the effectiveness of different



strategies employed by NGOs and identify factors that contribute to successful implementation and long-term sustainability.

- **Intersectionality studies:** Exploring the experiences of NGOs that focus on diverse marginalized groups within the realm of inclusive education would be a valuable avenue for future research. This particular study put greater emphasis on the disability perspective, as the understanding of inclusive education among the study participants as well as the local policy revolved mostly around the issues of students with SEND. Future research could encompass the challenges and successes of NGOs working with other populations, such as learners in difficult life situations or from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, migrants and refugees, ethnically and/or linguistically diverse students, gender and sexual minorities and other socially marginalized groups. By understanding the unique strategies required to address the intersectional needs of these populations, researchers could provide more targeted as well as encompassing recommendations for fostering inclusive education.
- **Impact evaluation:** Further research could focus on rigorous impact evaluation methodologies to assess the effectiveness of NGO initiatives in inclusive education. This was outside of the scope of the present study, which employed a qualitative approach to studying the engagement of NGOs in IE. However, by measuring outcomes such as improvements in student achievement, increased access to education, and enhanced teacher capacity, researchers can quantify the impact of NGO interventions and identify best practices that lead to positive outcomes.

Overall, future research should build upon the foundation provided by this grounded theory study to further explore and understand the complexities of NGO engagement in inclusive education. By addressing the gaps and expanding the knowledge base, researchers can contribute to the development of more inclusive education systems and practices globally.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

While the present research offers valuable insights into the engagement of domestic grassroots NGOs in the inclusive education movement within developing countries, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that could impact the scope, validity, and generalizability of the findings. This section addresses these limitations and provides a critical assessment of the study's boundaries and implications.

First, this research was conducted primarily in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which represent specific contexts within the Central Asian region. The findings generated through this research may be highly context-specific, deeply embedded within the socio-political and cultural context of these countries. While these countries were chosen due to their relatively advanced progress in inclusive education, the findings may not be fully transferable to other developing countries with distinct socio-cultural, political, and educational landscapes. Although the research framework was validated through conversation circles involving representatives from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the number of participants and the scope of validation might not fully encompass the diverse perspectives within these countries. A broader range of stakeholders from other countries of Central Asia could enhance the validation process and the applicability of the model to wider Central Asian context. Caution should also be exercised when applying the results to countries other than Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan due to a limited representation of other countries in the region. Caution should also be exercised when applying the results to contexts outside the Central Asian region.

Second, the research heavily relied on qualitative data, predominantly gathered through interviews, document analysis, and discussions. Therefore, the findings of this study may be subject to biases and limitations associated with qualitative research. While qualitative methods provide rich insights into the complexities of NGO engagement, they lack the statistical generalizability associated with quantitative research. Therefore, caution is advised when attempting to make broad statements based solely on the present qualitative findings.

Third, the study focused primarily on the perspectives of domestic NGO representatives and international donor organizations. However, other key stakeholders in the inclusive education movement, such as government officials, educators, parents, and students with special needs, were not adequately represented in the data collection process. This limited range of perspectives might affect the comprehensiveness of the insights gained. This limited stakeholder perspective can be further aggravated by the potential bias and subjectivity issues, embedded within the grounded theory method. Despite efforts to maintain rigor through iterative analysis and data saturation, the interpretations could be influenced by my backgrounds, experiences, and preconceived notions as a researcher. Recognizing and minimizing these biases has been crucial to ensuring the validity of the research.

Finally, the socio-political environments in which NGOs operate are subject to change over time. The research captured a specific moment, and the findings might not fully reflect

the effects of future political shifts, policy changes, or societal dynamics that could impact NGO engagement and inclusive education efforts in Central Asia and beyond.

In conclusion, while the current research contributes valuable insights into NGO engagement in the inclusive education movement, it is imperative to recognize and address the limitations inherent in the study. These limitations inform future research directions, guiding scholars and practitioners toward more comprehensive and contextually nuanced investigations of the role of domestic grassroots NGOs in advancing inclusive education reform.

### **Closing Statement**

In embarking on this journey to explore the engagement of domestic grassroots NGOs in the inclusive education movement, especially within the unique context of Central Asia, this doctoral thesis sought to unravel the tapestry of efforts, ideals, successes, and challenges that define this vital area of education reform. Through a meticulous journey of grounded theory inquiry, data collection, and analysis, this research has not only demonstrated the complex role of NGOs but also illuminated the broader narrative of change, empowerment, and progress within inclusive education systems. The culmination of these efforts gave rise to the 'NGO Engagement in IE Framework,' a four-tiered structure that encapsulated not only the functional roles, strategies, barriers, and motivations of domestic NGOs but also a testament to the transformative potential of these grassroots actors.

The resounding message that emerges is one of resilience, advocacy, and the profound interplay between NGOs and the socio-political terrain. The dedication of Central Asian grassroots NGOs, fuelled by the “linchpin mindset” as well as the "nothing about us without us" principle, exemplifies the profound potential in shaping the landscape of inclusive education reform.

The insights gained from this research are not finite, but rather they serve as a starting point for future inquiries. I hope that this thesis would act as an inspiration for scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and advocates to continue the dialogue, to refine strategies, and to create a more inclusive world with the efforts of grassroots NGOs and wider civil society.

As this thesis concludes, it is not a farewell, but a promise – a promise to continue the journey, to push the boundaries, and to stand alongside the silent heroes who shape the future of education for all.

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## Appendix A: Information sheet for respondents

### INFORMATION SHEET

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:** This research is aimed at understanding the role of non-governmental organizations in inclusive education in Central Asia. As part of this research, I seek to explore how NGOs work around promoting inclusive education, what actors they engage with, what resources they require, and what main outputs they produce. For this study, I am interviewing foreign donor organizations as well as local NGO representatives engaged in activities around inclusive education to learn about the involvement of their organisation in the inclusive education system development.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:** This study commits to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Therefore, participants do not have to reveal their real or full names and do not have to mention the name of their organization. In case they do, such information will not be recorded in the transcripts and will not appear in the written reports or publications. Each participant will be assigned a numerical code instead. However, a full anonymity cannot be guaranteed since certain characteristics of the participants such as associating with NGO sector will be disclosed and since some of the participants can be recruited upon snowball technique or recommendation. The participants must be informed of that before reviewing and signing the consent form.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** The risks associated with this study are no more than minimal such as the ones you could face in the daily activities and regular conversations. Yet, conducting research during COVID-19 implies the participants might experience a higher screen time when partaking in the study or having to be interviewed from home, which can be disruptive. The participants are therefore free to choose audio interview instead of the video call and the time of their best convenience. There are no direct benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study, but the contribution of participants would be very valuable and helpful to learn more about NGO roles in inclusive education.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Each interview will take approximately one hour.

**DATA TREATMENT:** The interview recordings and transcripts, numerically coded, will be securely stored on a personal Google Drive account of the researcher, in a separate folder with no shared access. The data will be stored for up to five years. The participants have a right to receive study results if wish so. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** The participation is voluntary, and the participants have the right to withdraw their consent or discontinue participation at any time without giving a reason. They have the right to refuse to answer some questions and not to partake at all.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, your rights as a participant, risks and benefits, contact the Doctoral Thesis Supervisor for this student work, Dr Elaine Wilson via [email redacted] or phone [number redacted]. Contact information of the primary investigator is the following: Kamila Rollan, PhD student at the Faculty of Education, the University of Cambridge, [email redacted], mobile [number redacted].

## **Appendix B: Informed consent form**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

As a doctoral student at the Faculty of Education, the University of Cambridge, I am conducting a research study aimed at understanding the role of non-governmental organizations in inclusive education systems in Central Asia. As part of this research, I seek to explore how NGOs work, what actors they engage with, what resources they require, and what main outputs they produce.

For this study, I am interviewing international donor organisations and domestic NGO representatives engaged in initiatives or activities around inclusive education. I have asked you to participate because you were identified as a member of such organisation and I would like to learn more about the involvement of your organisation in the inclusive education.

I would like to audio record this interview, with your permission. The recording will only be accessed by me to be able to adequately capture your responses, to analyse the data, and not to miss any details. I may use quotations from this interview in future publications. Every attempt will be made to anonymise quotations to protect confidentiality and privacy of each study participant, including you.

I will only use your information for research purposes. The recordings of our interview will be stored in a secured file on Google Drive with no shared access, so only I will have access to this data. I can share with you the results of my work at any time after the interview. I will keep your personal information for 5 years; it will then be confidentially destroyed.

If you have any questions about how your personal information will be used, or you have some complaints or concerns, you can contact the Doctoral Thesis Supervisor for this research of mine, Dr Elaine Wilson via [email redacted]

Your participation should only be voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that cause you discomfort. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time and without giving a reason. After withdrawal, all data already collected will be destroyed. Your rights, as well as risk and benefits to participation, are also described in the information sheet that you should have received earlier. In case you read the sheet and you agree to proceed, I would like to kindly ask you to sign this form below.

- I have carefully read the information sheet and the consent form;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this research project!

### Appendix C: Interview transcript sample

*Note for the reader: identifiable information was redacted for confidentiality purposes.*

#### Respondent 1

I: Tell me about how long the organization has been in existence and what its goals are.

R: In 2011, our corporate fund was established by the association of students of the [removed] program with the aim of developing the charitable system in the country and helping the state to solve some systemic issues. Today our main projects are:

- [removed], which is an inclusive education project
- Project for dubbing Hollywood films into Kazakh language [removed]
- Project [removed] to support youth to participate in international competitions
- Media project on the best material on the topic of inclusive education
- The Winter Charity Ball, which is our main donor event, the funds from which are used to implement the projects [removed] and [removed].

I have been leading the [removed] project for over three years. The project itself is 6 years old this year. In 2015, we were approached by a group of parents whose children with autism had been excluded from school. At that time there was no inclusive education in the country, so to speak. This is how we launched our project on inclusive education.

Children with autism are one of the most vulnerable groups in the world. Our team began to investigate this issue in more depth. Our director and other specialists from the local authorities of the capital's education department went to Israel under the Mashav program for the exchange of best practices. Learning from and interacting with specialists from Israel, we invited a visiting professor and have begun work here.

An expert council was created, we analyzed the legislation and the situation in the country, and a new resolution on inclusive education was signed by the government. And so, in November 2015, the first inclusion support office was opened at school No. 71 in Nur-Sultan. Today we have opened almost 50 school-based support offices. Last year, we helped the Foundation of the First President open about 16 more of them. In total, about 60 offices are currently working as part of our project. The project is very large, we have about 15 people working in our team, and we cover about 60 schools.

Our main areas of work are the following: opening resource offices and providing methodological support to schools on a daily basis, training specialists, translating professional literature into Kazakh language, expert work in terms of legislation, consulting parents, and so on. As part of the project, we have already included about 500 children in schools, and the same number of specialists work for us. We were the first to talk about the

need for a teacher-assistant, or as we also call it, tutor. Last year, such a specialist was already introduced into the school to accompany children, that is, now this issue has been resolved on the level of legislation.

I: Let me clarify. The main reason for introducing inclusive education in the agenda for the foundation was the request of the parents, right?

R: Yes, we have studied the topic and understood that nobody dealt with this problem systematically. Today we have about 60 inclusion support offices, including in villages and regions. In general, the situation in the regions is worse than in Astana and Almaty.

Especially in the Kazakh-speaking regions: Turkestan region or Almaty region... Yes, the main reason was the parental community, who came to us and showed that this problem was a blind spot.

I: Tell me how the inclusion support office works, and how it fits into the overall work of the school.

R: The Inclusion Support Office is not a class as children are not enrolled there, because the child is enrolled in a regular class at school. Although usually parents enroll a school through us, because they know that without such support, the child would either not be taken to school or sent to home schooling. The support office is an additional space where children receive assistance according to their needs.

Now there are about 170 offices in Kazakhstan, 60 of them work under our support. We are working with the government now to separate our inclusion offices from others, because they work a little differently. I'll explain now.

A feature of the project is methodological support with the methods of ABA therapy, that is, applied behavior analysis is used. There were no ABA specialists in the country at all when we started the project. Now there are about 20-30 of them across the country, half of which work in our foundation, and we have paid for their education.

The inclusion support office is a room where the child receives additional assistance and is accompanied by a tutor. There is a certain hierarchy of specialists. We took the resource class model based on the experience of the United States and Israel, and this is also being developed in Russia now. Each child has a tutor, an inclusion support teacher, a behavioral program curator, a behavioral specialist and a supervisor, that is, a specialist with whom the curator consults. A whole team of specialists is working with a child.

The child is enrolled in the first grade, and our specialists conduct an assessment. All children who study with us are those whose parents agreed to behavioral intervention, because it differs from classical defectology and psychology. In defectology there is a more medical

model of intervention, and in ABA there is an assessment of the child's capabilities and behavior. After a team assessment, an individual development plan is developed and a plan for behavior correction if necessary. Specialists work on the development of learning behavior. 80% of the children in our project are children with behavioral disorders.

Gradually, the child begins to be included in the general class, and the duration of stay in the class increases according to their capabilities. So, the child studies part of the time in the inclusion support office and the other part in the general class. In the office, they are provided with corrective support for social behavior and the development of skills, both daily and social. In the office, they are educated according to an individual program. That is, if the child struggles with the general program, then the program is adapted to their capabilities. We immediately tell parents that the goal is not the development of academic skills, this is not a priority. The priority is to teach children to live in society and adapt and interact with peers. Another feature of our office is that each office is a mini-factory for producing specialists. As I said, there is a certain hierarchy of specialists in the team: tutor, teacher, curator, supervisor. For tutors and teachers, we conduct a competitive selection and train them in certification courses in applied behavior analysis so that they can become curators. We currently have 12 curators working on the project, each of the curators is assigned from 3 to 7 offices in different regions of the country. And each curator has been given the task in each region to supervise at least one specialist, accompanying and helping them. And at the same time we invest into their own education.

So we are now training about 40 people, and the need in Kazakhstan, according to our calculations, is about 500 people.

I: Are most of the children on your project children with autism?

R: Yes, 80% of children are on the autism spectrum.

I: And if parents come without a need in behavioral intervention, then how do you organize the work?

R: In fact, behavioral intervention is aimed at skills development. Yes, usually we offer correction of undesirable behavior, but the development program also includes work on the development of social, gaming, and self-service skills. We have children with Down's Syndrome, cerebral palsy, or mental delays... ABA has been pretty successful for everyone. If we see that a defectologist or psychologist can help a child, then we redirect. If a parent says that they have already tried their services and they did not help, then we include the children in our project. We have children who leave our project after a while because they

have socialized with our support. Now the children go to the regular class for their grade level. But without our support, this might not have happened

I: And yet, children are usually enrolled in school through you, and not directly? So, you facilitate their school placement.

R: Yes, it is the case for about 80% of children that we supervise. Their parents applied directly to us. They study not in their neighboring school. They fill out an application form, and if we have free places in the inclusion office, we enroll them, and usually this is not around the place of residence. We had a case when parents have been bringing their child to school from the village to the city for more than a year, because we opened an office in this city. Often parents move due to the inaccessibility of the school in their city.

I: You support students, and you also support schools. When you support a school, how do you come up with a sustainability plan so that the school will continue to replicate the experience without your further help?

R: This is a good question. We work with the government, parliament, party and so on within the framework of our project. Because our goal is to transfer our model to the state so that it works without us. To do this, we are working on by-laws of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, so that the types of behavioral interventions are regulated, so that a methodologist of behavioral programs, a supervisor, a teacher-instructor in applied behavior analysis, and so on, are included in the state register of professions. We are working to ensure that universities teach courses, that is, educational programs, on applied behavior analysis. This year we launched the first advanced training course in applied behavior analysis. Upon completion, the participants are issued an official certificate, which will be taken into account during teacher performance review (attestation).

At the same time, we show the government the need for personnel, services, courses, literature, and so on. System changes require a lot of time. A few years ago, the Ministry of Education and Science was against specialists in applied analysis and such courses in Kazakhstan, and now the government is asking us how to do it, where to buy services, and so on.

Our goal is to train behavioral specialists in each region and then transfer them to the state. An important point: when transferring specialists to the state, it is necessary to prepare the infrastructure. If they come to the position of a behavioral specialist, they should not be overwhelmed with other unrelated functions and tasks in the school.

This is how we plan to ensure sustainability. It will take about 5-7 years, we think, with the support of the government.

I: Behavioral specialists work directly with children, but who will be in charge of management tasks in the school to keep this resource model working? How do you think it will be ensured?

R: Psychological and pedagogical support services (PPSS) are being launched in schools. We have integrated our offices so that they operate as part of the PPSS. We are working on developing regulations and documentation for this now, these nuances will take about a year or two years. If PPSS appear in schools, there will appear vice-principals for inclusion, methodologists, social pedagogues... that is, a multidisciplinary team that includes defectologists, tutors, speech therapists, and so on. The task of organizing this work at the school will be dealt with by PPSS. In addition, there are methodological offices at the departments of education. For example, we are working on introducing a position of a methodologist of behavioral programs to the registry. In our schools, we called them curators, but we adapted the nomenclature to the Kazakhstani names of professions. And for the curator, that is, for the methodologist of behavioral programs, we envision work in methodological offices at the Department of Education, and not in schools, in order to provide broader methodological support.

I: Summarizing your work around IE, you've already mentioned:

- Teacher and specialist training
- Methodological development, piloting, and sharing experience
- Modelling support system for students with SEN in schools
- Policy-making work including updating state registry of professions, introducing the law on teaching assistant and so on
- Raising awareness through the Bolashak competition about inclusive education that you've mentioned.

Let us talk more about your policy making or legislation-related work.

R: Our foundation is a member of numerous government working groups. Recently, the president of the country signed a law on inclusive education, and our director was a member of the working group on its creation, gave corrections and suggestions. One of our proposals was to impose administrative responsibility for not accepting a student with special needs in an educational institution. That is, for refusing to accept a child, a fine may be imposed on the principal.

In the field of legislation, we fought along with other NGOs to introduce a teacher-assistant in Kazakhstan. All law changes go through all stages from denial and anger to acceptance.



That is, it took us almost five years to legalize the work of teaching assistants in school. Our next stage is introducing teaching assistants in kindergartens.

The definition of behavioral intervention is something we are also working on now. There are no behavioral specialists in Kazakhstan, only in our foundation and sometimes private ones. This slows down work. We have international partners, so we can talk about how it might look and be implemented in Kazakhstan.

Now we are working on inclusive education. Inclusion support offices appeared in the nomenclature of educational organizations, according to decree No. 50 of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as a form of educational assistance. Further methodological recommendations will be developed.

In general, the legislation in the country is not bad and gives enough freedom to educational organizations to create conditions for learning, but local implementation is of poor quality or justified by human fear.

I: You offer professional development courses. Does it take place on your platform or in cooperation with institutes of professional training?

R: We run it ourselves and issue a certificate, approved by the Ministry of Education.

Previously, this work was done by special institutions under the Ministry of Education and Science, in accordance with the law. And now order No. 175 has been issued, which declared teacher training to be delivered in a competitive environment, that is, legal entities like our foundation can do this as well.

I: Question about the competition around inclusive education. This is an annual competition for media coverage of the topic of inclusive education, right?

R: Yes, not only journalists, but anyone can participate in it. Participants are offered the nominations “Best Television Work”, “Best Print Publication”, “Best Social Media Post” and “Best Online Publication”. This is managed by the press service of our foundation, so I can’t remember all the details right now. The competition has been held for the fourth year. The goal is to develop tolerance and understanding of inclusive education. Every year we receive more than 200 submissions for the competition, and the number of participants is growing every year.

I: A lot of work is being done, and the results are colossal. Do you have resource needs to achieve your goals even better?

R: Active support from the state, government and local executive bodies will help us. That is, the political will for them to listen and support our proposals.

Annual winter charity ball is what helps us ensure financial stability. We collected quite significant amounts of money for an NGO, and it helps our work. At the same time, we are trying to involve the state in financing the school-based services of the specialists we hire, so that even if the fund runs out of money to support the project, the children continue to receive the services of specialists.

In general, we need more ideological support. We have outperformed the state when it comes to training specialists, and we have built a system of how to train specialists using the example of behavioral specialists. ABA therapy is an evidence-based science that is actively developing in the US and other countries.

I: I plan to discuss your work with partners and financing with your director. But since we started touching on this topic, I will ask you. What are the organization's main sources of income? In addition to self-financing through the winter ball, do you have international donors or state social orders?

R: I don't deal with finance. I know that among the international partners, Chevron financed us to open inclusion support offices and translate professional literature. This year we are planning to publish two books in Kazakh: "Special Children: An Introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis" and "ABLES-R Skills Assessment Tools" by author James Parson, who developed this toolkit for individual development plans.

This year, for the first time, we receive money from the state, not only as part of the state social order, but also through direct contracting. About 100 million tenge of project expenses annually goes to methodological support and training of specialists. Yes, schools pay the salaries of tutors and teachers of the inclusion support office. But there are services of behavioral program curators and supervisors, which are very expensive, and the school has no reason to hire such specialists, because they do not yet exist in the state registry of professions. And the salaries that schools can offer are not yet competitive. This year we are making agreements with schools, sometimes directly, sometimes through the state social order with some regions, so that they pay for part of the supervision costs. The cost is about 150 million tenge per year (that is, 160,000 per month per specialist), which would allow schools to pay salaries and allow us to be more sustainable.

We also offer paid training courses.

I: Do you work with private schools?

R: We plan to start working with them this academic year. But our priority is public schools. If we are talking about children with autism, then it is also important to work with private schools, because sometimes such children are asked to leave private schools as well.

In general, we are concerned about the problem of ‘formalizing inclusive education’, when children are formally in school, the school receives money for them at an increased rate, but they just sit at school with no additional support in place. This is a hidden form of discrimination. Conditions are not created for them, and children suffer, both special and neurotypical, as well as teachers.

I: What is your personal motivation to do this work?

R: For me, this is a professional challenge. My goal is not exactly to help children or families, this is a by-product, but to solve the problem at the system level. Our director and I are very close in spirit, we are not afraid of difficulties and are looking for systemic solutions. We bring practices to Kazakhstan, implement, adapt, and then work at the government level, amend laws, and so on. We are working with the Ministry of Labor so that behavioral specialists also appear in medical and social institutions. We believe that every child should have the opportunity to choose services and their quality implementation.

I: That is, I see three reasons that you listed: your professional ambitions, your civic position on the issue of education, that is, your personal belief about children's rights for education, and your employer, because you liked that your views coincided with the leadership of the organization.

R: Yes, those are the reasons. And I have always wanted to improve the quality of life in Kazakhstan, and if we can do this through our projects, then this is for me.

I: Thank you very much for your answers and detailed information about your work. I will review your reports on the foundation's website. It was very nice to meet you!

## Respondent 2

I: How many employees do you have, and how many of them work in the [removed] project?

R: Now I am the chairman of the board of trustees, although I have worked as a director all my life. Therefore, I need some time to count now ... There are 10 people in the staffing team, in addition to this, 10-12 specialists are contracted as curators, and about 500 specialists who work at regular rates within schools, that is, de jure, they are not our employees, but de facto we supervise them, we train them, we can fire them if necessary, and so on. These are the specialists who work in our inclusion support offices. You know that we have opened 43 inclusion support offices, plus 16, which we fully supervised, but financed by the Nursultan Nazarbayev Foundation.

I: Do you rely on the help of volunteers?

R: Not in this project, but we are open to them.

I: Tell us how long ago and why did you join this work?

R: The [removed] project has been implemented since 2015, and the foundation is already 10 years old. Until 2014-2015, we worked with correctional institutions for children with hearing, vision, developmental impairments and disorders, as well as with orphanages.

I have been there since the first days of the foundation. I worked for the [removed] when it was decided on the initiative of [removed] to create a charitable foundation. And I came there because I was on maternity leave at the time, my eldest daughter was about one and a half years old, and there was a need to realize my potential and give back something. A foundation was created, and I worked here as a volunteer for three years out of the need to do something good, cool and kind. Then they made me an offer to become a director... We held many events, for example, charity auctions. We had different programs... For example, we organized educational courses for children from the SOS children's village. We held a republican competition of artworks among about two thousand children from orphanages and so on ...

I: So, you moved from the paradigm of charity and volunteering towards the paradigm of child protection, is that right?

R: Yes.

I: [removed] and I talked about the following roles of your foundation in the development of IE: modeling support for students with special needs, methodological development and exchange of experience with other schools, teacher training, raising awareness through Bolashak competitions, and so on, and we touched a little on your involvement in policy making. What can you add?

R: 'GR', which is lawmaking.

I: Can you give a couple of standout examples of your work with the government?

R: There are so many. For example, in 2015 we held the first conference on autism, where foreign experts, government agencies and other stakeholders were invited. Then we wrote the first resolution for the government. In those years, Dariga Nursultantovna was Deputy Prime Minister, and we passed this resolution on to her. It turned out so fortunate that she visited the school where we implemented our project. We showed her a regular classroom attended by a student with special needs 'accompanied by' an assisting teacher. And then back in 2015, I created an expert council on the topic of inclusive education. There were NGOs that dealt with issues of autism, inclusive education, but they were scattered. At the same time, there was a need to change the legislation. I realized that there is a need and possibility to unite

NGOs for certain goals and objectives. So, back in 2015 I created an expert council, where I included representatives of state bodies from the Ministry of Health, Social Protection, Education, PMPC, Department of Education, that is, all key parties, including other NGOs. There were the [removed], [removed], [removed], many parent organizations and so on. We've made a lot of changes. For example, by common efforts we have ensured that children with autism can study according to individual educational programs. I don't remember in which particular government decree... but it was adopted. We also worked a lot with by-laws, made methodological recommendations, and improved the regulatory framework. We promoted the introduction of an assistant teacher in the 77th resolution.

I: Does this council work now?

R: No. It was a tool to influence government bodies and for us to be heard. When you speak alone, you are not heard. And now our NGO is so 'authoritative' that our opinions are considered. I can directly call any vice minister and discuss any law that we don't like, or use other lobbying platforms. That is, back then we needed a platform and expertise, and other NGOs invested their expertise, made an analysis, and so on. This work with other NGOs is also being carried out now, but already directly or within the framework of other platforms. And the council worked for about two years.

I: A question about your partners. I have already drafted a table of partners, which I would like to fill in with you. I divided these partners into 4 sectors: public, private/business, NGO/civil society and academia. Let's start with government partners. You work with the Ministry of Education through working groups, expert councils... that is, you have an advisory role where the ministry consults with you and you advance your agenda.

R: Yes.

I: The same can be said about the parliament and other legislative bodies. The Department of Education helps you establish partnerships with schools.

R: Yes.

I: Schools are sites for project implementation, as well as beneficiaries.

R: Yes, kindergartens as well. We have two kindergartens that operate within a pilot program.

I: Do you work with PMPC, parties and courts? You said PMPC's were involved in your expert council.

R: Yes, I hated them because they were a barrier to children's inclusion. Apart from the council, we don't really work with them. We can only directly work with the republican PMPC; if we know about any violations in the regional PMPCs, we inform, discuss, and call

for action the republican PMPC ... In general, we are the only NGO in Kazakhstan that systematically implements inclusive education in the country. Other foundations also help, but only we work systematically and with such difficult children.

I: How do you cooperate with the party (Nur Otan), and what role do they play?

R: The party is a huge resource and platform for making changes and interacting with state bodies, but it depends on the leader. I became a member of the party last year, and was twice a trustee in parliament from the party. The party has platforms, in the past 2015-2016 they were called commissions for social issues, education, and so on, and now these are republican councils, where recommendations are made and state bodies report. I am a member of the Republican Council for the Protection of the Rights of Women and Children and the Council of Education. There we raise a lot of questions and we have huge support from the party. Why is it unique? The party has regions and branches everywhere. We have worked hard to put inclusive education on the agenda of the government, and through the party we can raise this agenda regionally.

I: That is, a party for you is a platform for building political will, for your expert voice to be heard and to build a dialogue with the state and experts.

R: Yes.

I: Did you have cases of working with courts?

R: No, not yet. But I would like to make such a precedent, but it should come from the parents. Parents come to us and complain that their rights are being violated, and I encouraged them to go to court, showed them the law and explained their rights. When the practice of precedent appears in court, as long as at least one case appears, it will start working. But none of us are coming. We could help to organize all this, but we cannot do everything, we are engaged in providing basic conditions for children.

I: That is, you are engaged in parental capacity building by involving parent NGOs and providing legal advice to parents?

R: Yes, and we plan to expand our work with parents.

I: Do you work with universities and professional training institutes?

R: Everything is sad there. Feedback from our specialists and teachers suggests that they lack knowledge about working with children with special needs. Such institutes as Orleu and so on, we don't really work with them. We met with some of them, invited them to round tables, but I did not see the desire or the level of quality. Maybe things have changed now.

I: What about local scientific institutes?

R: We had a partner, the Republican Scientific and Practical Center for Correctional Pedagogy. We worked closely with them in 2015-2017, with [removed]. Then the chairman was changed there, and we were also busy with operational work, and now we interact only through councils and working groups. But we keep in touch with them.

I: Do you have business partners?

R: When it comes to donation and fundraising, every year we hold a winter charity ball, the funds from which allow us to do all our work. That is, business gives us donations.

In general, it is important to understand your partners. I learned to put myself in the place of partners, in the place of state bodies, and think from their position. We must always seek consensus, NGOs cannot simply demand. This position is often taken by parents, thinking that everyone owes them everything, but it doesn't work that way.

Sometimes the interaction goes on for a long time. For example, I am proud that our foundation together with others fought against the fact that children were locked up in a mental hospital for 40 days for diagnosis. We participated in all councils and working groups, met with vice ministers, psychiatrists and explained that this is a violation of the rights of the child. They accepted this change in the protocol for the diagnosis and treatment of autism in a psychiatric clinic, but for another year they continued to work according to the old scheme. So we had to take it under our oversight, and we called and reported to the appropriate authority in which city the violation occurred, which child, what is their name and so on. I became an expert through such experiences, when I went to hospitals, participated in the discussions, personally studied the protocols, understood the experience of international partners, that is, I knew everything from the inside. Now we are working systematically.

I: What does that mean to you, to work systematically?

R: That means we cooperate with all major stakeholders in the inclusive education process. With the ministries, departments of education, city councils, schools, teachers, families, students, media, donors, and so on. We have a big picture, that is our goal to promote inclusive education, and we have mechanisms of how to implement this goal. This means, we work at all levels and with all main actors, so we work systematically.

I: Thank you very much for your time and your answers.