



COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES: THE CASES OF UZBEKISTAN, TAJIKISTAN, MOLDOVA, KYRGYZSTAN AND GEORGIA

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ABOUT THIS COMPARATIVE STUDY

This study is a product of a KIX EMAP Rapid Customised Country Support (RCCS) activity. The KIX EMAP RCCS is a demand-driven activity that follows up on regional capacity strengthening and peer-learning exchange activities to ensure that countries have the opportunity to uptake the learnings at the national level. This particular RCCS focused on promoting the exchange of good practices for inclusive education among five participating countries—Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CRDP	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
EMAP	Europe, Middle East, and North Africa, Asia, and Pacific
GPE KIX	Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisations
RCCS	Rapid Customised Country Support
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
SEN	Special Educational Needs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Moldova, the journey towards inclusive education is advancing, but significant gaps remain. This report provides a comparative analysis of inclusive education in the selected countries, focusing on their progress and challenges in implementing inclusive education systems for children with disabilities. This analysis is part of a rapid customised country support (RCCS) activity facilitated by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and the Pacific (EMAP) Hub. The activity focused on promoting the exchange of good practices for inclusive education among the five participating countries: the Kyrgyz Republic, Georgia, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Based on national reports and data collected in 2023 by teams of national researchers, practical recommendations for strengthening these systems and ensuring equitable access to education for all children are offered.

The historical and legal foundations of inclusive education in each country reveal diverse trajectories that are shaped by international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Although all five nations have laid the legal groundwork for inclusive education, the implementation of these policies varies widely. Countries such as Uzbekistan and Moldova have made notable progress in aligning their educational systems with international standards through pilot projects and legal reforms. However, significant challenges remain, including insufficient resources, gaps in teacher training and a lack of adaptive learning materials, which continue to hinder the full integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools.

In addition to legal reforms, the role of civil society and international organisations in promoting inclusive education is crucial. NGOs and international bodies such as UNICEF and UNESCO have been instrumental in raising awareness, providing resources and supporting the development of inclusive educational practices. Collaboration among government agencies, parents and international actors has been essential in driving positive change, even though the level of involvement and effectiveness varies by country.

Notably, countries such as Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have seen a shift in societal attitudes towards greater acceptance of inclusive education because of public awareness campaigns and increased engagement from civil society.

Despite these positive developments, there are ongoing challenges that impede the full realisation of inclusive education. Funding constraints, inadequate teacher preparation and limited access to modern educational tools remain significant barriers. In particular, rural and underserved regions struggle with implementing inclusive practices because of logistical and infrastructural challenges. As a result, sustained financial support, enhanced teacher training and more robust monitoring systems are needed to ensure that inclusive education is effectively realised, here with a special focus on fostering collaboration between local and international stakeholders.

AIMS AND METHODS

This report examines the state of inclusive education in five countries: Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Moldova. By analysing existing policies, legal frameworks, historical developments, professional training opportunities, and the implementation of inclusive educational practices, the report identifies successful approaches and challenges faced by each country in integrating children with disabilities into mainstream educational systems. The primary objective is to provide insights and recommendations to policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, helping enhance inclusive education in their respective contexts.

The methodology involved data collection and analysis conducted by national teams from the participating countries. The process commenced in June 2023 and was completed by September 2023. Each national team began the process with an extensive literature review to gather existing information on inclusive education within their specific contexts. This literature review was supplemented through systematic data collection. Each team constructed several databases incorporating critical information, including relevant organisations, legal orders, agreements, and educational resources that relate to inclusive education.

Based on the collected data, each team of national researchers developed a prestructured national report. These reports, which detail those findings specific to each country, contribute to the comparative analysis of inclusive education practices. The reports encompass sections focused on examining historical development, the legal framework, implementation, and the monitoring of inclusive educational practices.

The comparative nature of the present report allows for identifying the commonalities and differences in inclusive education practices and policies across the five countries. Although the national reports are not explicitly cited within the text to maintain the flow and coherence of the analysis, they form the critical foundation for the study's insights, directly informing the content and recommendations presented throughout the report.

This report is a product of rapid customised country support (RCCS) activity facilitated by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX)

Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and the Pacific (EMAP) Hub. The RCCS activities focus on strengthening regional capacity and fostering peer-learning exchanges, ensuring that countries can effectively implement the knowledge and insights gained from these collaborative efforts at the national level. This particular RCCS activity focused on promoting the exchange of good practices for inclusive education among the participating countries—Kyrgyz Republic, Georgia, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

In preparing this report, inclusive education was considered both an educational goal and methodology (Slee, 2018). Hence, the current comparative report is an attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of inclusive education from a comparative perspective, beginning with a review of historical and institutional changes in the five analysed countries, followed by a description of legal developments, professional training opportunities and available teacher resources; this report then concludes with an overall assessment and recommendations for inclusive education in each country. In terms of the definition of inclusive education, this report takes the most fundamental meaning of the term: Inclusive education is a way to ensure equal educational rights for every person, and it must also be recognised that definitions and implementations of inclusive education vary immensely between countries and regions (Haug, 2017).

The approach of this report adheres to the view that inclusive education is a dynamic process rather than a static change (Anderson et al., 2014). Furthermore, although it is now recognised that inclusive education should focus not only on children with disabilities but also on children with any set of differences or unique needs, this report specifically focuses on understanding inclusive educational practices toward children with limited abilities. Although the national reports and literature in source languages use a variety of concepts, this report uses “people with limited abilities” or “people with disabilities” in line with the recommendation of “putting the person first and avoiding condescending terminology” (Bloomberg, 2021; Rahman, 2019). The report also uses the term students with special educational needs (SEN), which covers a wide range of needs for extra help or support that students may have in their learning journey, including but not limited to physical, sensory, cognitive, and emotional challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 stated that education is a human right for everyone. There is growing recognition that inclusive education stands as the best approach to ensure universal access to education for all individuals. In an inclusive educational environment, every learner, regardless of their background or ability, is afforded equitable opportunities for growth and development in their education. International organisations play a pivotal role in paving the way for inclusive education to become the cornerstone in educational systems around the world. Specifically, in 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) organised an international conference entitled “The International Conference on Education for People with Special Needs: Access and Quality”, which resulted in the so-called “Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education” (UN, 1994). The ambition of this statement was to promote inclusive education systems globally.

Further **international efforts**, such as the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the adoption of “inclusive education” within the goals of the World Education Forum and UNESCO’s concept of “education for all”, have also proven milestones in the advancement of inclusive education (Madhesh, 2023; Rieser, 2012). On the whole, the international community has long worked to elucidate the meaning of inclusive education and putting it into practice. Inclusive education is understood by the international community as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through inclusive practices in learning, cultures and communities and reducing exclusion within and from education” (UNESCO, 2005) or as “real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded” (UNICEF, n.d.a.). The United Nation’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—“a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” that is envisioned as a universal agenda for all countries—comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of which SDG4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education” (UNESCO, n.d.).

Today, in the pursuit of **embracing international values** and adhering to pertinent international conventions, numerous countries are aspiring to embrace inclusive education as a modern approach to education (Madhesh, 2023). In many countries, however, inclusive education still faces uncertainty, with little to no institutional experience supporting this practice.

In the post-Soviet context, although inclusive education has taken root as a leading trend in educational discourse, it is a long-term strategy that requires a systemic and holistic restructuring of both the system and philosophy of education (Huseynova, 2019). With no “global standard that defines the implementation of inclusive education in developed and developing nations” (McCall, 2016, p. 22), local contexts must be considered when adopting and implementing inclusive education. This report strives to illuminate diverse approaches and challenges to implementing inclusive education in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Moldova while offering practical insights for advancing inclusive education across the region.

The report is broadly divided into three sections. The first section, entitled “Inclusive Education of Children with Limited Abilities in the Five Countries”, provides a general review of the countries under investigation, analyses the evolution of historical and legal development in the countries while focusing on inclusive education and considers changes in societal values and attitudes towards inclusivity. The purpose of this section is not only to present the current state of inclusive education and its historical antecedents in the five countries but also to embed the experience of these countries into the wider literature on the topic by relying on the academic literature.

The second section, entitled “Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Five Countries”, takes a closer look at the current accomplishments and challenges with inclusive education in the five countries. This section is complemented with first-hand accounts from study visits that were carried out within the framework of the KIX Initiative; study visits were conducted in Georgia and Uzbekistan and organised by research teams from these countries in September and October of 2023, respectively. Visiting research teams drafted short reports upon returning, akin to fieldnotes and observations, describing the importance of the study trip. These visit reports are incorporated into the second section of the report.

Finally, the third section, “Conclusions and Implications”, contains an assessment of the state of inclusive education in the five analysed countries and a short summary of the most important findings and policy recommendations based on the comparative analysis.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH LIMITED ABILITIES IN THE FIVE COUNTRIES

Country Background

The five countries included in this comparative analysis were part of the Soviet Union and share the legacies of socialism, even though their trajectories of development since independence have been considerably different. Initially, these countries inherited a medical model of disability. The association of the medical model—focusing on deficiency and impairments and leading to the segregation and exclusion of persons with disabilities—with the Soviet legacy¹ is common (Rasell & Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2014). However, research suggests that the concept of disability is inextricably linked with the development of capitalism (i.e., paid work) and modernity itself, where segregated state institutions exercise a form of social control (Barnes, 1999; Barnes et al., 1999; Humpage, 2007).

Inquiries about the educational trajectories of former Soviet republics revealed that countries have inherited “solid infrastructures for educational provision and administration, fee-free education for all children, nearly universal general education enrolments, and high literacy rates” and a system designed for the mass provision of socialist education on an egalitarian basis that can advance social cohesion (Heyneman, 2000; Silova, 2009, p. 295). Moreover, these education systems were fragmented and, at times, inefficient, whereas pedagogic practices were rigid and teacher centred, lacking individual learning practices (Silova, 2009). A World Bank report maintained that, as a legacy of the Soviet Union, reasonably successful education systems were inherited, which were then reformed to reflect not only educational priorities but also “questions of national identity and globalization ... driven by different doses of principle and pragmatism” (Brunner & Tillett, 2007, p. 11). Accordingly, until the early 1990s, children with SEN attended segregated institutions in all the studied countries, yet afterwards, the development of inclusive education in the region was diverse because of the unique national education landscapes.

In Uzbekistan, boarding schools have functioned since the 1920s, and it was already in the 1930s that integrated education for all children, including children with disabilities, was proposed; since the 1970s, there has been considerable work towards expanding education for children with special needs in boarding or special schools in all regions of the republic (Kenzhaev et al., 2024). In other countries, exposure to international norms and agreements after a regime change served as a milestone in the development of inclusive education. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1994) was ratified, pilot projects have been implemented in the field of inclusive education that inspired and motivated further improvements towards the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools (Mambetova et al., 2024).

Similarly, in Moldova, important changes in the education of children with special needs occurred with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1993) and the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2010), which were followed by activities carried out by UNICEF and various nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in the field of child rights protection in the period 2007–2012. As a result, since 2010, a series of strategies and policies have been implemented to ensure compliance of national policy with international policies governing inclusive education (Cojocararu et al., 2024). The Georgian experience was comparable as well: The activities of donors and nongovernmental organisations played an important role in the process of developing inclusive education, which began with pilot projects implemented in the 2000s (Bibileishvili et al., 2024). In these cases, **international standards combined with the work of NGOs** have significantly contributed to the development of the sociopedagogical inclusion of children with SEN.

Inclusive education has been a relatively recent notion in Tajikistan, where the adoption of the National Concept of Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2011–2015 was a pioneering step in this direction (Hakim-zoda et al., 2024). The country is the only one among the analysed countries where the CRDP has not been

¹ This report recognises that there was variation in education of children with disabilities within the USSR (Anderson et al., 1987).

ratified (but was signed). Arguably, lobbying by child rights advocates generated such momentum in the country that it resulted in the Tajik government moving away from the long-established segregated education system toward an inclusive one (Husnidinzoda, 2023). As a result, the terms “inclusion” and “inclusive education” have recently been established in the education system in Tajikistan, and considerable effort is underway to improve legislation in the field of inclusive education.

Overall, after the regime change, although segregated education still persisted, positive attitudes toward integration and inclusive education began to emerge. In all these cases, the **participation of civil society and nongovernmental organisations has played a significant role** in the promotion and development of inclusive education. Considering that legal steps have been relatively recent, the development and implementation of inclusive education in each country is currently underway. In addition, it is important to study inclusive education in Eastern European and Central Asian countries, here considering that the region is currently undergoing significant changes in education, particularly in the implementation of inclusive and special education (Somerton & Makoelle, 2021). To assist in this process, the current comparative analysis of these countries is aimed at facilitating cross-fertilisation and collaboration between these countries to strengthen the values of inclusive education.

There is wide recognition among researchers from the countries under investigation that, as many countries are currently addressing access to education for children with limited abilities, accumulated experience and persistent obstacles must be evaluated to improve policies and monitor the progress of inclusive education. Likewise, researchers expressed their aspiration to learn from other countries in the region and share their own experiences as well. Although it is important to recognise the different contexts and challenges faced by countries in providing inclusive education, it is also possible to learn from countries’ experiences in implementing progressive inclusion in education (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020).

Evolution and Legal Development of Inclusive Educational Practices

Within the UN CRPD, Article 24 guarantees the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities (UNICEF, 2017). The CRPD was drafted in 2006, and all analysed countries have ratified the Convention, with the exception of Tajikistan, which has to date only signed but not ratified the Convention. Some countries have ratified it as early as 2010 and some relatively recently (see timeline below in Figure 1). In most cases, after ratification, a complex process of legal adjustments and the systematisation of inclusive educational strategies began. Until then, however, pilot projects realised by international and nongovernmental organisations continued laying the foundation for inclusive education. The role of **international**

donors, nongovernmental organisations and, more broadly, **civil society** in promoting inclusive education has been documented by several authors (Dar, 2014; Rollan, 2018) and further supported by national reports written within the framework of the KIX Initiative.

Figure 1. Ratification of CRDP by Year, with Tajikistan Having Signed Only but Not Ratified



Source: Amnesty International, 2020; UN, 2019, 2017, 2021, 2023; UNDP, 2021; UNICEF, n.d.b.

Partially building on international frameworks of inclusive education and the rights of people with disabilities, formal changes facilitating inclusive education have been enacted at different times in the evaluated countries. Table 1 provides a list of the most relevant legal changes facilitating inclusive education and promoting the rights of children with limited abilities since 2020 in the countries under investigation. Starting in 2020, the most recent developments took place in Uzbekistan, where substantive work has been underway to train teaching staff in inclusive practices (Kenzhaev et al., 2024). Indeed, 2020 was a turning point for the country, when the president claimed that “dozens of decrees, resolutions and programmes have been adopted ... that open new horizons in the development of ... distance and inclusive education” (Mirziyoyev, 2020). Shortly thereafter, the first legal steps towards inclusive education were made in 2021, with the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan: “On approval of regulatory legal acts relating to the education of children with special educational needs” (Kenzhaev et al., 2024, p. 22). The 2021 resolution represents a significant step towards realising the broader objectives of inclusive education, including enhanced access, quality and equity in educational opportunities for children with special needs (Kenzhaev et al., 2024).

Table 1. List of Selective and Recent Legal Changes Facilitating Inclusive Education and Promoting the Rights of Children with Limited Abilities in Chronological Order Since 2020

Country	Document	Year	Significance
Moldova	National Development Strategy “European Moldova 2030”	2023	National document of strategic long-term vision that promotes human-centric development, holistic human development and human rights.
	Standards for the protection and safety of children/students in the online environment	2022	Sets out a minimum framework for actions that can be taken by mainstream education providers to strengthen the promotion of online safety, including for students with SEN and disabilities.
	Approval of the results of piloting the Model of Inclusive Education for Children with Severe Disabilities and its extension to the national education system	2020	The pilot project aimed at creating an educational cluster and empowerment cluster in general education institutions to ensure the right to education and maximise educational opportunities for children with severe/multiple disabilities and complex needs.
	Regulations on the certification of teaching staff in general education, vocational technical education and psychological and pedagogical assistance services	2020	Implementation of changes in the certification of teachers and specialists to strengthen psychological and pedagogical assistance to children with SEN.
Georgia	Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	2020	The Law requires the state to promote and protect human rights of persons with disabilities and ensure the protection of their dignity.
Kyrgyzstan	Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On Education”	2023	The law explicitly promotes inclusive education, defined as “ensuring equal access to education for all students, taking into account the diversity of educational needs and individual capabilities”.
	National Standard for School Education	2022	This revised standard introduced new concepts such as socioemotional development and self-awareness.
	Education Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2021–2040	2021	Inclusion is a widely used concept in the Strategy; particular attention is given to inclusion of people with special needs.
Tajikistan	National Strategy for the Development of Education until 2030	2020	The strategy identified several priority reform measures in matters of inclusive education, such as construction and renovation of schools, ensuring the adequacy and quality of infrastructure, development and inclusive education programmes and many others.
Uzbekistan	On Approval of Regulations on State Specialised Educational Institutions for Children with Disabilities	2021	In part, the document is aimed at ensuring social guarantees as well as creating an adaptive environment for training, education and integration for children with various developmental disabilities.
	Resolution President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Measures to Further Improve the System of Education and Upbringing of Children with Special Educational Needs	2020	Inclusive education in the public education system is implemented in stages on the basis of a “Roadmap” that includes target indicators and main directions.
	Concept of Development of Inclusive Education 2020–2025	2020	The Concept identifies objectives to improve the quality of educational services for children with SEN.

Source: Bibileishvili et al., 2024; Cojocaru et al., 2024; Hakim-zoda et al., 2024; Kenzhaev et al., 2024; Mambetova et al., 2024.

In **Moldova**, having ratified the abovementioned essential international agreements, sociopedagogical services were increasingly offered to children with limited abilities, and inclusive education appeared to be a policy goal. The Strategy for the Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities 2010–2013 and the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova for 2011–2020 were subsequently approved, marking the formal introduction of inclusive education into the political landscape of the country. With that, **national policies were brought in line with the international agreements** governing inclusive education. In the process of implementing inclusive education, representatives of various international agencies and nongovernmental organisations are actively involved (Cojocaru et al., 2024).

In **Tajikistan**, the adoption of the National Concept of Inclusive Education for Children from 2011 to 2015 firmly established the term inclusive education in the education system of the country. In 2015, the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On the Protection of the Rights of the Child” was adopted, in which two chapters were devoted to the rights of children with disabilities. Since then, Tajikistan has engaged in the process of **restructuring the education system to align it with inclusive practices** that include the development of a system for the professional training of teachers and educational staff (resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 357, 2017). What is noteworthy in Tajikistan is the establishment of a working group on inclusive education under the Ministry of Education and Science, which works on strategic planning for developing inclusive education in the country (Hakim-zoda et al., 2024).

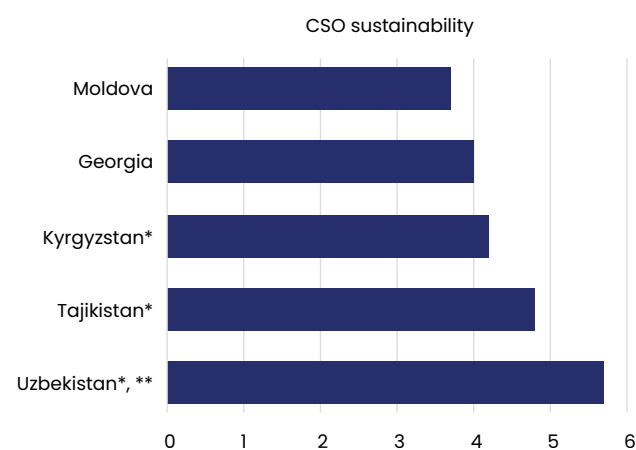
In **Kyrgyzstan**, the National Program for Supporting Persons with Disabilities for 1999–2005 set the goal of **integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools**. Importantly, at the end of the programme, a set of measures was adopted to support the education of people with disabilities. More recently, on July 19, 2019, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic approved the Concept and Program for the Development of Inclusive Education of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019–2023 as well as the plan for its implementation. These measures give continuous political attention to inclusive education (Mambetova et al., 2024).

In **Georgia**, several subprogrammes were created within the framework of the Inclusive Education Assistive Program, initiated by the Georgian state (Samarguliani, 2015). For example, the subprogram “Supporting of Inclusive Education in Pilot Schools in Tbilisi” was introduced by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia and was supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research from 2006 to 2008 (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, n.d.). These series of projects **laid the foundation for inclusive education** early on, expediting promising reforms in inclusive education by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia towards the development of a national policy and legal framework for inclusive education (Dgebuadze, 2011; UNESCO, 2007). Overall,

the Norwegian government has provided significant financial and methodological support for the implementation of inclusive education in Georgia (Bibileishvili et al., 2024).

Beyond changes achieved at the state level towards inclusive education, **the work of civil society, donors and nongovernmental organisations** is noteworthy in all the analysed countries. The role of international organisations in promoting dialogue on the importance of educational inclusion and realising inclusive education in schools has also been documented by multiple studies (Miles, 2013; Miles & Ahuja, 2007). Importantly, the viability of civil society and NGOs differs among countries, as reflected in the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, which is summarised in Figure 2 (USAID, 2021). For example, international organisations, such as the Open Society Foundation, Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia, USAID, UNICEF and others, have played a key role in introducing the concept of inclusive education and putting it to practice through pilot projects and sharing expertise.

Figure 2. Viability of Civil Society



Note: Data are shown for 2021 in the case of Georgia and Moldova (USAID, 2021) and for 2013–2014 for the remaining countries (USAID, n.d.). The index for Uzbekistan may be misleading because the report included GONGOs mutual benefit organisations such as associations of realtors and property managers (USAID, 2012).

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are apt cases for illustrating the role of international organisations and civil society. In Kyrgyzstan, as early as 1994, organisations such as the Kyrgyz Society of the Blind and Deaf and the Association of Parents of Disabled Children worked towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in various cultural and educational events. Furthermore, save children (Denmark) funded inclusion programmes in the country, promoting cooperation between classes and inclusive classes within public schools (Mambetova et al., 2024). In Tajikistan, UNICEF provides ongoing and active support to the Ministry of Education and Science, which collaborates on aspects such as curricular development. For example, in 2017, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, with the financial support of UNICEF, created 49 resource centres in secondary

schools in the country. More about the resource centres are given in the box below (Hakim-zoda et al., 2024).

Box 1. Resource Centres in Tajikistan

“... Resource centers were established at schools around Tajikistan by the Ministry of Education and Science to support the education of children who have mental and physical disabilities. Children with disabilities learn in mainstream classes and have access to the resource centers, where learning takes place mainly through play and there are games’ zones, libraries and visual materials. Parents are also active participants in the lessons carried out at these centers and children can take books home” (GPE, 2023). The mother of one student with special educational needs who is in the resource class says they enjoy the class because the child has the opportunity to play and learn. Children with special educational needs go to school and attend the resource class with pleasure because not everyone has such sports equipment, developmental material and fairy tale books at home. Parents are glad that teachers give some educational materials at home so that children at home, with the support of their parents, can consolidate the material they have covered (Hakim-zoda et al., 2024).

Collectively, these initiatives supported by various organisations were pioneering in inclusive education because they culminated in success stories, generating momentum for the parents of children with disabilities and persons with disabilities themselves to begin seeking the right to receive an education. These efforts can be seen as **opportunities for societal empowerment**, strengthening earlier marginalised voices to emerge in an effort to formulate better policies and more inclusive spaces. Importantly, because international support often assumes local collaboration, particularly from state institutions, such **multiactor cooperation** also yields transformative results. In these cases, pilot projects implemented in the field of inclusive education are experimental in nature and require an integrated approach and adequate budgetary support for successful implementation. In these cases, such projects and resulting cooperation generated enough momentum to inspire legal change, which is the necessary basis for supporting inclusive education, according to a Kyrgyz inclusive education expert Seinep Dyikanbaeva (Sputnik, 2023). An example of how a small-scale project can generate substantive changes in rooting and upscaling practices of inclusive education is presented in Box 2.

Box 2. NGOs in Kyrgyzstan

“The first [collaborative effort] was undertaken in Naryn [Kyrgyzstan], where over 50 children were assigned to regular classes. In 1997, representatives of the NGO ‘Bayastan’ in the city of Naryn turned to the Save the Children organisation (UK) in the Kyrgyz Republic for technical and financial support to ensure access to education for children with special needs. In May 1998, employees of this organisation again visited the city of Naryn, met with teachers and parents, reviewed the situation in the school and, having decided to support the project, set the goal of trying to develop a model of inclusive education with the participation of the regional and city departments of education, the NGO ‘Bayastan’ and the organisation ‘Save the children’” (Marasulova, 2019).

Overall, a comparative examination of the evolution and legal development of inclusive educational practices in the five countries clearly highlights that all the countries have enacted some formal changes that recognise the rights of children with limited abilities or special needs. Therefore, each country under investigation is decisively promoting inclusive education. Table 1 clearly demonstrates the complex and comprehensive nature of the changes that are required for inclusive education—comprising reforms in teacher education and the certification system, children’s rights protection, and the system of education as a whole—which is reflected in the diverse legal changes implemented. In all these cases, some international pressure or reinforcement was imperative. Despite laying the legal groundwork, a shared challenge among these countries that national reports have attested to is the selective or sporadic implementation of these regulations and the lack of funding provided to successfully realise inclusive education.

Comparative research on the role of international pressure in promoting human rights reforms, especially in the context of autocratic regimes, suggests that legal reforms may indeed create windows of opportunity for real changes to consolidate; however, in these cases, they remain window-dressing and carry no real societal change (Bjarnegård & Donno, 2023). Hence, it is imperative to pay attention to the extent to which reforms promoting inclusive education actually make a difference once they are adopted. Accordingly, multiple expert committees have urged more effective implementation of policies on the inclusive education and rights of people with disabilities while praising these countries for legal advancements in these fields (in the case of Georgia, see the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2023; in the case of Uzbekistan, see the United Nations Uzbekistan, 2021).

Changes in Societal Values

This section explores the evolution of societal values in relation to inclusive education across the analysed countries, highlighting both historical legacies and recent transformations. Societal values may change as a result of legal reforms in the country but can also instigate such reforms, especially if there is a strong civil society. In the former case, recent research has indicated that “adoption of laws can be a powerful signal in itself and may ignite processes of social transformation independent of implementation” (Bjarnegård & Donno, 2023, p. 229). In other words, laying the legal foundation to promote inclusive education may prompt positive changes in societal attitudes, generating wider acceptance of inclusive practices. In the latter case, bottom-up or community-driven approaches assume the active participation of various stakeholders and civil society in advancing inclusive education (Bjarnegård & Donno, 2023; Elder et al., 2022).

Hence, changes in societal values related to inclusive education can result from or precede legal changes in the country, but in all cases, the cultivation of tolerance and appreciation of diversity are key for the implementation and success of inclusive education. A change in the global politics of disability rights led to the growing agency of bottom-up actors and civil society, the need to deinstitutionalise disability and the recognition of the societal exclusion of people living with disability (Shakespeare, 2017). Because globalisation has increasingly affected former socialist countries, the role of international treaties and agreements has grown, and with that, the values of human rights and, more specifically, disability rights have begun to seep into the public discourse. Thus, it is worth examining the current public attitudes in the five countries that recognise their role in creating and maintaining inclusive societies.

The **role of international organisations and civil society** is imperative for **raising awareness and changing social values**, as the national reports suggest. For example, in Uzbekistan, as a result of international conferences and training seminars conducted by international organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, the public receives information about the importance of equal access and inclusive education for all children, including those with disabilities (White et al., 2022). Accordingly, public opinion and views gradually changed, being supported by a similar direction taken in government policies (Kenzhaev et al., 2024). A similar overall trend can be observed in all analysed countries, moving from a limited understanding and dismissal of inclusive education to a better understanding and acceptance of differences. This societal transformation can be seen with the public reception of inclusive practices as changes were initiated, here in contrast to the improved social attitudes recorded in most recent opinion polls.

In **Georgia**, the first steps taken towards inclusive education were particularly difficult because the school community, parents and society as a whole were not prepared to see children with disabilities in public schools (Human Rights Council, 2013). Today, there are evident improvements: There is lower stigmatisation and a greater number of special needs students in schools as well as significant improvements in the attitudes of school staff and parents towards students with SEN (Bibileishvili et al., 2024). In Georgia, growing societal awareness was accompanied by a broadening of the meaning of inclusive education. At the initial stages, inclusive education was exclusively seen in relation to children with disabilities, but gradually, the meaning of this term expanded and was reflected in the use of the term “students with special educational needs” (SEN) in various official and state documents (Bibileishvili et al., 2024).

In **Moldova**, attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special needs in education have also improved, and the reason for societal change can be attributed to better information about disability and more successful awareness-raising campaigns (Trofin, 2019, p. 112). However, challenges remain, for example, because of inadequate training or support for teachers (Trofin, 2019). In **Tajikistan**, the comprehensive definition of inclusive education was codified in the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On Education”, which describes inclusive education as “the creation of favourable conditions for children, regardless of gender, race, language, nationality, religious beliefs, physical or mental disabilities, abilities, cultural and social status, to receive education” (Government of Tajikistan, 2019, p. Article 1). Legal definitions closely mirroring a comprehensive and all-encompassing view of inclusive education akin to international discourse are vital to legitimising societal change and promoting inclusive practices in education.

In countries such as **Uzbekistan**, local traditions have played a significant role in shaping values towards people with disability and inclusivity in general. With this, discussions of inclusive education in Uzbekistan started as early as in the Middle Ages with the writings of Abu Ali Ibn Sino, a famous Uzbek scientist of the tenth century (known in Europe under the name Avicenna) about children’s rights and equal opportunities (Kenzhaev et al. 2024). Hence, Uzbek people have a long history and heritage in education, which has played a definitive role in educating youth in the spirit of morality and humanity (Rakhmanova, 2017). In Uzbekistan, concerted efforts in awareness raising and government policies have significantly improved societal value: Because of laws, government regulations, media promotion and training programmes since 2020, there has been a positive shift in public and school staff attitudes towards inclusive education (Kenzhaev et al. 2024).

Some disagreements regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities characterise all countries, indicating the **contentious nature** of this topic. In Kyrgyzstan, a recent study concluded

that parents of children with SEN are a heterogeneous group and that many do not wish for their children to receive education in general education schools (Alieva & Kovyazina, 2022). A possible explanation for this attitude may be the unsuccessful implementation of inclusive education; the main reason for ineffective mechanisms and practices within inclusive education tends to be low government spending, which leads to overcrowding, especially in regions with high population density, a lack of physical accessibility, poor quality education and negative attitudes (Alieva & Kovyazina, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2020; UNICEF, 2021).

Overall, in all countries under investigation, civil society and nongovernmental organisations have played an imperative role in promoting a positive view of inclusive education and addressing the stigmatisation of people with limited abilities. Although attitudes towards disability and inclusion are changing, there is still a disconnect between the recent laws ensuring rights and equal educational opportunities for children with limited abilities and norms that predominate in these societies (White et al., 2022). The following description of cultural norms in Uzbekistan may resonate in the case of other countries as well:

Cultural norms dictate that parents often do not see a bright future for their children with disabilities. Therefore, they may hide them or limit their social experience and educational and other opportunities. This limits these children's socialisation, further inhibiting their ability to function in mainstream schools, especially with a lack of resources/specialists who can give them individual attention. Additionally, this limits the opportunity of non-disabled peers to learn from and understand disabled students, cementing a lack of understanding and perpetuating societal stigma (White et al., 2022, pp. 30–31).

We can conclude that societal attitudes are changing, but there is still much work ahead when it comes to sensitising the population to the rights of people with disabilities and inclusive education. Public attitudes are imperative for the successful implementation of inclusive education, and continuous concerted effort is needed to inform the public about the benefits of inclusive education.

IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE FIVE COUNTRIES

Actors Involved in Inclusive Education

There are **various actors** in the inclusive education system, each of whom plays an important role in ensuring the effectiveness and success of the inclusive process. Among the most important actors are governmental agencies, international organisations, parents and guardians and other country-specific actors.

In each country, the **government agencies** and services of participating countries are key actors; they are responsible for the development and implementation of inclusive education policies as well as for ensuring the necessary resources and quality standards. Public and **international organisations** are also imperative players that support and facilitate inclusive education in all the analysed countries. Indeed, public organisations, activists and citizens can influence the formation of positive public opinion on issues of inclusion and support sociocultural and educational initiatives. In addition, various international organisations and charitable foundations can provide financial support, expertise and technical assistance for the further development and improvement of inclusive education.

In addition to institutional players, **parents and legal guardians play** an important role in inclusive education by contributing to the development of individual learning plans for their children and providing learning support. A key factor of parental involvement is **their interaction with teachers and school staff**. To ensure inclusive practices in education, the role of subject teachers in providing accessible and tailored learning for all students, including those with SEN, and specialist teachers, including speech therapists, psychologists and inclusion specialists, must be recognised. Box 3 illustrates how multiple actors contribute to the promotion of inclusive education in schools, highlighting some persistent challenges.

Box 3. Actors contributing to inclusive education in Georgia

“During the visit to school No. 55, a meeting was held with the director. It became clear that directors also influence the national policy of inclusive education. The director, being a mathematics teacher by training, set herself the goal of introducing an inclusive policy in its broad sense...We also learned about the experience of NGOs in the sector represented by a large coalition of parental communities through the example of the organisation ‘Child. Family. Society’. The coalition has existed for a long time. The coalition contributed to the development of tutoring services and the introduction of personal assistants as a staff position. ... This coalition has done a great job. ... As a result of the meeting, we [also] learned that parents face various barriers such as lack of information” (Excerpt from an unpublished report of a study visit to Georgia by Kyrgyzstan’s delegation in the context of the KIX EMAP RCCS activity, 2023).

Thus, the implementation of inclusive education must be seen as a concerted effort necessitating the cooperation of various players at multiple levels. Table 2 provides examples of the varieties of actors involved in promoting inclusive education from each analysed country. The collaboration of actors is also well illustrated by UNICEF’s approach to inclusive education:

At the school level, teachers must be trained, buildings must be refurbished and students must receive accessible learning materials. At the community level, stigma and discrimination must be tackled and individuals need to be educated on the benefit of inclusive education. At the national level, Governments must align laws and policies with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and regularly collect and analyse data to ensure children are reached with effective services (UNICEF, n.d.a.).

Academic findings have also supported the importance of various actors collaborating towards inclusive education, especially in the case of developing countries (Mitchell, 2005; Srivastava et al., 2015;). Most specifically, although governments’ primary goal is aligning the legal foundation to

accommodate international standards on inclusive education, nongovernmental and international organisations may bring unique perspectives, expertise and resources, cooperating with governments and communities to construct inclusive educational environments. Furthermore, NGOs and civil society may play a multifaceted role to “facilitate the provision of methodological support to schools and professionals, contribute to promoting cultural change about perceptions of people with special needs, and inform parents, the state, and the public more broadly about the needs of children requiring additional educational support” (Rollan & Somerton, 2021, p. 1109).

There are also unique country-specific participants in inclusive education. For example, in **Moldova**, multidisciplinary intraschool commissions are successfully operating; these schools are formed from representatives of the educational institution and performing the functions of planning, coordinating and monitoring the process of inclusive education (Cojocaru et al., 2024). These commissions are also involved in the development of individual educational plans for students with special education needs. In **Kyrgyzstan**, the heads of schools and other educational institutions play a significant role, taking part not only in shaping the policy of inclusive education but also in providing resources and support for teachers (Mambetova et al., 2024), whereas in **Georgia**, a similar role is played by multidisciplinary teams and centres for quality education (Bibileishvili et al., 2024). In **Tajikistan**,

active participants in inclusive education are public initiative groups, local authorities and committees (Hakim-zoda et al., 2024). In addition, **Uzbekistan** is a good example when it comes to adapting to foreign experiences, as described in Box 4 (Kenzhaev et al., 2024). Taken together, the practices of these countries reflect the multidimensional nature of efforts to introduce inclusive education.

Box 4. Inclusive Education in Uzbekistan

“By presidential decree, pilot inclusive schools have been opened in 2021. Currently, 417 schools have Inclusive School status. At the Inclusive school No. 134 [in Uzbekistan], there are 14 children with disabilities studying and two full-time psychologists. Psychologists undergo a 72-hour advanced training course per year. ... The school is equipped with the latest equipment and the experience of Japan is being introduced... [Furthermore, based on] presentations of the directors of schools No. 70 and No. 324, No. 55, No. 290, the Japanese experience is being introduced in all pilot Uzbek schools. Schools are supported by JICA project of Japan [Japan International Cooperation Agency]” (Excerpt from an unpublished report of a study visit to Uzbekistan by Tajikistan’s delegation in the context of the KIX EMAP RCCS activity, 2023).

Table 2. Types of Actors and their Contributions to Inclusive Education

Country	Moldova	Georgia	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Government Agencies	Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research	Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia	Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic	Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Tajikistan	Ministry of preschool and school education of the Republic of Uzbekistan
International Organisations	Lumos Foundation, Keystone, Hope, Partnership for Every Child, KulturKontakt, Charistas, CCF Moldova, Hilfswerk, The World	UNICEF, Open Society Institute, UNDP, UK Aid	Soros Foundation–Kyrgyzstan, USAID, UNICEF, Asian Development Bank	UNICEF, Institute for Advanced Studies and Retraining of Personnel (Russia), Russian Educational and Methodological Center, UN Tajikistan	Limited exposure
Parents	collaboration on children’s individual educational plans, as well as on monitoring and evaluation	partnership between parents and schools, identifying the needs of children	active participation in the decision-making process, participation in monitoring and evaluation	participation in public associations, cooperation with educational institutions	participation in methodological support and in educational processes, cooperation with schools

Country	Moldova	Georgia	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Country-Specific Actors	Republican Center for Psycho-pedagogical Assistance (republican level) Psychological and pedagogical assistance service (district level) Multidisciplinary intraschool commission (monitoring and individual study plans)	Inclusive Education Multidisciplinary Team (monitoring since 2018) Public Defender's Office of Georgia (monitoring 15 pilot public schools in 2019)	Embassy of Finland and Embassy of Switzerland (support and monitor projects for inclusive education)	Center for Comprehensive Support for Children and Parents (cooperation with public organisations and institutions in the field of inclusive education) Regional Committees of Parents of Children with Disabilities (supports and implements projects introducing inclusive education)	Republican Center for Social Adaptation of Children (methodological support to teachers of inclusive schools) Center for Inclusive Education (assistance to parents and children with disabilities for inclusive education) NGO Avlod Baraka (medical and social assistance to parents and children with autism spectrum disorders)

Source: Bibileishvili et al., 2024; Cojocaru et al., 2024; Hakim-zoda et al., 2024; Kenzhaev et al., 2024; Mambetova et al., 2024; White et al., 2022.

Pedagogical and Methodological Support for Inclusive Education

Pedagogical and methodological support for inclusive education must consider the diversity of student needs to ensure equal educational opportunities. Accordingly, instructional materials and techniques must be adapted to meet the different learning needs of students, which may include creating personalised learning plans and using a variety of teaching methods that cater to each student's learning style. In some countries, dedicated institutions have been established to fulfil this task (see box below). Importantly, inclusive education necessitates a change in teachers' functional responsibilities, rendering traditional pedagogical skills insufficient and requiring the acquisition of new skills and abilities (Abdullayeva, 2022). For example, to support teachers' work, methodological manuals have been developed in **Uzbekistan** to facilitate individual lesson plans with SEN students (Kenzhaev et al., 2024).

Box 5. Inclusive Education in Uzbekistan

"The Center for Vocational Guidance and Psycho-Pedagogical Diagnostics of Students [in Uzbekistan] (*Республиканский Центр профессиональной ориентации и психолого-педагогической диагностики учащихся*) is working on promoting inclusion ...by training specialists, developing textbooks for children with special educational needs, preparing programs, etc. The institute has developed the "Manual on the theory and practice of inclusive education," a Russian language textbook for third and fifth grade children with special educational needs in Uzbek schools" (*Excerpt from an unpublished report of a study visit to Uzbekistan by Tajikistan's delegation in the context of the KIX EMAP RCCS activity, 2023*).

In any country, teacher training and preparation are the cornerstones of successful inclusive education (Makoelle & S'lungile, 2022; Mlolele et al., 2023; Tristani & Bassett-Gunter, 2020). A comparative assessment of teacher education reveals that, in some cases, although government measures aimed at the preparation and training of teachers for implementing inclusive education are in place, either opportunities or enforcement of these measures are lacking. In the case of **Uzbekistan**, the 2006 Resolution on the Further Development of the System for the Retraining of Pedagogical Staff defines the skills needed for a "modern teacher" and contains the requirement for in-service teacher training to occur no less than once every three years (Izvorski et al., 2021; Kenzhaev et al., 2024). Despite their mandatory nature, however, professional development opportunities are limited (UNESCO, 2021a; The World Bank, 2018). Similarly, in **Kyrgyzstan**, the 2003 Law on Education requires teachers to undergo professional training every five years, and the 2019–23 State Concept for the Development of Inclusive Education highlights the importance of training for teachers working with special needs students (UNESCO, 2021c). Nevertheless, teacher education does not provide adequate preparation for implementing inclusive education. Importantly, some projects by international organisations such as the Asian Development Bank have attempted to fill this gap, such as a project in 2009–10 that supported the training of school principals and educators. This initiative also included the development of interactive modules for elementary teachers (UNESCO, 2021c).

In other countries where the implementation of policies has been more efficient, tangible results are evident in teacher training for inclusive education. For example, in **Tajikistan**, policy measures are in place to support inclusive education: Both the National Development Strategy up to 2030 and the National Strategy of Education Development up to 2020 stress

the importance of providing skills for inclusive education for teachers. The training of teachers seems relatively more successful than in the earlier described cases because the implementation of teacher training is conducted through the incorporation of these skills in higher educational pedagogical curricula: Tajik National University and Tajik State Pedagogical University (with a Centre on Inclusive Education) both provide training for teachers and other professionals (UNICEF, 2021d), with further higher educational institutions training professionals in their departments of oligophrenopedagogy, speech therapy, defectology and deaf education (Hakimzoda et al., 2024). In **Georgia**, good practices have constituted the foundation of the National Center for Teachers Professional Development and the establishment of special education teacher degree programmes in the country since 2013, which have collectively contributed to ongoing training and equipping of necessary specialists in the field of inclusive education (UNICEF, 2021e; Bibileishvili et al., 2024). **Moldova** is another noteworthy case, where, in 2012, a course on inclusive education was added to university initial teacher training for all professionals; in addition, the Institute of Inclusive Education Sciences provided continuous professional development in inclusive education (Cojocararu et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2021f).

The need to use modern technologies, such as computers, software for adapting text, and audio and video materials, has been recognised by all the countries participating in the project. Access to technology and equipment can provide additional educational support for students with limited abilities. The development and use of specific teaching aids, including materials in raised print (e.g., Braille) and special audio and video materials, help ensure that learning is accessible to all students. For example, in **Kyrgyzstan**, in parallel with the use of textbooks written by Soviet defectologists intended for teaching deaf, hard-of-hearing and blind students, modern didactic materials have been developed, and new technologies have been introduced (e.g., smart boards, sound amplifiers, video enlargers, etc.) (Mambetova et al., 2024). Equipping educational institutions with adaptive educational literature intended for children with various forms of disabilities is a key aspect of educational and methodological support for inclusive education in **Tajikistan** (Hakimzoda et al., 2024). In addition, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL)—a method that facilitates and enhances inclusive education (Oliveira, Munster, & Goncalves, 2019; Wilson, 2017)—that has been applied in **Georgia** involves modifying and adapting the educational environment to meet the needs of all students (Bibileishvili et al., 2024). In Georgia, to provide appropriate conditions for the implementation of universal design, there is a plan “to build and renovate up to 800 schools in need by 2026 in accordance with modern standards [and] universal design requirements...” (Global Education Cooperation Mechanism, 2022)

In all countries, the creation of a mental health and pedagogical support system, including the work of psychologists, social

workers, speech therapists and other specialists, provides additional assistance for students with SEN. Country reports further highlight the importance of developing methodological resources and guidance for parents to support children’s learning at home. The experience of **Moldova** is noteworthy in its effort to develop a detailed system for introducing inclusive education in the country. This system is based on methodologies that help identify children with special education needs, create internal school commissions, assess the family educational environment, develop individual educational plans, support children and families in the process of inclusion and monitor and evaluate educational inclusion. In other words, this strategy envisions a **comprehensive change** in pedagogical practices and educational settings towards the implementation of inclusive education (Cojocararu et al., 2024).

In addition, the development of an **assessment and monitoring system** that considers the individual achievements of students and the effectiveness of inclusive education as a whole is key. **Georgia** has achieved the greatest success in this matter, having introduced periodic monitoring of the effectiveness of the selected strategies and methods for assessing student achievements with the possibility of adjusting some strategies or incorporating additional methods. An established online platform plays a significant role in Georgia’s approach to inclusive education, which provides extensive information on legislation, as well as access to resources, videos and other support materials to assist teachers, parents and teaching staff in implementing inclusive education (Bibileishvili et al., 2024).

A particularly important aspect of pedagogical and methodological support for teachers to facilitate inclusive education happens in **teacher training courses**: either as part of the formal education of future teachers or as part of the professional development of current teachers. Indeed, evidence suggests that “a coherent and well-articulated strategy for preservice teacher preparation for inclusion” must be reflected in teacher education or professional development opportunities for the successful implementation of inclusive education (Higuera-Rodríguez & Medina-García, 2020; Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2021). Each analysed country faces challenges and has a long road ahead in terms of improving its teacher training system.

Boxes 6 and 7 discuss the importance of inclusive education and present examples of such institutions implementing teacher training programmes. The Georgian case study depicts the role of a recently approved change in the formal education system aimed at instilling skills in inclusive education for future teachers. This is an imperative step, and its results will become evident in the years to come. The case of Uzbekistan highlights the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and NGOs.

Box 6. Inclusive Education in Georgia

“A representative of the Ministry of Education said that since 2019, the ministry began to work on a project on inclusive education in partnership with public organisations; ...improving the quality of inclusive education will enable people with disabilities to be competitive when hiring. More than 10,000 people with disabilities study at universities, but the quality of education for such students is still questionably, due to the knowledge of teachers in the field of inclusive education. In December 2021, a law was lobbied for and passed, making a module on inclusive education mandatory for all teachers. In 2022, the module was introduced into universities in subjects related to working with children with all types of disabilities. The emphasis of the programme is on preschool and school education, as well as on the development of special schools as resources for schools to work with blind children. It was also interesting to learn about the functional responsibilities of an educational assistant and a special teacher. ...

The work of [Tbilisi State University] in promoting inclusive education at the stage of primary education and training experts in the field of inclusive education [is noteworthy]. ... Personnel (subject teachers, special educators) are trained in the field of inclusive education and then work in schools with children with special educational needs. The primary school teacher training programme includes several subjects for children with special educational needs. ... The work is carried out in three directions:

1. Promoting social inclusion of people with disabilities by improving quality education in schools;
2. Creating a course for teachers who in turn will be able to teach such a course after a year of training;
3. Raising awareness among academic staff about students with disabilities” (*Excerpt from an unpublished report of a study visit to Georgia by Tajikistan’s delegation in the context of the KIX EMAP RCCS activity, 2023*).

Box 7. Inclusive Education in Uzbekistan—The Role of Universities

“At the [Chirchik Pedagogical University in Uzbekistan] there is an NGO ‘Center for Inclusive Education’. The center has branches in 8 regions. ... The center works towards rehabilitation of children, [and engages with the work of] the University at the academic level as well, [by allowing university] students undergo practical training directly working with children with special needs. ...The university has 25,000 students. The Faculty of Pedagogy trains educators of blind and low-vision students, speech therapists, defectologists, and teachers of the deaf, [and in general concerned with] training staff for inclusive schools. There are two specialisations: speech therapist and a primary school teacher (with 60 modules on speech therapy and 40 modules on primary school teachers). The state allocates quotas on a budgetary basis. ... ‘There are no boundaries to learning, and we are learning from the experience of other countries’, said the rector” (*Excerpt from an unpublished report of a study visit to Uzbekistan by Tajikistan’s delegation in the context of the KIX EMAP RCCS activity, 2023*).

Overall, the comparative analysis shows that, after countries have laid the legal foundations of inclusive education, implementation remains a challenge in most countries. Indeed, inclusive education is a political ideal that assumes a certain definition of the “purpose of education, the content of education and the organisation of education” (Magnússon et al., 2019, p. 70)—changes that must all be explicitly reflected in reforms pertaining to inclusive education. In terms of implementation, some of the best practices show that a concerted effort from a variety of actors is key—when civil society, nongovernmental organisations, international institutions and state bodies align with the principle of inclusive education, there are better results.

The analysis has also revealed that a comprehensive support system must be developed to assist teachers, parents and school staff in implementing inclusive education. These measures must include teacher training programmes (for both in-training and in-service teachers), methodological guides and investment in infrastructural upgrading. Undoubtedly, these forms of support necessitate the allocation of adequate funds from the government, which may be challenging for all the countries under investigation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Assessment of Inclusive Education

In summary, this comparative report has established that all five analysed countries have expressed their commitment to inclusive education. Thus far, these commitments have manifested in various legal steps that ensure the rights of people with limited abilities, particularly those of children, as well as a political turn that favours inclusive education. These positive developments have been noted by various international assessments; for example, the 2021 Global Education Monitoring Report reaches a similar conclusion, suggesting that the region of Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia “has made progress towards a rights-based approach to inclusive education” (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2021).

The same report aptly highlights one of the most important challenges that emerged in this comparative analysis as well: The implementation of inclusive education and dismantling of segregated education are still lagging behind. This report highlights the role of the international community—in both determining international standards and norms regarding inclusivity and encouraging a collective stance and principles to ensure that equal access to education is granted to all, particularly to children with limited abilities. Various examples have shown how pilot projects, small-scale grants, the exchange of knowledge and other initiatives between local communities and international donors have generated momentum for further improvements to take place. In short, the realisation of inclusive education requires comprehensive and systemic changes to the national education system, along with ongoing learning (Sailor, 2017). These changes should be implemented on multiple levels, including policymaking, awareness raising and professional training, hence necessitating a collaborative attitude towards inclusive education from all segments of society.

Some key findings at the country level are also worth highlighting. Inclusive education in **Moldova** has become the subject of attention and reform in recent years. According to previous reports and data, the country has implemented various models of inclusive education, such as full inclusion, partial inclusion and episodic inclusion, here depending on

the needs of students with disabilities. These models assume various forms of support, such as assistance to teachers, as well as the establishment of resource centres and multidisciplinary intraschool panels. The development of methodologies and standards for inclusive institutions within the general education system has also played an important role in improving the quality of inclusive education in the country. However, in terms of the implementation of inclusive practices, Moldova, like many other countries, faces challenges such as a lack of resources, inadequate teacher training and a lack of adapted educational materials (Cojocaru et al., 2024).

Inclusive education in **Kyrgyzstan** shows some positive trends; for example, Kyrgyz teachers have been trained in a variety of methods, including the Waldorf pedagogy and Montessori methods, demonstrating a commitment to teaching children with special needs. Notably, in Kyrgyzstan, the Index for Inclusion is also used to assess the organisation of an inclusive educational environment. This is undoubtedly a positive step, although it is important to regularly update monitoring techniques to track changes and improvements in the system. Further shortcomings stem from a lack of efforts to update educational and methodological support as well as to ensure appropriate financing and staff training. Despite commitments, many teachers are not well versed in the methods and technologies for teaching children with special educational needs, and some SEN students lack access to the assistance they require for their academic development; however, progress has also been noted (Mambetova et al., 2024).

Among the foremost improvements in **Tajikistan** is the legislative framework for inclusive education, which has laid the foundation for the further development of inclusive practices. Therefore, the introduction of inclusive education in general education institutions occurs in accordance with state standards. However, there is a need to increase funding to ensure the availability and quality of inclusive education in Tajikistan because financial constraints are globally one of the barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Grönlund et al., 2010). Important enablers of inclusive education in Tajikistan are international organisations (e.g., UNICEF) that significantly contribute to the implementation of

programmes to support and develop inclusive education. In general, inclusive education in Tajikistan is under development and requires additional efforts in the areas of financing, teacher training and creating an accessible environment for the education of children with disabilities. At this initial stage, it is important to introduce continuous monitoring and improve existing practices by considering the experiences of other countries (Hakim-zoda et al., 2024).

In recent decades, **Uzbekistan** has adopted laws and regulations aimed at ensuring the rights and social protection of people with disabilities, including laws regulating the education of children with SEN. The state has developed concepts and programmes for the development of the education system, including inclusive education, which indicates strategic attention and commitment to inclusion. There are still specialised educational institutions in Uzbekistan, including schools and boarding schools, focused on educating children with various types of disabilities. In addition, SEN students tend to face uneven access to inclusive education because some regions of the country (especially remote and rural areas) experience difficulties in implementing inclusive and high-quality education programmes (UNESCO, 2021a). There is still a need for methodological support for teachers in inclusive classes as well as assistance to schools with the necessary resources and modern technology for the effective implementation of inclusive education. The development of a monitoring system evaluating the results of inclusive education in the country could provide the necessary feedback for a more objective assessment of the effectiveness of inclusive programmes (Kenzhaev et al., 2024).

In **Georgia**, year after year, there has been a steady increase in the number of students with SEN in general education schools, hence demonstrating the gradual removal of stigma and a more open approach to the inclusion of children with different needs in the educational process (Bibileishvili et al., 2024). The role of the state in ensuring access to and exchange of information in the field of inclusive education is noteworthy and is evident based on the establishment of a multidisciplinary inclusive education team within the Ministry of Education and Science that aims to develop inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021b). In addition, it is necessary to note the significant support of donor organisations for inclusive education in Georgia. This financial support undoubtedly contributes to the development and strengthening of the inclusive education system. The country recognises the need to improve the skills and readiness of school personnel to work with SEN children; this, in fact, is the foremost barrier to successful inclusive practices worldwide (Grant & Jones-Goods, 2016).

Main Findings and Policy Recommendations

The recommendations presented in the current report were derived from a comparative analysis of national reports from Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Moldova (Bibileishvili et al., 2024; Cojocararu et al., 2024; Hakim-zoda et al., 2024; Kenzhaev et al., 2024; Mambetova et al., 2024). Each national report examined the specific challenges, legal frameworks and institutional capacities within these countries, focusing on the implementation of inclusive education. By assessing these country-specific contexts, the comparative analysis highlighted common issues such as gaps in monitoring systems; the need for greater cooperation with international organisations, NGOs and parents; and the importance of public awareness campaigns to foster societal acceptance of inclusive education and need for improved teacher training.

General Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establishing and Improving the Monitoring of Inclusive Education

The shift towards an inclusive educational approach has been ingrained in the principles of human rights and advocacy for social justice, demanding equal opportunities in education for everyone globally (Forlin, 2013). The growing acceptance of inclusive education signifies a positive societal shift, reflecting a collective recognition that diverse learning needs should not only be accommodated but also celebrated, fostering a richer and more equitable educational experience for all. The implementation of inclusive education, however, is impacted by numerous challenges, which, in developing countries, can manifest through institutional capacities, financial abilities, societal acceptance and other factors. It is imperative to establish accurate ways of monitoring progress in inclusive education that are aligned with international standards and practices.

Recommendation 2: Promotion and Scaling Up Cooperation with International Organisations and Local NGOS

Analysing the development of inclusive education practices in the five countries, we can conclude that, in each case, milestone achievements were made through collaborative projects that have set further changes in motion. In all the analysed countries, the extent of inclusivity within education towards youth with limited abilities is tied to the economic, legal and cultural development of the country. Typically, foreign donors or international organisations have piloted projects or implemented change, which then was scaled up with the support of state institutions and contributed to legal changes. NGOs are imperative in collaborating with state bodies, universities and other institutions, providing expertise and resources to improve inclusive education standards.

Recommendation 3: Support Awareness-Raising Campaigns and Dissemination of Information About Disability in General and the Value of Inclusive Education in Particular

In terms of cultural development, the level of inclusive values within society and the government are also important indicators. Societal values are shaped by the attitude of the government (manifested in legal changes as well as formal recognition accommodation of disabled youth in education) as well as awareness-raising campaigns, with the leading role coming from NGOs and international organisations. With a growing body of literature showing that inclusive learning environments benefit all students, including students without special needs (Roldán et al., 2021), this information must be widely disseminated to change societal acceptance and awareness.

Recommendation 4: Support The Revision and Restructuring of Teacher Training and Professional Development with a Focus on Inclusive Teaching

Appropriate teaching skills and training opportunities have been recognised as key in all the cases when it comes to the implementation of inclusive education. Along with teacher training, improved methodological support must be provided to educators to facilitate their work with SEN students. There is great potential in cross-national learning from best practices as well as in the evaluation of international practices for the purpose of adapting to the local context. For example, international experience suggests that it is desirable to infuse inclusive education content across the teacher curriculum for all instructors to be exposed to the necessary skills to teach SEN students (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010; Florian & Rouse, 2009) rather than in separate courses, as tends to be the case in the analysed countries, which reinforces a sense of separation.

Recommendation 5: Continue and Strengthen the Involvement of Parents and Representatives of Children with Special Education Needs in their Education

The involvement of parents and guardians in the development and evaluation of inclusive programmes suggests positive outcomes. Empirical evidence shows clear benefits of parental involvement when it comes to the academic success and psychoeducational development of students with special needs (Afolabi, 2014). Therefore, it is important to provide mechanisms for the regular exchange of views between parents and educational institutions to improve the mutual understanding and effectiveness of the system. In addition, parents must be supplied with additional educational resources and support to actively participate in their children's educational process.

Country-Specific Recommendations

Georgia (based on Bibileishvili et al., 2024)

1. Integration of courses on special and inclusive education into teacher training programmes and increasing the availability of support services:
 - The incorporation of relevant courses and training into university curricula must be assured in order for future teachers to acquire the necessary skills to work with students with SEN.
 - The availability of specialists, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists, in schools should be ensured to provide additional support to students with SEN. Currently, in many schools, especially those outside the capital, these specialists are lacking.
 - It is imperative to facilitate the exchange of experiences and dissemination of knowledge among teachers, seminars and workshops for representatives of resource schools to improve inclusive educational practice and promote the exchange of knowledge.
2. Improvements in monitoring and supervision processes as well as in raising awareness:
 - Subject teachers and special educators should be provided with access to consultations and training to increase their qualifications.
 - The internal monitoring system in schools should be enhanced, including regular external inspections and updates to teaching methodologies.
 - Information campaigns and seminars for teachers and parents should be organised to increase the understanding of inclusive education and the needs of students with SEN.
3. Increase in funding:
 - Sufficient funding should be allocated for inclusive education. Currently, funding for inclusive education in Georgia is insufficient.
 - The funding system should be adapted to consider the individual needs of students with SEN.
 - Funds should be allocated for the development of digital technologies in schools to support the learning of students with SEN.

Moldova (based on Cojocararu et al., 2024)

1. Extension of the inclusive education development programme:
 - A new inclusive education programme should be approved, outlining clear objectives, action plans, designation of responsible individuals and phased

monitoring of implementation.

- The programme should include specific measures to expand access to inclusive education for preschool-aged children.
2. Provision of support services for children with SEN and their parents:
 - Support services for children with various SEN, including psychological-pedagogical, speech therapy, social, medical and financial support should be developed and provided.
 - Services must be accessible and adequately staffed to meet the diverse needs of students.
 - A system should be developed for regular and clear communication with parents regarding changes in individual education plans and other aspects of inclusive education.
 - More active involvement of parents should be facilitated, especially to encourage their involvement in decision-making processes related to the education and support of SEN children.
 3. Training of teachers and staff and development of an appropriate assessment system:
 - Systematic training programmes for teachers and staff should be implemented to better prepare them for inclusive education.
 - Resources and support for teacher training should be made available to better adapt to the needs of diverse student groups.
 - Differentiated methods of assessment must be developed, taking into account the individual needs and characteristics of students.
 - Communication between teachers, students and parents should be more frequent and constructive to support the educational progress of students with SEN.
 4. Improving public awareness:
 - Informational campaigns should be conducted to raise public awareness and understanding of the principles and benefits of inclusive education.
 - A monitoring and evaluation system should be established to assess the effectiveness of informational campaigns and enhance their impact.

Kyrgyzstan (based on Mambetova et al., 2024)

1. Increasing financial support:
 - The education financing norms for children with SEN must be reviewed with consideration of inclusive education standards.
 - The opening of private special schools should may

be considered to alleviate the financial burden on the budget.

2. Improving professional development and teacher training:
 - No fewer than two additional positions for psychological-pedagogical support should be introduced per 750 students in schools. Tutor and assistant positions should be included in the staffing schedules of general educational institutions to support children with SEN.
 - A system of activities to prepare teachers for working in inclusive educational environments, including professional development courses and relevant courses in teacher training institutions, should be developed.
3. Assuring appropriate monitoring and feedback:
 - Regular monitoring programmes involving parents, teachers and students to assess the effectiveness of inclusive education should be conducted.
 - Sociopsychological parameters of the adaptability of students with SEN should be analysed to obtain more informative data for monitoring.
4. Prioritising international collaboration:
 - International collaboration with organisations such as UNICEF, USAID and the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation should continue for the exchange of experiences and technical support and to gain international expertise in the field of inclusive education.
 - The adaptation of international experiences regarding textbooks and teaching materials, including the use of modern (digital) technologies and new teaching methods for children with SEN, should be considered.

Uzbekistan (based on Kenzhaev et al., 2024)

1. Assuring methodological and other forms of support:
 - Individualised and differentiated methodological approaches for teachers should be developed, providing them with the necessary tools to work with children with SEN.
 - More detailed methodological guides for teachers working with SEN students should be created and disseminated, preferably by considering international experience in this regard.
 - Schools should be provided with necessary resources, including modern equipment (e.g., computers, electronic boards), for more effective teaching. Currently, the number of fully equipped schools outside the capital is low.
 - Regular updating of materials and technical

resources (e.g., school laboratories) is necessary to support modern approaches in inclusive education.

2. Organise professional training opportunities and provide financial support:
 - The competency of teachers in inclusive classrooms should be enhanced through systematic training, courses and seminars focused on individualised learning.
 - Inclusive education components should be integrated into teacher training programmes at pedagogical universities.
 - Incentive payments and bonus programmes should be implemented for teachers actively working in the field of inclusive education.
3. Investment in advocacy and public participation:
 - Information campaigns should be strengthened to increase public awareness of the benefits and importance of inclusive education.
 - Events and campaigns involving the public should be carried out to create a positive perception of inclusive education.
 - The experiences of other countries should be considered, where inclusive education campaigns were successfully implemented, in order to adapt best practices to the conditions of Uzbekistan.

Tajikistan (based on Hakim-zoda et al., 2024)

1. Assuring adequate resources:
 - Funding should be increased to ensure sufficient resources for inclusive education programmes. Currently, insufficient funding is one of the most significant challenges in inclusive education in the Republic.
 - The availability of appropriate equipment and infrastructure in educational institutions for the education of children with SEN should be ensured, with a special focus on modern equipment (i.e., electronic boards, tablets) for more effective and differentiated learning.
2. Provide training and support for pedagogical staff:
 - Training and education for teachers on inclusive education issues, including training in methods of working with children with various types of SEN, should be organised.
 - Adaptive programmes and methodological guides for teachers that are tailored to different types of educational needs should be developed and implemented.
3. Investment in infrastructure improvement and increased accessibility:

- A comprehensive reconstruction and adaptation of educational institutions should be conducted to ensure the accessibility of educational spaces for all children.
 - Schools should be equipped with ramps to provide a barrier-free environment.
 - New educational institutions should consider the principles of accessible environments for children with disabilities.
4. Enhance parental and community involvement:
- The parents of children with SEN should be actively involved in the educational process and decision-making regarding inclusive education.
 - Informational campaigns among parents and the community should be conducted to increase awareness and support the principles of inclusive education.
 - A system of psychological and pedagogical support for students with SEN and their parents, including tutoring and mentoring support, should be developed.
5. Strengthening collaboration with international organisations:
- Cooperation with international organisations for the exchange of experiences and support in implementing inclusive education programmes should be strengthened.
 - International experience in developing monitoring systems and evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive programs to improve the quality of services provided should be analysed.

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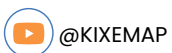
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