

The Effectiveness of Foreign Aid in the Sphere of Media and Information Literacy in Central Asian Countries

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of foreign aid on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in Central Asian countries. Through a comprehensive analysis of aid programs and their outcomes, the study assesses the effectiveness of interventions aimed at enhancing MIL in the region. Findings reveal the nuances of foreign aid's influence on media literacy education, shedding light on both successful strategies and challenges faced in promoting information literacy in Central Asia. Classification of the main foreign donors in the field of MIL is carried out within the research. The effectiveness of foreign aid in the development of the MIL, the role and importance of the MIL sector in the development of countries in the conditions of today's information society are discussed as examples of the experience of several countries in the Central Asian region, particularly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The research contributes to the understanding of how external support can shape media education initiatives, offering valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners in the field. Based on the author's observations and research of various resources, suggestions, and recommendations were given to further improve the effectiveness of foreign aid.

Keywords

Media and Information Literacy (MIL), Foreign Aid, Donors, Projects, Grants, Achievements of Foreign Aid, Failures

1. Introduction

Media and information literacy are becoming an important part of general education at a time when our daily lives are directly in the environment of information technologies. However, this is a type of education that should be learned by

all ages.

In an era defined by the rapid proliferation of information and communication technologies, media and information literacy (MIL) has emerged as a critical skill set for individuals and societies alike. Central Asian countries, situated at the crossroads of geopolitical and cultural influences, have undergone significant transformations in their media landscapes. Foreign aid has played a pivotal role in shaping MIL initiatives in this region. This scientific article delves into the intricate web of achievements and failures associated with foreign aid in the development of media and information literacy within Central Asia. By examining the impact, challenges, and opportunities brought about by international support, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role foreign aid plays in fostering media literacy in a region at the intersection of diverse global dynamics.

1.1. Literature Review

The issues of media education and the development of media literacy in Central Asian countries have been researched by various authors. The research results were published in the form of various articles, manuals, books and textbooks in Russian, partially in English and local languages.

In carrying out this research, it was necessary to work with the literature in two directions:

- 1) Foreign aid, in particular, literature on foreign aid in the field of MIL;
- 2) The development of the military industry in the countries of Central Asia and the role of foreign aid in it.

There is a lot of literature on foreign donor assistance in the field of education and MIL. Especially in this regard, a lot of experience has been accumulated in the territory of the European Union. “Public Policies in Media and Information Literacy in Europe Cross-Country: Comparisons” (Edited by Divina Frau-Meigs, Irma Vélez and Julieta Flores Michel) includes experience and research results in this field on the European continent.

Several studies highlight how foreign aid fails (Prokopijevic, 2006; Leeson, 2008; Williamson, 2009). Although these studies mostly discuss the economic aid provided to developed countries up to that time, their ideas played an important role in researching the effectiveness of foreign aid in the field of MIL.

In the book named “Mass Media Education in Commonwealth of Independent States” (Fedorov et al., 2020: 273 p). The scientific and practical development of media education in the countries of Central Asia has also been widely discussed.

In addition, the group of authors led by A. Fedorov published their research in the form of various articles. For example, in the article “Mass Media Education in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)” the authors address the goals, objectives and concepts of the project on mass media education in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The purpose of the study: a comparative analysis of the development of media education in the CIS (1992-2020)

at each stage (including theoretical concepts, goals and objectives, role, place, functions, and organizational forms of media education in mainstream education). The object of the study is media education in the countries of the CIS (Fedorov & Levitskaya, 2018).

In Kazakhstan, a scientific group of Akhmetova et al. (Akhmetova et al., 2013) published collective monograph “Media Education in Kazakhstan”.

In 2015 the group of authors published a book named “Media Education and Media Literacy: theory, methodology, practice” (Akhmetova et al., 2015b) and it was highly appreciated by UNESCO. The second book “Media and Information Literacy” (Akhmetova et al., 2015a) published for the first time in Kazakhstan in the form of comics on media and information literacy has been prepared by request of UNESCO in the Kazakh and Russian languages (Akhmetova, 2016: p. 1755).

The process of mass media education in Kazakhstan began with a scientific group led by L.S. Akhmetova, and became quickly equipped with an analysis of foreign media education theories (Akhmetova et al., 2017).

Having received a grant from the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan on the topic “Formation of media and information literacy among the youth in the context of national security and the implementation of the State Program “Information Kazakhstan - 2020”, the research team led by L. S. Akhmetova published another work - “Media and information literacy: conceptual and methodological foundations” (2017), which took into account the current recommendations of UNESCO (Fedorov et al., 2020: 273 p.).

In 2018, with the support of the British Embassy in Kazakhstan and the British Embassy in Kyrgyzstan, as part of the activities of IREX Europe, a series of study guides in Russian was published: “Media Literacy: A Practical Study Guide for Higher Educational Institutions on Media and Information Literacy” (Shturkhetsky, 2018).

The article of I. Chelysheva “Media Literacy Education in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan” is devoted to the development and current state of media literacy education in a number of Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan). The author analyzed the goals and objectives, key concepts, structure, content, main stages of development, models of mass media education in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, scientific works and practical experience in the field of media literacy education in the countries of Central Asia in the post-soviet period (Chelysheva, 2019).

In 2018, a textbook for teachers on media and information literacy was published in Kyrgyzstan (Imankulov et al., 2018), which will be a significant help in developing the media competence of both teachers and their students.

When it comes to theoretical and methodological literature in the field of MIL in Kyrgyzstan, Russian, English, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik and it is necessary to talk about the books and manuals in the Uzbek language directly related to the field of MIL.

Within the framework of the project “MediaSabak: Development of media

and information literacy in the school system of the Kyrgyz Republic”, a resource book on MIL for teachers” was developed, tested and recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic (Mediasabak, 2019). The book was published and distributed to all schools in the Kyrgyz Republic. Also, the Foundation has developed a multilingual (Russian, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Kazakh) learning portal www.mediasabak.org, which consists of animation and video lessons, practical exercises, tests and literature on MIL. The training site is constantly updated with MIL content.

The collection “Media and Information Literacy in a Digital World: How to Teach Teachers” presents articles and descriptions of practical activities that reflect the issues of discussions within the framework of the international project “Media and Information Literacy in a Digital World: How to Teach Teachers”, as well as recommendations developed on their basis. The project was initiated by the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education and the UNESCO Information for All Program and implemented in 2020 in partnership with the Eurasian Association of Pedagogical Universities with financial support from the Program. More than 1300 representatives of the education sector from nine countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States—Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan took part in the project events (Cherny & Murovana, 2021: p. 5).

Media education in Uzbekistan has long been in a phase of protracted development.

One of the Uzbek scholars S. S. Beknazarova (Beknazarova, 2013) “Theory and Applied Methods of developing models and software complex of the media education system” published a number of articles while writing her doctoral dissertation. She promotes the idea of developing the field of media education in the educational system of Uzbekistan in her article about comparative analysis of the implementation of elements of media education in the educational process (Beknazarova, 2011).

Another scholar Ablazov (Ablazov, 2013) in his article “Media culture and media education in ensuring the modernization of the higher education system in Uzbekistan” tries to reveal the role of media education in the development of the higher education system in the country.

The textbook “Uzbekistan on the path of developing media education” (Mamatova & Sulaymanova, 2015) contained a brief retelling of the adapted UNESCO recommendations on the development of media and information literacy, and it was already quite good.

K. Ismailova notes that “in Uzbekistan, the state of media education today can be characterized as being in its infancy. There is no concept of a national model for the development of media education, there is no unified system of media pedagogy. Media education projects are more manifested in non-formal education (training courses of non-state educational institutions, advanced training courses, etc.). There are not enough specialists who can effectively teach media literacy” (Ismailova, 2016: p. 124).

The author N. Gendina (Gendina, 2017) talks about MIL projects in Uzbekistan in the article “UNESCO Curriculum on Media and Information Literacy for Teachers as an Object of Analysis and Adaptation in Russia and Uzbekistan”.

The book by N. Muratova, E. Grizzle, D. Mirzakhmedova “Media and information literacy in journalism” (Muratova et al., 2019) became the main guide for journalism faculties.

In “Instructional manual on media literacy for teachers of higher education institutions of Uzbekistan” (Sulaymanova & Osmanova, 2021) presented in the format of a modular educational and methodological complex. The uniqueness of this work lies in the fact that the training materials are based on domestic media practice.

The manual also accumulates the practical experience of foreign researchers and media educators. It can be useful for university teachers, masters, doctoral students and scientific applicants, practicing journalists, employees of cultural centers, and spiritual and educational associations.

One of the important aspects of this manual for this research is that it provides an in-depth analysis of media literacy, and in module 16, training as the main method of teaching media literacy and the main stages of preparation for training were also analyzed.

In Central Asian countries, various specialists are conducting scientific research, surveys, and publishing scientific articles, reports, manuals and textbooks in the field of MIL and its development. However, our article differs from other studies and books in that it examines the stability and effectiveness of international donor organizations, their projects and grants in the field of MIL. The article analyzes for the first time the types of foreign assistance in the field of MIL in the region, their achievements and shortcomings. Necessary conclusions and recommendations are presented within the topic.

1.2. Research Methodology

Aim of the research: to identify and analyze foreign aid in the sphere of MIL in the case of Central Asian countries, its effectiveness, and its failures.

Objectives of the Research:

- 1) To identify and classify the types of foreign aid and main donors in the sphere of MIL in the case of Central Asian countries.
- 2) To clarify the resources and services transferring In MIL projects.
- 3) To analyze the expected goal of foreign aid and its achievements and failures in the development of MIL in CA countries.
- 4) To develop recommendations on how to increase the level of media literacy among different groups of the population considering the activities of foreign donors.

Research questions:

- 1) Why foreign aid in the sphere of MIL is important to CA countries?
- 2) Who are the main donors to CA countries in the field of MIL?
- 3) What were the expected goals and achievements of foreign aid projects?

4) What were the main failures of foreign aid?

5) What should be the performance of recipient countries in supplying sustainability of foreign aid?

Materials and data collection method. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection have been applied:

- In-depth interviews with MIL trainers, media experts, and researchers. During the qualitative study, several approaches have been used, including the “snowball” method and participant observation.
- case studies in media literacy projects, grants, and training courses in the context of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.
- content analysis of the data on the websites of donor companies and organizations.

Active processes contributing to the development of mass media education have begun in recent years in Kyrgyzstan, where “the existing activities to increase the level of media literacy as a skill and the development of media literacy as a science are in their infancy” (Report, 2018: p. 94). These conclusions were drawn based on the results of a study assessing the level of media literacy of the population (over 16 years old) in the Kyrgyz Republic. In the “Report on the results of the study of the level of media literacy in the Kyrgyz Republic” (a study to assess the level of media literacy of the population over 16 years old in the Kyrgyz Republic was conducted from September 1 to November 30, 2017; 1200 urban and rural respondents from seven regions were interviewed) (Report, 2018: p. 11) says that in Kyrgyzstan “the topic of media literacy is relevant and problematic. The existing activities to increase the level of media literacy as a skill and the development of media literacy as a science are in their infancy” (Report, 2018: p. 94).

In 2021, Internews Kazakhstan, one of the donor organizations actively promoting the field of MIL in Central Asia, in cooperation with USAID and “Vektor” Research and Consulting organization conducted “*Sociological Research on the Study of Media Consumption and Media Information Literacy in Central Asian Countries: Kazakhstan Tajikistan, Uzbekistan*” and announced the results. This study is a continuation of a similar survey conducted in 2019 and serves to determine the effectiveness of MIL projects, grants and training implemented in the past two years (INTERNEWS, 2021b).

The Center for the Development of Modern Journalism in Uzbekistan conducted a sociological study on the topic: “The state of media literacy of the staff of the Ministry of Education, secondary school teachers and high school students in Tashkent and Tashkent region” (Sociological Study in Uzbekistan, 2021).

Through this survey, based on the local conditions of Uzbekistan, media consumption and media usage of teachers and young people were studied. Based on the obtained results, useful conclusions and suggestions were made for improving media education and media literacy in the country.

The researched materials show that researchers began to pay attention to the issues of media education and media literacy in the countries of Central Asia in the middle of 2010, despite the fact that international donor organizations have been continuously and actively allocating projects and grants since 2015, the level of media literacy of the country's population has increased. Indicators are not high compared to the global level.

2. Analyses and Results

2.1. Why Foreign Aid in the Sphere of MIL Is Important to CA Countries?

Media and information literacy have become essential skills for people all over the world (Braesel & Karg, 2021: p. 6). Media and information literacy in the modern world is a set of skills, and abilities that allow users to analyze media messages broadcast through the media and the Internet, the ability to critically approach the received data and perceived information (Khanina et al., 2021: p. 111).

Media and information literacy is an interrelated set of competencies that help people to maximize advantages and minimize harm in the new information, digital and communication landscapes. Media and information literacy cover competencies that enable people to search, access, critically evaluate, use and contribute information and media content wisely; knowledge of one's rights online; understanding how to combat online hate speech and cyberbullying; understanding of the ethical issues surrounding the access and use of information; and engage with media and ICTs to promote equality, free expression, intercultural dialogue and interreligious dialogue, and peace. Capacities in these areas are indispensable for all citizens regardless of their ages or backgrounds (UNESCO, 2022: p.4).

Central Asian countries have become sovereign independent states since the 1990s. But until today, mass media channels with a strong ideology could not be formed in them. Even today, the majority of the population is not free from the influence of Russian mass media channels and the Russian information space.

The field of media and information literacy not only teaches people to filter media information and think critically but also teaches them to protect themselves and their loved ones with electronic financial resources and various Internet and social networking systems that are important today. On a broader scale, the field of military intelligence plays a fundamental role in the stabilization of democratic principles in the country, and in the further strengthening of freedom of opinion and speech.

The UN General Assembly calls upon all Member States and other stakeholders "to develop and implement policies, action plans and strategies related to the promotion of media and information literacy, and to increase awareness, capacity for prevention and resilience to disinformation and misinformation, as appropriate". (Resolution: Global Media and Information Literacy Week—UNESCO,

2021: p. vi).

Media and information literacy empower people to think critically about information and use digital tools. It helps people make informed choices about how they participate in peacebuilding, equality, freedom of expression, dialogue, access to information, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021: p. 6).

Moreover, surveys and studies conducted until this period show that the MIL level of the population in the region is not high.

The conclusion of the survey of “*Sociological Research on the Study of Media Consumption and Media Information Literacy in Central Asian Countries: Kazakhstan Tajikistan, Uzbekistan*”: Among the countries studied, the average value of the integral index of Kazakhstan (16.8) can be attributed to the average level of media literacy, Uzbekistan—on the border between low and medium (12.2), the value of Tajikistan—low (11.5).

The following table (Table 1) shows the average values of the integral index of media literacy of citizens in three Central Asian countries during 2019 and 2021.

This situation shows the need to re-analyze the level of efficiency and sustainability of MIL projects implemented by donors and local organizations in Central Asian countries, and to make recommendations for the development of the sector based on the existing experiences and results.

While doing this research, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 media trainers and experts with experience in the field of MIL from Central Asia, in particular, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. During the interview process, experts defined the field of MIL in different ways. For example, professor Ismailova Klimentina Fuzailovna defines: “*MIL is a set of competencies necessary for a person to navigate the media space, be able to evaluate information, and work with it*”, one of the experts with many years of experience Islamova Lola describes the field as follows: “*MIL is a set of knowledge and skills for analyzing the critical perception of information in the media space*”.

Associate professor Nishanova Gulnora Usmanovna tries to give a comprehensive definition of the field of MIL: “*Media information literacy means being literate in communication with the media, sorting information, identifying fake news, resisting them, protecting him/herself from the effects of psychological attacks, not using hostile language, knowing ethical communication methods, knowing the norms of using social networks, and being literate in many media-related issues*”.

Based on the definitions given by Central Asian experts in the field of MIL in in-depth interviews, it is possible to draw such a conclusion, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) encompasses several key features essential for individuals to navigate today’s information landscape effectively. These key features are summarized in the table below (Table 2).

These features collectively empower individuals to be informed, critical, and responsible consumers and creators of media and information in our interconnected world.

Table 1. Average values of the integral index of media literacy.

| Year | Kazakhstan | Tajikistan | Uzbekistan | Max |
|------|------------|------------|------------|-----|
| 2019 | 14.6 | 11.9 | 11.3 | 35 |
| 2021 | 16.8 | 11.5 | 12.2 | 35 |

(Source: INTERNEWS_Media_consumption_Media_literacy_-KAZAKHSTAN_2021.pdf P. 88 // <https://prevention.kg/?p=12875>)

Table 2. Main key features of media and information literacy.

| # | Key features | Definitions |
|----|--------------------------|---|
| 1. | Critical Thinking | MIL involves the ability to critically analyse and evaluate media content, recognizing bias, misinformation, and propaganda |
| 2. | Information Retrieval | Proficiency in finding and accessing information from various sources, including digital and traditional media, is crucial for MIL. |
| 3. | Communication Skills | Effective communication, both online and offline, is emphasized in MIL, enabling individuals to express themselves clearly and responsibly |
| 4. | Digital Literacy | Understanding digital tools, technologies, and platforms is fundamental for MIL, enabling individuals to engage with digital information and media |
| 5. | Ethical Awareness | MIL emphasizes ethical considerations in media consumption and production, fostering an awareness of responsible information sharing and media use. |
| 6. | Privacy and Security | Awareness of online privacy, data protection, and cybersecurity are integral components of MIL in the digital age |
| 7. | Media Production Skills | MIL extends to the creation of media content, promoting the development of skills to produce and share information responsibly |
| 8. | Adaptability | Given the evolving nature of media and technology, MIL involves the ability to adapt to new platforms and information sources |
| 9. | Media Literacy Education | Formal and informal education initiatives play a crucial role in MIL, providing structured learning experiences to enhance media and information literacy skills. |

(Source: Own creation.)

2.2. Classification of Foreign Aid Donors in Central Asia

There are several foreign aids to Central Asia from developed countries in various fields. The main donor countries are the United States, some European countries such as Germany, UK etc. The main international organizations are UNESCO, USAID, the European Union, and Deutsche Welle Academy.

Various projects and grants in the field of MIL have been awarded mainly to the Central Asian region by the following donor organizations.

UNESCO. UNESCO supports the development of media and information literacy for all to enable people's ability to think critically and click wisely. The Organization particularly strives to enhance the capacities of policymakers, educators, information and media professionals, youth organizations, and disadvantaged populations in this area, assisting Member States in formulating national media and information literacy policies and strategies (UNESCO, 2023).

The international project “Media and Information Literacy in the Digital World: How to Teach Teachers” was initiated by the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education and the UNESCO Information for All Program and implemented in 2020 in partnership with the Eurasian Association of Pedagogical Universities with the financial support of the Program. More than 1300 representatives of the education sector from nine countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States—Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—took part in the project’s activities.

The project “Implementation of UNESCO international standards of journalism in the context of strategic priorities of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan” aimed to analyze the state of media in Kazakhstan based on a system of international indicators, develop recommendations and suggestions for further implementation in the Republic of Kazakhstan of international standards in the field of journalism, freedom of expression, legal regulation of media, information security of individuals and society, etc.

However, the project “Formation of information culture and media literacy of specialists of information and library institutions in Uzbekistan during the period of deepening reforms in the information and library sphere” was implemented during 2015-2017 years, by the initiative of the UNESCO Office in Uzbekistan and the National Library of Uzbekistan named after A. Navoi. The goal of the project is to train specialists of information and library institutions of Uzbekistan in the methodology of promoting the ideas of UNESCO and IFLA on media and information literacy through the training course “Basics of the information culture of the schoolchildren”, as well as training in ways to adapt these educational materials in order to facilitate their perception by schoolchildren in Uzbekistan” (Gendina, 2017: p. 37). As a result, the authors of the project prepared a number of useful recommendations for the development of media and information literacy in Uzbekistan: first, “compare the UNESCO curriculum with the existing national curricula on information literacy and/or media literacy in order to determine the composition of the missing information and/or media components. Then the missing component (media or information) should be added, thereby ensuring a balance between media and information competencies. Next, you need to analyze the definitions borrowed from the UNESCO curriculum for compliance with the terms and concepts accepted in the given country and, if necessary, supplement the glossary. In addition, it is necessary to analyze the information and media resources recommended in the UNESCO curriculum, select and replace them with appropriate national information and media resources, and then compile a list of literature in the national language (languages). After that, it is required to analyze the educational text using ethno-markers and replace the identified precedent phenomena with analogues that correspond to the realities of the country (geographical, literary, folklore and historical objects, political associations and organizations, laws, etc.)” (Gendina, 2017: p. 41).

In recent years, Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) have maintained close ties in the field of media education with the Media Development Fund (Moscow), UNESCO, MediaNet (Almaty), and IREX Europe organizations, and have actively cooperated with the Association of Librarians in the field of media literacy development (Chelysheva, 2019: p. 7).

- 1) The media shape the political and cultural dynamics of Information society.
- 2) The media shape values and influence behavioral patterns of the population.
- 3) The media play a substantial role in modern society, influencing how information is perceived and understood.
- 4) The evolution of media necessitates engagement from the audience, involving both passive consumption and active participation.

These studies highlight key reasons for imparting media literacy to the broader population in Central Asian region. Notably, fostering media and information literacy education for the youth is crucial due to the media's role in shaping political and cultural life, influencing values and behavior, exerting a substantial impact on society, and necessitating active engagement from the audience in addition to passive consumption.

In recent years, with UNESCO's support, several large-scale media literacy projects have been implemented, including surveys and the development of methodological tools. These projects address the theory, methodology and practical use of media resources in the educational activities of the younger generation (Chelysheva, 2019: p. 7).

ERIM—Equal Rights and Independent Media (previously named IREX Europe). One of the main donors' was IREX Europe and this organization works in Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Uzbekistan and in 6 European countries to promote media literacy.

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ERIM works to empower citizens to engage critically with what they watch, hear and read – increasing their resistance to fake news and helping them access accurate and objective information. We seek to institutionalise Media and Information Literacy (MIL) wherever we work, building a cadre of trained educators and supporting organisations to promote MIL education in the long term (ERIM Annual Report, 2020: p. 6).

In general, the modern development of media literacy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is supervised by Western organizations IREX Europe and Albany Associates (Fedorov et al., 2020: p. 30).

The IREX Europe project in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, launched in 2017, aimed to increase the capacity of people

in these countries to recognize false reports and misinformation, to make informed decisions and to promote understanding of the role and responsibility of the media in a democratic society (Shturkhetsky, 2018: 3).

The main lever for the development of media education in Kyrgyzstan is the non-profit Media Support Center Foundation, established in 2002. The first media and information literacy development project in Kyrgyzstan was launched by the Foundation in 2012 in partnership with IREX Europe and the Deutsche Welle Academy. Through the efforts of the Media Support Center Foundation in Kyrgyzstan, 25 schools have already pilot-tested media literacy lessons developed by the Foundation jointly with the Ministry of Education and Science of Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz Academy of Education. In Kyrgyzstan, such an “experiment is being conducted for the first time. The project has already reached about three hundred children in and around Bishkek. ... The first thing the course teachers teach children is not to take any information for granted. Regardless of where it appeared, everything needs to be checked against other sources. Those who attended the course say that even ordinary news releases are now viewed differently” (Begalieva, 2017).

USAID. Since the 1990s, USAID has played a critical role in supporting the development of independent media in Central Asia through building basic technical and professional capacity and helping media leaders obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in their countries’ governance systems and policy development processes.

Throughout the last two decades, USAID made significant efforts to support the media sector as broadly as possible.

The USAID-funded Central Asia Media Program, implemented by Internews, aims to develop a more balanced information environment in Central Asia to increase openness among young people and adults to various ideas, opinions, and perspectives, and in turn, increase their engagement in civic participation. Operating since October 2018, the Central Asian media program MediaCAMP 19 (Central Asian Media Program), along with a number of other tasks, is aimed at improving the media and information literacy of young people and adults, at increasing the number of literate consumers and providers of information in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

USAID is the world’s premier international development agency and a catalytic actor driving development results.

The program is aimed at developing a balanced information environment in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This, in turn, should educate the audiences of these countries in an openness to the exchange of ideas, different opinions and points of view and increase the number of citizens actively participating in society.

One of the main directions (tasks) of this program is to increase media and information literacy among young people and adults and increase the number of discerning consumers and providers of information.

The number of participants of this program is increasing year by year. The program helped to increase the number of media trainers in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan and to implement a number of training courses and projects in the field of media information literacy. According to the website of US Embassy Kazakhstan, on June 9-10, 2022 in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Central Asia Media Program an International Media Literacy Conference in Almaty gathered 60 media literacy experts from Central Asia and beyond to promote media and information literacy in the region. In Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan many innovative projects are being implemented to support the spread of media and information literacy: board and mobile games, theater plays, comics, and so on. However, the vast majority of those initiatives are carried out by non-governmental and civil society organizations. Countries of the region can benefit from national strategies for developing media literacy that include all stakeholders. The goal of the conference is to develop a conceptual framework and recommendations for designing those strategies based on local and international experience ([U.S. Mission Kazakhstan, 2022](#)).

Participants discussed trends in promoting media literacy, such as interdisciplinary approach, gamification, mobile technologies and engaging with performing arts. Another important theme of the conference was society's resilience to disinformation in times of crisis. Several sessions have been dedicated to the specific challenges Central Asia is currently facing in this regard and the ways to address them.

Deutsche Welle Akademie. (The projects are funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)).

DW-Akademie is a strategic partner of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. This organization also receives funding from the Federal Foreign Office and the European Union and is active in approximately 50 developing countries and emerging economies, as well as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

People in Uzbekistan are thus to be supported in accessing participatory and balanced informational opportunities. This is being done with the support of Kyrgyz project sponsors, who bring experience in developing community media and strengthening media competence (media and information literacy) to the project strategy. In addition, the Kyrgyz project sponsor, the Association of Community Media (ACM), supports the Uzbek partners in establishing community media in remote towns in the Uzbek Republic of Karakalpakstan, as well as training citizen journalists there (media and journalism education, media viability). Politically committed individuals, so-called change agents, as well as children and young people, are also given the opportunity to get involved and improve their media skills ([DW Akademie, 2022](#)).

Uzbekistan is a new focus country for the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The ministry is also supporting

other projects in this Central Asian republic. In addition to providing facilities and teacher training at UJMC, DW-Akademie is in partnership with the local Uzbek organization Modern Journalism Development Centre. This organisation is working on creating new media training programs and establishing three community media hubs in the country.

DW Akademie's focus in Central Asia is on strengthening community media, facilitating Media and Informational Literacy (MIL) skills among youth and offering capacity-building in media management and journalism (Bodine, 2022).

DW Akademie's projects in Uzbekistan are supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

During the research, we found some other donors in this sphere. Such as the United Kingdom Conflict, Security and Stability Fund, organized several projects on "Media & information literacy" in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan from April 2018 to January 2019.

2.3. Expected Goals and Achievements of Foreign Aid Projects

According to the "Central Asia Media Program Fact Sheet" The USAID-funded Central Asia Media Program aims to develop a more balanced information environment in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to increase openness among youth and adults for differing ideas, opinions, and perspectives and in turn increase their engagement in civic participation.

One of the main goals of this program is increasing "media and information literacy among youth and adults so they become more critical consumers and producers of information". Others also connected with MIL in some level by improving the media's capacity to provide balanced, informed, and unbiased reporting on key policy and public interest issues etc.

The Central Asia Media Program's direct support for local partners in years 1 - 2 included major events that served as educational and networking platforms for hundreds of media practitioners, CSO representatives, journalism teachers, media literacy educators, trainers, and civic activists, including Regional Media Literacy Eduthons, Inclusive Content and Business Labs, and the annual region-wide Central Asian Media Festival and Journalism Award.

The "Promoting media plurality, balance and media literacy in Central Asia" project aimed at increasing the resilience of the Central Asian population to external false news and disinformation.

Together with our partners, we provided Media and Information Literacy training trainers to different types of educators, including high school teachers, university professors and librarians, alongside developing teaching manuals for them to use in their classes.

Together with DW Akademie, and with funding from Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the foundation produced ten informative and entertaining videos in Russian and the Kyrgyz language. The videos focused on fake news, disinformation and cyber-mobbing

and were aired on the country's public broadcaster, KTRK, and its news channel Ala-Too 24, Kyrgyzstan's two most viewed TV channels (Rahnert & Oganjanyan, 2021).

Influencing for MIL

To reach as many people as possible and to raise awareness about the campaign, the foundation brought in two well-known local Instagram personalities: Bektur Usenov and Nursultan Kursanali Uulu. Although both had appeared in front of the camera before, neither had ever starred in an MIL video.

In one video, Nursultan played a father who had received information about "the rising US dollar," "helicopters spraying poison," and "the dangers of 5G." He then shared the information on WhatsApp groups without checking it first. While it's an entertaining scenario, it's also one that is familiar to viewers, many of whom have relatives who uncritically spread information, believing that everything they see or read is true. But few are aware of the consequences of passing on false information.

Many social media users liked the videos and shared them with their parents and relatives. Some videos had up to 500,000 views on social media platforms. Aichurek Usupbaeva, program director at the Media Support Center Foundation, said this showed it was an effective approach.

"The videos have helped people to see and understand the problem, and to question how they usually react themselves," she explained. Above all, she added, they have become critical of the information they receive.

Achievements of ERIM organization:

- 559 educators took part in Media Literacy training of trainers workshops across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (103 university professors, 322 school teachers and 134 librarians).
- Media and Information Literacy teaching manuals were developed for schools, universities and librarians and are available in Russian, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Tajik.
- In Kyrgyzstan our schools curriculum was accepted by the Ministry of Education and is now taught in schools across the country
- The online tool Media Sabak is available in Russian, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Tajik and Uzbek (ERIM NGO, 2019).

There are nine effects and results of the USAID-funded Central Asia Media Program. Two of them are directly related to the development of media literacy.

- The program will develop media literacy so that citizens can evaluate information critically and correctly. To this end, it is planned to launch a website that will host educational materials, where it will be possible to share the best practices of local media literacy partners and post comments on the content of the Central Asian media. In addition, CAMP intends to promote professionalism in media institutions by selecting and training independent ethics monitors in each of the three countries. They will be trained annually to learn monitoring strategies, develop uniform standards for the quality of media work, and get inspiration that they can share with colleagues.

- CAMP plans to develop universal media literacy in the region by distributing university-level educational materials developed under the Access to Information project, translating them for users in Uzbekistan and adapting them for secondary and primary schools in the region. Annual training of trainers, grants and mentoring will help expand local pools of qualified trainers and increase the number of training sessions. In order for society to realize the importance of media literacy and strive for it, CAMP will hold major regional conferences on this topic, attracting international experts to participate in them. CAMP will also annually conduct audience surveys in each of the three countries to study their preferences, information consumption habits, degree of trust in the media, and literacy levels.
- The program will involve citizens in the production of news and information materials, thus stimulating the development of citizen journalism. Internews and local partners will encourage media experimentation with new models of community engagement and collaboration with CAMP. The Audience Engagement Fund will provide small grants to help local media promote these initiatives (INTERNEWS, 2021a).

Regional consultant on media literacy of the MediaCAMP Program of the Representative Office of Internews in Kazakhstan, Candidate of Philosophy, Associate Professor G.Asanbayeva writes about the results, of MediaCAMP program of Internews, achieved since 2018:

Internews has been working on improving the media literacy of residents of Central Asian countries for the third year as part of the MediaCAMP program. It is already noticeable that the work is not in vain: the participants of the training courses are eager to study the topic in depth and become fact-checkers. In schools, 29 universities in Kazakhstan and 8 universities in Tajikistan, media literacy has been introduced as an independent discipline or a module integrated into other social and humanitarian disciplines (Asanbaeva, 2021: p. 31).

According to L. Akhmetova, the results of different projects of UNESCO were as follows:

- educational and methodical materials according to the international standards will be developed;
- the condition of a problem in Kazakhstan in the theory and practice will be studied;
- informing of the public about media education;
- stereotypes concerning media education will be changed;
- target groups are trained (Akhmetova, 2016: p. 1755).

2.4. Failures of Foreign Aid Projects

Failures of foreign aid are a topic that has been the cause of scientific discussions by experts for a long time. The effectiveness and stability of foreign aid are reduced precisely through these mistakes. In many cases, the relations of foreign donors with the country or organization they help play an important role in the

continuity and stability of cooperation. In this regard, it is appropriate to mention the following classification of D. Ellerman and the philosophy of relations between them.

Helping or assistance is a relationship between those offering assistance in some form, the helper or helpers, and those receiving the assistance, the doer or doers. The helpers could be individuals, NGOs, or official bilateral or multilateral development agencies and the doers could be individuals, organizations, or various levels of government in the developing countries. (Ellerman, 2005: p. 4)

Ellerman's (Ellerman, 2005) different philosophy is summed up in "do" and "don't" principles in his book. We summarized these principles in the following table (Table 3):

The book concludes with the following remark: Helpers cannot and should not try "to do development." Helpers can at best use indirect, enabling, and autonomy-respecting methods to bring doers to the threshold. The doers have to do the rest on their own in order to make it their own.

The doers acquire development only as the fruits of their own labour (p. 252).

When it comes to direct MIL projects and grants, W. Easterly's following recommendations may give good results.

Easterly recommends a much-reduced role and scope for foreign aid. He suggests that aid be oriented towards programs that seek to have a direct and concrete impact on the poor...

If you want to aid the poor, then:

- 1) Have aid agents individually accountable for individual, feasible areas for action that help poor people lift themselves up.
- 2) Let those agents search for what works, based on past experience in their area.
- 3) Experiment, based on the results of the search. (Easterly, 2006: p. 382)

Easterly provides additional principles that focus on the need for evaluation results to govern rewards and penalties, tying these incentives to aid agent actions.

We can see the appropriateness of these recommendations in the fact that many experts do not always trust foreign donors and assess that the international organization presenting the project comes only to miss this event.

Table 3. Ellerman's (Ellerman, 2005) "do" and "don't" principles in foreign assistance issues.

| The three dos | The two don't |
|---|--|
| First Do: Starting from Where the Doers Are... | First Don't: Don't Try to Impose Change on Doers... |
| Second Do: Seeing Through the Doers' Eyes... | Second Don't: Don't Give Help as Benevolence... |
| Third Do: Respect the Autonomy of Doers | |

(Source: Ellerman, 2005). Helping people help themselves: From the World Bank to an alternative philosophy of development assistance. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 8-22.)

It is necessary to work with not one, but several national (in-country) organizations in offering MIL training and events. That's where the competition takes place. It is very important to discuss with local experts from the beginning what aspects should be given more importance in the implementation of MIL projects in the country, how to start the work, and who should be involved in the processes.

“MIL should not only be understood as a series of textbook chapters, school workshops or a set of skills to be gained. MIL needs to be about active participation and be embraced as a process leading to empowerment. It must shine a light on the unfairness and structural inequalities in our media systems. It should cover suppression, human suffering, crime and injustice. It is essential that MIL also focuses on the dark side of technology and open citizens' eyes to how people misuse technologies and how they unashamedly commit rights violations without fear of consequences. MIL should offer guidance on what we can do about this. And this means it has to be interlinked with something very fundamental: the question of digital rights. MIL is important to safeguard the rights of citizens, young people, those who navigate our media and information ecosystem and internet users. It is also necessary for MIL projects to address the responsibilities of those who define the rules and policies governing how we communicate, and those who provide us with the infrastructure to do so—the technical tools and platforms we use on a daily basis. MIL is important to ensure that young people can take their future into their own hands and raise their voice against injustice, even when the challenges they face seem overwhelming” (Nitsche, 2020: p. 2).

Associate Professor Asanbaeva Gulnar Doskaliyeva writes:

“In countries where the MediaCAMP program is being implemented, there is no targeted state policy for the development of media literacy, scientifically based concepts adapted to local socio-political and cultural contexts have not been adopted. As a result, terminology in national languages related to media literacy is in its infancy. In many cases, working on the development of media literacy, we experience difficulties in choosing criteria for assessing its state. In this regard, it seems appropriate to carefully study foreign experience” (Asanbaeva, 2021: pp 21-22).

In “Study of Media Literacy Level in Kyrgyzstan” The following are recommendations for donor organizations in the field of MIL:

“Recommendations to donors and international organizations

- To promote the development of media literacy curriculum, pedagogical staff training and development of teaching aids through the organization of exchange visits to countries with well-established programs in media literacy and media education;
- To consider funding a fact-checking platform or another technological know-how to debunk misleading information, information manipulation and fake news through regular monitoring and verification of information that represents the public interest.
- To raise awareness about the public role of media, regulation on media and dissemination of information, right to freedom of speech and expression and

responsibility it comes with” (Eshenalieva et al., 2013: p. 17).

2.5. Role of the Recipient Countries in Supplying Sustainability of Foreign Aid in the Field of MIL

Recipient countries play the most important role in the sustainability of foreign aid. But there are a number of factors, problems and obstacles that reduce the effectiveness of foreign aid.

The topic of failures of foreign aid is a topic that has been studied by many researchers for a long time, just like the topic of foreign aid itself. For example, Dunkan (Duncan, 2023) gave a good classification of foreign aid in the article “8 Reasons Why Foreign Aid Fails”. Orestes R Betancourt Ponce de León (Orestes R Betancourt Ponce de León, 2021) highlights “5 Historic Examples of Foreign Aid Efforts Gone Wrong”.

Having studied these and other sources and summarizing the opinions and recommendations of Central Asian experts on this issue, we have classified the following problems that may be an obstacle to the sustainability and effectiveness of foreign aid (see Table 4).

Now regarding the issue of foreign aid failures directed directly to the Central Asian region in the field of MIL, one of the main problems is that this topic is

Table 4. Failures of foreign aid.

| # | Failures | Definition |
|---|-------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Poor Governance | Recipient countries often lack the necessary systems and structures to effectively manage and implement foreign aid. This can lead to aid being misused and not reaching its intended beneficiaries. |
| 2 | A political regime | A political regime is also can be a determining factor for aid effectiveness, because it reflects the relations between citizens and government. To pose a theoretical argument, I can say that foreign aid volume could affect the relationship between government elites and citizens. If aid provider countries are providing the majority of public finance and governments are primarily accountable to external agencies, then it can easily be said that there cannot be credible relationship between state and its citizens. |
| 3 | Inadequate Capacity | Many recipient countries lack the capacity to effectively use and manage foreign aid. This includes limited access to resources and expertise, as well as inadequate infrastructure and technical skills. |
| 4 | Corruption | Corruption is a major problem in many recipient countries, with foreign aid often being diverted to enrich corrupt officials and their cronies. This means that the intended recipients of the aid do not benefit from the assistance. |
| 5 | Weak Accountability | Recipient countries often lack the necessary systems and structures to ensure that foreign aid is used properly and for its intended purpose. This can lead to aid being misused or wasted. |
| 6 | Unsustainable Projects | Many recipient countries fail to properly plan for the long-term sustainability of projects funded by foreign aid. This can lead to projects being abandoned once the aid is withdrawn, leaving the local population without the benefits of the aid. |
| 7 | Unsolicited Aid | Many recipient countries are unable to properly assess and manage unsolicited aid. This can lead to |
| 8 | Aid dependency | Aid dependency is very crucial and it will be the main barrier for sustainable development in recipient country. Aid dependency of countries is showing the short-term effects of foreign aid. |

(Source: Own creation.)

not widely considered by the state and government organizations in these regions.

Even though private schools and educational institutions operate in the countries of the region, the main place is occupied by state educational institutions. Educational standards are centralized, and textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education and state-approved subjects are taught in all educational institutions. Private educational institutions also use only these resources.

Increasing media and information literacy of the population in today's era of information and ideological struggles. Today, it is becoming more important to create a healthy information space in every country in the region free from external influences, in particular, the influence of the Russian mass media.

If the level of MIL in the population does not increase, they will continue to accept the information received from any mass media as correct and pass it on to others.

If we pay attention to the practice, in recent years mainly two organizations - USAID-supported Internews and Germany's DW-Akademie organizations - have been allocating MIL grants to the Central Asian region. They mainly work with NGOs. Every year, they announce project contests and allocate grants to individuals who participate in training with their projects. From this point of view, the efficiency of foreign aid is systematic and going well. Because small grants are implemented on time. Grant holders are trying to impart knowledge and skills related to the field of MIL to the population.

The political regime, inadequate capacity, weak accountability, unsustainable projects, and aid dependency factors in the "Failures of foreign aid" table that we cited above have a negative impact on the effectiveness of aid in the field of MIL. There is also a certain degree of familiarity in winning grants, that is, cases of constantly inviting certain participants to contests and financing the grants offered by them.

However, if the most important issue is to raise the MIL level of the entire population of the country, first of all, the ministries of education and donors should work together. Then the MIL level of the population will increase, and the level of information preparation and transmission of the mass media will increase accordingly.

3. Conclusions

As a result of our observations and analysis of stakeholders and recipient organizations, we found it necessary to mention the following failures, which have a negative impact on the effectiveness of projects, training courses, scholarships and grants in the field of MIL in Central Asian countries in recent years:

- 1) When planning projects, treat the political, social, cultural and religious views of Central Asian countries with the same view.
- 2) In the matter of language approach in the organization of training courses, it should be based on the characteristics of the "host" country. Since 2018, the

Internews organization branch in Kazakhstan has been organizing various training courses in Central Asian countries every year. Russian was chosen as the main language of all these training courses. Synchronized translation of other languages has been supplied. But this will be a barrier to the active participation of the training participants in the events. The Russian language may not have lost its importance in Kazakhstan. But in Uzbekistan, the study of English and other languages is strong among young people. This situation leads to the fact that young people involved in training and projects do not fully use the training materials.

3) Continued invitation of certain specialists to most training courses. The 2021 training focused on the importance of the film industry in MIL. However, journalists were attracted from Uzbekistan, not major specialists in cinema and documentaries.

4) As a result of unrest at the borders, participants did not always arrive at the training courses.

We can explain all the above shortcomings as a general “allowance of shortcomings in following the principle of orientation”. All MIL projects are managed by the Internews organization from Kazakhstan. The allocation of projects, grants, and scholarships for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is also being resolved “outside” the border.

1) Selection of expensive hotels when organizing training courses.

2) The short duration of the training courses and the fact that the same participants often attend continuously.

3) Donors work mainly with NGOs and establish relations with state organizations, particularly ministries, and do not inform them about planned grants and scholarships.

Despite the fact that non-state educational institutions are increasing in the countries of Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan, the public’s confidence in state universities is at a high level. In addition, if a project, for example, the competition of the best lesson project for raising the MIL level of young students, is carried out in cooperation with the ministries, there will be more participants and the result will be effective accordingly.

The participation of representatives from all primary and general secondary schools under the authority of public education or all secondary special vocational institutions, lyceums, institutes and universities under the authority of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education, although they may not be the winner in the end, the teachers who got acquainted with the topic during the preparation of materials on this topic can voluntarily or involuntarily explain the topics in connection with MIL in the future.

State educational organizations do not always believe in projects proposed by non-governmental and private organizations or “cannot fit into the agenda”.

In general, thanks to several annual projects and grants of foreign aid to the region, today it is difficult to find a field or life activity that is not affected by MIL.

Based on the study of various sources and interviews with experts, we put forward the following proposals.

To increase the MIL level of the population in the countries of Central Asia, the following actions should be carried out by these countries, in particular, by state organizations:

- Conducting awareness campaigns among children and parents about online risks for personal safety, as well as bullying, in particular privacy and personal data protection;
- carrying out explanatory work or conducting short-term courses among the general public about the role of the mass media in society, regulation of their activities, the right to freedom of speech and the responsibility of using this right;
- raising awareness of media and information literacy among schoolchildren and students through subjects and courses aimed at developing critical thinking, media functions and responsible web content;
- supporting the study of foreign languages in schools in order to ensure the citizens' access to information from a wider range of sources;
- contributing to the development of national media and information literacy curricula and standards.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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