



Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

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Abstract

This article explores the role, forms, and sustainability issues of foreign assistance in the field of media and information literacy (MIL) in Central Asian region. MIL skills are vitally important in an era dominated by information overload and disinformation. However, Central Asian countries face unique challenges in developing and implementing MIL programs given limited resources, political pressure, and diverse cultural contexts. Foreign aid has become an important source of support for MIL initiatives in the region. In investigating the sustainability of these initiatives, the study delves into the impact of foreign assistance on the shaping of robust MIL frameworks within the unique sociocultural contexts of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. By analyzing specific aid programs, policy implications, and local responses, the article contributes valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on the enhancement of MIL in these transitional societies. This study also examines the potential challenges associated with foreign aid in Central Asian countries and highlights the importance of context-specific approaches to MIL development.

Keywords: Media and information literacy (MIL); Central Asia; forms of foreign aid; MIL projects; training courses; financial support; educational resources; sustainability; context-specific approach.

1. Introduction

Media and information literacy (MIL) has gained increasing recognition as an essential competency for navigating the modern information landscape. Central Asian countries have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and they face distinct challenges in promoting MIL among their populations. Limited resources, political pressure, and rapid digital transformation further complicate the development and implementation of comprehensive MIL programs. In this context, foreign aid has emerged as a significant source of support for addressing these challenges and promoting MIL in Central Asia.

In today's "Information and Knowledge Society," education is the best investment for a country's future and development. Since 2010, foreign donor organizations have offered various forms of foreign aid in the MIL field in Central Asia. Foreign aid is defined as the voluntary transfer of resources from one country to another. This includes any flow of capital to developing countries. Foreign aid can take the form of a loan or a grant. Aid may be bilateral, given from one country directly to another, or multilateral, given by the donor country to an international organization such as the World Bank or a United Nations agency (e.g., UNDP, UNICEF) to be distributed to developing countries (Thapa, I., 2020: 1-2).

With the globalization of information and media technologies, the flow of information has accelerated throughout the world. As a result, the need to improve the media and information literacy of the population in the Central Asian region is increasing. MIL development is particularly important in this area to protect the population (1) from external information attacks and (2) from internal information noise (such as fake news on social networks). Therefore, the purposes of this study are as follows.

First, this article discusses projects, grants, and scholarships in the field of MIL, which are offered as multilateral aid. Second, this article investigates the role, sustainability, and forms of foreign assistance on MIL initiatives in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. It explores how foreign aid plays a crucial role in developing and enhancing MIL initiatives by providing financial and technical assistance. Additionally, it delves into the various forms of foreign aid, such as capacity-building programs, infrastructure development, and policy support, and analyzes their effectiveness in promoting MIL in the region. Third, the article emphasizes the importance of sustainability in foreign aid programs, considering the long-term impact of MIL initiatives beyond the initial project implementation. It examines the challenges and opportunities associated with sustaining MIL efforts in Central Asian countries, considering factors such as funding stability, institutional support, and community engagement. Fourth, it highlights the importance of context-specific approaches to MIL, considering the unique sociocultural, linguistic and political dynamics of each country.

Overall, the analysis presented in this article contributes to the understanding of the role of foreign aid in supporting MIL in Central Asia, identifies the most effective forms of aid, and sheds light on the sustainability and challenges of these programs. By doing so, it provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners involved in MIL development in Central Asian countries.

2. Literature review

In examining the landscape of foreign aid and its implications for media and information literacy (MIL) initiatives in Central Asia, existing literature offers valuable insights. The interplay between foreign aid and MIL initiatives underscores the complexities inherent in fostering information literacy within diverse socio-political contexts.

Numerous scholars have delved into the realm of media education and the cultivation of media literacy across Central Asian nations. Their findings, predominantly disseminated in Russian publications, encompass articles, manuals, books, and textbooks, with some works available in English and local languages. A cohort of researchers, spearheaded by A. Fedorov (Fedorov & Levitskaya, 2018; Fedorov et al., 2020), has contributed extensively to various publications, while in Kazakhstan, a research teams under L. S. Akhmetova's leadership (Akhmetova et al., 2015a; Akhmetova et al., 2015b) have produced collective monographs, focusing on mass media education processes and foreign media education theories.

In the article entitled "Media Literacy Education in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan", Chelysheva (2019) explored the landscape of media literacy education in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, scrutinizing its evolution, objectives, key concepts, structure, content, developmental stages, and models within the post-Soviet period.

The research titled "Measuring Media Literacy Level: A Case of Central Asia" (Zadorin et al., 2023) underscores the evolution of media literacy since the 1970s across various disciplines. However, there remains a gap in comparative studies of media literacy at the national level. This research addressed this gap by presenting findings from cross-country studies conducted in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 2019 and 2021. The authors examine key communicative practices and characteristics of media literacy among the populations of these countries, presenting a methodology for measuring media literacy that includes two consistent models of the media literacy index suitable for cross-country research.

In Uzbekistan, media education is undergoing gradual evolution. Notable works such as "Uzbekistan on the Path of Developing Media Education" (Mamatova & Sulaymanova, 2015) and "Media and Information Literacy in Journalism" (Muratova et al., 2019) serve as pivotal resources for journalism departments and institutes. The "Instructional Manual on Media Literacy for Teachers of Higher Education Institutions of Uzbekistan" (Sulaymanova & Osmanova, 2021) offers a comprehensive modular educational framework, drawing from both domestic and foreign expertise, catering to university educators, students, journalists, cultural center employees, and educational associations.

In sum, the literature underscores the multifaceted nature of foreign aid and its impact on MIL initiatives in Central Asia. Moving forward, a holistic approach that integrates donor support with local capacities and priorities is essential for advancing information literacy and media education in the region.

While various specialists in Central Asia contribute to the scholarly discourse through re-

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

search articles, reports, manuals, and textbooks on media and information literacy (MIL), this research stands out for its examination of the sustainability and efficacy of international donor organizations' projects and grants in MIL. It represents the first comprehensive analysis of foreign assistance types in the region, highlighting achievements, shortcomings, and offering practical recommendations.

3. Materials and Methods

Research Purpose. The study aims to scrutinize various forms of foreign aid within MIL initiatives in Central Asia, assessing their impact in enhancing MIL.

Research Objectives:

1. Identify and categorize forms of foreign aid and primary donors in Central Asian MIL initiatives.
2. Specify the resources and services allocated within MIL projects.
3. Evaluate the anticipated outcomes of foreign aid and assess its accomplishments and setbacks in Central Asian MIL development.
4. Formulate recommendations to enhance media literacy across diverse population segments, taking into account foreign donors' contributions.

Materials and Data Collection:

The research utilized a quantitative data collection methodology, comprising:

- Conducting case studies on MIL projects, grants, and training courses in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.
- Undertaking content analysis of donor companies' and organizations' websites.
- Engaging in in-depth interviews with 15 MIL trainers, media experts, and researchers, employing purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives on foreign aid sustainability in MIL.

Interview Methodology:

Interviews were conducted both in-person and digitally to comprehensively explore participants' experiences and insights. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for elaboration on experiences and perspectives, focusing on participants' encounters with foreign aid in MIL, its impact on their work, and perceptions of sustainability challenges and opportunities.

Ethical Considerations. The research adhered to ethical principles, obtaining informed consent from each participant prior to interviews. Researchers provided explanations on the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality measures, assuring anonymity and securely storing all data. Ethical clearance was secured from relevant institutional review boards.

Research questions:

Today, in every Central Asian country, the MIL sector is developing mainly because of foreign aid projects and grants. Considering this, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Who are the main donors to Central Asian countries?
2. What kinds of resources and services are transferred in MIL projects?
3. How much has the Western world transferred in terms of resources, projects, and servi-

ces?

4. What is the expected goal of foreign aid and to what extent is it being achieved in reality?

5. What are the main issues of sustainability in foreign aid MIL projects in Central Asian context?

To answer these questions, the author investigated the impact of foreign aid, especially the role of foreign organizations in the sustainable development of MIL projects in Central Asia, focusing on the cases of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Limitations:

This study focused specifically on the perspectives of trainers and experts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts within Central Asia. Additionally, the study's reliance on qualitative data may restrict the ability to draw quantitative conclusions about the sustainability indicators of foreign assistance initiatives in MIL.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. In-Depth interview results

At first, the respondents were asked about the importance of the development of the MIL sector for the Central Asian region. In response to this, the respondents' definitions of the MIL field show the strong influence of the field on people's family and work activities, in particular, from situations such as sharing information with others, ensuring the digital security of themselves and their loved ones, to becoming an active social citizen in society. talked about. Below are some of the responses given:

“MIL serves as a torch for people to find their way in the media and information bush”.
(Journalist, media trainer, senior lecturer project manager, 50)

“In today's accelerated and globalized information exchange, MIL plays an important role in protecting Central Asian countries from external and internal information threats and attacks.”

(DSc, professor, director, media trainer and MIL expert, 50)

“MIL is important to increase the citizenship position.”
(PhD, associate professor, media trainer, 33)

During the interviews, the interlocutors were asked “What does foreign aid in the field of MIL include?” was addressed with a question. Media trainers and experts spoke about various project forms and formats that they observed based on their experience:

Foreign donors can allocate funds for conducting training courses on media literacy among journalists, managers in education and other industries.

(DSc, professor, media trainer, 53)

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

The need to consolidate the international community for the spread of media education is indisputable. In view of this, “foreign assistance” can be viewed both as an exchange of experience in the field of information and media literacy, and as the creation of joint educational programs, methodological and practical manuals, the organization of partnership projects in the format of conferences, seminars, training courses, master classes.

(DSc, professor, media trainer, 64).

In the Scandinavian countries, for example, MIL have been practiced since the second half of the last century. And many other countries have come a long way in understanding MIL and implementing its components at all levels, especially with regard to media education. In Uzbekistan, only this year (2022) the issue of integrating MIL into the school curriculum entered the practical mainstream. Undoubtedly, international organizations can accelerate the process of introducing MIL in Uzbekistan through the implementation of projects aimed at specific areas where it is difficult for the state system to develop, since non-profit organizations are more flexible in this regard, and they work in this direction in cooperation with government agencies.

(Media and MIL expert, trainer, 47)

While answering to the question “What projects of foreign organizations and countries in the field of MIL are you aware of?” the respondents talked about projects in which they participated as trainers or participants, foreign donor organizations that offered grants. Here are some of them:

Central Asian program MediaCAMP (I am its participant) under the initiatives of Internews, projects of the Centre for the Development of Modern Journalism in Uzbekistan (participated as a trainer) in partnership with UNESCO, Kazakhstan’s project on media literacy “Know Media! (I was a consultant), School of Media Literacy (Kazakhstan) under the auspices of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), “Mediasabak” projects (Kyrgyzstan) on the introduction of MIL in education, etc.

(DSc, professor, media trainer, 64).

UNESCO (as a pioneer in the development of MIL in the world) conducts training courses and research in this area), IREX, USAID, Internews organized training courses for journalists, bloggers, university teachers and faculties of journalism. One of the latest OSCE roundtables on MIL was in the context of freedom of speech.

(Journalist, editor, media trainer, project manager, 50)

I am aware of and participate in the training of foreign organizations such as Internews, USAID, KazMediaNetwork, OBSE in the field of MIL.

(Journalist, media trainer, senior lecturer, project manager, 50).

U.S. Agency for Global Media (USA), Internews (USA), Deutsche Welle Akademie (Germany), UNESCO.

(Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor, media trainer, 52)

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

According to the answers we can classify foreign donor organizations and as well as, their national partners in the country, in the field of MIL are listed in the following table (Table 5). These organizations have been actively implementing various projects, grants and training courses in the field of MIL in Central Asia since 2015.

Table 1. Foreign donor organizations and national NGOs in the field of MIL (Uzbekistan)

#	Organization Type	Name of foreign organization	Name of national organizations
1	International organizations	UNESCO, USAID, Internews Kazakhstan (USA), UNICEF	
2	Media Institutes	Deutsche Welle Akademie (Germany)	
3	State organizations	U.S. AGENCY FOR GLOBAL MEDIA (USA)	Ministry of Education of Uzbekistan
4	NGOs	Media SABAK projects (Kyrgyzstan), School of Media Literacy (Kazakhstan) etc.	Center for the Development of Modern Journalism, International Community Center for Retraining of Journalists, The non-governmental non-profit organization "NEW MEDIA EDUCATION CENTER", Media literacy House (Tashkent)

4.2. Results of Case studies and analysis of MIL projects in the Central Asian region.

4.2.1. Media literacy development programs and their main donors

In recent years, significant progress in digital technologies has led major international organizations and developed countries to initiate numerous projects and grants in the field of media and information literacy (MIL) for Central Asian countries. Developed nations, including the United States and Germany, have provided various forms of foreign aid to the region, with support from organizations such as UNESCO, the European Union, and Deutsche Welle Akademie (DW Akademie).

According to Gulnar Asanbaeva (2021), a regional consultant on media literacy for the MediaCAMP Program of the Internews Representative Office in Kazakhstan and a Candidate of Philosophy and Associate Professor, this trend is notable:

The topic of media literacy in the countries of Central Asia has long been a subject of discussion exclusively in academic circles. Despite regularly held university conferences and a solid list of scientific publications, its discussion did not come to the fore in the socio-political discourse. Training courses and courses on teaching media literacy to residents of remote rural areas, university professors, and teachers began to be conducted about five or six years ago by non-profit civil sector organizations with the financial support of UNESCO, Internews, IREX, the Deutsche Welle Akademie, as well as using grant funds allocated by

embassies a number of foreign states within the framework of cultural cooperation. (p. 21)

4.2.2. Classification of foreign aid to Central Asia in the field of MIL

4.2.2.1. Training courses, educational programs, and courses.

In most cases, the organization of professional development courses, training courses, and short-term training courses for teachers and specialists of educational institutions based on various grants and projects are the most effective forms of foreign assistance. Through such courses, educational innovations and international experiences are rapidly gaining popularity.

Many training courses have been organized by all the donor organizations that have allocated funds for grants and projects in the field of MIL to the Central Asian region. Until now, trainings have been organized for school and university teachers, journalists and bloggers, librarians and employees of information research centers, filmmakers and documentary film makers, pupils and students - for each level separately.

The “IREX Europe Annual Report 2018” stated, “In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan we’ve trained over 400 teachers, university professors and librarians in MIL, so that by using our locally adapted MIL manual they can go on and run their own MIL workshops. We’ve also developed media literacy curricula in languages such as Russian, Kirghiz, Kazakh, and Tajik. In 2018 our curriculum for high schools was approved by the Kirghiz Ministry of Education and is now part of the national curriculum as a ‘mandatory supplement’ for students aged 12 to 16” (p. 9).

a) International and regional conferences on MIL issues. Such conferences are organized with the participation of more scientists, researchers, leading media experts and leading media trainers of the Central Asian countries. They have a great role in mastering the news and innovations in the field, exchanging experience, and connecting practical experiences with the achievements of theoretical research.

As an example, the Central Asian international conference on MIL was held in Bishkek on November 15-16, 2019. At the conference venues and panel discussions, the participants were able to establish cooperation and to exchange experience and new ideas for the further promotion of MIL in the education system. International experts shared their experience and success stories based on national and global educational strategies for introducing MIL into the education system. In total, about 200 participants from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, Russia, Ukraine, Finland, and Germany took part in the conference. One of the main outcomes of the conference was the creation of the CAMIL network to promote media information literacy in Central Asia and Mongolia. “A Memorandum of Cooperation” was signed by the Media Support Center (Kyrgyzstan), the Center for the Development of Modern Journalism (Uzbekistan), the International Center for Journalism “MediaNET” (Kazakhstan), Gurdofarid (Tajikistan), and the BAYAR Media Foundation (Mongolia). This “Memorandum” aims to establish cooperation between these organizations in the field of supporting civil initiatives to provide the population of the region with quality media products, developing people’s MIL level and critical thinking (Mediasabak, 2019).

b) MIL Festivals. Media literacy festivals have been held to involve the widest circles of the population in the promoting of main MIL issues across the region. For example, in 2021, online festivals were held in 12 regions of Kazakhstan and six regions of Tajikistan. The right to hold them was won by non-profit organizations that showed themselves to be the most creative and proactive in the first two years of MediaCAMP's activities. All of the participants were trained at training courses and Eduton, an innovative Internews seminar on the development of media literacy, and they developed their projects under the guidance of experienced mentors and trainers from Central Asia, as well as from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (Asanbayeva, 2021:30).

c) A traditional democracy and media literacy camp. The MediaSabak Foundation's summer media camps have become well known not only in Kyrgyzstan, but also in other Central Asian countries, as they have been among the most fruitful projects in the field of MIL. The MediaSabak Foundation, DW Akademie's long-time Kyrgyz project partner, hosted a summer media camp at Lake Issyk-Kul in northern Kyrgyzstan with a focus on MIL. In the summer of 2019, in partnership with other civil organizations, a traditional democracy and media literacy camp was held in Issyk-Kul for high school students from all regions of the country. For 10 days, at various interactive sites of the youth camp, 72 participants learned the basics of democratic governance, critical perception, and analysis of information. At the end of the camp, the graduates entered the field, conducting training courses and seminars, and they passed on their experience and knowledge to more than 200 students. In August and November, Media Laboratories continued its work in the region, training schoolteachers and representatives from regional education departments and teacher retraining centers in the basics of media literacy and the introduction of MIL elements into the educational process. In August, 42 teachers from 10 schools in the Naryn region were trained. They in turn trained more than 100 of their colleagues at the end of the Media Lab (Kut Bilim, 2020).

d) Training courses abroad and working trips. In October 2019, 10 schoolteachers from Kyrgyzstan became acquainted with the experiences of their colleagues in Germany as part of a working trip organized by DW Akademie and the Media Support Center. The participants were selected based on the results of a competition among teachers at pilot schools who completed a 3-day course on MIL within MediaLAB. The teachers were able to hear the experiences of their German colleagues regarding the promotion of MIL in the education system. The working tour participants visited German organizations promoting MIL to see firsthand how such lessons are carried out and what their colleagues in Berlin and Leipzig emphasize (Kut Bilim, 2020).

e) Online and hybrid training courses. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in certain periods of 2020 and 2021, some MIL training courses were conducted in a purely online format. This contributed to the formation of skills regarding the active use of Internet technologies in training and conferences. Today, remote online participation by speakers and trainers in international conferences and trainings has become popular.

For example, Internews plans and manages its MIL projects through its office in Kazakhstan. Participants, project managers from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan must go to the city of Astana

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

at the invitation of the organizers. However, this is not always easy. Problems related to multiple-day travel times and border crossings prevent some participants from attending. It is not always practical to gather all applicants and MIL experts from three countries in one place. This does not facilitate the popularity of the MIL project and its ideas in these countries. For these reasons, 4 out of 18 sessions of the Eduton-2021 innovation seminar, organized by Internews on February 2-6, 2021, were held as open sessions that were available for anyone to watch via the Internet. The seminar thus aimed to inform the general public who could not attend but who were interested in this field about the scientific news of the training.

The program of these open sessions (see Table 2) was announced on the organization's website and through Telegram channels (Khodoreva, 2021a).

Table 2. The program of open sessions of MediaCAMP Eduton 2021 of Internews. (Source: <https://ru.internews.kz/2021/01/mediacamp-edyton-2021-priglashaem-na-otkrytye-sessii-po-mediagramotnosti/>)

MediaCAMP Eduton 2021: We invite you to open sessions on media literacy
<p>“Media literacy online: attraction of creativity!” – Under this slogan, Internews will hold an innovative seminar Eduton-2021 on February 2-6.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The goal of the project is to train existing teachers, media literacy trainers, NGO representatives, librarians, and those who have shown an interest in media literacy for the first time in online skills.- Of the 18 sessions, four will be open, and everyone can watch them.- Calendar of open sessions:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- February 2, 15:30–16:45 Vsevolod Pulya, “Digital philosophy as the basis for the development of media literacy,” with a question-and-answer session- February 3, 15:00–16:30 Vsevolod Pulya, “New media trends and the development of media literacy”- February 4, 17:15–18:15 Sergey Shturkhetsky, “Algorithms for disseminating information in social networks”- February 5, 17:00–18:00 Sergey Shturkhetsky, “Interactive methods for teaching critical thinking online”- Open sessions will be broadcast live on the Internews Facebook page in Russian.- Session times are given in Nur-Sultan time.

4.2.2.2. Resources, manuals, and other publications

One of the most important factors in the stability of international projects and grants is the creation of educational resources and their accessibility to all. Manuals will be effective if they include important topics related to the field of MIL, demonstration materials, case studies, and assignments. Many educational resources have been created under the influence of foreign projects.

a) Publications. In various years, manuals in the field of MIL have been published in several languages under the auspices of UNESCO in Central Asian countries. Some of them are presented in the “Literature Review” section of this article. They are freely available on the

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

UNESCO website and on the websites of the local organizations directly involved in the project. Four MIL manuals have been produced and adapted to the Central Asian, Moldovan, and Tunisian contexts with specific curricula for different audiences: universities, schools, youth, and the general public (IREX Europe Annual Report 2018: 8). Kyrgyzstan is a pioneer in this area throughout Central Asia because unlike in neighboring countries, the project to introduce elements of MIL in education received state support from key partners. In 2020 alone, several major events were implemented under the Mediasabak project that have made substantial contributions to the promotion of MIL in education (Kut Bilim, 2020).

The Media Support Center will continue to cooperate with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Kyrgyz Academy of Education in introducing elements of media information literacy, innovative methods, critical thinking skills, and the use of new technologies, programs, and applications in the field of education as part of the state program for the digitalization of all areas of life for citizens.

Sulaymanova and Osmanova 2021, specialists at the Modern Journalism Development Center of the Republic of Uzbekistan NGO, have been actively contributing to the development of the mass media sphere in Uzbekistan with the support of foreign partners for several years. They published Media Literacy Training Manual for Teachers of Higher Education Institutions of Uzbekistan (Sulaymanova and Osmanova, 2021), which was prepared as part of the MediaCAMP project with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

b) Implementing MIL as a school curriculum and publishing textbooks for schoolchildren. Educational programs and courses, which range from several days to several months, show greater effectiveness compared to training. However, the most lasting impact is seen when international projects and grants integrate MIL into the curricula of general secondary education and higher education systems. According to the “Central Asia Media Program Fact Sheet” (2022) from the USAID-funded CAMP (Central Asia Media Program), in the 2020-2021 academic year, 29 universities in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan incorporated modules from Internews’ Media Literacy Manual in Russian, Kazakh, and Tajik to teach MIL and journalism to more than 1,500 students (2 p.).

The greatest achievement of MIL projects in Kazakhstan has been the introduction of such courses into school education.

Khodoreva (2021b), one of the experts in the field, stated,

The introduction of media literacy in school education is one of the key points of the MediaCAMP project, which Internews has been working on since October 2018. From the first days of its existence, the project team announced a competition for the creation of learning resources adapted to the local context. The creation of modern textbooks, moreover, in new, only emerging disciplines, is not an easy task. The competition received several applications from university professors, NGOs, and other civil society organizations.

The first textbook on media literacy for schoolchildren in Kazakhstan was approved by the

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

state expert commission and recommended for use in educational institutions.

According to the expertise of the Republican Scientific and Practical Center “Textbook” under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the educational and methodological manual on media and information literacy, developed under the Internews project by the International Center for Journalism MediaNet with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are recommended for use in educational institutions of Kazakhstan. “The content of the textbook corresponds to modern scientific ideas about the system of media and the media sphere,” – from the official conclusion of the center of “Uchebnik.” (Khodoreva, 2021c)

A team of experts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, and Lithuania developed a textbook for students in grades 9-11/12 and a methodological manual for schoolteachers published in Kazakh and Russian to instruct students in media literacy, critical thinking skills, how to recognize fake news and media manipulation, and how to use the Internet safely.

Such education has already been implemented in numerous foreign countries. For instance, in the United States, European nations, and many other countries, media literacy is a mandatory component of secondary education.

c) Online resources and platforms as a main and innovative way of promoting MIL concepts. The Media Support Center in Kyrgyzstan is considered a pioneer in the development of MIL in Central Asia. It created a mechanism for integrating MIL into the education system. This center plays a leading role in the development of curricula and reference literature for teachers. It also creates and tests programs for high school students. The most innovative part of the project is the online platform for students and teachers, “Media Sabak: Developing Critical Thinking for Youth through MILEducation.” This platform provides opportunities for learning and testing MIL online, and it enables participants to share learning outcomes and receive course completion certificates. The goal of an upcoming project is to establish regional media literacy centers to provide mentoring support.

In 2020 in September, a new platform of the Mediasabak project was launched at <http://mediasabak.org/>, where all the lessons on media information literacy in Russian, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Tajik are uploaded. In the future, it is planned to translate these lessons into Uzbek. Each video lesson is accompanied by a detailed development of the lesson in Power Point and in text form. They are duplicated on the official channel of the project on YouTube, @MediaSabak. (Kut Bilim, 2020)

In 2020, a series of animated films was prepared to explain various aspects of MIL to children in an accessible and playful way. On the new platform, users can take a test to assess their level of media literacy. In addition, a trial version of the online textbook on the subject “Man and Society” (<http://onlinekitep.kg/>) developed by the expert group of the Media Support Center, the Kyrgyz Academy of Education, and the Ministry of Education and Science, has been uploaded here. This new type of teaching aid is the first of its kinds in the history of education in Kyrgyzstan, with interactive tasks and tests that take into account the phy-

biological and psychological aspects of the development of fifth graders.

4.2.2.3. Financial support.

UNESCO, with the financial assistance of international donors, such as the European Union, has launched several projects totaling almost 13 million USD aimed at reinforcing technical and vocational education and learning in rural areas, supporting teachers, increasing social harmony among youth and strengthening gender equality through the public education system of Uzbekistan (UNESCO, 2021). How much does the Western world transfer for resources, projects, and services?

The five-year, \$15 million USAID-funded Central Asia Media Program was implemented by Internews and ran from October 1, 2018 through September 30, 2023 (MediaCAMP Fact sheet, 2023). The UNESCO project “Enhancing the Capacity of Uzbek Media to Serve the Public Interest. Phase II” received \$190,450 in funding from the UK government. The project was launched in March 2019 and focuses on enhancing the capacity of Uzbek media to produce more objective and inclusive high-quality media content (UNESCO, 2020).

In January 2022, Internews declared that non-profit, public, educational, and non-governmental organizations, non-governmental theater and art groups, and associations interested in promoting media information and digital literacy in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are eligible for financial assistance for the following activities during the year:

- creating media literacy content in various genres (e.g., interviews, short videos, comics, memes) by stable professional journalistic organizations on the topic of media information and digital literacy;
- staging entertainment forms (e.g., theater pieces, plays, musicals) that promote media literacy through the active participation of the audience;
- organizing film literacy training courses for different segments of the population;
- creating visual tools and games, questions and answers, quizzes, etc. on the topic of media information and digital literacy;
- creating and producing MIL and digital literacy posters for distribution on social media networks and public places for different population segments.

4.2.2.4. Commodities. In many cases, foreign aid in the field of education takes the form of educational materials (books, notebooks, pens, etc.), information and Internet technologies, and the opening of fully equipped centers in institutions for specific educational purposes.

In MIL projects and grants, commodities often include notebooks, pens, various handouts, and educational resources for participants in conferences and training courses. Examples:

* Providing technical assistance: According to the “Central Asia Media Program Factsheet”, Internews has provided capacity-building and technical assistance to support nine media organizations in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, aiming to enhance their advocacy efforts, reinforce self-regulation in the media community, and ensure media representation in legislative

* *Material promotion of activity in the field of media and MIL.* In November 2020, the city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan hosted the second national competition of school media corners, attracting 100 participants from across the country who showcased over 60 school media corners. Winners of the competition were awarded with laptops and Wi-Fi routers as a means of promoting media and information literacy activities (Kut Bilim, 2020).

* *Helping to open media editorial offices, educational and creative laboratories in the field.* The establishment of the new radio studio at the Journalism and Mass Communication University, a project by DW Akademie, represents a significant development in Uzbekistan, providing hands-on training for aspiring journalists. This initiative demonstrates a positive step towards press freedom in the country, offering practical learning opportunities for the next generation of reporters (Bodine, 2022).

The opening of the radio studio provides both professional skills and increases media literacy among young people. Students who conduct a live broadcast in the studio increase their practical experience, and listening to programs prepared by others also shapes their understanding of MIL. This can be seen in the provision of technical technologies for the development of mass media in various regions by foreign donors, particularly DW Akademie. The technical development of mass media enables the preparation and transmission of better-quality information. This makes it possible for residents to use faster and more saturated information distribution channels.

4.2.2.5. Opening of Media Literacy Houses

Media Literacy Houses have been established to promote the effective use of information technologies and techniques to ensure information security among all age groups of the population, supporting their development of critical thinking, logical thinking, and information filtering skills and increasing their digital technology, advertising, and film literacy.

The regional consultant on media literacy of the MediaCAMP Program of the Representative Office of Internews in Kazakhstan, associate professor Gulnar Asanbaeva (2021) discussed the importance of these Houses in her article:

A new area of work for MediaCAMP was the creation of Media Literacy Houses. These are centers for the development of media literacy, formed by university professors, librarians, media literacy trainers, youth leaders, civil activists who received media literacy training in Internews projects. Now they are constantly working with all categories of the population in the regions. Media literacy houses independently form their activity programs based on the needs of local communities, closely cooperating with each other, exchanging resources and ensuring systematic work on the development of media literacy. We hope that Media Literacy Houses will gradually appear in each of the regions of our countries and will be able to independently participate in competitions of various funds to support the development of media literacy. (p. 30)

It is important to support the work of Media Literacy Houses in the context of adult literacy, without which our efforts to develop media, information, and digital literacy will not lead to a strengthening of critical attitudes toward information or the ability to recognize misinformation and propaganda.

Muhayyo Saidova, the founder of the Media Literacy House in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, expressed the following:

I have been working on media literacy projects for several years, organizing seminars and trainings with the financial support of foreign partners. When I participated in the international media literacy festival held in Kazakhstan in May of this year [2022], my colleagues from Tajikistan and Kazakhstan spoke proudly about the establishment of “Media Literacy Houses.” Modern information fields sometimes serve for good, sometimes for evil. In such a situation, it is very important that people have the skills to get quality information. For this purpose, I preferred to start media literacy work in my neighborhood. Jamshid Rikhsiyev, the youth leader of the New Beltepa community assembly, and Gulnora Yusupova, the head of the Shaikhontohur district vocational school, helped me in this regard. Thanks to such enthusiastic pedagogues, today 20 teenagers will have their first training in media literacy. (Xabar.uz, 2022)

The subjects of the trainings in these Houses are media literacy (e.g., activities on social networks, standards of information consumption, safety activities on mobile apps and messengers, fact-checking), media use skills and digital literacy (e.g., proper use of the capabilities of mobile communication devices, efficient use of Internet equipment, computer literacy), film literacy (e.g., formation of thinking skills regarding plot, character, and problem issues in film works), and the advertising of literacy skills.

4.2.2.6. Other projects

Foreign aid in the field of MIL is manifested in various forms, such as supporting the creation of various media platforms, contributing to the improvement of the content and quality of media products etc.

For instance, during the period from 2018 to 2023, as part of the MediaCAMP initiative funded by USAID, representatives of the organization collaborated with Central Asian media, academic institutions, and civil society partners. Their aim was to enhance the quality of content and engagement on both traditional and digital media platforms, improve the financial sustainability of media outlets, elevate the professionalism of journalists, bloggers, and citizen reporters, boost media literacy among the public, and fortify the legal and regulatory framework supporting media in Central Asia. Program activities were tailored based on feedback and needs from local partners, adopting a flexible approach to adapt to the rapidly evolving media and socio-economic landscape. Leveraging the demographic trend of a youth bulge in the region, the program focused on promoting digital media production and consumption to foster innovation, broaden the reach of local media, and promote openness to diverse perspectives.

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

Through the Central Asia Media Program, Internews and its partners trained over 2,050 media professionals from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the initial three and a half years of the program. Additionally, they provided support to 160 non-state-funded news outlets, individual journalists, and civil society organizations, resulting in the creation of over 3,900 pieces of locally relevant content in various engaging formats, delivering timely and socially significant information in Russian, Kazakh, Tajik, and Uzbek languages. Furthermore, nearly 6,100 individuals from the target countries participated in media literacy initiatives, festivals, and training courses organized by Media and Digital Literacy Houses, equipping them with critical thinking skills when evaluating information. (United States Agency for International Development, 2023, 2 p.)

At the end of 2019, IREX Europe started an EU-funded project to strengthen the resilience of youth in Central Asia to misinformation and hate speech online by promoting critical thinking and media literacy. An online game was launched in the summer of 2020 (IREX Europe, 2019, p. 8).

As media and information technologies progress, the types and forms of projects in this field are increasing year by year. Types of foreign aid in the field of MIL identified through observations are summarized in **Table 3** below.

Table 3. Classification of foreign aid in the field of MIL in Central Asia (Source: Author's own creation according to the research results).

Forms and types of foreign aid				
1. Training courses, educational programs, and courses	2. Resources, manuals, and other publications	3. Financial support	4. Commodities	5. Opening of Media Literacy Houses
International conferences on MIL issues	Publications (manuals, guidebooks, etc.)	Finance the creation of media literacy content in various genres, such as interviews, short videos, comics, memes, etc.	Provide participants with notebooks, pens, various handouts, and educational resources during conferences and training courses	These are centers for the development of media literacy, formed by university professors, librarians, media literacy trainers, youth leaders, and civil activists who received media literacy training in foreign aid projects
MIL festivals	Implement MIL into school curricula and publishing textbooks for school children	Finance the staging of entertainment forms (e.g., theater pieces, plays, musicals, etc.) that promote media literacy and the organization of film literacy training courses	Provide capacity-building and technical assistance to media support organizations	

Training courses abroad and working trips	Online resources and platforms on MIL as a main and innovative way of promoting MIL concepts.	Financial support for creating visual tools and games, questions and answers, quizzes, etc.	Resources for organizing school media corners	
Online and hybrid training courses		Financial support for the creation and production of media information and digital literacy posters for distribution on social media networks and public places for different population segments	Financial support to provide media schools and editorial offices with modern technical equipment	
6. Other projects				
Supporte to improve content quality and audience engagement across traditional and “new” media platforms	Strengthen media outlet financial sustainability and the professionalism of journalists, bloggers, and citizen reporters	Strengthen the legal and regulatory enabling environment for media in Central Asia	Launch online games and contests	

5. Discussion

5.1. Resources and services transferred in foreign MIL projects

Foreign aid has been an essential tool for the socioeconomic development of developing countries since the 1960s. It has been described by OECD as financial and technical assistance and commodity flow to countries that are on the list of the Development Assistance Committee (Farah et al., 2018: 7).

As Howard White (1998: 69) stated, “Aid flows consist largely of three types: (i) project aid, (ii) programme aid (including commodity aid, which has largely been food aid), and (iii) technical assistance.”

According to Williams (2021), these resources can take the form of grants, projects, or concessional credits. Table 1 presents the types of foreign aid.

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

Table 1. Types of foreign aid (Source: Author’s own creation according to the research results)

Types of foreign aid			
Financial resources	Commodities (e.g., technological equipment)	Technical advice	Training courses

In their article “*Broadening the Approach: The Importance of Partners and Research for MIL*,” Reineck and Lublinski (2015) cited the classification of DW Akademie projects, as follows:

1. Organizing isolated workshops, although this is not sufficient for longer-term development projects.
2. Upscaling to the regional or even national level by developing curricula and integrating them into school syllabuses, with support from local and international partners.
3. Developing educational content and programs suited to individuals and the educational system by working in cooperation with local teachers, school administration and education ministries.
4. Working with university lecturers who educate future schoolteachers to multiply the effects.
5. Establishing institutions such as competence centers that support MIL in schools.

According to the authors, all of these are being pursued in various DW Akademie projects (Reineck & Lublinski, 2015: 7).

The “IREX Europe Annual Report 2019,” which was developed in the MIL sphere, the following classification of sources was given:

“We work in Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Uzbekistan and in 6 European countries to promote media literacy. IREX Europe has developed a package of MIL tools and activities adaptable to local circumstances including:

- **MIL training of trainers workshops** in libraries, universities, schools and community centres.
- Developing **MIL courses and curricula**.
- Creating an **online platform** for MIL resources and **media corners** in libraries.
- **Public discussions** on reports focused on social issues and **media manipulation** and propaganda.
- **MIL summer fairs** to share good practices among stakeholders.
- **An online game (website and app version)** to build resistance among young people to **hate speech and misinformation**.
- **Media tours** to raise awareness on how the media works.
- **Media monitoring** to identify country-specific misinformation, hate-speech, fake news and propaganda” (p. 8).

MIL projects have become increasingly popular in recent years, and all of the above types of assistance have been provided in various forms.

5.2. Issues of sustainability in foreign aid MIL projects

Foreign aid plays a crucial role in supporting the development of MIL in Central Asian countries. These countries often face significant challenges in terms of access to quality information media freedom and the ability of their populations to critically analyze and evaluate information. This section explores the main donors involved in supporting MIL initiatives, their roles in the development of MIL, and the sustainability of foreign aid in this context.

One of the main donors contributing to MIL development in Central Asian countries is the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO has been actively involved in promoting MIL in the region, having recognized its importance in fostering democratic societies and enabling citizens to make informed decisions. Through various projects and initiatives, UNESCO has provided technical and financial support to improve media literacy education, promote media pluralism, and enhance media regulatory frameworks in Central Asian countries. Its contributions have been instrumental in building the capacity of media professionals, educators, and policymakers and in raising awareness of the importance of MIL among the general population.

Another key donor in the field of MIL is the European Union (EU). The EU has actively supported initiatives aimed at fostering MIL in Central Asian countries through its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights program. These initiatives have focused on strengthening media independence, promoting fact-checking, countering disinformation, and enhancing digital skills among citizens. The EU's involvement has not only provided financial resources but has also brought valuable expertise and best practices from European countries, which have served as a catalyst for positive change in the region.

Initiatives funded by international organizations have aimed to improve media professionalism, promote press freedom, and strengthen the legal and regulatory environment for media. These international stakeholders have also funded projects focused on digital media literacy to empower citizens to critically assess the information that they consume online.

While foreign aid has been instrumental in jumpstarting MIL development in Central Asian countries, the sustainability of these initiatives remains a challenge. Long-term sustainability requires local ownership of MIL programs and a supportive national policy environment. It is essential for governments in Central Asia to recognize the importance of MIL in promoting democratic societies and to actively invest in its development. This includes allocating financial resources for MIL education in schools, providing ongoing training for media professionals, and fostering an enabling environment for media freedom. Without robust local commitment and investment, foreign aid alone cannot ensure the long-term sustainability of MIL efforts.

Furthermore, partnerships between international donors, civil society organizations, and local stakeholders are crucial for sustaining and enhancing MIL development in Central Asian countries.

Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

These partnerships can leverage expertise, resources, and networks to develop innovative approaches, share best practices, and create platforms for collaboration. By involving key stakeholders at every level from government institutions and educational institutions to media organizations and community groups, the sustainability of MIL initiatives can be maximized.

Donors such as UNESCO and the EU and bilateral aid from countries such as the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom have provided essential resources and expertise to improve media professionalism, promote media freedom, and enhance critical thinking skills among citizens. However, to achieve long-term sustainability, it is crucial to foster local ownership, develop supportive national policies, and nurture partnerships between international donors and local stakeholders. Only through such collaborative efforts can Central Asian countries achieve sustainable and impactful MIL development, enabling citizens to navigate the complex information landscape and actively participate in democratic processes.

Foreign aid plays a crucial role in addressing global poverty, inequality, and other development challenges. However, like any other programs, foreign aid projects encounter sustainability issues, particularly in MIL projects. Some of the main sustainability issues that can arise in this context are presented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Main sustainability issues regarding foreign assistance in the field of MIL (Source: Author's own creation according to the research results)

#	Sustainability issues	Definition
1	Funding and Dependence	MIL projects heavily rely on external funding. In many cases, these projects are dependent on foreign aid, making their sustainability uncertain. When funding is unpredictable or limited, it becomes challenging to maintain the continuity and effectiveness of such projects.
2	Capacity Building	MIL projects often seek to build the capacity of local communities and institutions. While these efforts can be successful in the short term, sustainability becomes a concern when there is inadequate follow-up support or a lack of investment in building and maintaining local capacity. Without ongoing training, support beneficiaries may struggle to sustain the outcomes of the project.
3	Technology Access and Infrastructure	MIL projects frequently use technology such as internet access, computers, or mobile devices to enhance learning experiences. However, unequal access to technology and infrastructure can hinder the sustainability of these projects. Limited access to technology or unstable infrastructure may prevent communities from fully benefiting from the resources and tools provided, making it difficult to sustain the impact of the project.

4	Cultural Relevance and Local Ownership	Sustainable MIL projects require a strong level of cultural relevance and local ownership. In some instances, externally designed projects may not fully align with the local context language or cultural preferences. Failure to acknowledge and incorporate these aspects can lead to limited acceptance and relevance among the target audience, jeopardizing the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of the project.
5	Policy and Political Instability	MIL projects are greatly influenced by the policy and political environment in which they operate. In regions with political instability, changes in government or policy can have significant implications for the sustainability and continuity of these projects. Political interference or a lack of regulatory frameworks to protect media freedom can undermine the project's success and long-term impact.

To ensure the sustainability of foreign aid projects in MIL, it is crucial to address these issues. Emphasizing local ownership, building long-term capacity, investing in technology infrastructure, designing culturally relevant initiatives, and promoting supportive policy environments are key steps toward creating sustainable and impactful programs. In addition, diversifying funding sources and working toward self-sufficiency can help reduce dependence on foreign aid, making projects more resilient and sustainable in the long term.

6. Conclusion

Because of foreign aid, a number of achievements have been made in the field of MIL in the countries of Central Asia, as follows.

1. Knowledge and skills in the field of MIL and their importance have been developed among a certain segment of the population.
2. As a result of the provision of grants and scholarships by foreign donors, MIL training is being provided in many educational institutions to increase participants' MIL.
3. A group of MIL trainers has been formed in each country.
4. In the field of MIL, books and manuals adapted to the region have been published, and scientific research is being carried out.
5. MIL is now being taught in some universities in these countries.

To further enhance the progress made with the support of foreign donor organizations in the area of media and information literacy (MIL) and to improve the efficiency and long-term impact of foreign aid, the following recommendations can be offered:

1. While continuing cooperation with NGOs, it is worthwhile to strive to establish strong relations with state organizations and educational and cultural institutions and to organize grant contests in cooperation with them. It is necessary to introduce the basics of media, information, and digital literacy in school so that children can competently analyze, compare, and search for the information they need for education.

decisions (United States Agency for International Development, 2023, 2 p.).

2. To advance the development of MIL curriculum, training of educational staff, and the creation of teaching resources through organizational exchange, it is important to visit countries with established MIL and media education programs.

3. MIL programs and projects should aim to enhance the public's understanding of how media is funded, regulated, and distributed, to educate individuals about their rights and responsibilities regarding data and privacy, and to improve their understanding of how social and search platforms operate.

4. Different groups of people will require different MIL interventions at different points in their learning styles, so in the formation of groups of trainers, it is necessary to consider the formation of trainers from each region of the country. In the future, one responsible person should be appointed to continuously the MIL project in each region.

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Azamjon Oltmishevich Dadakhonov: Exploration of Foreign Aid Forms and Impact on Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in Central Asian context

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