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## Issues of Foreign Aid Efficiency in the Field of Media and Information Literacy in Uzbekistan

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# Issues of Foreign Aid Efficiency in the Field of Media and Information Literacy in Uzbekistan

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## Abstract

This research article investigates the dual dimensions of effectiveness inherent in foreign aid endeavours aimed at advancing MIL in Uzbekistan, including the issues of increasing the MIL level of the population and improving the efficiency of foreign projects in the field. As the main method of research, in-depth interviews were conducted with MIL experts and trainers in the country in a face-to-face manner. Through a comprehensive analysis of expert opinions and surveys conducted with key stakeholders in the field, including policymakers, educators, media professionals, and civil society representatives, the study delves into the impact of foreign assistance in shaping MIL frameworks within the unique sociocultural context of Uzbekistan. Through thematic analysis, the paper unveils the underlying complexities surrounding the utilization and impact of foreign aid in enhancing MIL in Uzbekistan. The findings reveal nuanced perspectives on the positive influence of foreign aid, acknowledging notable advancements in awareness and education. Based on the opinions of experts, general conclusions and proposals were presented on the development of the MIL sphere in the country and on further increasing the efficiency of the projects implemented by foreign donors.

**Keywords:** Media and information literacy (MIL), foreign aid, effectiveness, MIL experts, MIL projects.

## Introduction

The field of media and information literacy (MIL) is of crucial importance in emerging democracies, where the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and promoting transparency and accountability (UNESCO, 2013; Carlsson, 2019; Ramaiah & Rao, 2021). In Central Asian countries, such as Uzbekistan, the transition towards democracy has brought about a growing need for foreign aid to support the development of MIL initiatives. However, the sustainability of such aid and its impact on fostering a culture of media freedom and critical thinking in Uzbekistan must be carefully considered and implemented. This theoretical article aims to explore the sustainability of foreign aid in the field of MIL in the Central Asian context, with a specific focus on Uzbekistan.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the role of MIL in promoting a free and democratic society (Nitsche, 2020; Reineck & Lublinski 2015). As emerging democracies strive to strengthen their media landscapes, foreign aid plays a crucial role in supporting the development of MIL programs. However, there is a lack of research on the sustainability of foreign aid in the field of MIL in emerging democracies, particularly in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan, a Central Asian country with a population exceeding 36 million, has undergone significant political and economic reforms since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. In recent years, the government has demonstrated an interest in modernizing its information space, including reforms in the media sector and the digital ecosystem. However, despite efforts at liberalization, the media environment faces systemic challenges and low levels of media and information

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literacy (MIL) among the population.

Foreign aid has played a vital role in supporting Uzbekistan's transition processes — especially in areas like education, public health, governance, and, more recently, media development. International donors such as UNESCO, the European Union, Deutsche Welle Akademie, and USAID have funded initiatives to strengthen media capacities, promote digital literacy, and train journalists in fact-checking and ethical reporting (Dadakhonov, 2024c). However, support for media and information literacy (MIL) — particularly in institutional, policy, or curricular forms — remains fragmented and inconsistent.

Although MIL is increasingly recognized as essential for democratic development and countering disinformation, the Uzbek government has not yet fully institutionalized MIL within the national education system or public communication strategies. Pilot programs and workshops are mainly donor-driven and short-term. There is no unified state-level policy, framework, or budget line specifically for MIL, and most local media professionals lack access to sustained, systematic MIL training. This gap underscores the continuing need for foreign aid in this domain — not to replace national responsibility, but to complement and support capacity-building.

Therefore, understanding the sustainability of foreign aid in the field of MIL in emerging democracies like Uzbekistan requires not only a technical evaluation of project outcomes, but also an analysis of the structural limitations and political will at the national level (United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, 2025). By providing this contextual backdrop, this study aims to offer a more comprehensive view of the issue for both local and international readers. This research will utilize a qualitative approach, gathering expert opinions and insights through interviews and surveys. Experts in the fields of education, media, and international development in Uzbekistan will be invited to share their perspectives on the effectiveness and sustainability of foreign aid in MIL. Their views will provide valuable insights into the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of aid programs in this particular field.

The findings of this research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on MIL in Uzbekistan, as well as inform policymakers and practitioners engaged in promoting MIL initiatives in the country. By understanding the experts' opinions on the outcomes and sustainability of foreign aid, policymakers can make informed decisions regarding future investments, program adaptations, and resource allocation.

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### Literature Review

Since the topic of this research is at the intersection of several fields, it was necessary to study the literature and scientific research in the following fields. In covering this topic, it is necessary to mention a number of literature about foreign aid and its influence on the development of recipient countries.

Foreign aid plays a crucial role in supporting the development of recipient countries. According to Radelet (2006), foreign aid can be instrumental in promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, and addressing social inequalities. However, some scholars argued that the effectiveness of foreign aid depends on the design and implementation of aid initiatives, and whether they align with the priorities and needs of the recipient countries (Frot, Olofsgård & Berlin, 2014). Furthermore, the accountability and transparency of aid programs can also impact their success (Dreher and Fuchs, 2015).

Winters (2010) reviewed five different accountability relationships that exist in foreign aid projects among donors, governments, implementing agencies and end users and summarized existing empirical evidence, when there is more government and implementing agency accountability.

The field of MIL and its role in the development of society, in today's conditions of advanced information and media technologies, the importance of MIL is increasing more and more.

MIL have been recognized as crucial skills for individuals in the 21st century, in order to navigate the complex media landscape and critically engage with information. According to Kit Wai & Nie Suet (2022). media literacy is an important factor in determining how an individual internalises media messages which in turn, affect how they view the world (91 p.), as well as it is vital for the proper functioning and well-being of individuals in a democratic society. (Mohamed Salleh et al., 2019).

Alper and Herr-Stephenson (2013) argue that media literacy education is necessary for fostering informed, critical, and engaged citizens. However, an equally important consideration which has not been adequately addressed is ensuring that the media literacy course syllabus in schools and universities are relevant to the needs and challenges of the contemporary society (Mohamed Salleh et al., 2019). Australia, Canada, England, South Africa, Scandinavia, Russia as well as countries in Europe, South America and Asia are among the first countries that implemented media literacy within their school curriculum. Most of these curricula focus on educating society, especially children and teenagers to critically scrutinize and evaluate media messages (Fedorov et al., 2022; Kit Wai & Nie Suet, 2022).

MIL is often emphasized in the face of technological breakthroughs, when policy- and lawmakers find themselves unable to tackle emerging problems. Therefore, MIL should be understood as part of a whole that includes legislation and reforms in media, education and other fields of relevance – as part of a democracy strategy. This is a process that involves many different stakeholders in society, and combining

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extensive collaboration with proactive political leadership is a challenge (Carlsson, 2019).

In the article entitled “Evaluating Media Literacy Education: Concepts, Theories and Future Directions” Martens (2010) synthesized a large subset of the academic literature on media literacy education. The author argued that media literacy is mostly defined in terms of the knowledge and skills individuals need to analyze, evaluate, or produce media messages and evaluated what is empirically known about the effectiveness of media literacy practices.

In “Instructional manual on media literacy for teachers of higher education institutions of Uzbekistan” (Sulaymanova, 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, spiritual and educational associations.

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). (See: Table 1)

Year	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan	Max
2019	14,6	11,9	11,3	35
2021	16,8	11,5	12,2	35

**Table 1.** Average values of the integral index of media literacy (Source: Internews, 2021)

This situation shows the need to re-analyse 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.

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 (Sulaymanova & Osmanova, 2021; Djumanova, 2022; Tailakova, 2023; Kadyrova, 2023). However, this research differs from other studies and books that it examines the sustainability and effectiveness of international projects and grants in the field of MIL with the opinion of foreman experts of the sphere in Uzbekistan. It will build on this existing literature to evaluate the impact



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and sustainability of foreign aid initiatives promoting media literacy in Central Asia.

### **Materials and Methods**

The present study sought to investigate the issues of foreign aid efficiency in the field of MIL in Uzbekistan. In order to achieve this, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 MIL experts and trainers, who were selected based on their expertise and experience in the field. Additionally, recent publications and books on MIL in Central Asia were also reviewed to supplement the insights obtained from the interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the selected experts to gather their opinions and insights on the efficiency of foreign aid in promoting MIL in Central Asia. The interviews were structured around key themes such as the impact of foreign aid, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement.

The data collected from the interviews and literature review were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring themes and patterns in the responses of the participants and the information obtained from the literature. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the issues related to foreign aid efficiency in MIL in Central Asia.

Participants were selected based on their expertise and experience in MIL training and implementation in CA. Morris (2015) stressed the significance of carefully selecting, locating, and reaching out to interviewees in any study involving in-depth interviews. The 'quality' of respondents accessed can significantly impact the study's quality. Key informants included prominent trainers and experts, authors of books and guidebooks in the sphere, project managers and coordinators from Uzbekistan, ensuring diverse perspectives and insights.

The qualitative method allowed for an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of prominent trainers and experts in the field.

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants to gather qualitative data regarding their opinions and experiences with foreign assistance initiatives in MIL. Interviews were conducted either in person or through virtual platforms, allowing for flexibility and accessibility.

Open-ended questions encouraged participants to provide detailed responses and share their perspectives freely. As emphasized by Rutledge and Hogg (2020), the interview questions would be open-ended, aiming to foster a discovery-driven methodology. The objective of conducting in-depth interviews is to gather comprehensive insights into an individual's viewpoint, personal experiences, feelings, and the inferred significance regarding a specific subject or matter.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit information on various aspects of foreign assistance projects in MIL, including their perceived effectiveness, challenges faced, and potential sustainability indicators.

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Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time was respected.

General information about experts is summarized in the **Table 2**.

Code	Gender	Age	Academic degree	Role in MIL projects	Experience (in years)
<b>Uzbekistan</b>					
R1	Female	53	DSc, professor	Media trainer, MIL expert	16
R2	Female	43	DSc, associate professor	Media trainer, MIL expert	15
R3	Female	50	N/A	Journalist, editor, media trainer, project manager	17
R4	Female	64	DSc, professor	Media trainer	30
R5	Female	52	Candidate of philological sciences, associate professor	Media trainer	6
R6	Female	51	Candidate of philological sciences, professor	Editor and translator (in MIL training courses and books about MIL)	6
R7	Female	47	N/A	Media and MIL expert, trainer	16
R8	Male	50	DSc, professor	Media trainer and MIL expert, project manager	15
R9	Female	50	N/A	Journalist, media trainer, project manager	6
R10	Female	33	PhD, associate professor	Media trainer	7
R11	Female	45	N/A	Reporter, blogger, media trainer, project manager	3
R12	Female	30	PhD	Lawyer, trainer	5
R13	Female	46	Candidate of philological sciences, associate professor	Media trainer	15
R14	Male	41	N/A	Editor, project manager	3
R15	Male	27	N/A	Media trainer	2

**Table 2.** Information about respondents

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. Transcripts were coded and categorized into themes and sub-themes, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and significant insights related to sustainability indicators in the CA context. Conducting in-depth interviews, coding, and analyzing thematically the responses were inspired by the guides explained in “Conducting In-Depth Interviews: A Guide for Designing and Conducting In-Depth Interviews for Evaluation Input” by Boyce and Neale (2006)

Recent publications, books, and scholarly articles related to MIL in Central Asia were reviewed to complement the insights gathered from the expert interviews. This comprehensive literature review provided additional context, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence to support and enrich the findings of the study. Furthermore, the findings from the interviews were validated by comparing them with the information obtained from the literature, which helped in ensuring the credibility and reliability of the study results.

Overall, the methodology employed in this study aimed to provide a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the issues of foreign aid efficiency in MIL in Central Asia, based on the insights obtained from the interviews with experts and trainers, as well

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as recent publications and books in the field.

### Results

**The main forms of foreign aid.** The in-depth interview responses offer insights into the primary forms of foreign aid supporting media and information literacy (MIL) and education in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Here's an analysis of the key themes:

1. **Training and Educational Support.** Respondents identified training as a significant form of foreign aid, addressing gaps in knowledge and skills among professionals in journalism, education, and media. The training courses are often supported through international funding and focus on enhancing expertise and awareness around media literacy. For example, R1 mentions funding for media literacy courses aimed at journalists and educational managers, highlighting the need to improve knowledge across sectors. Similarly, R4 and R6 note the role of international training courses, conferences, and seminars, emphasizing these as crucial for expanding MIL. For example, opinion of one of the respondents was as follows: *“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*. (R4).

2. **Development of Resources.** Another common form of foreign aid involves providing educational resources, including literature, manuals, and guides in foreign languages, which serve as essential tools for MIL development. R4 describes aid in terms of collaborative creation of educational materials and resources, like methodological guides, which reflect foreign expertise. These resources are vital for establishing a foundation in MIL that local organizations might lack.

3. **Project-Based Financial Aid.** Funding for specific projects, especially those based on competitions, allows for focused initiatives in MIL. Respondents cite grants and competitive funding as a means to drive innovation in educational approaches (R1). By funding projects, foreign donors encourage the development of creative solutions and sustainable practices in media literacy.

4. **Expert Involvement and International Collaboration.** Respondents, particularly R4 and R7, also highlight foreign experts' involvement, partnership projects, and international collaboration as forms of foreign aid. These partnerships facilitate the transfer of expertise and best practices from countries with established MIL systems, like Scandinavian nations, to Uzbekistan. R7 mentions how these collaborations can accelerate the process of introducing MIL, a field where international nonprofits can often offer flexibility and agility beyond that of state systems.

5. **Challenges and Shortcomings in MIL Implementation.** Some respondents, like R3, point to challenges within the Ministry of Education, particularly regarding the lack of a clear methodology for integrating MIL into the curriculum. This reflects a gap where foreign assistance may be directed not only toward resources and training



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but also toward supporting systemic changes. The limited capacity within the local system suggests a reliance on foreign support to develop a comprehensive approach.

*“There are small projects for the development of media literacy, however, the Ministry of Education, which is entrusted with the implication of MIL into education, lacks the methodology and methodology for introducing MIL into education, in general there is no competent management in this direction”. (R3)*

6. Long-Term Impact of Foreign Aid. The responses collectively hint at a gradual but essential shift in the field of media education in Uzbekistan. As R7 notes, MIL has only recently entered the practical domain within schools, and international support is crucial in bridging gaps where the state system struggles to advance:

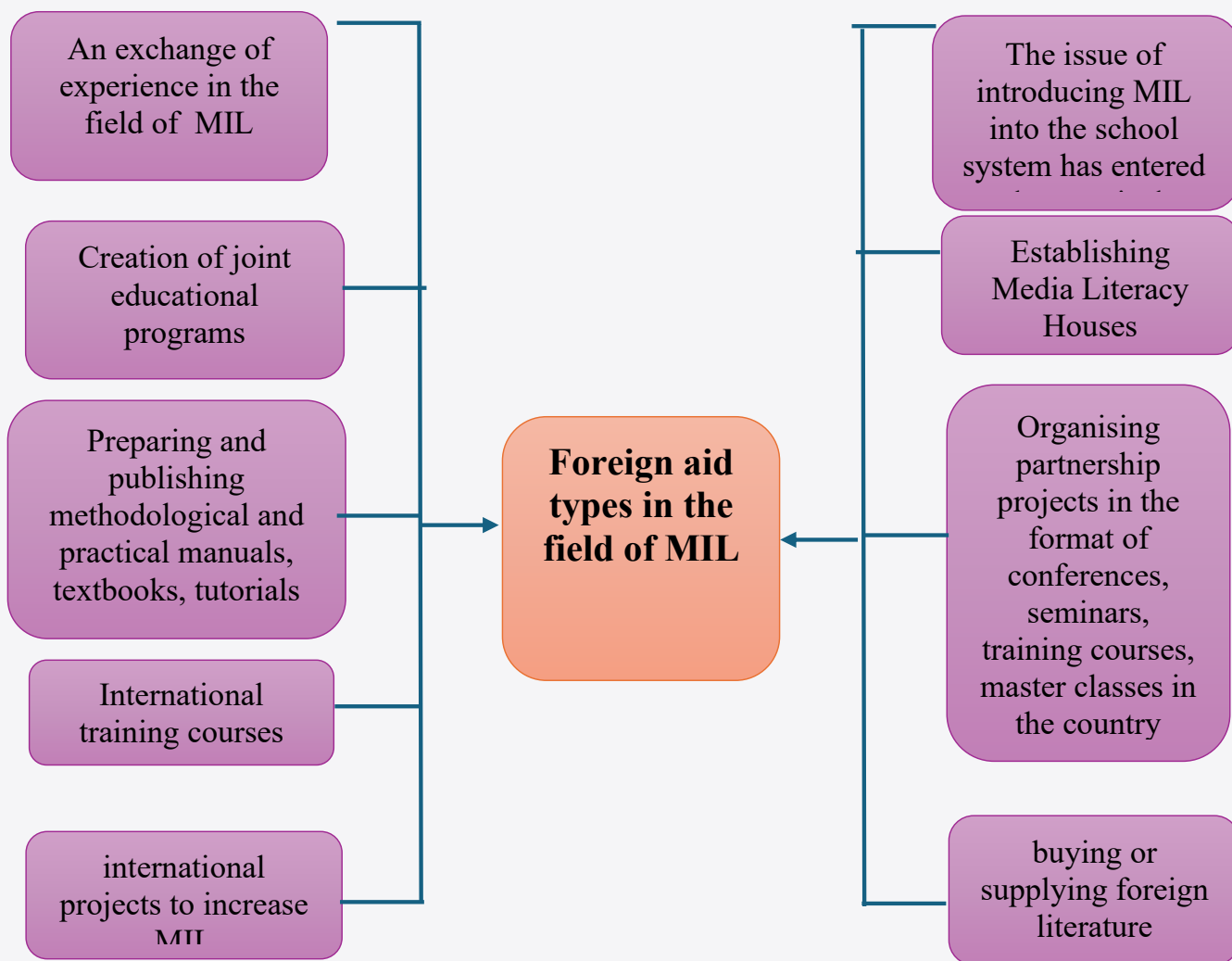
*“In the Scandinavian countries, for example, MIL have been practiced since the second half of the last century. And many other countries have come a long way in understanding MIL and implementing its components at all levels, especially with regard to media education. In Uzbekistan, only this year (2022) the issue of introducing MIL into the school system has 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”. (R7)*

This indicates that while foreign aid has begun to make an impact, its full effects may be realized over a more extended period.

In general, foreign aid in Uzbekistan’s MIL and educational sectors largely centers around training, resources, project funding, expert support, and international partnerships. These contributions are foundational, offering structural support where local capabilities are still developing. Respondents express optimism about foreign aid’s potential to advance MIL but underscore the need for sustained, strategic assistance to overcome institutional limitations in the long term.

Based on the answers given by all interviewees, the following figure shows the foreign aid provided in the field of MIL today (Figure 1):

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**Figure 1.** Types of Foreign aid in the field of MIL (Source: own creation according to in-depth interview results)

**Positive and negative impacts of foreign aid.** The analysis of these interview excerpts reveals both positive and negative perceptions of foreign aid in the field of media and information literacy (MIL) in Uzbekistan. Respondents generally highlight more positive impacts, but some also express reservations, suggesting a nuanced view of foreign involvement.

### Positive Impacts of Foreign Aid:

1. National Development and Educational Improvement. Many respondents view foreign aid in MIL as a catalyst for national development, improving education quality and promoting informed media consumption. R7 emphasizes that comprehensive MIL support contributes to the broader development of the country, positively affecting multiple sectors:

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*“The comprehensive introduction of MIL, of course, has a beneficial effect on the development of the country, since this is a matter of quality education and quality media consumption. It influences to many areas of the development of the state” (R7).*

2. Enhancing Political Atmosphere and Public Awareness. Several respondents point out that foreign aid can lead to a more positive political atmosphere by educating individuals and organizations in MIL. R13 specifically notes that MIL training fosters awareness, which has a constructive effect on political engagement, suggesting that informed citizens contribute to a healthier political environment.

3. Empowering Individuals and Organizations. Respondents like R12 emphasize that foreign aid provides foundational support for individuals and small projects, potentially leading to significant impacts. This perspective suggests that even small grants or resources can drive substantial change by empowering people to undertake larger initiatives:

*“I consider it as a positive process. If a person receives support, then he/she starts to think about the project. Small supports can start big things”. (R12)*

4. Correcting Misconceptions about Foreign Aid. R11 addresses common concerns about foreign aid being a tool for political influence, specifically mentioning the Soros Foundation as an example. However, this respondent argues that aid in MIL is beneficial, countering fears that foreign support might be intended to destabilize or control the recipient country. This viewpoint implies a perception of MIL aid as apolitical and aligned with positive educational objectives.

### **Negative Impacts and Reservations about Foreign Aid:**

1. Potential for Hidden Agendas. A recurring theme among those expressing concerns is the idea that foreign organizations may have self-interested motives. R10 notes that “a wise organization wants its own interests to be stimulated first,” implying that foreign aid can sometimes prioritize the donor’s interests over the recipient’s needs.

2. Risk of Mismatched Goals or Values. Some respondents emphasize the need for foreign aid to respect local contexts. R4 highlights the importance of adapting foreign initiatives to the specific needs and characteristics of the region, cautioning that if aid projects are poorly aligned with local culture, they might lead to unintended negative consequences. This reflects an awareness that foreign methods may not always be suitable for local conditions.

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3. Dependency and Influence over National Interests. R15 offers a more philosophical critique, noting that foreign aid inherently carries specific objectives that may ultimately serve the interests of the donor. This respondent points out that the long-term impacts of foreign aid are only revealed over time, and depend on the parties' ability to negotiate and foresee outcomes. This perspective suggests a degree of caution, as foreign aid may subtly influence the country's direction in ways that align with the donor's broader agenda:

*“Any aid always creates interest in one form or another, and at the core of such aid there are always specific goals. Whether these objectives produce good or bad consequences for the recipient or serve the interests of the parties is another matter. How this “aid” positively or negatively affects the country's political, national and other characteristics is manifested not in the process, but in the outcome. That is, it comes from the ability of the parties to see the future and the ability to convince the other party in negotiations”. (R15)*

4. Concerns about Political Influence. Although not widely mentioned, a few respondents imply that foreign aid, particularly in the field of MIL, could influence the country's political or national identity. R11 acknowledges that officials may worry about foreign aid's political implications, although they personally believe such support is generally beneficial. This acknowledgment of political concerns reflects an underlying sensitivity to sovereignty and control within the context of foreign involvement.

The respondents' perspectives on foreign aid in MIL reveal a complex balance of optimism and caution. On the one hand, foreign aid is largely viewed as a beneficial force that aids in educational, social, and political development by empowering individuals and institutions. However, some respondents highlight potential risks, particularly regarding hidden donor interests and the importance of adapting aid to local contexts. This mix of views suggests that while foreign support is welcomed, there is also an awareness of the need for careful, context-sensitive approaches to maximize positive outcomes and minimize unintended impacts.

The opinions expressed about the negative and positive effects of foreign aid are summarized in the following table (Table 3):

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**Table 3.** Effects of foreign aid in the sphere of MIL (Source: own creation according to in-depth interview results)

#	Positive effects of foreign aid	Negative effects of foreign aid
1.	“Beneficial effect on the development of the country, since this is a matter of quality education”	“Cultural and Political Bias and Influence”
2.	“Beneficial effect on the quality media consumption”	“Dependency on External Sources”
3.	“Media education a part of human literacy, focusing on teaching critical thinking skills and developing quality strategies”	“Short-Term Focus”
4.	“It has a positive effect on the political atmosphere”.	“Limited Community Engagement”
5.	“If a person receives support, then he/she starts to think about the project. Small supports can start big things”	“Mismatch with Local Needs”

**The main obstacles and challenges in further improving the efficiency of foreign projects in the field of MIL.** The responses gathered from in-depth interviews reveal several interconnected obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of foreign projects in Media and Information Literacy (MIL), particularly in the regions you're studying. Here's a breakdown of these obstacles:

1. **Influence and Control by State Organizations.** Respondents noted that state bodies have substantial control over MIL projects. This influence can create challenges, as it often results in bureaucratic complexities and can hinder the autonomy of organizers and participants. When projects are overly influenced by state organizations, it may stifle innovative ideas or approaches, leading to repetitive practices and less impactful outcomes.

2. **Documentation and Legal Challenges.** Another common theme among respondents was the burden of extensive documentation when working with legal organizations. This process can delay project implementation and create an additional administrative layer that organizers must navigate. This issue reflects a broader challenge in many international projects, where excessive paperwork and legal requirements can be obstacles, especially for those unfamiliar with legal and regulatory standards.

3. **Limited Skills and Experience Among Organizers.** Respondents identified a lack of skills and experience among local MIL activists as a limiting factor. According to one media trainer, this includes ineffective fund utilization and a lack of consideration for engaging appropriate participants. When participants are chosen without clear motivations or relevant backgrounds, it weakens the overall impact of the project. Additionally, failing to address cultural or mental characteristics can limit participant engagement and project success.



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4. Nepotism and Favoritism in Project Coordination. Several respondents highlighted issues of favoritism, where coordinators repeatedly award grants or management roles to the same people or organizations. This "closed circuit" discourages fresh talent from participating and innovating in MIL projects. As noted by respondents, this practice may improve project efficiency for experienced participants but limits opportunities for new entrants, which could be detrimental to the overall diversity and inclusivity of MIL programs. Here is one of the responds:

*“Coordinators often agree and give it to their acquaintances. Or regular winning contestants win over and over again. Those with little experience or those who are in need will not win in many cases” (R12).*

5. Language Barriers. Language barriers were also noted as significant obstacles, particularly for those who are not proficient in widely used languages like Russian or English. This limitation restricts access to international projects and training courses, potentially excluding motivated participants who lack language skills but could otherwise benefit from and contribute to these projects.

These findings highlight the need for targeted strategies to address the structural, administrative, and skill-based challenges in MIL projects. By promoting inclusivity, ensuring fair project management practices, and supporting skill-building for local MIL activists, project organizers could work towards more impactful and sustainable outcomes. Additionally, providing language support could allow a more diverse group of participants to engage, further enhancing the effectiveness and reach of MIL initiatives.

In general, all respondents in their answers admitted that there are many obstacles. Among them, the most mentioned ones are shown in the following table (Table 4):

**Table 4.** Main obstacles and challenges in further improving the efficiency of foreign projects in the field of MIL. (Source: own creation according to in-depth interview results)

#	Main obstacles and challenges	Number of mentions by the interviewees
1.	Permission by state administrative organs	5
2.	Familiarity, groupizm	3
3.	Lack of skills among domestic MIL activists	3
4.	Lack of professionals and specialists	4
5.	Language barriers	1
6.	Problems of implementation MIL in school education	2
7.	Few projects and insufficient allocation of funds	2

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Suggestions and recommendations by the media experts for improving the efficiency and sustainability of MIL projects. Dad, [11/10/2024 11:03 PM]

The respondents provided a range of recommendations to improve the efficiency and sustainability of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) projects, emphasizing the need for strategic planning, collaboration, educational integration, and equitable resource allocation. Here's an analysis of the main themes:

1. **Promotion of Research and Quality Content Development.** Respondents suggested enhancing MIL research and content quality, aligning these with modern media transformations. By intensifying research efforts, the projects can better address current issues in MIL and adapt to evolving digital literacy needs. This research-based approach could help ensure MIL content is both relevant and impactful, as well as encourage innovation and progress in project design.

2. **Government Partnerships and Institutional Support.** Several experts recommended collaborating with government agencies, particularly the Ministry of Public Education, to strengthen MIL efforts. Integrating MIL initiatives within governmental structures, such as education ministries, could provide long-term support, broaden the reach of MIL initiatives, and enhance project credibility. This approach also suggests that institutional backing could lead to a more cohesive framework for implementing MIL programs nationwide.

3. **Innovative and Creative Outreach Methods.** Creative industries, including theatre and music, were highlighted as tools for popularizing MIL through engaging formats. Such creative avenues can resonate with a wider audience, especially when localized and culturally relevant. As seen in Kazakhstan's use of a musical to promote MIL, this approach leverages entertainment as an educational tool, making MIL concepts more accessible and memorable.

*“The cultural sphere of theatres and further such a creative industry also attracts the illuminated media information literacy. Because we saw in Kazakhstan there was a musical scene (play), which was aimed at the development of media information literacy among people through such kind of creative industries. We can also develop musical performance theatres, for example, stories and novels. We can develop and inculcate media information literacy among the population”.*  
(R2)

4. **Youth Engagement and Peer-to-Peer Learning:** Experts noted the importance of involving youth through engaging, peer-led initiatives, as well as forming a consistent “youth contingent” to sustain MIL projects. By fostering a community of young advocates who can share knowledge and teach their peers, MIL projects could create a ripple effect that reaches various demographics more naturally and effectively.

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*“It is necessary to make interesting decisions based on electronic platforms for the development of MIL and this will help both develop and increase the coverage of media information literacy in the country. I think that for sustainability it is necessary to form a permanent youth contingent. It seems to me that MIL can be developed by example on the principle of teaching peers” (R14).*

5. Educational Integration. Many respondents advocated for MIL to be incorporated into formal education, starting from early childhood through to higher education. This proposal reflects a long-term approach that aims to embed MIL as a foundational competency. Teaching MIL from a young age could foster critical thinking skills and media awareness, addressing the issue systematically and consistently across generations.

*“MIL should be taught from childhood. For this, it is necessary to establish cooperation with schools, conduct continuous training and practical exercises among students from the 1st to the 11th grade, make presentations on social networks using various online platforms, and open clubs that help to develop MIL separately in the neighborhoods”. (R11)*

6. Interactive and Digital Learning Tools. The use of digital platforms, including mobile games, was identified as a promising method for expanding MIL outreach. By developing interactive tools tailored to local cultural contexts, MIL projects could reach a broader audience, especially among children and teens. These tools make MIL learning more accessible, engaging, and adaptable, aligning with how young people often interact with technology.

*“In order to widen the field of MIL, I would recommend increasing the number of interactive, mobile games for different ages, adapting them to the Uzbek segment, and widening them in kindergartens and schools”. (R5)*

7. Fairness in Grant Distribution and Avoiding Favoritism. Concerns about the fairness of grant allocation were repeatedly raised, with respondents calling for more transparency and objectivity in the funding process. These issues reflect systemic challenges in ensuring equal opportunities for MIL project participants. Creating an open database of MIL initiatives, as one respondent suggested, could help reduce redundancy and improve collaboration across projects, while more equitable funding practices could encourage wider participation and innovation.

8. Transparency and Accountability in Project Management. Respondents shared experiences of unfair financial practices, including cases where coordinators took disproportionate cuts of project funds. Such practices can discourage skilled experts from participating in MIL initiatives. Transparency in fund allocation, accountability measures, and fair compensation could enhance trust among participants and ensure resources are used effectively.

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The respondents provided a multi-faceted approach to enhancing MIL project effectiveness and sustainability. Their suggestions highlight the need for diverse methods, including creative and technological engagement, fair grant allocation, and institutional partnerships. By implementing these recommendations, MIL initiatives can foster a more informed and literate society, equipped to navigate the complexities of modern media landscapes. Some experts put forward the idea of applying it to educational processes as one of the most effective ways to develop the field of MIL:

### Discussion

**The Need for Foreign Aid in MIL in the region.** Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, have historically struggled with limited media freedom and restricted access to information. With the recent wave of democratization, there has been a greater demand for MIL programs to empower citizens with the skills and knowledge to critically engage with media content and hold their governments accountable.

*The experts from four countries of the region discussed the popularization of communities, low level of media literacy, the lack of critical thinking, and other issues during the expert meeting “How to Improve the Media Literacy of the Population of the Central Asian Countries?” held by the CABAR.asia analytical platform on March 18 (CABAR.asia, 2022).*

Foreign aid has played a crucial role in supporting the development of MIL initiatives in the region, providing funding, expertise, and resources to local organizations and institutions.

While foreign aid has undeniably played a pivotal role in advancing MIL in Uzbekistan, sustaining these gains necessitates a holistic strategy. This involves fostering local ownership, tailoring initiatives to the cultural context, and addressing the dynamic nature of the digital environment. The insights provided by experts in this analysis contribute valuable perspectives to the ongoing dialogue on enhancing the effectiveness of foreign aid in media literacy initiatives.

The discourse also unveiled the importance of tailoring foreign aid programs to align with the socio-cultural context of Uzbekistan. Experts emphasized the necessity of nuanced approaches that account for the specific information landscape and digital habits prevalent in the country. This recognition of cultural nuances, they argued, is essential for ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of MIL interventions over time (Dadakhonov, 2023).

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The experts highlighted that in the context of global information warfare, when the population of the region is drawn into wars that do not threaten their lives, this can lead to tension within countries. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the level of media literacy, and this should be done at the government level.

The experts proposed several measures to improve the situation with the level of media literacy, including:

- The governments of countries should work more thoroughly and fundamentally to improve media literacy and critical thinking of the population of their countries;

- To support initiatives and educate different segments of the population;

- To strengthen work to ensure own information security;

- Use a wide range of tools to increase empathy;

- Create zero tolerance for violence using all available tools and opportunities;

- To support local independent media so that they do not depend on grants and projects from foreign states (CABAR.asia, 2022).

Activities and achievements in the field of MIL in Uzbekistan based on foreign aid initiatives

Based on the answers given by the respondents in the interviews and the evidence and information provided in the studied literature, internet resources, the gesture implemented in Uzbekistan through the support of foreign aid can be classified as follows:

**1. Training workshops and seminars.** Foreign aid initiatives have supported the organization of training workshops and seminars on MIL in Uzbekistan. These activities have aimed to improve the skills and knowledge of media professionals, educators, and students in understanding and critically analyzing media content. As a result of several years of workshops and training courses of foreign stakeholders, groups of trainers consisting of strong MIL experts were formed not only in Uzbekistan, but also in Central Asia.

**2. Curriculum development:** Foreign aid has been instrumental in the development of MIL curriculum in Uzbekistan. This has involved the design of learning materials and resources to be used in schools, universities, and vocational education programs. Some of the main MIL issues were included in a number of subjects in the secondary school curriculum. In the country, MIL field was initially included in the curriculum of higher education institutions providing knowledge in the field of journalism. Based on the initiative of UNESCO, the guidebook "Media and information literacy in journalism" (Muratova, Grizzle, & Mirzakhmedova, 2019) was published, and this book now serves as the main source of knowledge for journalism students. In recent years, many universities in Uzbekistan, including the National University of Uzbekistan, the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, have included courses in the field of Media Education and MIL in the curriculum of a number of specialties and started teaching is being placed. In this regard, in secondary schools, some topics related to the field of MIL are taught in the textbooks of a number of subjects, such as history, mother tongue, informatics,



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labour. However, in the neighbouring country of Kazakhstan, as part of the MediaCAMP project of the international organization Internews (USA), a textbook "Media and information literacy" for students of grades 9-11/12 at secondary schools in the Russian and Kazakh languages, as well as their teaching aids, was created. (Khodoreva, 2021a) and teaching as a separate subject was introduced (Khodoreva, 2021b).

The application of this experience in Uzbekistan is also possible for today's youth, who are growing up surrounded by today's information and media technologies, who take daily important news from Tik-Tok, Instagram, and Telegram channels more than official media channels, and form their worldview and information culture. will be useful for the generation. During the in-depth interviews, respondents used terms such as "Ocean of Information " and "Media Bush" to describe the Media and MIL fields.

If the young generation is introduced to the systematic teaching of the MIL field at all stages of kindergarten, school and education, they will be able to find and use useful information for themselves without "drowning" in this "ocean of information"; they will be helped to find their right way easily in the "media bush", which is full of information attacks such as misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and bullying etc.

**3. Research and advocacy.** Foreign aid initiatives have supported research and advocacy efforts to promote MIL in Uzbekistan. This has involved the funding of studies to assess the level of MIL in the country and to identify areas for improvement. A number of manuals, electronic resources were created, articles and research papers were published.

**4. Public awareness campaigns.** Foreign aid has also supported public awareness campaigns on MIL in Uzbekistan. This has involved the production of educational materials, public service announcements, and social media campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of media literacy skills.

**5. Capacity building.** Foreign aid initiatives have contributed to the capacity building of local organizations and institutions working in the field of MIL in Uzbekistan. This has involved training and technical assistance to strengthen their ability to deliver effective media literacy programs. In October of 2022 year "Media Literacy House" was established in Tashkent and began to operate. Until the end of 2024, a series of workshops organized in the "Houuse" to improve the MIL level of many schoolchildren and employees of a number of organizations in the country. However, the founder of "Media Literacy House" stated that she was unable to continue her activities due to the end of the project period and the lack of foreign and local grants.

**6. Establishment of networks and partnerships.** Foreign aid has facilitated the establishment of networks and partnerships between local and international organizations working on MIL in Uzbekistan. These collaborations have provided opportunities for knowledge sharing, skills transfer, and resource mobilization to advance MIL initiatives in the country.

**7. Technology and infrastructure development.** Foreign aid initiatives have

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supported the development of technology and infrastructure for MIL in Uzbekistan. This has involved the provision of equipment, software, and digital platforms to enhance access to media literacy resources and training opportunities.

**Key factors of foreign aid effectiveness.** In examining the effectiveness of foreign aid in the realm of MIL within Uzbekistan, our study engaged with experts in the field to glean valuable insights. The discussions underscored a nuanced landscape where foreign aid initiatives have demonstrated notable impact yet face challenges in long-term viability.

Several experts highlighted the positive contribution of foreign aid in education (Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016; Heyneman & Lee, 2016; Masino & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). For instance, scholars Masino & Niño-Zarazúa (2016) wrote:

*“Relying on a theory of change typology, we highlight three main drivers of change of education quality:*

*(1) supply-side capability interventions that operate through the provision of physical and human resources, and learning materials;*

*(2) policies that through incentives seek to influence behaviour and inter-temporal preferences of teachers, households, and students;*

*(3) bottom-up and top-down participatory and community management interventions, which operate through decentralization reforms, knowledge diffusion, and increased community participation in the management of education systems” (53 p.)*

Some other researchers discussed the positive influence of foreign assistance in establishing foundational MIL infrastructure, including educational programs and awareness campaigns (Dadakhonov, 2024a; 2024b). This, they argued, has contributed to an initial surge in MIL awareness among diverse demographics. However, concerns were raised regarding the sustainability of these initiatives, with experts pointing to the need for greater local ownership and integration of MIL strategies into the national education framework (Dadakhonov, 2024a).

Based on the results of the conducted research, it can be summed up that the effectiveness of foreign aid in the field of MIL in Uzbekistan hinges on several key factors (Table 5):

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**Table 5.** Key factors for the effectiveness of foreign aid in the field of MIL in Uzbekistan (Source: author's own creation)

#	Key factors	Explanation
1.	Local Ownership and Engagement	Ensuring active involvement and ownership by local stakeholders, including government bodies, educational institutions, and community organizations, is vital for the sustained impact of foreign aid initiatives
2.	Cultural Relevance	Tailoring programs to align with Uzbekistan's unique cultural context is crucial. Recognizing local media consumption habits, language preferences, and societal norms enhances the effectiveness and acceptance of media literacy interventions
3.	Integration into Education Systems	Embedding MIL into formal and informal education structures ensures longevity. This integration fosters a systematic approach, reaching a broad spectrum of the population, including students and educators
4.	Continuous Adaptation	Recognizing the dynamic nature of the digital landscape, foreign aid programs should incorporate mechanisms for continuous adaptation. This involves staying abreast of evolving technologies, emerging media trends, and adjusting educational content accordingly
5.	Collaboration and Partnerships	Building sustainable partnerships with local institutions, NGOs, and private sector entities fosters a collaborative ecosystem. This not only shares the responsibility but also enhances the resources available for long-term initiatives.
6.	Monitoring and Evaluation	Establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms helps gauge the impact of interventions over time. Regular assessments enable adjustments based on feedback, ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of foreign aid efforts.
7.	Community Engagement and Awareness	Fostering community engagement and raising awareness about the importance of media literacy creates a demand for sustained efforts. Communities that understand the value of media literacy are more likely to advocate for its continued integration
8.	Capacity Building	Investing in the capacity building of local professionals, educators, and content creators develops a self-sufficient ecosystem. This empowers the local workforce to drive MIL initiatives independently

By addressing these factors collectively, foreign aid programs can contribute to the sustainable development of MIL in Uzbekistan, fostering a resilient framework that adapts to the evolving needs of the population.

**The formula for identifying the effectiveness.** The formula for identifying the effectiveness of foreign aid projects in the field of MIL in Central Asian countries may include the following key factors:

$$\text{“Effectiveness} = (\text{Reach of the project} + \text{Quality of content} + \text{Participant engagement}) / (\text{Cost of the project} + \text{Time taken for implementation})\text{”}$$

Where:

- Reach of the project refers to the number of individuals reached by the MIL initiatives. This can be measured by the number of participants or the coverage area.
- Quality of content is an assessment of the educational materials, resources, or media produced as part of the project, as well as the accuracy and relevance of the

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information.

- Participant engagement measures the level of involvement and interaction of the target audience with the MIL programs.
- Cost of the project reflects the financial resources invested in the initiative, considering both direct and indirect costs.
- Time taken for implementation refers to the duration from the start to completion of the project.

It is important to note that this formula is just a conceptual representation, and the actual assessment of effectiveness may involve a more comprehensive and tailored evaluation methodology based on specific project goals and objectives.

### CONCLUSION

The sustainability of foreign aid in the field of MIL in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries requires a strategic and long-term approach. By prioritizing local ownership, capacity building, and community engagement, foreign aid can support the development of sustainable MIL initiatives that promote media freedom, information access, and critical thinking. This model for sustainability can serve as a blueprint for foreign aid in other emerging democracies in the region, contributing to the advancement of MIL in Central Asia.

The examination of the effectiveness of foreign aid in advancing MIL within the unique landscape of Uzbekistan underscores the complexity of the endeavour. Through a meticulous review of existing literature, encompassing global perspectives on foreign aid in MIL development, the specificity of Uzbekistan's media landscape, case studies of aid programs, expert opinions, success indicators, and the importance of local empowerment, a multifaceted understanding has been cultivated.

Expert opinions, as gleaned from interviews with key stakeholders in Uzbekistan's media and education sectors, enrich the discourse by providing qualitative insights. These perspectives serve as a compass, guiding future interventions towards a more nuanced and contextually relevant approach.

As we navigate the complexities outlined in the literature, it becomes evident that the sustainability of foreign aid in MIL hinges on meticulous planning, community engagement, and adaptability to the dynamic media landscape. Clear success indicators and metrics, as identified by scholars, offer a roadmap for evaluating the impact of foreign aid initiatives and refining strategies for maximum efficacy.

In essence, this research paper serves as a vital contribution to the ongoing dialogue on foreign aid in MIL, specifically tailored to the Uzbekistan's context. By synthesizing expert opinions and lessons learned from both successful and less successful interventions, it provides a foundation for informed policymaking and strategic planning. As Uzbekistan continues its journey towards enhanced MIL, the insights derived from this analysis can guide future initiatives, fostering a more

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resilient and informed society in the rapidly evolving realm of media and information. In recent years, the field of MIL has been developing and gaining popularity in Uzbekistan. Projects and grants organized by foreign donor organizations based on cooperation with representatives of the Ministry of Education and several NGOs play a decisive role in its development.

There is a lot of work to be done to develop the field and increase MIL of the country's population. In this regard, it is necessary to create grants and projects by the state along with foreign grants.

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