MEDIA EDUCATION
Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche

Sustaining foreign aid initiatives in the field of media and information literacy within the central asian context

Il supporto straniero alle iniziative di alfabetizzazione ai media e all'informazione in Asia Centrale

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Abstract. In the ever-evolving landscape of global media and information dissemination, the need for literacy and critical understanding has become increasingly paramount. Central Asia, with its unique cultural tapestry and geopolitical challenges, stands as a region ripe for intervention in the realm of media and information literacy (MIL). This research paper examines the endeavours to attain sustainability in international MIL projects within the distinctive context of Central Asia. Through a multifaceted approach incorporating in-depth interviews with prominent media trainers and MIL experts and research works from Central Asian scholars, the study offers a comprehensive exploration of the sustainability landscape in the region. This study delves into the challenges and strategies associated with sustaining MIL initiatives, shedding light on the intricacies of fostering MIL in Central Asia. Findings highlight the importance of local partnerships, contextualization of interventions, resource allocation, technology integration, and policy advocacy in promoting sustainable MIL practices. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, policy documents, and empirical data, this paper sheds light on the various dimensions of foreign aid projects in MIL. The paper provides valuable guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders involved in advancing MIL efforts in Central Asia and beyond.

Keywords: MIL, sustainability, Central Asia, best practices, policymakers.

Riassunto. Nel panorama in continua evoluzione dei media globali e della diffusione delle informazioni, la necessità di alfabetizzazione e comprensione critica è diventata sempre più importante. L'Asia centrale, con il suo particolare arazzo culturale e le sue sfide geopolitiche, si presenta come una regione matura per l'intervento nel campo dell'alfabetizzazione ai media e all'informazione (MIL). Questo articolo esamina gli sforzi per raggiungere la sostenibilità dei progetti MIL internazionali nel contesto peculiare dell'Asia centrale. Attraverso un approccio sfaccettato che include interviste in profondità con importanti media educator ed esperti di MIL e lavori di ricerca di studiosi dell'Asia centrale, lo studio approfondisce le sfide e le strategie associate al sostegno delle iniziative MIL, facendo luce sulle complessità della loro promozione in

Asia centrale. I risultati evidenziano l'importanza dei partenariati locali, della contestualizzazione degli interventi, dell'allocazione delle risorse, dell'integrazione delle tecnologie e dell'advocacy politica nella promozione di pratiche MIL sostenibili. Attraverso una revisione completa della letteratura esistente, dei documenti politici e dei dati empirici, il presente documento fa luce sulle varie dimensioni dei progetti finanziati su fondi stranieri in materia di MIL. L'articolo fornisce una guida preziosa per i policymaker, gli educatori e gli stakeholder coinvolti nella promozione della MIL in Asia Centrale e non solo.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era characterized by the rapid proliferation of information and the ubiquity of media platforms, the importance of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) cannot be overstated. MIL equips individuals with the critical skills necessary to navigate the complex media landscape (Wilson et al., 2011; Andersson, 2021; Potter, 2021), discern credible information from misinformation (Singh & Banga, 2022; Lord & Vogt, 2021), and actively engage in democratic processes (Kahne et al., 2021; Ashley et al., 2017).

In the context of Central Asia, where media environments are evolving amidst diverse socio-cultural and political dynamics, the significance of MIL is particularly pronounced by several researchers (Akhmetova et al., 2013a; 2013b; Asanboeva, 2021; Chelysheva, 2019; Ismailova, 2016).

Central Asia, comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, is a region undergoing significant transformations in its media landscape (Freedman & Shafer, 2011; Haerpfer & Kizilova, 2020; Karabchuk et al., 2023).

As governments strive to modernize their media sectors and harness the potential of digital technologies, there is a growing recognition of the need to foster MIL among citizens. International organizations and donor agencies, such as UNESCO, UNISEF, IREX, Internews, DW-Akademie, have been instrumental in supporting MIL projects in the region, aiming to promote media literacy, freedom of expression, and access to information.

The topic of media literacy in Central Asian countries has long remained a subject of discussion exclusively in academic circles. Despite regularly held university conferences and a solid list of scientific publications, its discussion has not come to the fore in socio-political discourse. Trainings and courses on media literacy for residents of remote rural areas, university professors, and teachers began to be conducted approximately five to six years ago by non-profit organizations in the civil sector with the financial support of UNESCO, Internews, IREX, the Deutsche Welle Academy, as well as using grant funds allocated by a number of embassies foreign states within

the framework of cultural cooperation (Asanbayeva, 2021, p. 21).

However, achieving sustainability in international MIL projects in the Central Asian context poses a formidable challenge. As Morfaw (2014) aptly noted:

Project sustainability is now a common approach related to the management of projects, programs, institutions, organizations, people, and other entities requiring effective and efficient production, marketing, distribution, and the delivery products and services… It is a proven truism that most projects are failing because of the lack of an appropriate sustainability plan. It is therefore very necessary for a comprehensive analysis of the social, economic, legal, cultural, educational, and political environments for project implementation (para. 2)

Sustainability encompasses not only financial viability but also the integration of MIL practices into educational systems, media regulations, and community initiatives. It requires a concerted effort from stakeholders across sectors to ensure the enduring impact of MIL interventions.

Against this backdrop, this research paper endeavours to explore the attempts to achieve sustainability of international MIL projects within the Central Asian context. Drawing upon in-depth interview results, observations of MIL projects, and analysis of guidebooks and research works from Central Asian scholars, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the sustainability landscape in the region. By synthesizing insights from diverse sources, the paper aims to identify key challenges, strategies, and best practices for sustaining MIL initiatives in Central Asia.

The insights gleaned from this research are expected to contribute to both scholarly discourse, practical policymaking and programming in the field of MIL. As Central Asia navigates the complexities of media development and information dissemination, fostering a culture of MIL becomes imperative for promoting informed citizenship, safeguarding democratic values, and fostering social cohesion. Through collaborative efforts and inno-

vative approaches, the vision of a sustainable and resilient media ecosystem in Central Asia can be realized.

The aim of this research paper is to explore the endeavours to achieve sustainability of international MIL projects within the Central Asian context, drawing upon insights from in-depth interviews with media trainers and MIL experts, observations of MIL projects, and analysis of guidebooks and research works from Central Asian scholars.

Research questions for this research are as follows:

RQ1. How do MIL trainers and media experts explain the importance of MIL projects in the region?

RQ2. What are the primary challenges faced in achieving sustainability in international MIL projects within the Central Asian context?

RQ3. What strategies have been implemented by MIL trainers in Central Asia to ensure the long-term sustainability of their projects?

RQ4. In what ways do MIL trainers in Central Asia assess the effectiveness of their sustainability efforts and adjust their strategies accordingly?

RQ5. What are the most effective strategies for ensuring the long-term sustainability of foreign aid projects focused on MIL in Central Asian countries?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous scholars have emphasized the significance of MIL in empowering individuals to critically engage with media content and navigate the complexities of the information landscape. According to Nitsche (2020), MIL is essential for fostering critical thinking, promoting civic participation, and mitigating the spread of misinformation and protecting young people from cyberbullying and its traumas.

The following quote can be found on the UNESCO (8 September 2017) website:

In the global, sustainable context, MIL competencies are indispensable to the critical understanding and engagement in development of democratic participation, sustainable societies, building trust in media, good governance and peacebuilding (para. 9)

In Central Asia, where media freedom and access to information vary across countries (Freedman & Shafer, 2011; Karabchuk et al., 2023), MIL serves as a catalyst for promoting transparency, accountability, and pluralism in media systems (Akhmetova et al., 2013b).

Achieving sustainability in MIL projects requires overcoming various challenges, ranging from institutional barriers to socio-cultural constraints. As highlighted by Morfaw (2014), 'for projects to be sustained, certain metrics and standards need to be set from project identification through feasibility studies, formulation, design, appraisal, funding, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation'. Moreover, the lack of supportive policies and frameworks for integrating MIL into educational curricula and media regulations poses a significant challenge. Additionally, language barriers and digital divides exacerbate the accessibility of MIL resources and training programs in Central Asian countries.

Despite the challenges, scholars and practitioners have identified several strategies for enhancing the sustainability of MIL projects in the Central Asian context. Localization of MIL initiatives, as advocated by Asanbaeva (2021), Akhmetova (2016), Dadakhonov (2023) involves tailoring interventions to the specific sociocultural contexts of Central Asian countries. Collaborative partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions are also essential for leveraging resources and expertise to sustain MIL efforts. Furthermore, integrating MIL into formal and non-formal education systems, as recommended by UNESCO, can institutionalize media literacy practices and promote lifelong learning.

Research works and guidebooks authored by Central Asian scholars offer valuable insights into the local dynamics of MIL and the challenges unique to the region. For example, studies by several scholars, such as Zadorin et al. (2023), Chelysheva (2019) highlight the importance of addressing promoting MIL skills in Central Asia.

The research by Zadorin et al. (2023) provided results of the cross-country studies, conducted in 2019 and 2021 in the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). The authors highlighted the main communicative practices and characteristics of media literacy level of the countries' population. The article also presented the methodology for measuring media literacy, including two models of the media literacy index, that has shown its consistency for cross-country research. Special attention was drawn to the social and economic differences of the countries, that may influence the media literacy level.

Chelysheva (2019) conducted an analysis of media education in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, examining its goals, structure, content, and development stages. The study also reviewed scientific literature and practical experiences in media literacy education across Central Asian countries. The author concluded that the primary objective of media education in these countries is to enhance the population's media literacy and competence.

Additionally, observations of MIL projects in the region provide practical insights into the effectiveness of various approaches and methodologies in promoting sustainable media literacy practices (Dadakhonov, 2023). In recent times, several surveys and sociological studies have been conducted in order to determine the MIL level of different strata of the population in the region. Internews Kazakhstan, conducted with the support of USAID "Media consumption and media literacy in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan" (Internews, 2021) and Analytical report based on the sociological study of the Center for the Development of Contemporary Journalism (2021) and "Report on the results of a study of the level of media literacy in the Kyrgyz Republic" published by Library of the Institute of Media Polis (2018) among them. However, in all these surveys, the fact that the knowledge of the population in Central Asian countries is not high on MIL is justified by the results of a special sociological study.

In summary, the literature reviewed underscores the importance of addressing the multifaceted challenges and leveraging contextualized strategies to achieve sustainability in international MIL projects within the Central Asian context. By drawing upon insights from diverse sources, this research paper aims to contribute to the advancement of MIL scholarship and inform practical interventions for promoting media literacy in Central Asia.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection was primarily conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented by observations of MIL projects, and review of research works from MIL scholars.

Semi-structured interviews, as described by Wong et al (2023), allow progressive interview refinements to gain an in-depth understanding of a research question. Regarding the sustainability of MIL projects in Central Asia, semi structured interviews allow for in-depth probing of key themes and issues. In-depth interviews were conducted either in person or via video conferencing platforms, allowing for flexibility and accessibility. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore participants' insights, experiences, and perspectives regarding the sustainability of international MIL projects in Central Asia. The interviews covered topics such as challenges encountered, successful strategies employed, and recommendations for enhancing sustainability.

The study recruited a purposive sample of 19 media trainers and MIL experts with extensive experience working in Central Asia. As Kelly (2010) notes, purposive sampling is «used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information» (p. 317). Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants who possess relevant knowledge and expertise, ensuring the depth and richness of the data collected. Participants were selected based on their involvement in international MIL projects, expertise in media literacy, and familiarity with the socio-cultural context of Central Asian countries. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, nationality, and organizational affiliation among the participants.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and respondent-driven sampling, leveraging existing networks and contacts within the field of media literacy in Central Asia. According to Ellard-Gray et al. (2015), snowball sampling is particularly effective for accessing hard-to-reach populations and generating referrals from initial participants, thereby facilitating the recruitment process. Similar to snowball sampling, respondent-driven sampling has been suggested to reduce bias so that those with large, open networks are not oversampled (Heckathorn, 1997). Respondent-driven sampling begins with an initial sample and involves asking that sample to refer or recruit a specified number of peers, resulting in several waves of participants, each wave recruited by the last (Heckathorn, 1997). Initial contacts were identified through professional associations, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international agencies involved in media development initiatives in the region.

General information about experts is summarised in the Table 1. Period of the interviewing was from January 2021 till December 2023. Nineteen potential participants were approached, and those who expressed interest were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives and procedures. Face-to-face interviews lasted 30–40 minutes.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze interview transcripts, observation notes, and literature review findings. Jnanathapaswi (2021) outline the iterative process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting data to identify recurring themes and patterns across the dataset.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, involving iterative coding and interpretation of interview transcripts, observation notes, and literature review findings. Transcribed interviews were coded manually or using qualitative data analysis software, allowing for the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and discrepancies. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, literature) facilitated the validation of findings and enriched the depth of analysis.

Table 1. Information about respondents.

Code	Gender	Age	Academic degree	Role in MIL projects	Experience (in years)
			Uzbekistan		
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
			Kyrgyzstan		
R16	Female	27	N/A	Program Director, project manager, media trainer	16
R17	Male	32	N/A	Project Coordinator for the Southern Region of Kyrgyzstan	6
R18	Female	28	N/A	MIL Project Coordinator	5
R19	Female	27	N/A	Project Development Manager and media expert	7

Source: Author's own processing.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for conducting research with human subjects. Researchers adhered to ethical guidelines for conducting research with human subjects, respecting participants' rights and privacy at all times.

Overall, the combination of in-depth interviews, observations, and literature review facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the sustainability landscape of international MIL projects within the Central Asian context. Drawing upon established methodological frameworks and ethical principles, the study generated valuable insights and recommendations for advancing media literacy efforts in the region.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Importance of MIL projects in the region: insights by the interviewees

The insights gathered from the interviews shed light on the crucial importance of MIL projects in the Central Asian region, particularly in countries like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. These projects play a vital role in safeguarding the population against external and internal information threats, as highlighted by one interviewee (R8).

When it comes to why MIL is needed for the Central Asian region, the following can be emphasized: in the face of challenges such as information attacks from external actors like Russia and China, as well as the proliferation of misinformation within social networks, MIL initiatives serve as a shield, equipping individuals with the necessary skills to discern credible information from falsehoods (R8)

Moreover, foreign aid initiatives hold significant weight in advancing MIL efforts, especially in regions where government prioritization of media literacy is lacking, as noted by another interviewee (R9). This underscores the critical role of international organizations in providing funding and support for media researchers and trainers, who are instrumental in promoting media literacy among diverse segments of the population.

The establishment of "Media Literacy Houses" in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan exemplifies the grassroots efforts to impart media literacy skills to individuals of all backgrounds, ranging from homemakers to professionals (R9). Such initiatives not only empower individuals to navigate the media landscape effectively but also contribute to broader societal development by fostering a culture of critical thinking and informed decision-making.

Furthermore, the experiences of other nations, such as Scandinavian countries, highlight the long-term benefits of integrating MIL into education systems and societal frameworks (R7). While Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan are only beginning to mainstream MIL practices within their educational curricula, international collaboration and support can expedite this process, ultimately enhancing the quality of education and media consumption nationwide.

> 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. Well, 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. This effects many areas of the development of the state (R7)

In essence, the comprehensive adoption of MIL principles stands to positively impact various facets of national development, ranging from education to governance, thereby underscoring its indispensable role in shaping the future trajectory of Central Asian societies.

4.2 The primary challenges faced in achieving sustainability in international MIL projects within the Central Asian context

These challenges within the Central Asian countries are multifaceted and demand strategic solutions.

Firstly, the lack of comprehensive methodology and competent management within the Ministry of Education impedes the effective integration of MIL into the education system. As highlighted by R3, despite the presence of small-scale projects, the absence of standardized methodologies hampers the widespread adoption of MIL education:

> There are small projects for the development of media literacy, however, the Ministry of Education, which is entrusted with the introduction 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)

Secondly, inadequate funding allocation, as noted in R6, poses a significant barrier to sustaining MIL initiatives. Insufficient financial resources limit the scope and impact of projects, hindering their ability to address the complex challenges of media literacy comprehensively.

Furthermore, issues of corruption and nepotism, as highlighted by R10 and R12, exacerbate the sustainability challenge. The tendency to favour certain authors or organizations repeatedly undermines the diversity of ideas and expertise necessary for innovative and effective MIL interventions. Addressing these systemic issues is essential for fostering an inclusive and transparent environment conducive to sustainable project development.

Moreover, logistical and bureaucratic hurdles, such as tax regulations, banking systems, and documentation complexities, as mentioned by R9, add layers of difficulty to project implementation. Streamlining administrative processes and enhancing collaboration between international and local stakeholders are imperative for overcoming these obstacles and ensuring efficient project execution.

Additionally, the lack of capacity among domestic MIL activists, as highlighted in R4, further complicates sustainability efforts:

> Lack of skills among domestic MIL activists to effectively use the provided funding, they do not always think carefully about attracting participants (often there are random, unmotivated and not promising participants in the group), mental peculiarities are not always taken into account, etc. (R4)

Insufficient skills in project management, participant recruitment, and cultural sensitivity impede the effective utilization of funding and diminish the long-term impact of initiatives. Investing in capacity-building programs and fostering partnerships with experienced organizations can help address these skill gaps and enhance the effectiveness of MIL interventions.

In conclusion, achieving sustainability in international MIL projects within the Central Asian context requires concerted efforts to address systemic challenges related to methodology, funding, corruption, bureaucracy, and capacity building. By implementing strategic reforms and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, it is possible to overcome these obstacles and advance the cause of MIL in the region.

4.3 Strategies implemented by stakeholders and MIL trainers in Central Asia to ensure the long-term sustainability of their projects

The sustainability of foreign aid initiatives in Central Asia, particularly in the realm of MIL, relies heavily on the strategies implemented by stakeholders and MIL trainers. Drawing from insights gathered from in-depth interviews, several key strategies emerge as integral to ensuring the long-term viability of such projects.

One of the interviewees (R3) highlights the effectiveness of Internews's approach, emphasizing their utilization of a classic scheme involving competitive selection for trainings and master classes, coupled with the opportunity for participants to receive grants or scholarships to implement ideas developed during these sessions. This model not only fosters skill development but also provides tangible support for project implementation, enhancing the sustainability of initiatives:

> From what I know – Internews. It is effective because they use their classic scheme: competitive selection for trainings and master classes and the opportunity to receive a grant or scholarships to implement the idea developed during the trainings (R3)

Similarly, respondent 4 (R4) identifies organizations such as Internews, USAID, and Deutsche Welle Academy as pivotal in driving MIL efforts in Central Asia. These entities engage in a multifaceted approach that encompasses international conferences, trainings, competitions, and the establishment of networks like the CAMIL network. Through these collaborative endeavours, stakeholders recognize the importance of MIL in addressing contemporary challenges and leverage financial resources to sustain initiatives over time.

Moreover, one of the respondents (R14) underscores the significance of continuous learning and collaboration to enhance project efficiency and longevity. Recommending more offline meetings with colleagues from the Central Asian region and beyond, the respondent emphasizes the value of exchanging experiences, sharing relevant cases, and staying abreast of innovations

in promoting media literacy. Such interactions not only foster knowledge dissemination but also cultivate a sense of community among stakeholders, strengthening the foundation for sustained collaboration and impact:

> To further increase the efficiency and sustainability of projects in the future, I recommend holding more offline meetings with colleagues from the Central Asian region and other countries. Constant exchange of experience, learning about new relevant cases and innovations in methods of promoting Media Literacy (R14)

In summary, the sustainability of MIL projects in Central Asia hinges on a combination of factors, including competitive selection processes, strategic partnerships with international organizations, and ongoing knowledge exchange and collaboration. By adopting these strategies and recommendations, stakeholders and MIL trainers can effectively navigate challenges and work towards the long-term advancement of MIL in the region.

4.4 Ways for assess the effectiveness of their sustainability efforts by MIL trainers in Central Asia and adjust their strategies accordingly

The effectiveness and sustainability of MIL initiatives in the Central Asian context are crucial for fostering informed citizenry and combating misinformation. Through in-depth interviews with stakeholders, several key themes emerged regarding the evaluation and long-term viability of MIL projects.

Respondents emphasized the importance of considering multiple factors when evaluating the effectiveness of MIL projects. These factors include aligning project objectives with the expectations of stakeholders and participants, assessing student reactions, measuring the effectiveness of knowledge transfer, and evaluating the practical application of acquired skills. This comprehensive approach ensures that MIL initiatives not only meet immediate goals but also contribute to long-term behavioural change and information literacy enhancement (R4).

Furthermore, respondents highlighted the significance of audience-centric content selection in determining the success of MIL training sessions. Tailoring topics according to the specific demands and interests of the audience enhances engagement and fosters a deeper understanding of media literacy concepts (R9).

A recurring theme among respondents was the necessity of continuous training to sustain the effectiveness of MIL projects. Given the dynamic nature of media and information dissemination, ongoing educa-

tion is essential to keep pace with evolving trends and technologies. Continuous training not only reinforces existing knowledge but also allows participants to adapt to changing media landscapes effectively (R11).

The main criterion of effectiveness is the need to conduct continuous training. The reason is that media literacy should be talked about every minute, not every day. Because the flow of information is increasing every hour, and their genre, format, instrument, distribution audience is expanding. Formation of practical knowledge and skills of the participants also depends on continuous training (R11)

Moreover, the long-term nature of MIL projects emerged as a critical factor in ensuring their effectiveness and sustainability. Short-term interventions may not yield significant results within the complex sociocultural context of Central Asia. Therefore, investing in long-term initiatives facilitates gradual change and enables the consolidation of media literacy practices within local communities. Additionally, international collaboration and the exchange of expertise play a vital role in broadening perspectives and enriching MIL interventions (R18).

To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of MIL projects, the long-term nature of the project must be considered first. Since often short-term projects do not give results in such a short time, when it comes to projects aimed at developing and improving media information awareness in Kyrgyzstan. If we talk about international projects, we can note the exchange of experience of experts/trainers, which often helps people to look at things from a different angle» (R18)

In conclusion, sustaining foreign aid initiatives in MIL within the Central Asian context requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes stakeholder engagement, audience-centric content delivery, continuous training, and long-term planning. By incorporating these insights into project design and evaluation, stakeholders can maximize the impact of MIL initiatives and foster a more informed and resilient society in the region.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Sustainability challenges and strategies in international MIL projects

Projects have become increasingly globalized, contributing significantly to growth in the countries in which they are executed, particularly for the local industry in developing countries (Aarseth et al., 2011; Javernick-Will & Scott, 2010). On the other hand, projects also pose challenges to the local community and government, sustainable development being one of these challenges. The question of how actors like state bodies, corporations, and others can develop and execute projects without compromising the life and prosperity of future generations is fundamentally important (Aarseth et al., 2017).

As Neckel noted (2017):

Sustainability has become a central theme in the public sphere and a key concept in social change. Numerous institutions, businesses, organisations and public entities invoke sustainability as a core value and as a guiding principle for their actions. Today alongside environmental issues, economic and social problems are increasingly being discussed under the heading of sustainability as well (p. 46).

One of the key concepts at the center of this study is the term sustainability, which is a broad concept, and the definition given in the field of Project Sustainability Management is more suitable for the term in this study.

In our changing world, sustainability in projects is more important than ever. Project sustainability involves both individual and organisational responsibility to ensure that outputs, outcomes and benefits are sustainable over life cycles and during their creation, disposal and decommissioning. Building sustainability into the vision at the very start of the project – if sustainability is planned in as a key requirement from the outset, it can't be traded or forgotten. Sustainability is relevant across all areas of project-based working (Association for Project Management, 2024, para. 2).

As one of the respondents admitted, the comprehensive introduction of MIL, has a beneficial effect on the development of the country, since this is a matter of quality education and quality media consumption. This effects many areas of the development of the state. Hence, UNESCO has designated MIL as integral to attaining sustainable development goals. Ensuring the sustainability of projects aimed at promoting the MIL sector becomes paramount, given its significant potential to contribute to the sustainable development of individuals, societies, and states.

MIL projects face numerous sustainability challenges, prompting scholars to delve into strategies for long-term viability. Funding instability can be a major barrier to sustaining MIL initiatives, requiring innovative financial models. In addressing these challenges and foster-

ing the sustainability of MIL initiatives, it is crucial to consider the issues highlighted on the European Commission website (26 May 2023). These include convening media literacy stakeholders into expert groups; identifying, documenting, and expanding best practices in the field of media literacy; promoting networking among diverse stakeholders; and exploring strategies for coordinating policies, support programs, and media literacy initiatives across various countries and organizations. Moreover, Wells et al. (2021) emphasizes the significance of cultivating partnerships with diverse stakeholders to foster sustainable communities.

By synthesizing insights from diverse scholars, this analysis aims to shed light on the complexities of sustaining international MIL projects and offer viable strategies for their longevity and impact. Through a comprehensive examination of sustainability challenges and strategies, the research paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue on fostering MIL initiatives in the dynamic Central Asian landscape.

The governments in many countries are more and more aware of their responsibility to ensure sustainability, at least locally. Empirical studies have demonstrated how governments require that companies executing projects develop strategies, action plans and performance indicators which will contribute to sustainable development in the host country (Aarseth et al., 2017, p. 1072)

5.2 Key factors emerge as critical for assessing effectiveness and adjusting strategies

The effectiveness of sustainability efforts in MIL projects in Central Asia is crucial for ensuring long-term impact and relevance. Drawing from in-depth interviews with MIL trainers in the region, several key factors emerge as critical for assessing effectiveness and adjusting strategies accordingly.

1. *Alignment with Stakeholder Expectations*. Respondents emphasized the importance of aligning MIL initiatives with the expectations of both customers and participants. Understanding their needs and objectives throughout the project lifecycle ensures relevance and engagement.
2. *Participant Reactions and Changes*. Monitoring participant reactions and assessing any observable changes in their knowledge and behaviours are vital indicators of effectiveness. Evaluating whether MIL training leads to tangible outcomes and behavioural shifts underscores the project's impact.
3. *Application of Knowledge and Skills*. Effectiveness extends beyond the training session to practical application in real-life contexts. Post-training assessments and follow-up mechanisms are essential for gauging the extent to which participants apply MIL knowledge and skills in their daily lives.
4. *Audience Demand and Continuous Training*. Tailoring training topics according to audience demand, as highlighted by respondents, ensures relevance and sustained interest. Moreover, recognizing the evolving nature of media landscapes, continuous training is essential for keeping pace with changing information dynamics and enhancing practical competencies over time.
5. *Long-Term Project Sustainability*. Long-term sustainability is a cornerstone of effective MIL projects. Recognizing the need for continuous engagement and capacity-building efforts, especially in rapidly evolving media environments, is crucial for achieving lasting impact. International collaboration and the exchange of expertise contribute to a broader perspective and enrich the effectiveness of MIL initiatives in the region.

In general, assessing the effectiveness of sustainability efforts in MIL projects requires a multifaceted approach that considers stakeholder expectations, participant reactions, practical application, audience demand, and long-term sustainability. By incorporating these insights into project design and implementation, MIL trainers in Central Asia can enhance the relevance, impact, and longevity of their initiatives, thereby fostering media literacy and information awareness in the region.

5.3 Strategies of providing sustainability of foreign aid projects in the field of MIL in Central Asian countries.

Ensuring the sustainability of foreign aid projects in the field of MIL in Central Asian countries requires a multifaceted approach. With the increasing importance of MIL in today's digital age, there is a growing need for donor organizations, recipient countries, and NGOs to develop sustainability strategies to ensure the long-term impact of foreign aid in this field, particularly in the Central Asian context.

In recent years, experts and researchers in Central Asia have consistently offered valuable suggestions for advancing media literacy in the region. During the expert meeting "How to Improve the Media Literacy of the Population of the Central Asian Countries?" organized by the CABAR.asia analytical platform on March 18, 2022, experts from four countries of the region addressed issues such as community polarization, low media literacy, and a lack of critical thinking. They concluded the discussion by proposing various measures to

enhance media literacy, including more comprehensive efforts by governments to promote critical thinking, support for initiatives to educate diverse segments of the population, and intensified efforts to ensure information security etc (Cabar.asia, 06 April 2022).

The group of researchers who conducted a survey aimed at determining the Media Literacy Level of the Kyrgyz population (Eshenalieva et al., 2013), have offered recommendations to state bodies (p. 15), for civil society (p.16), to the mass media (p. 16), and to donors and international organizations (p. 17) to develop the field in the country at the end of their study.

In this article, based on the recommendations offered by MIL experts in these surveys and respondents views during the interviews, an attempt was made to find out strategies for initiative sustainability in the field of MIL in the region.

One of the key challenges in advancing MIL in Central Asia is the lack of adequate resources and capacity within recipient countries to sustain initiatives beyond the initial funding period. Donor organizations play a crucial role in providing financial support, technical expertise, and networking opportunities to help build the capacity of local stakeholders and institutions. However, without a comprehensive sustainability strategy in place, these efforts may be short-lived and fail to achieve lasting change.

To address this issue, donor organizations should work with recipient countries and local NGOs to develop long-term sustainability plans that outline clear objectives, strategies, and mechanisms for ensuring the continued impact of MIL initiatives. This may include building partnerships with local universities and educational institutions, establishing training programs for educators and media professionals, and investing in the development of curricula and educational materials.

At the same time, recipient countries and local NGOs need to take ownership of these initiatives and demonstrate their commitment to sustaining them beyond the support of external donors. This may involve advocating for policy changes, mobilizing resources from government and private sector sources, and building networks with other organizations and stakeholders in the region.

By developing sustainability strategies that involve collaboration between donor organizations, recipient countries, and NGOs, we can ensure that foreign aid investments in MIL have a lasting impact on the development of a more informed, engaged, and empowered citizenry in Central Asia. This, in turn, can help promote democratic governance, social cohesion, and economic development in the region.

Table 2 summarizes several ways to achieve sustainability in MIL projects by different actors:

By implementing these strategies tailored to the Central Asian context, donor organizations, recipient countries and NGOs can contribute to the sustainability of foreign aid in the field of MIL, ultimately empowering individuals and communities to navigate the digital landscape critically and responsibly.

6. CONCLUSION

In the process of conducting this research, it was admitted that, to ensure the effectiveness of projects in the field of MIL, it is necessary to properly promote the role of MIL in the life of society to people and members of the government. After all, MIL is important in the implementation of the following areas: increasing the level of knowledge and digital literacy of the population in the society; in the establishment of freedom of speech and opinion in society; in the effective course of democratic reforms and the formation of pluralism; in the development of quality journalism; in the establishment of the independent information space of the developing countries.

The theoretical analysis conducted in this paper has shed light on the underlying frameworks and conceptual paradigms that shape MIL interventions in Central Asia. By examining the theoretical underpinnings of foreign aid initiatives, this research has highlighted the importance of understanding the socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts within which these interventions operate. Furthermore, it has emphasized the need for a nuanced approach that accounts for the diverse perspectives and realities of Central Asian societies.

The practical analysis conducted in this paper has provided actionable recommendations for sustaining foreign aid initiatives in the field of MIL within the Central Asian context. By synthesizing insights from the interviews with experts, this research has identified key challenges and proposed strategies to address them effectively.

Based on the results of this research, it is necessary to implement the following recommendations to ensure the sustainability of foreign aid in the field of MIL in Central Asian countries:

– Foster greater collaboration between academics, researchers, and policymakers to refine and contextualize theoretical frameworks for MIL in Central Asia.
– Encourage the development of locally driven theoretical models that reflect the unique socio-cultural dynamics of the region.

Table 2. Sustainability strategies of foreign aid MIL projects in Central Asian countries

Strategies for donor organizations	Strategies for recipient countries/governments	Strategies Recipient NGOs
Partnership with Local Institutions. Forge partnerships with local governments, educational institutions, media organizations, and civil society groups to integrate MIL into existing structures. Collaborating with local stakeholders fosters ownership and increases the likelihood of sustainability.	*Local Partnerships.* Foster partnerships with local governments, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and media outlets to integrate MIL into existing educational and media structures. This ensures buy-in from local stakeholders and increases the chances of sustainability.	*Partnership Development.* Forge partnerships with local educational institutions, media organizations, community groups, and government agencies to create a network of stakeholders committed to MIL. Collaborative partnerships can provide resources, expertise, and support for sustainability efforts.
Curriculum Integration Work with educational authorities to integrate MIL principles into school curricula at various levels. Embedding MIL education into formal education systems ensures its institutionalization and long-term sustainability.	*Curriculum Integration* Work with local education authorities to integrate MIL into school curricula at various levels. By embedding MIL principles into formal education systems, the knowledge becomes institutionalized and more likely to be sustained over time.	*Capacity Sharing and Networking* Facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration with other NGOs, both locally and internationally, working on MIL issues. Sharing best practices, lessons learned, and resources strengthens the capacity of recipient NGOs and contributes to sustainability.
Capacity Building Invest in training local educators, journalists, and community leaders to become MIL advocates and trainers. Building local capacity empowers communities to sustain MIL efforts independently beyond the lifespan of foreign aid projects.	*Capacity Building* Invest in training local trainers and educators in MIL techniques and methodologies. This empowers local communities to sustainably continue MIL initiatives beyond the lifespan of the foreign aid project.	*Local Capacity Building* Invest in training local staff and volunteers to become MIL trainers, educators, and advocates. Building local capacity ensures that MIL initiatives can be sustained even after the foreign aid ends.
Cultural Sensitivity Tailor MIL interventions to the cultural and linguistic diversity of Central Asian countries. Recognize local norms, values, and communication preferences to ensure relevance and acceptance of MIL initiatives within the community.	*Cultural Sensitivity* Tailor MIL initiatives to the cultural and linguistic contexts of Central Asian countries. Understanding local norms, values, and communication preferences is essential for designing effective and sustainable interventions.	*Cultural Sensitivity* Adapt MIL interventions to the cultural context and language preferences of Central Asian communities. Tailoring approaches to local norms, values, and communication styles increases relevance and acceptance, fostering sustainability.
Community Engagement Empower communities through awareness campaigns, workshops, and community-led initiatives. Engaging local populations in MIL activities fosters grassroots support and ownership, contributing to sustainability.	Community Engagement Engage local communities through workshops, awareness campaigns, and community-led initiatives. Empowering communities to understand the importance of MIL and enabling them to take ownership of initiatives increases the likelihood of sustainability.	Community Engagement Empower local communities to take ownership of MIL initiatives through participatory approaches such as community-based workshops, awareness campaigns, and citizen journalism programs. Engaging communities fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to sustaining MIL efforts.
Digital Infrastructure Development Invest in improving digital infrastructure and access to information technologies, including internet connectivity and digital literacy programs. Enhancing digital access facilitates MIL efforts and supports sustainable information dissemination.	*Digital Infrastructure* Invest in digital infrastructure and technological solutions that support MIL efforts. This includes providing access to reliable internet, digital literacy programs, and platforms for sharing MIL resources and information.	*Technology Integration* Harness digital technologies and social media platforms to deliver MIL content, resources, and training programs to a wider audience. Leveraging technology increases the scalability and impact of MIL interventions, contributing to sustainability.
Advocacy for Policy Integration Advocate for the integration of MIL policies and practices into national development agendas and media regulations. Influencing policy ensures that MIL remains a priority beyond the duration of specific projects.	*Policy Advocacy* Advocate for the integration of MIL policies into national educational frameworks and media regulations. By enacting supportive policies, recipient countries can institutionalize MIL initiatives and ensure their sustainability beyond the lifespan of foreign aid projects.	*Advocacy and Policy Influence* Advocate for the integration of MIL policies and practices into national education curricula, media regulations, and development agendas. By influencing policy and decision-making processes, NGOs can institutionalize MIL initiatives and ensure long-term sustainability.

Table 2. (Continued).

Strategies for donor organizations	Strategies for recipient countries/governments	Strategies Recipient NGOs
Support for Media Development: Provide support for independent media outlets and journalists committed to promoting MIL principles. Strengthening media freedom and professionalism contributes to a more informed and critical public discourse, essential for MIL sustainability.	*Resource Mobilization* Strengthen domestic funding mechanisms for MIL initiatives through government budgets, public-private partnerships, and philanthropic support. Diversifying funding sources reduces dependence on foreign aid and increases financial sustainability.	*Resource Mobilization* Diversify funding sources by seeking support from local businesses, philanthropic foundations, and international donors interested in MIL. Developing sustainable funding streams reduces reliance on foreign aid and enhances financial stability.
Monitoring and Evaluation Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact and effectiveness of MIL interventions. Regular assessments help identify areas for improvement and inform future programming, ensuring continuous progress and sustainability.	*Monitoring and Evaluation* Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the effectiveness and impact of MIL initiatives. Regular assessments help identify areas for improvement and ensure that resources are allocated efficiently to sustain successful programs.	*Monitoring and Evaluation* Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the progress, impact, and effectiveness of MIL initiatives. Regular assessments help identify areas for improvement and demonstrate the value of MIL interventions to donors and stakeholders, enhancing sustainability.
Long-term Funding Commitment Prioritize long-term funding commitments and multi-year partnerships to support sustained MIL efforts. Stable funding allows for strategic planning, capacity building, and program continuity, essential for achieving lasting impact.	*Financial Sustainability* Explore avenues for financial sustainability beyond initial foreign aid funding. This may include establishing partnerships with private sector entities, philanthropic organizations, or government funding streams dedicated to MIL initiatives.	*Long-term Planning* Develop strategic plans with clear goals, objectives, and timelines for MIL initiatives, emphasizing sustainability and scalability. Long-term planning ensures continuity and guides resource allocation towards sustainable outcomes.

Source: Author's own processing.

– Promote interdisciplinary research that integrates insights from fields such as communication studies, sociology, and cultural studies to enrich theoretical understandings of MIL in Central Asia.

– Enhance capacity-building efforts aimed at local stakeholders, including educators, media professionals, and civil society organizations, to strengthen their ability to promote MIL.

– Foster partnerships between international donors and local institutions to ensure the sustainability and relevance of MIL programs in Central Asia.

– Prioritize the development of context-specific resources and materials that cater to the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Central Asian populations.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, practitioners, and donors can contribute to the sustainable development of MIL initiatives in Central Asia, thereby empowering individuals and communities to critically engage with media content and navigate the complex information landscape effectively.

Moving forward, future research should delve deeper into several areas to advance our understanding of sustaining MIL initiatives in Central Asia. This includes exploring the impact of specific interventions on MIL competencies and behaviours, examining the role of media literacy in promoting civic engagement and democratic participation, and investigating the intersectionality of MIL with other fields such as digital literacy, human rights education, and media development. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term sustainability and scalability of MIL projects and to identify best practices for adaptation and replication in diverse contexts.

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