

## US FUNDED EDUCATION PROJECTS IN KYRGYZSTAN IN THE LAST 20 YEARS: CONTRIBUTION TO THE REFORMS, SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

“What are the main US funded education programs in Kyrgyzstan and how much they contribute to the education reforms in Kyrgyzstan in the last twenty years?” is the question that seeks the answer through this article.

**Key words:** US programs and projects, the reform in education, exchanging programmes, education development.

"Каковы основные финансируемые образовательные программы США в Кыргызстане и как они способствуют реформе образования в Кыргызстане в течение последних двадцати лет?" Ответ на этот вопрос в этой статье.

**Ключевые слова:** программы и проекты США, реформы в сфере образования, Программы по обмену, развитие образования.

After the gaining independence from Russia the Kyrgyz Republic chose its own way of development including the education system. The previous Soviet Kyrgyzstani education system had reached lots of achievements, since the literacy rate in the country was very low under the Russian Empire and was improved dramatically during the Soviet Union; e.g. 3.1% vs. 99.7% .

After the collapse of the USSR, the independent Kyrgyz Republic had to form its own education system; since the country shifted from communist into the market economy. Accordingly, the education system together with the other sectors had to meet the market-oriented system principles. Thus, newly founded independent country needed some support in education system reforms from well-developed capitalist countries including the Western Europe and United States of America.

The reform in education sector mostly funded and supported by the European Union (EU) and US programs and projects. The EU programs are

mainly focused on higher and vocational education systems; e.g. projects as TACIS, TEMPUS , and DAAD concentrated on higher education and GIZ on vocational education. Since this paper is focused on US projects, the EU projects are not discussed in this article.

The USA funded education programs/projects covered almost all levels of education system in Kyrgyzstan. There are many different US funded programs/projects that focused on education development support in Kyrgyzstan; this article is devoted to such programs/projects' achievements, challenges, and prospective. The key question of this article is, “the main US funded education programs in Kyrgyzstan and how much they contribute to the education reforms in Kyrgyzstan in the last twenty years.” Relying on this research question I seek to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the main US funded programs/projects on education reform in Kyrgyzstan and their missions?

2. What are the major contribution and impact of the US funded education reform programs/projects to the Kyrgyz education? and

3. What is the prospective of the US initiated education programs/projects in Kyrgyzstan?

The responses to the above-mentioned questions are based on US funded education projects' reports, publications on US projects impact to the Kyrgyz education system, and my own experience of studying in two-year U.S. State Department Fellowship graduate program "Muskie" and working in six different US funded projects in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia.

1. Main US funded projects on education reform in Kyrgyzstan and their missions

Since the early 1990s Kyrgyzstan had been benefitting from various US programs and projects that were targeted at education reforms in the country. The US funded projects covered almost all levels of the education system including; basic education, high school, undergraduate and graduate levels of universities, professional development in general, civic education, leadership programs, and other programs/projects that support the US values and democracy.

The US funded programs/projects in Kyrgyzstan pursue to support the better exchanging of the ideas and information between the two societies; the USA and Kyrgyzstan.

The key implementers of the US funded education programs are the American Councils for International Education, International Research and Exchange Board; Soros Foundation – Kyrgyzstan and Open Society Foundation; several international organizations of the USAID financed education projects' implementers; Peace Corps; and US Embassy in the KR.

American Councils for International Education ACTR/ACCELS: Currently the American Councils for International Education offers programs for high school students, for undergraduate students, and for professionals from different fields. For instance, FLEX (Future Leaders Exchange Program) for high school students; OW (Open World) for the professionals and leaders in different spheres; and U.S. – CAEF (U.S. Central Asian Education Foundation) for the AUCA (American University – Central Asia) students in Bishkek.

IREX (International Research and Exchange Board): IREX focuses on supporting scholars, researchers, professionals, and experts from

different fields through exchange programs. The following are the main programs of IREX: Global UGRAD (Undergraduate Exchange) exchange program for undergraduate students; TEA (Teaching Excellence and Achievement) Program for school English teachers; Community Solutions program for community leaders, Edmund S. Muskie Graduate Fellowship Program; and others.

Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation: The Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation support various programs as special education, multicultural education, Ministry of Education and Science to develop new generation standards of education, and other projects that support professionals and experts in Kyrgyzstan.

International Organizations that implement the USAID educational projects: There are many organizations that implement the USAID education projects. For instance, two main long-term projects on basic education were implemented by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and Creative Associates International Inc. The AED implemented a project called, PEAKS or "Participation, Education, and Knowledge Strengthening" during 2003 – 2007. The PEAKS was mainly focused on teachers; however, the project evaluators recommended to work closer with the education system specialists and policy makers in the next similar project; e.g. the report (June 27, 2005) noted, "Building much stronger links between the project and the education establishments ..., especially the local district education departments and their urban counterparts and give them a real sense of ownership."

The next USAID financed basic education support project after the PEAKS was the Quality Learning Project (QLP) that was implemented by Creative Associates International Inc. during 2007 – 2012. The QLP continued to strengthen the students' critical thinking skills and student-centered teaching methods through targeting at capacity building of the education system organizations including District Education Departments, the Kyrgyz Academy of Education, Pre-Service Institutions (Pedagogical Universities) and Ministry of Education and Science as it was recommended by the PEAKS project evaluators.

Currently another basic education support of USAID funded projects has been implementing in Kyrgyzstan since 2013 which is focused on improving the pre-school and elementary grades students' reading skills. The project titled,

“Reading Together” is designed by taking into account the lessons learned from the previous projects, the PEAKS and QLP.

All three projects ultimate goals are to improve the students’ critical thinking, to decentralize the management system that will involve the communities, to change the teacher-centered teaching methods into the student-oriented approaches, and to make the teaching and management more democratic and transparent than before.

Peace Corps – Kyrgyz Republic: Peace Corps mainly supports the English language at village schools and regional universities. The TEFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language) program of Peace Corps gives opportunities for the remote schools students to improve their English language skills through communicating with English native speakers.

The US Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic: The US Embassy in the KR has actively been either implementing or supporting various education programs/projects in Kyrgyzstan in the last 20 years. The US Embassy to the KR currently has three main education support programs; Exchange, Academic Year and for Educators, and for Professionals.

The first, Exchange Programs include three Fulbright programs that support the PhD level researchers, secondary school English teachers, and visiting graduate students. The main missions of these programs are to exchange the professionals in the university level research fields, English language teaching at school level, and Master’s degree programs. The programs’ terms vary from one semester up to two academic-year periods.

The second, Academic Year Programs and Programs for Educators includes high school and undergraduate students, and professional development of the university and school levels.

The last Programs for Professionals have targeted at professionals of different fields including the government, business, academia, and community. For example, the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship Program gives opportunities to improve the professionalism in the US universities through attending non-degree courses within one academic year and the Community Connections program gave opportunities for professionals of different areas to visit the US organizations and communities to

learn the principles of the US values and apply in Kyrgyzstan.

2. Main outcomes and impact of the US funded education reform projects

The outcomes of the projects that supported the education reform in Kyrgyzstan vary depending on each project’s specific plans and missions. For instance, the projects as PEAKS and QLP have left several innovative changes in teaching as introducing and encouraging the critical thinking of students, student-centered teaching methods; and in democratization and decentralization of school administration, introduced “Per Capita” financing system to the schools, introduced Board of Trustees, and Public Hearings. Another noteworthy achievement of the US funded projects is establishing the Kyrgyzstani National Testing Service that has been functioning since 2002 in Kyrgyzstan. Initially this project was implemented through the American Councils for International Education by the USAID financial support. Thanks to this project applicants have fair opportunities to enter the universities through the international standard testing principles.

The alumni of the US funded education programs are supported by different networking activities and alumni associations. For example, Fulbright program alumni have their own association that conducts various activities in the country, the US State Department program alumni have been receiving weekly career support information via e-listserv and organize Annual Meetings that support to strengthen the networking and joint activities. Also, the U.S. State Department Program Alumni have different small grant opportunities for conducting individual and group activities or researches. However, some US funded program alumni and involved people are not tracked by any programs or activities; the reasons may be different depending on program/project implementers’ initial program designs and strategies.

3. Prospective of the US initiated education projects in Kyrgyzstan

Despite the achievements of the US education programs/projects in Kyrgyzstan, the sustainability question is still open. First of all, the majority of the Kyrgyz education system specialists and policy makers have not been trained in the US initiated programs due to the projects’ limited sources and timeframes. Secondly, most of the alumni are not involved in the state educational organizations because of the

lack support and motivation; accordingly the advocacy of the US initiatives is not highly effective in the system as might be. Thirdly, the Kyrgyz national partnership strategy plays an important role for supporting the sustainability of the US funded programs and their participants. This factor is very critical especially, after the official Kremlin's behavior towards the former USSR countries in the last few years; e.g. to Georgia and Ukraine.

Thus, the US supported education projects involved parties should be supported further that

would motivate them despite the negative factors as the Russian influence. However, I am still an optimist to positive influence of the US values to the Kyrgyz education system. My optimism is based on the logic; the gained knowledge cannot be taken out from the humans brains by any regimes. At the same time, my optimism may be misled or changed essentially if the further support of the US education and other programs in Kyrgyzstan will be weakened and dominated by the other's ideologies or influence.

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