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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

The Impact of Foreign Aid and Cooperation on Social Innovation in Azerbaijan: Example of Vocational Acquisition*

Azerbaycan'da Dış Yardım ve İşbirliğinin Sosyal İnovasyona Etkisi: Mesleki Edinim Örneği

Meral BALCI**

Abstract

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, international organizations and programs such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union, as well as Turkish public diplomacy institutions like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE), have encouraged the governments and local populations of Central Asian countries to innovate in a bid to find solutions to existing social problems. The impact of foreign aid and international collaboration on social innovation in Azerbaijan's vocational education system has been analyzed in this study. Focusing on vocational acquisition, the research has examined how financial aid from international organizations and bilateral cooperation has improved transformation in the practice of vocational training in Azerbaijan. The study merged quantitative data obtained from questionnaires with qualitative data from interviews by adopting a mixed-methods approach. The findings reveal that foreign aid has played an important role in introducing progressive methods and in forging partnerships that form a bridge between education and industry needs. All these efforts have made a significant contribution to developing Azerbaijan's human capital and have made vocational training more responsive to the growing needs of the labor market. Additionally, this study is expected to contribute to sustained international coordination in stimulating social innovation and to offer policy directions to enhance the positive effects of such interventions.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Cooperation, Foreign Aid, Social Innovation, Vocational Education

Öz

Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasının ardından Birleşmiş Milletler Kalkınma Programı (UNDP) ve Avrupa Birliği (AB) gibi uluslararası örgütler ve kuruluşlar ile Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı

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(TİKA) ve Yunus Emre Enstitüsü (YEE) gibi Türk kamu diplomasisi kurumları, Orta Asya ülkelerinin hükümetlerini ve yerel halklarını, mevcut sosyal sorunlara çözüm bulmak amacıyla yenilik yapmaya teşvik etmiştir. Bu çalışmada, dış yardım ve uluslararası iş birliğinin Azerbaycan'ın mesleki eğitim sistemindeki sosyal inovasyona etkisi analiz edilmiştir. Mesleki beceri kazanımına odaklanan araştırma, uluslararası kuruluşlardan ve ikili iş birliklerinden gelen mali yardımın Azerbaycan'daki mesleki eğitim uygulamalarında dönüşümü nasıl iyileştirdiğini incelemiştir. Çalışma, karma yöntem yaklaşımı benimseyerek anketlerden elde edilen nicel verileri ve görüşmelerden elde edilen nitel verileri birleştirmiştir. Bulgular, dış yardımın ilerici yöntemlerin uygulanmasında ve eğitim ile endüstri ihtiyaçları arasında köprü kuran ortaklıkların oluşturulmasında önemli bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Tüm bu çabalar, Azerbaycan'ın insan sermayesinin geliştirilmesine önemli katkı sağlamış ve mesleki eğitimin işgücü piyasasının artan ihtiyaçlarına daha duyarlı hale gelmesini sağlamıştır. Ayrıca, bu çalışmanın sosyal inovasyonu teşvik etmek için sürdürülebilir uluslararası koordinasyona katkı sağlaması ve bu tür müdahalelerin olumlu etkilerini genişletmek için politika yönlendirmeleri sunması beklenmektedir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan, İşbirliği, Dış Yardım, Sosyal İnovasyon, Mesleki Eğitim

1. Introduction

Foreign aid, international cooperation, and social innovation have been the subject of significant research interest in development studies. Azerbaijan, with its geopolitical importance and abundant natural resources, presents a particularly useful case study through which to explore these dynamics. Throughout its history, especially during the post-Soviet transition process, Azerbaijan has experienced multidimensional challenges in modernization and globalization and has faced difficulties in economic diversification and social development.

Foreign aid obtained from international organizations has played a significant role in Azerbaijan's development roadmap. Aid from international institutions and bilateral partnerships has contributed to the country's socio-economic development through various programs and investments. Foreign aid has not only provided financial input but has also introduced new methods for addressing local challenges. In particular, the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector has been an area of significant interest in which international aid has overlapped with indigenous demands to foster social innovation.

Vocational acquisition, referring to the abilities and skills required for specific occupations and professions, is crucial for facilitating sustainable economic growth. In Azerbaijan, the revitalization of the vocational education sector has been prompted by the need to equip the labor force with appropriate skills that can meet the demands of a rapidly changing market economy. This transformation has been significantly influenced by international collaboration, which has brought in technical expertise, innovative approaches, and world-class practices from around the world.

This study attempts to investigate the impacts of foreign assistance and collaboration on social innovation in the context of vocational learning in Azerbaijan. In doing so, it seeks to clarify

how external assistance has initiated changes in the vocational training sector and led to broader social innovation outcomes.

The research question of the study, focusing on the implementation of foreign aid provided by international organizations, is as follows: How do international organizations' vocational training and foreign aid projects in Azerbaijan contribute to social innovation, the local economy, and the development of workforce skills?

This study is significant for several reasons, as it presents the outcomes of such initiatives. By examining the roles of institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Union (EU), the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), and the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE), the article illustrates how collaborative efforts between international bodies and local governments can lead to successful project implementation and social innovation. In summary, this article provides a comprehensive analysis of the intersection between foreign aid, vocational training, and social innovation, using Azerbaijan as a focal point. Lastly, as stated by Lancaster (2006, p. 8), public opinion in donor countries may wish to know what the development impact of recent aid increases has been, which makes this study noteworthy.

2. Background to the Study

During the period of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), vocational education in Azerbaijan was structured to meet the needs of the industrial and agricultural sectors in line with central planning. In 1940, by decision of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR, the Department of Labour Reserves was established, and technical and vocational education institutions were placed under the management of this department. In 1959, this structure was reorganized as the State Committee for Technical Vocational Education (Azerbaijan, n.d.).

After the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan restructured its vocational education system during the independence process and initiated comprehensive reforms in this field. On June 13, 2000, by order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "On the Development of the Education System in the Republic of Azerbaijan," institutions providing vocational education at the secondary level under certain state institutions were transferred to the Ministry of Education, thereby enabling fundamental changes in the content of vocational education and improving the network of educational institutions (Azerbaijan, n.d.).

As an important step in this reform process, the "Strategic Roadmap for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Azerbaijan," focusing on improving the social welfare of citizens in the country, was adopted in 2016. This strategic document aims to align vocational education and training with the current and future needs of the economy, establish a strong link with the labour market, and increase private sector cooperation.[1] It also focuses

1 By this Presidential Decree, strategic road maps were prepared for 11 main sectors of the economy, one of which was

on priorities such as the renewal of curricula, the development of vocational skills standards, and the modernization of educational infrastructure. Today, the vocational education system in Azerbaijan is being renewed in line with this strategy and is supported by comprehensive reforms aimed at increasing the employability of young people. This process represents a transformation that combines both historical background and contemporary dynamics (Strategic Roadmap, 2016).

These transformative efforts in vocational education have been further complemented and reinforced by foreign aid programs and cooperation between countries, which have played a significant role in modernizing Azerbaijan's education sector and aligning it with international standards. In this study, foreign aid in Azerbaijan has been examined in two categories: assistance through the UNDP–EU partnership and cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan.[2]

First, the dynamics of relations between the EU and Azerbaijan have significantly influenced the scope and characteristics of the development assistance provided by the EU. The EU started aid projects in Azerbaijan following the EU–Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1999. Since then, the EU has funded many projects in Azerbaijan.

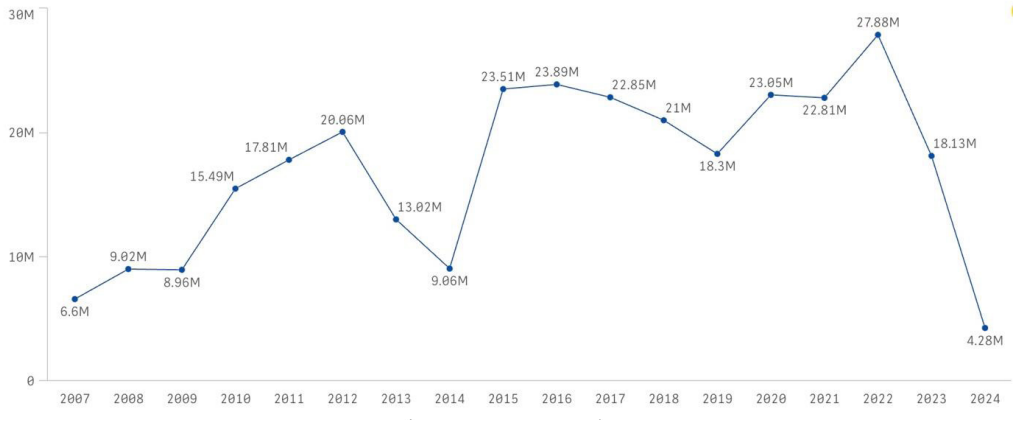
To draw a definitive conclusion, one can examine two significant periods in EU–Azerbaijani relations: the flourishing period between 2009 and 2011 and the turbulent phase from 2014 to 2016. The former can be regarded as a period of positive development, marked by Azerbaijan's accession to the EU's Eastern Partnership programme in 2009. This programme aims to promote the Europeanization and integration of six countries. Furthermore, in 2011, an agreement was reached to construct the Southern Gas Corridor, which is intended to transport Azerbaijani gas to Italy, thereby enhancing Europe's energy security.

Empirical data (see Figure 1) indicate that following 2009, the European Commission's development aid to Azerbaijan (excluding direct aid from individual EU member states) more than doubled, reaching 20 million euros in 2012. Specifically, between 2007 and 2022, the EU, as the principal financial and technical benefactor of Azerbaijan's development, allocated approximately 939 million euros to the country (Agora-Analitik Kollektiv, 2022; EU Aid Explorer, 2024).

the "Strategic Road Map for the Development of Professional Education and Training in the Republic of Azerbaijan" (Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan, 2016).

2 The aid activities carried out by Türkiye are analysed and presented under the heading "Türkiye–Azerbaijan Cooperation" in this study.

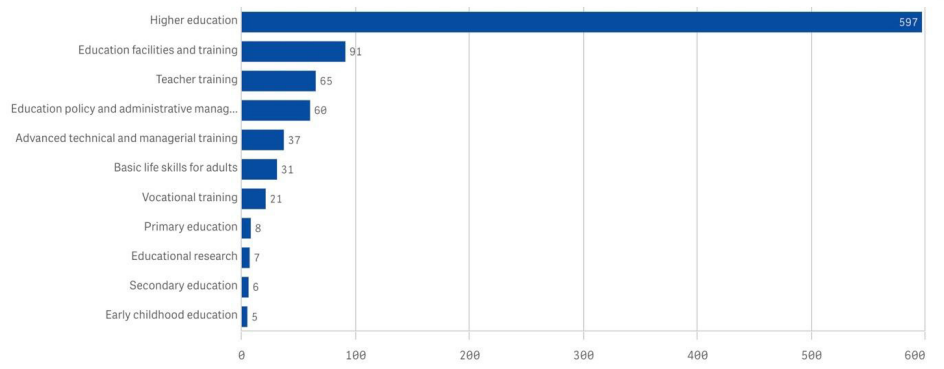
Figure 1. The volume of development aid to Azerbaijan from the European Commission (excluding aid from member countries) by Year (in millions of euros)



Source: EU Aid Explorer, 2024

Although it is commonly perceived that the non-governmental sector is the primary recipient of foreign financial assistance, data from the EU database reveal that the largest portion of foreign aid to Azerbaijan has historically been directed toward the government sector. Specifically, the European Commission, the executive branch of the EU, has granted the Azerbaijani government a sum for project implementation that is five times the amount allocated to local non-governmental organizations over the past 15 years (Agora-Analitik Kollektiv, 2022). Vocational Education and Training (VET) is one of the leading areas funded by the EU. In general, 21 out of 928 projects in the education sector supported by the EU are vocational education and training projects (EU Aid Explorer, 2024).

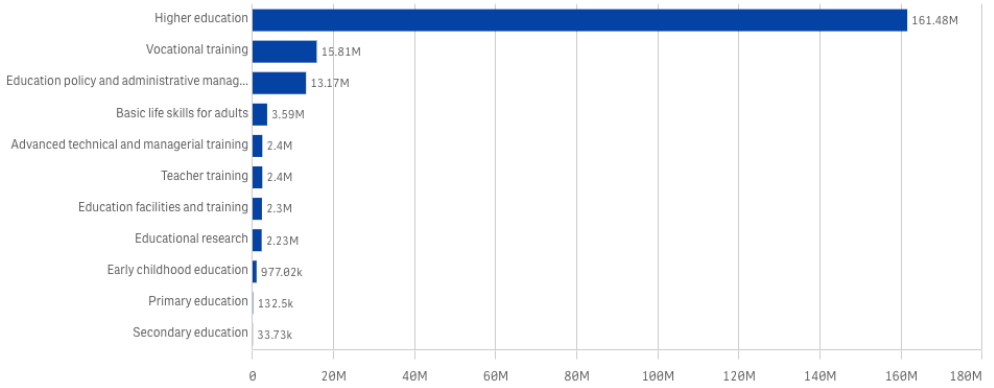
Figure 2. Number of projects in education sector



Source: EU Aid Explorer, 2024

Out of 204.52 million euros allocated by the EU to the education sector, 15.81 million euros were directed to vocational education and training projects (EU Aid Explorer, 2024).

Figure 3. Money spent on vocational education and training projects (million euros)



Source: EU Aid Explorer, 2024

Secondly, the UNDP has been active in Azerbaijan for nearly 30 years, beginning in 1992 when Azerbaijan gained independence. Initially focused on assisting victims of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the UNDP's role in the country has evolved to support long-term socio-economic development. The UNDP's work in Azerbaijan has aimed to utilize the country's oil reserves to strengthen human capital, expand opportunities, and reduce inequality. The main framework for the UNDP's activities in Azerbaijan is the UN–Azerbaijan Partnership Framework (UNAPF), which aligns with the country's development needs and the UN's Development Agenda 2030 and involves close cooperation with the government and civil society (UNDP, 2024a).

In addition, the UNDP has been implementing several EU-funded social projects to help strengthen Azerbaijan's economy. One of these projects is the VET project (UNDP, 2024c). The aim of this EU-funded project is to support the modernization of VET institutions in Azerbaijan, and its activities have been launched in two phases. The first phase started in 2017 and was completed in 2020. The second phase has been implemented by the UNDP since 2020 and is planned to be completed in 2024 in eight VET centres (four in Baku and four in Ganja, Jalilabad, and Sheki; see Table 2) (UNDP, 2024b).

Thirdly, Türkiye's TİKA and YEE are the primary institutions involved in this study. The roots of Türkiye–Azerbaijan cooperation are deeply historical, and Türkiye has been conducting this partnership through various institutions. As a global development cooperation organization, TİKA implements projects in many regions, including the Caucasus and Central Asia. Operating in more than 170 countries, TİKA has implemented more than 30,000 projects and activities in many fields. Since 1993, TİKA has carried out more than 1,200 projects and activities across

various fields in Azerbaijan (TİKA, 2021). YEE has also implemented various projects (Rehimov, 2020).

In developing countries, social innovations are initiated by community leaders in cooperation with governments through the establishment of networks and interpersonal relationships (Radjabov, 2022, p. 21). Türkiye–Azerbaijan cooperation can be evaluated within this category. When sponsoring organizations and other institutions interact effectively, social innovation evolves in its most effective form (The Hope Institute, 2017, p. 257).

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework involves the concepts of social innovation, foreign aid and international cooperation, and a key theory—i.e., Human Capital Theory. The framework aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these elements interact to influence vocational education outcomes in Azerbaijan. The concepts examined in this context are social innovation, foreign aid, and cooperation.

Social innovation refers to the establishment and implementation of effective solutions that typically involve active collaboration among government, business, and the nonprofit sector to address structural social and environmental problems in support of social progress (Stanford Graduate School of Business, n.d.). This concept appears in various forms, ranging from new enterprises to new business models, policies, programs, and services, each with a tangible impact on individuals' lives and societal well-being. It aims to make a positive social difference and address social challenges by improving well-being and quality of life, particularly for those who are marginalized or underserved. Social innovation is characterized by co-creation and collaboration among various stakeholders, including academics, individuals, communities, organizations, and governments. It therefore encourages collaboration among these actors for the purpose of empowering low-income entrepreneurs and promoting economic development (Jain, 2023).

In the Azerbaijani context, social innovation is manifested in the development of new curricula, teaching methods, and institutional frameworks in the field of vocational education. For example, the design of technical training programmes aligned with industries such as the oil and gas sector in Azerbaijan can be considered an indicator of social innovation. Such innovative approaches are better able to respond to the demands of the labour market while at the same time meeting societal needs (Indrichovska, 2012, p. 160). Moreover, social innovation can reduce social inequalities by contributing to outcomes such as lower unemployment and increased participation in vocational training. This is especially important in countries undergoing rapid economic transformation, such as Azerbaijan. The effective implementation of social innovation enables vocational training to create not only economic but also social value. The success of social innovation depends on certain conditions, such as meeting social needs through effective social interaction (Mulgan et al., 2007); including new processes or products; involving stakeholders in

social innovation processes (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014); creating value not only for individuals but for society as a whole; and ensuring long-term sustainability (Harrison, 2012).

In this context, in addition to government policies, foreign aid and international cooperation are also crucial for realizing social innovation. First, foreign aid usually involves the transfer of resources from one state or international organization to another to help fund development goals and poverty alleviation. Assistance may take the form of financial support, technical advice, and capacity building. Foreign aid to vocational education can provide vital resources to implement innovative practices and build educational infrastructure. This support generally entails funding new projects, training teachers, sharing knowledge, and establishing partnerships that enable capacity building.

Second, foreign aid cooperation is a pillar of sustainable development and global stability. It involves different actors—from donors and host countries to international institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—working together to address global challenges such as poverty, health crises, and educational disparities. Effective cooperation ensures that support is not merely a temporary bailout but contributes to the achievement of long-term development (UNDP, 2021, p. 36). The primary components of foreign aid cooperation are capacity building, mutual accountability, and coordination. Capacity building refers to developing the capabilities and infrastructure of local communities in order to facilitate the sustainability of development initiatives (Riddell, 2007, p. 6).

This research draws its theoretical foundation from three interrelated approaches: Social Innovation Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Foreign Aid and International Cooperation Theories. These theoretical frameworks enable a multidimensional examination of the relationship between foreign aid, international cooperation, and social innovation in the context of vocational education in Azerbaijan.

Among these three theories, Human Capital Theory constitutes the main theoretical basis of the study. The primary objective of the research is to examine how international organizations' vocational education and foreign aid projects in Azerbaijan contribute to social innovation, the local economy, and the development of workforce skills. Therefore, Human Capital Theory has been adopted as the main conceptual framework of the study. This theory argues that investment in education and training to increase individuals' knowledge and skill levels is one of the most important determinants of productivity and economic growth. Based on the work of Schultz (1961, p. 5), the theory conceptualizes human capital as an investment category parallel to physical capital and maintains that individuals should be regarded as assets in which investment through education and professional development contributes to the economy. Becker (1993, p. 115), in turn, defines human capital as a concept in which the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by individuals are translated into economic value, emphasizing that this accumulation shapes the dynamics of development for both individuals and societies.

According to this theory, the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills not only increases individuals' income levels but also contributes to economic growth, social development, and societal welfare (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004, p. 112). Developing human capital through education strengthens the overall competitiveness and productive capacity of the economy by improving the quality of the workforce. In developing countries in particular, investments in human capital are regarded as a sustainable foundation for long-term economic development.

In the context of Azerbaijan, the development of human capital is of critical importance, particularly in line with the goals of ensuring economic diversification and reducing dependence on natural resources. Investments in education and vocational skills aimed at reducing reliance on oil revenues increase the employability of the workforce in more diverse sectors, thereby enhancing economic resilience. For example, strategic initiatives in Azerbaijan aimed at increasing human capital in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and information technology can be considered concrete steps toward economic growth and strengthening the labour market (Guliyev, 2016, pp. 6–7).

Another important dimension of Human Capital Theory is that investments in education yield not only economic but also social benefits. Education not only increases individuals' economic productivity but also functions as a mechanism that strengthens social cohesion and reduces social inequalities (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012, p. 269). This is particularly important in terms of effectively integrating the young population into the labour force and reducing unemployment.

In this study, the role of vocational education within Human Capital Theory is emphasized as a cornerstone of skill-based economies. Becker (1993, p. 117) argues that structuring vocational education in accordance with labour market needs increases individuals' employability and enhances productivity in the labour market. Investments in vocational education in Azerbaijan have contributed to making the workforce more competitive in national and international markets, particularly through the development of programmes tailored to local labour demand (The World Bank, 2022, p. 23).

Social Innovation Theory is used as a framework that complements the main theoretical structure outlined above. This theory is concerned with developing new concepts, ideas, and strategies to meet social needs and improve the well-being of individuals and communities (Mulgan et al., 2007, p. 10; Indrichovska, 2012, p. 160). It also addresses the role of collaboration and creativity in solving complex social problems. In vocational education, social innovation takes the form of developing new curricula, pedagogies, and institutional arrangements that better reflect the needs of the labour market and society. This theory is used in the study to understand how foreign aid projects not only impart technical skills but also contribute to community empowerment, increased stakeholder participation, and social value creation. Thus, Social Innovation Theory integrates economic outputs with the dimension of social impact.

Theories of Foreign Aid and International Cooperation form the contextual basis of the study. These theories explain how aid mechanisms operate, under what conditions they are effective,

and how donor–recipient relationships shape development outcomes. Research by Burnside and Dollar (2000, p. 847) emphasizes that the effectiveness of foreign aid in influencing development outcomes is highly dependent on the political and economic context in which it is implemented. In particular, it is argued that for foreign aid to be successful, the recipient country must have a stable political and institutional environment.

The main components of foreign aid include financial assistance, technical expertise, and capacity building. Financial aid is most often provided through intergovernmental transfers or international institutions and can be used in key sectors such as infrastructure development, education programs, or health services. However, the effectiveness of financial aid depends on the transparent management and utilization of such funds (Easterly, 2006, p. 54). Technical expertise is applied particularly in projects involving the transfer of knowledge and experience. Such assistance can create long-term effects in recipient countries, including capacity building, institutional transformation, and the improvement of training programs (Tarp, 2006, p. 32).

International cooperation does not view foreign aid merely as a donation mechanism; rather, it aims to establish long-term partnerships between parties. In this context, cooperation not only provides financial support but also encourages knowledge sharing, cultural understanding, and political dialogue. International Cooperation Theories emphasize the importance of multilateral development projects and regional collaboration. For example, development aid provided by the European Union is used as an effective tool to support democratization and economic reform processes in non-member countries (Mavrotas, 2010, p. 207).

The reason for referring to these theories in this study is to determine the place of foreign aid projects in Azerbaijan within the broader international development paradigm and to assess the impact of this aid on social innovation in a global context. Consequently, Human Capital Theory is at the center of this study; Social Innovation Theory provides a complementary explanatory framework; and Foreign Aid and International Cooperation Theories constitute the contextual background. Through this three-pronged theoretical structure, the research analyzes the effects of foreign aid projects not only on the economy but also on social transformation and capacity building in a holistic manner.

4. Review of Related Literature

A thorough review of the existing literature on foreign aid, international cooperation, and social innovation was conducted. This included academic articles, policy reports, and case studies relevant to Azerbaijan and other comparable contexts. The literature review helped frame the research questions and identify key themes and variables to be explored.

While early studies (Tarde, 1903; Kallen, 1932; Ogburn, 1966) emphasized the socio-cultural dimensions of innovation, over time the focus shifted toward its economic and technological dimensions. Social innovation was recognized as an economic term in the 20th century in the

works of Drucker and Young (Drucker, 1987; Young, 1983). Later, as academics and policy communities began to pay closer attention to the subject, new theories and definitions emerged, describing it as a "driving force of institutional change," a means of "satisfying social needs," and, most importantly, "a new way to overcome social problems" (Solov'eva et al., 2018, p. 54). Within this framework, aid programs were initiated to address social problems. While many scholars supported aid programs, Easterly (2006, p. 2) questioned the benefits of international development aid, stating that "the best plan is to have no plan at all." Easterly's argument was echoed by Waters, who argued that "with no plan, you're more open to possibilities, you can focus on being brilliant, you can figure out what you need, you become free to adapt and change to the world around you" (Waters, 2017).

In addition, Moulaert and MacCallum emphasize that social innovation has economic dimensions, although they shift attention toward political and emancipatory projects and focus on participatory governance (Moulaert et al., 2013; Montgomery & Mazzei, 2021, p. 6). Schumpeter developed a theory highlighting the role of entrepreneurs, structural change in society, and innovation as the key to development (Schumpeter, 1934). Social innovations are often difficult to generate in developing countries without government support (Radjabov, 2022, p. 19). They are frequently regarded as a means of improving the welfare of individuals and communities through systemic change (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010, pp. 117, 120). Since the aim of social innovation is to improve well-being and quality of life through the implementation of new ideas, it fosters new social relationships and strengthens active citizen participation (Rodek et al., 2020, p. 587).

The literature summarized above shows that social innovation has historically been associated with economic growth, entrepreneurship, and technological development; however, in recent years, it has increasingly focused on social welfare, participatory governance, and local development processes. Nevertheless, studies examining the intersection of social innovation with foreign aid and international cooperation remain limited. Particularly in developing countries, findings on how foreign aid contributes not only to economic growth but also to the emergence of social innovation vary considerably (Pradhan et al., 2023; Dechprom & Jermsittiparsert, 2018). This highlights the importance of variables such as the nature of foreign aid, its management style, and the level of local participation.

In the context of Azerbaijan, the literature indicates that social innovation has largely developed through state-supported programs or projects implemented by international organizations; however, the dimensions of local community participation and sustainability have not been sufficiently examined (Habibova & Zeynalova, 2018; Ibraghimov, 2022). This gap makes it difficult to understand how social innovation is shaped through foreign aid mechanisms. Therefore, examining the impact of vocational training–based aid programs on social innovation in Azerbaijan makes a significant contribution to both practice and theory.

This study aims to address the relationship between foreign aid, cooperation, and social innovation in a multidimensional manner by integrating existing approaches in the literature. It emphasizes that social innovation is not only an economic instrument but also an element of social transformation and local capacity development. The study seeks to fill the theoretical and empirical gap in the existing literature by developing a new perspective on how foreign aid can be integrated into local social innovation processes, particularly in developing countries, using the example of Azerbaijan.

5. Method

This study examines how foreign aid from international organizations and bilateral partnerships influences the community of vocational education practices in Azerbaijan. The methodology of the study is primarily qualitative; however, quantitative techniques were also employed to analyze the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved. The qualitative research methods used in the study included observation of training sessions and implementation processes, interviews, and the analysis of written documents. Therefore, the method of the study can be described as a modest mixed-method approach.

The reason for adopting a mixed-method approach was to determine how the implementation of foreign aid across the country generates social impacts, including economic consequences. Since no single data source was relied upon, multiple data collection techniques were employed. As one of the characteristics of qualitative research is that it takes place in the participants' and projects' natural environments, the locations where the projects were ongoing were visited, as shown in Table 2. In addition, documents provided by both the UNDP and the EU office were used for data collection. The use of documentary sources also contributed to time efficiency. When combined with other qualitative research methods, this approach ensured data triangulation and enhanced the validity of the research.

5.1. Data Collection Process

The research was based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, as well as data interpretation and analysis. The interview questions focused on the contribution of foreign aid to social innovation at both the societal and individual levels. Observation was used as a data collection tool, as it provided first-hand access to information. Since the observations were conducted in natural settings, they were carried out from the perspective of external observers. During the interviews, the conversations were guided with the aim of exploring issues in greater depth. Therefore, the study benefited from data obtained through interviews with beekeepers, course attendees, and students.

At this stage, establishing trust-based communication with the interviewees was crucial; thus, their names were to be anonymized upon request. However, this was not necessary, as the consistency of the participants' statements was verified through control questions that had the

same conceptual content but were phrased negatively. Although the questions were prepared in advance, they were not followed rigidly, allowing the interviews to focus more extensively on "why" and "how" questions.

Structured surveys were administered to a representative sample of stakeholders involved in vocational education in Azerbaijan, including students, educators, policymakers, and beneficiaries of foreign aid programs. Statistical data from government reports, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations were analyzed to track trends in vocational education and employment outcomes.

It is argued that qualitative methods are particularly suitable for the study of socially innovative initiatives (Konstantatos, Siatitsa, & Vaiou, 2013, p. 274). For this reason, the study was conducted primarily through interviews. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with 10 key informants, including representatives from international aid organizations, government officials, and vocational training providers. These interviews provided nuanced insights into the processes and impacts of foreign aid and cooperation on vocational education.

Moreover, detailed case studies of specific vocational training programs funded through foreign aid and cooperation were developed. These case studies highlighted best practices, challenges, and lessons learned. Qualitative interview transcripts and case study data were analyzed to identify key themes and patterns related to the impact of foreign aid and cooperation on vocational education and social innovation.

The "accessible society," one of the four theoretical sources from which the concept of social innovation draws today—the others being innovation, social investment, and change (Therace, Hubert, & Dro, 2011, p. 9)—constitutes the main reference point of this study, as innovation involves social processes. Since the accessible society literature focuses on information technology, this study utilized not only interviews with individuals affected by foreign aid but also data derived from the technological environment.

The findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of foreign aid and cooperation on social innovation in vocational acquisition in Azerbaijan. The results were interpreted in light of the broader literature and theoretical frameworks, identifying implications for policy and practice.

5.2. Participants

Interviews in this research were conducted in different cities (Khachmaz, Balaken, Zagatala, Kurdamir, and Goychay) and in various rayons of Baku and Sumgait between June and July 2024, and in January 2025. The coordinators of the aid projects (see Table 1 below) provided all the relevant data from start to finish and stated that the outcome of the study would serve as guidance

for them. The names and mobile phone numbers of the interviewees were provided by the project coordinators.

Interviewees living in remote cities were contacted by phone; the questions were directed to them, and their responses were recorded (those reached by phone are indicated in Table 1). The data obtained were recorded by taking notes during the interviews. The participants are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants and coordinators of projects

Organization	*Position of the Interviewees*	*How many persons*	*Location of the interviews*
TİKA	TİKA Baku Coordinator	1	Baku
	President of Mountain Beekeepers' Public Association	1	Sumgait
	Beekeeping trainee	1+2	Khachmaz (tel.)
	Robotic coding trainers and trainees	7+2	Baku
Yunus Emre Institute	Coordinator of the courses	1	Baku
	Trainer	1	Baku
	Marbling and ceramic art trainees	5+3	Baku
EU	Beekeeper	1+1	Zagatala (tel.)
	Pomegranate producers	2	Kurdamir and Goychay (tel.)
UNDP	UNDP Communications Associate	1	Baku
	VET Project Coordinator	1	Baku
	VET trainees	1+1	Baku

Note: The 9 participants demonstrated with "+" were intervieweed in January 2025, 6 months after the first interviews.

The data obtained from the interviewees were recorded and presented under the findings section according to the projects in which they were involved.

6. Findings

Foreign aid plays a crucial role in analyzing the social impacts of vocational training. These contributions have significantly supported human capital development efforts in Azerbaijan by aligning vocational training with the changing demands of the labour market. The findings were grouped into two categories: foreign aid provided through the UNDP–EU partnership and Türkiye–Azerbaijan cooperation.

6.1. Foreign Aid by EU and UNDP

Foreign Aid Projects by EU: Since 1999, the EU has funded many projects in Azerbaijan.[3] One of the most significant projects implemented by the EU is called ADSMIRRA. This EU-funded

3 The EU started Aid projects in Azerbaijan after the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1999.

project, "Accelerating the Development of Sustainable Micro-Entrepreneurship in Rural Areas of Azerbaijan" (ADSMIRRA), implemented by the Azerbaijan Micro-Finance Association (AMFA), provided an opportunity for an Azerbaijani family to start their own beekeeping business. The family participated in financial literacy, business planning, and cooperative development training organized by AMFA. Using the funds, they procured honey extraction equipment, expanded their bee colony, and diversified their product offerings. The ADSMIRRA project, which ran from 2018 to 2021, aimed to empower micro and small entrepreneurs in rural areas through various support mechanisms. This initiative enabled the establishment of new businesses, the expansion of existing ones, and the creation of employment opportunities in rural Azerbaijan (EU for Azerbaijan, 2021).

Another project, called STEP, focuses on pomegranate production in the Goychay and Kurdamir regions. This project, funded by the European Union, has been completed and has improved the productivity of pomegranate producers in seven regions of the country. The project aimed to enhance the pomegranate value chain and support transformation in the sector. As a result, the productivity of pomegranate producers increased by 25–35%. In addition, a mini-factory was opened in Kurdamir, enabling local producers to expand their farms and benefit from increased production volumes. The long-term goal is to shift from local trade to international exports in Azerbaijan's pomegranate sector (EU for Azerbaijan, 2022). As shown in Table 2, more than 2,000 pomegranate producers in seven different regions of Azerbaijan received financial support from the EU within the scope of this project.

Foreign Aid Projects by the UNDP: The recognition that the skilled and qualified labour force needed to strengthen Azerbaijan's economy and social welfare depends on the development of the VET system has shaped the direction of foreign aid to the country. Therefore, a visit was conducted to the State Agency for Vocational Education (Peşə Təhsili üzrə Dövlət Agentliyi, 2024).

In our meeting with the UNDP Azerbaijan VET project coordinator, he emphasized that UNDP considers two main priorities when planning its projects in Azerbaijan. First, projects are designed to align with the strategic objectives of the Azerbaijani state. Second, they must be consistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.[4]

In this context, UNDP and the State Agency for Vocational Education collaborated to launch a public awareness campaign promoting vocational training in Azerbaijan. This initiative forms part of the EU-funded project "Vocational Education for the Future." During the 2022–2023 academic year, a total of 23,340 trainees across 127 professions received training under this framework. The project aims to modernize vocational education institutions in Azerbaijan by introducing competency-based education and training aligned with labor market needs (UNDP, 2022; UNDP Azerbaijan, 2024).

4 This meeting was held in Baku on June 25, 2024.

As shown in Table 2, the VET project has been implemented in two phases. The first phase took place in Jalilabad between 2017 and 2020. The second phase began in 2020 and is still ongoing. At the end of the first phase, several tangible outcomes were observed. In addition to acquiring new professional skills, trainees contributed to shifting traditional perceptions within their families and communities. Notably, families who had previously been hesitant began to send their daughters to vocational schools.

Moreover, the project has supported both the institutional development of vocational education in Azerbaijan and broader economic growth. As VET coordinator Eltekin Omarov noted, more than 3,000 students at eight VET centers across the country are expected to benefit directly from the modernization of their institutions (see Table 2). Observations conducted at one of the vocational institutions in Baku further confirmed that the project has contributed to improvements in infrastructure and training facilities, reinforcing its broader developmental impact.

Table 2. Vocational Training Programs

Country/ Donor of the Organisation	***Name of the Project/ Location***	***Theme***	***Target Group of the Aid***	***Number of Beneficiaries***	***Duration***	***Expected and Gained Results***
Türkiye/ TİKA	Beekeping/ Sumgait, Karabagh	Beekeping Trainer and Technical Equipment Support	Forced migrants	500+	2012-continues	*Acquisition of a new profession, *Ensuring the family's livelihood, *Contribution to the national economy, *Promotion of reverse migration
Türkiye/ TİKA	Robotik codding/ Baku	Trainer and Technical Equipment Support	Young people aged 12 to 17	360	2021-continues	*Acquisition of a new profession *Self development, *Contribution to the national economy
Türkiye/ Yunus Emre Institute	Marbling and ceramic art course/ Baku	Marbling and ceramic art	Housewives	50	2016-continues	*Acquisition of a new profession, *Ensuring the family's livelihood, *Contribution to the national economy, *Gaining self confidence
EU	ADSMIRRA Project/ Zaqatala	Beekeeping	Beekeeper	1 family	2018-2021	* Strengthening small entrepreneurs in rural *Productivity growth *Ensuring the family's livelihood, *Contribution to the national economy
EU	STEP/ Goychay-Kurdamir	Pomegranate production	Pomegranate producers	2000+	2019-2022	*Productivity growth *Ensuring the family's livelihood, *Contribution to the national economy
UNDP	VET for the Future / Jalilabad	Vocational education in Azerbaijan	Open to all citizens		2017-2020 (the first phase)	*Acquisition of a new profession, *Promote vocational education in Azerbaijan *Changing people's minds *Contribution to the national economy *Support the modernisation of VET institutions
UNDP	VET for the Future / Baku (4 centers)-Ganja, Jalilabad, Sheki (4 centers total)= 8 centers	Vocational education in Azerbaijan	Open to all citizens	3000+	2020-2024 (the second phase)	*Acquisition of a new profession, *Promote vocational education in Azerbaijan *Contribution to the national economy *Support the modernisation of VET institutions

6.2. Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye

TİKA and YEE, two prominent Turkish institutions, have implemented several projects in Azerbaijan. This study examines the social impacts of these initiatives on different segments of society.

TİKA: The first Social Innovation Project (SIP) examined is a social and economic support program for Azerbaijani families who were forcibly displaced due to the conflicts in the Karabakh region. Within the framework of this program, families were provided with 10 bee colonies upon request and received practical training in beekeeping. Through this initiative, displaced families were encouraged to engage in beekeeping activities in Karabakh. As a result, individuals who had been forced to abandon their hometowns acquired a new profession and gained the capacity to support their households economically.

The social impact of the program became visible as these families secured employment and generated income through their newly acquired skills. Since one of the program's broader objectives is to facilitate the return and resettlement of displaced families in their original regions, the training programs conducted in cooperation with TİKA have had both economic and social benefits. In an interview with Yusif Guliyev, President of the "Dağ Arıçıları İctimai Birliyi" (Mountain Beekeepers Public Union), which is supported by TİKA, he presented the honey production facilities and explained that many individuals are employed in both the production and marketing stages. According to Guliyev, approximately 500 people have received beekeeping training and are currently active in the sector.

This initiative has not only supported those affected by forced migration but has also contributed to the national economy. The honey produced under this program is sold in the "Kənddən Şəhərə" (From Village to City) markets in Baku, which are supported by TİKA. These markets enable producers to sell directly to consumers, thereby increasing their income margins. Such projects can be considered examples of social innovation, as they facilitate the economic reintegration of vulnerable groups and strengthen community resilience.

The second SIP implemented by TİKA focuses on robotics and coding education at Baku Turkish Anatolian High School. Since 2021, TİKA has supported a project aimed at providing robotics and coding training to students aged 12 to 17 in Azerbaijan. Within this framework, TİKA has supplied both the necessary equipment and qualified instructors. A total of 360 students have participated in these courses. The primary objective of the program is to equip young people with professional skills that will enhance their future employability and contribute to the development of a skilled workforce aligned with national economic needs.

To assess perceptions of the program, a focus group interview was conducted with seven participants, including three instructors and four students who plan to pursue careers in robotics and mechanics. The findings indicate that students not only acquired technical skills but also experienced personal and professional development. They began to see themselves as potential

innovators capable of contributing to Azerbaijan's technological advancement. In this respect, the program demonstrates the strategic importance of targeted vocational education in national development policies.

YEE: The second pillar of Azerbaijan–Türkiye cooperation examined in this study is YEE. The institute organizes marbling (*ebru*) and ceramic art courses primarily for housewives. These courses, which began in 2016, remain active and provide participants with new vocational skills. Women who complete these programs contribute to their household economies and, indirectly, to the national economy.

According to interviewees, the impact of these courses extends beyond economic benefits. Participants emphasized that acquiring new skills significantly improved their psychological well-being, self-confidence, and overall sense of fulfillment. As empowerment through skill acquisition constitutes a core dimension of social innovation, this initiative has generated broader social effects by strengthening women's roles within both their families and society. In this regard, the courses offered by YEE illustrate how cultural and artistic education can function as an effective instrument of personal empowerment and socio-economic development.

7. Conclusion

The study set out to examine how and to what extent foreign aid and international partnerships generate social innovation in vocational education in Azerbaijan. The findings point to several interrelated conclusions.

First, foreign aid has played a significant role in aligning Azerbaijan's vocational education system with modern standards and labor market needs. Cooperation between local institutions and international donors has contributed to a more responsive and adaptable system, better equipped to address the demands of a continuously evolving economy. This alignment has strengthened institutional capacity and enhanced the overall quality of vocational training.

Second, the introduction of new practices through externally supported projects has not only improved educational standards but also shaped broader social and economic development goals. By equipping individuals with market-relevant skills, vocational training programs have increased employability and expanded economic opportunities. The evidence gathered in this research suggests that such initiatives have contributed to poverty reduction and fostered social mobility.

Third, EU-funded projects and other forms of international assistance have made substantial contributions to both short – and long-term development objectives. Among these partnerships, cooperation with Türkiye represents a distinctive dimension. Projects implemented primarily through TİKA stand out for their continuity and follow-up mechanisms. Rather than being

one-off interventions, these initiatives are monitored and sustained over time, enhancing their long-term social impact.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, investments in vocational education enhance individuals' skills and productivity, thereby contributing to economic growth and social progress. In the Azerbaijani context, vocational training initiatives have supported the development of non-oil sectors and encouraged broader labor force participation. The findings indicate that these programs have expanded economic opportunities, contributing to poverty alleviation and improved social welfare.

The research also demonstrates that the success of foreign aid projects depends on strengthening local capacity and encouraging private sector involvement. Awareness-raising campaigns and inclusive participation mechanisms, particularly in rural areas, have facilitated broader access to training opportunities. Overall, the findings suggest that international organizations' vocational training initiatives and bilateral cooperation projects in Azerbaijan foster social innovation, stimulate local economic development, and enhance workforce skills. In doing so, they provide a comprehensive response to the research question and offer practical insights for the design of future development programs.

Ethical Approval and Consent

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from ADA University in Baku on June 8, 2024 (Ref. No. 08/6847-24) to ensure that the interviews were conducted in accordance with the principles of qualitative research and established standards in the social sciences. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Participants agreed to the recording and written use of the information they provided, as well as to its publication in this article. They participated voluntarily and consented to the use of their first names only, without the disclosure of their surnames.

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