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WNISEF'S ACTIVITIES IN SOUTHERN UKRAINE FROM (2015–2021)

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The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of international technical assistance programs implemented by the American Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF, which currently operates as the Ukraine-Moldova American Enterprise Fund) on the socioeconomic development and profound transformation of local communities in the southern regions of Ukraine (Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Kherson regions) in 2015–2021.

The methodological basis of this study is grounded in the fundamental principles of historicism, scientific objectivity, and a systematic approach. To achieve the set goal, general scientific methods of analysis, synthesis, and comparison were actively employed. In addition, a modern interdisciplinary approach was applied to comprehensively study the complex mechanisms of interaction between international financial institutions and local authorities, business representatives, and civil society organizations within the framework of implementing innovative initiatives.

The scientific novelty of the article lies in its detailed focus on a little-studied aspect – the regional specifics of the Fund's work directly in southern Ukraine. This work introduces, for the first time, up-to-date and systematized data on the actual effectiveness of economic and social reforms in Ukrainian communities in the period prior to the full-scale invasion, revealing a unique mechanism of how international technical assistance influences local development. The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of international technical assistance programs implemented by the American foundation Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF, which currently operates as Ukraine-Moldova American). The paper provides a detailed analysis of WNISEF's key areas of activity after 2014, when comprehensive support for decentralization and institutional strengthening became a strategic priority. It is demonstrated that the Fund played a significant role in modernizing the educational infrastructure of the South by funding hub rural schools under the “Pilot 24” initiative. A substantial contribution to urban development is highlighted through the example of institutional support for the Mykolaiv Development Agency. The successful implementation of large-scale educational programs was noted: the establishment of the Mykolaiv branch of the Ukrainian Academy of Leadership (UAL) and support for free IT training for schoolchildren. Significant attention was paid to stimulating innovative business through investments in technology startups, as well as the DREAMactions microgrant initiative for social projects.

The author concludes that cooperation between influential international organizations, local government bodies, and community representatives has become an extremely effective tool for stimulating sustainable regional development. And the innovative projects implemented by WNISEF serve as a vivid example of effective collaboration that ensures the irreversibility of transformational processes and can be fruitfully utilized in shaping future reconstruction strategies.

Keywords: WNISEF, Southern Ukraine, local self-government, technical assistance, socioeconomic reforms, Mykolaiv Development Agency, USAID, regional development.

ДІЯЛЬНІСТЬ WNISEF НА ПІВДНІ УКРАЇНИ У 2015–2021 РОКАХ

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Метою запропонованої статті є комплексний аналіз впливу програм міжнародної технічної допомоги американського фонду Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF, який нині функціонує як Ukraine-Moldova American Enterprise Fund) на

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соціально-економічний розвиток і глибоку трансформацію місцевих територіальних громад у південних регіонах України (Миколаївська, Одеська, Херсонська області) у 2015–2021 роках.

Методологічна база представлено дослідження ґрунтується на фундаментальних принципах історизму, наукової об’єктивності та системного підходу. Для досягнення поставленої мети активно використано загальнонаукові методи аналізу, синтезу й порівняння. Крім того, застосовано сучасний міждисциплінарний підхід для всебічного вивчення складних механізмів взаємодії міжнародних фінансових інституцій із місцевими органами влади, представниками бізнесу та організаціями громадянського суспільства в рамках реалізації інноваційних ініціатив.

Наукова новизна статті вирізняється детальним фокусом на малодослідженому аспекті – регіональній специфіці історії роботи Фонду безпосередньо на Півдні України. Робота вперше вводить у широкий науковий обіг актуальні й систематизовані дані про реальну результативність економічних і соціальних реформ в українських громадах у період до повномасштабного вторгнення, розкриваючи унікальний механізм впливу міжнародної технічної допомоги на локальний розвиток. У роботі детально проаналізовано ключові напрями діяльності WNISEF після 2014 року, коли пріоритетом стратегії стала всебічна підтримка децентралізації та інституційного зміцнення. Доведено, що Фонд відіграв значну роль в модернізації освітньої інфраструктури Півдня, профінансувавши опорні сільські школи у рамках ініціативи “Пілот 24”. Виокремлено вагомий внесок у міський розвиток на прикладі інституційної підтримки “Агенції розвитку Миколаєва”. Відзначено успішну реалізацію масштабних освітніх програм: створення миколаївського осередку Української академії лідерства (УАЛІ) та підтримку безкоштовного ІТ-навчання для школярів. Значну увагу приділено стимулюванню інноваційного бізнесу через інвестиції у технологічні стартапи, а також ініціативи мікрогрантів DREAMactions для соціальних проєктів.

Автор приходять до **висновку**, що співпраця впливових міжнародних організацій, органів місцевого самоврядування та представників громадськості стала надзвичайно ефективним інструментом для стимулювання сталого регіонального розвитку. А реалізовані інноваційні проєкти WNISEF слугують яскравим прикладом дієвої взаємодії, яка забезпечує невідворотність трансформаційних процесів і може бути плідно використана для формування майбутніх стратегій відбудови.

Ключові слова: WNISEF, Південь України, місцеве самоврядування, технічна допомога, соціально-економічні реформи, Агенція розвитку Миколаєва, USAID, регіональний розвиток.

1. Introduction

Following the events of the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and against the backdrop of Russia’s invasion of Crimea and its waging of war in the East, Ukraine embarked on a path of profound institutional transformation. During this period, international technical assistance, particularly from the U.S. government, became systematic in nature and was refocused on strengthening Ukrainian institutions, supporting key reforms, deepening decentralization, and developing civil society. The American Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF) played a leading role in these processes. Given the current challenges associated with the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, a thorough analysis of WNISEF’s experience allows us to identify the most viable tools for supporting communities while planning the country’s future reconstruction. This paper highlights a little-studied aspect of Ukraine’s recent history concerning the mechanisms of cooperation between international donor institutions and local governments in the context of implementing nationwide reforms. This allows for the systematization of empirical data and the enrichment of domestic historiography with new factual materials.

The aim of this study is to examine the role of the American Western NIS Enterprise Fund and the specific features of its international technical assistance programs for Ukraine in supporting regional reforms in the Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Kherson regions during the period 2015–2021.

The methodological basis of the article is the general scientific principles of historicism, objectivity, and systematicity; methods of analysis, synthesis, and comparison were employed. The study also relies on an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing the

interaction of international financial institutions with local authorities and civil society organizations.

2. History and Evolution of WNISEF

The Ukraine-Moldova American Enterprise Fund (UMAEF), formerly known as the Western NIS (New Independent States) Enterprise Fund (WNISEF), has been supporting reforms in Ukraine’s economically and politically unstable environment for over 30 years (Gomonjuk E., 2025). Its history began in 1994, when the U.S. government provided \$150 million through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to establish the Fund, which would provide debt, financial, grant, and technical assistance, as well as other forms of support to portfolio companies operating in Ukraine and Moldova, to help these countries transition from a Soviet command economy to a modern market economy.

WNISEF was established as a result of the U.S. government’s “new” policy to support democracy and the free market in Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Based on the 1989 “Support for Eastern European Democracy Act” (SEED Act, 1989) and the 1992 “Freedom Support Act” (FREEDOM Support Act, 1991), it became part of an ambitious project to transform Ukraine’s economy. Both laws provided for technical and financial assistance, investment promotion, the organization of educational and training programs, the establishment of venture capital funds to finance business development, and more.

The fund became part of a network of ten similar organizations established to support market reforms in 18 countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The uniqueness of this model lay in combining public capital with private-sector expertise. Although the funds were

established by a decision of the U.S. President, they operated as independent private entities, which ensured flexibility and effectiveness in working with local entrepreneurs. This made it possible to involve prominent representatives of business and civil society in their management. For example, from February 2001 to December 2014, Ukrainian public figure and entrepreneur Natalie Ann Jaresko held the position of President and Chief Executive Officer of WNISEF. Since January 2015, lawyer Yaroslava Zelinska-Johnson has held the position.

While U.S. assistance prior to 2014 focused primarily on humanitarian and democratic programs, following the Revolution of Dignity, Russia's invasion of Crimea, and its funding of the war in eastern Ukraine, it became systematic and aimed at strengthening Ukrainian institutions, supporting reforms, decentralization, and the development of civil society. In this context, the U.S. government is encouraging WNISEF to implement new international technical assistance programs for Ukraine as one of its strategic priorities, allocating the first \$35 million in long-term investments to the Foundation for human capital development – essential for fostering private sector growth and supporting local initiatives across Ukraine's regions, particularly in the south.

Effective March 30, 2015, following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation (RBC-Ukraine, 2015) between the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine and WNISEF, the Foundation began implementing the international technical assistance project “Ukraine: Leadership, Export Promotion, Attracting Investment and Development Program” (ULEAD), whose main components are: export promotion, local economic development, social investment, and economic leadership. Two of these components were implemented in Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Kherson regions between 2015 and 2021.

3. Support for Local Economic Development

As part of a short-term pilot Local Economic Development Program, WNISEF, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine (at the time, the position of Minister of Finance was held by the former President and CEO of the Fund, Natalie Ann Jaresko) and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, supported the creation of 24 hub schools, one in each region of Ukraine, which became models of a new approach to local school education (KMU, 2016). In implementing the “Pilot 24” project, the Foundation allocated approximately 6.3 million hryvnias in the spring of 2016 for the development of educational institutions' infrastructure (UMAEF, 2017). The goal of the pilot project was to improve the quality of education for children living and studying in villages and small towns, as well as to increase the efficiency of public funds allocated for education. The selected

pilot schools were intended to become educational and cultural hubs that would fully meet the educational needs of children from under-enrolled schools, as well as those from schools that were closed or reorganized as a result of school network optimization within the framework of the decentralization reform.

Thanks to support from an international donor, three educational institutions in southern Ukraine received resources to upgrade their facilities, including building renovations, new educational equipment, and information and computer technologies, in order to ensure high-quality secondary education for children in rural areas. Specifically: Sukhoelanets Secondary School (Grades 1–12) in the Novo-Odeskyi District of Mykolaiv Oblast (village of Sukhyi Yelanets) (Decentralization, 2016), Velyka Lepetykha Secondary School No. 2 in the Velyka Lepetykha District of Kherson Oblast (town of Velyka Lepetykha), and the Zhovtnevy Educational Complex “Secondary School (Grades 1–12) – Preschool” in the Shyryaivsky District (since July 17, 2020 – Berezivsky District) of Odesa Oblast (village of Zhovten (since 2016 – Petrovirivka). Independent representatives of the “Pilot 24” project conducted the selection of educational institutions. Preference was given to schools that, as part of optimization efforts, were preparing for consolidation by merging with smaller schools (KMU, 2016).

The first phase of the project focused on improving the material and technical infrastructure of the hub schools – WNISEF allocated funds for the modernization of school science laboratories. Next, the emphasis shifted to the professional development of teaching staff. To this end, in collaboration with the Center for Innovative Education “Pro.Svit” (Kotvitska, K., 2017), principals and teachers were trained in project management, the basics of team and budget management, innovative teaching methods, and more.

4. Urban Development and Institutional Support

Furthermore, with the aim of fostering responsible, proactive communities at the local level, the Foundation provided institutional support to the activities of Mykolaiv City Council's municipal institution “Mykolaiv Development Agency”, from the very beginning of its existence, granting over \$120,000 in August 2016 to implement a series of urban development projects in the following areas: the city's investment attractiveness; urban planning; cooperation with civil society; and the creation of public spaces for residents (MMR, 2016). In particular, using funds from the Western NIS Enterprise Fund, analytical materials and a presentation package for investors titled “Invest in Mykolaiv” were developed, which included an investment passport, a promotional video, and a web portal featuring available real estate properties that could be attractive to businesses (MDA, 2017; Tysiachnyi, V., 2017). An information campaign titled

“Investor Support Office” was also conducted in collaboration with the editorial teams of the English-language publications *KyivPost* (Grytsenko, O., 2017) and *Business Ukraine* (Kutsolabskiy, A., 2017), which resulted in the publication of special print editions about Mykolaiv and the organization of business visits to Mykolaiv for representatives of the American Chamber of Commerce (ACC) and the Norwegian-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce (NUCC).

In addition, with the support of WNISEF, the project “Reconstruction of the Central Part of Mykolaiv” (MMR, 2017) was implemented; as part of this project, experts from the “Pivden” Center for Sociological Research conducted a survey of the opinions and attitudes of the city’s residents, while representatives of the architectural firm “Zotov&Co” provided proposals for the reconstruction of Soborna Square and Soborna Street, drawing on Ukrainian and international experience. In fact, the founders of the CANactions School of Urbanism, another project funded by the foundation, were contracted to work on the concept for the reconstruction of the central part of Mykolaiv.

In addition, Mykolaiv architects developed the “Soborna Design Code” concept, which contains recommendations regarding the rules for placing advertising signs on building facades in the city’s historic center. Additionally, an architectural competition was held to determine the concept for the reconstruction of Mykolaiv’s main square, with a prize fund of 85,000 hryvnias provided by the Foundation (MDA, 2017).

Similarly, in October 2017, WNISEF allocated \$25,000 for comprehensive monitoring of Mykolaiv’s development trends through the so-called City Progress Index – an important strategic planning tool designed to not only evaluate and analyze the performance of local government but also to provide specific recommendations. Experts from Deloitte, GfK, Baker Tilly, Joint Efforts Agency, and the Center for Economic Strategy to evaluate municipal programs developed its methodology. Mykolaiv then became a pilot city for testing it – the results of measuring key performance indicators were presented at the International Mayors’ Summit (IMS) in Kyiv.

In fact, IMS itself, held from 2016 to 2021, was also initiated and funded by the Foundation, bringing together city leaders from Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv regions, international experts, and members of local communities to jointly seek solutions to municipal challenges. The event served as a platform for tracking urban development trends and municipal innovations, establishing business partnerships, and initiating collaborations and new projects that would yield tangible results (Johnson et al., 2020: 24). Thanks to the summit’s unique format, participants had the opportunity to share inspiring stories and forge strong connections with prominent leaders of urban transformation from around the world, as well as meet urban development

visionaries, mayors of other cities, experts, and change agents in civil society and business.

In 2017, IMS launched the “Ranking of Innovative Ukrainian Mayors” project (UP, 2017), which included two mayors from the southern region: Volodymyr Mykolayenko, mayor of Kherson, and Vitaliy Lukov, mayor of Voznesensk in the Mykolaiv region. The project’s goal is to display successful case studies of innovation implementation in cities with populations of up to 500,000 and to rank the mayors leading these changes. Their activities were analyzed based on 10 criteria aligned with those of the global European Capital of Innovation ranking. These include urban planning, public services, culture, healthcare, ecology, safety and security, communication, entrepreneurship, the startup ecosystem, and the city’s brand. The jury members focused not only on the application of technologies in these areas but also on creative solutions to routine challenges.

5. Support for Technological Innovation

Equally noteworthy was the Fund’s next initiative – the business-social television project “Community for a Million”, in which Ukraine’s amalgamated territorial communities competed for a 1 million hryvnia investment from the Western NIS Enterprise Fund to be used for their own development. Five out of 665 amalgamated territorial communities (ATCs) participated in the project. The team represented the south from the Buzka ATC in Mykolaiv Oblast, which is actively developing its agricultural potential (UMAEF, 2018).

To support the emergence of technological innovations, WNISEF launched the U.ventures fund in 2017, which has become one of the three most active investors in early-stage startups in Ukraine. The initiative aims to develop technological talent by supporting a range of educational courses, training centers, and hackathons, and is designed to encourage Ukraine’s key IT teams to remain in the country.

For example, in May 2018, the Fund invested \$1.15 million in three Ukrainian startups, one of which is based in Odesa (Johnson et al., 2020: 49). This is 3DLOOK, which offers a cutting-edge mobile app with scanning technology for the apparel industry. Odesa entrepreneur Vadym Rogovskyi founded the company in 2016. It develops technology for scanning and measuring the human body using two smartphone photos, leveraging artificial intelligence, neural networks, and the latest 3D technologies. Financial support has helped the young company develop its products, create new jobs, and enter new markets.

In addition, WNISEF launched the DREAMactions microgrant program from the CANactions School of Urban Studies for local leaders, which provided opportunities to implement small but sustainable urban projects in their communities. For example, using a grant of

\$3,000, the “Public Transportation for People with Disabilities” project was implemented in Mykolaiv, which improved mobility for people with limited mobility. The main idea of the project was to ensure the efficient use of urban passenger transport adapted for transporting people with disabilities using modern electronic technologies. Therefore, using the grant funds, a special mobile app called “UkrWay: Mykolaiv” was created, which allows users to track trolleybuses and buses equipped with folding ramps in real time via GPS navigation (AIN, 2016).

6. Supporting Leadership and Human Capital

Local educational programs supported by WNISEF as part of the Economic Leadership Program have brought some of the best modern international practices and knowledge in the field of education to the Mykolaiv region. Schoolchildren and students became the main target groups in the region, which determined the need to establish a Mykolaiv branch of the Ukrainian Leadership Academy (ULA), for the opening of which the Foundation provided funding in the spring of 2016. This was a flagship project for the city. At the same time, leadership academies were established in Lviv, Poltava, and Kharkiv. The ULA’s concept involved preparing young people aged 16 to 18 to help transform Ukraine into a modern nation. The Israeli “mechina” model served as a template – a program that prepares young leaders to serve their country using the 600-year-old English educational programs of Oxford and Cambridge (Johnson et al., 2020: 40).

As in other cities, the academy’s educational program in Mykolaiv lasted 10 months and was free of charge for students who passed the selection process. The curriculum was based on three areas of development: physical, emotional, and intellectual. Here, young people were taught to become leaders in any field – business, governance, or civic engagement. Over the six years of the ULA Mykolaiv’s existence, from 2016 to 2021, 177 young men and women graduated (ULA, n.d.). The academy’s students organized a significant number of public events, attracting up to 3,000 participants per year.

In its early years, the academy was housed on a lease basis in the Korabelny District at the Metallurg Hotel, and later in the Zavodsky District at the Tourist Hotel. However, in 2020, with co-funding from the city budget, plans were made to create a modern, comfortable ULA Mykolaiv campus featuring a lecture hall, dining hall, kitchen, gym, library, laundry room, a lounge area, and a sports field in the building of the former “Pivden” Housing and Utilities Company in the Ingulsky District on Parkova Street, which is municipal property. To this end, WNISEF funded a concept for adapting the former housing and utilities complex into a center for full-fledged training and accommodation for 40 young leaders (Zotov&Co,

2020). However, with the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine, these plans were not implemented, and the center itself was initially relocated to Lviv and later ceased to exist.

Another educational initiative is support for the Technology Nation Kids program, which provides free IT training to teenagers and children aged 9–11 in cities across southern Ukraine (Den, 2016). (Mykolaiv, Kherson, Odesa, Mariupol, and Zaporizhzhia). The program was launched by the BrainBasket Foundation in partnership with the Coding Academy and Miratech, with support from the Western NIS Enterprise Fund (UMAEEF, 2017). In 2017, the Foundation funded the creation of a video course on robotics, which covered the basic principles of robot design – 3D modeling, microcontrollers, sensors, ready-made robotics solutions, and open-source solutions; paid for the work of mentors for children’s learning groups, consisting of IT specialists and computer science teachers; equipped the educational hubs of the Technology Nation project (Mayak, 2016) with computers and furniture in three regional centers of Ukraine’s Southern region – the O. Gonchar Kherson Regional Universal Scientific Library, the Mykolaiv Regional Universal Scientific Library, and the M.S. Hrushevsky Odesa Regional Universal Scientific Library.

The educational programs were based on CodeClub courses from the world’s top universities (Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford). Children learned programming in the visual, dynamic Scratch environment and were introduced to the basics of HTML/CSS and Python. The courses were conducted as an after-school enrichment program at educational centers located in libraries. A total of 200 students were trained.

7. Conclusions

In this way, the Foundation supported innovative, highly effective, reform-oriented projects in the region that created opportunities for sustainable change and encouraged local activists, entrepreneurs, and nongovernmental organizations to directly implement reforms on the ground and take an active role in rebuilding their country. They also helped nurture a new generation of leaders capable of transforming the vision for Ukraine’s future. WNISEF’s experience in southern Ukraine serves as a prime example of effective collaboration that ensures the sustainability and effectiveness of transformational processes. The practical value of this experience lies in its potential for use in developing effective models of international technical assistance and regional development strategies. Further research in this area holds significant potential and is linked to the following key areas: an analysis of the profound transformation of the Foundation’s activities and priorities immediately following the outbreak of

the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022, and a comprehensive assessment of the long-term impact of the innovation and education centers established

with the Foundation’s support on the viability and resilience of the regional economy under martial law.

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