

Local Ownership in Peace Processes: findings from a global online consultation

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Contents

3 Introduction

4 Methodology

5 Findings

5 I. Untangling “Local” and “Ownership” in the Context of Peacebuilding

7 II. Challenges in Implementing Local Ownership

9 III. Moving Towards Greater Local Ownership

11 Conclusion

12 References

Introduction

The concept of “local ownership” is widely recognised as a fundamental requirement for sustainable peacebuilding. Despite this consensus however, genuine local ownership remains elusive in many of the ongoing peace processes we see today. Why is this the case? Despite the term being increasingly popularised within international peacebuilding, the actual concept of “local ownership” remains deeply contested. For instance, while not an exhaustive list, local ownership is often interpreted in one or more of the following ways:

- ▶ As a process of “contextualising” externally developed peacebuilding models through consultation with local actors, participation of local actors, and implementation [of activities] by local actors;
- ▶ As a process primarily concerned with national level dynamics, whereby professionalised civil society actors play a role in providing support to national state actors in peace negotiation processes;
- ▶ As the extent to which domestic actors control both the design and implementation of political processes, more broadly. In other words, emphasis is placed on the critical agency and shift of power towards local actors as the driving force behind peace interventions.

This lack of consensus around what is *really meant* by local ownership, both theoretically and practically, has led to criticisms that the concept has become yet another buzzword in the sector. Critics of the term have claimed it is used to legitimise the hegemony of international peace interventions and superficially ensure local buy-in. Others have argued it is used as a pretext to justify exit strategies for international peacebuilding actors, placing undue burdens on local actors.

In the context of these ongoing debates, and as the widespread adoption of important policy frameworks such as the UN’s Sustaining Peace agenda present renewed opportunities to restructure current approaches to peace processes towards greater equity and inclusion, now is an ideal time to ensure local perspectives are placed front and centre in defining local ownership.

To this end, Principles for Peace (P4P) and Peace Direct convened a global online consultation in June 2021 to bring local peacebuilders together to unpack, interrogate and re-imagine the concept of local ownership in peacebuilding and what this means for building better and more inclusive peace processes. The insights from this consultation are discussed in this report.

Methodology

The findings within this report are based on discussions that were held during an online consultation that took place on Platform4Dialogue (P4D) on 22 June 2021. Over 70 participants from 40 countries were invited to contribute to a series of online, text-based discussions, exploring the terminology around local ownership, the limitations of current approaches to peace processes, and what is needed to achieve greater local ownership moving forward.

During the consultation, participants responded to pre-prepared questions posted in each discussion thread, as well as to points raised by other participants over the course of the consultation. For contributions that were considered sensitive, participants were given the opportunity to post anonymously. Quotes from participants are illustrative of the perspectives raised during the consultation, and a small number of quotes were subject to minor edits for clarity and readability. All participant quotes within this report were given explicit consent to be publicly quoted.

The following sections of this report discuss the main points raised by participants, and where possible, offer an analysis of these perspectives in view of current debates within academia and practice. Readers should view the issues discussed in this report not as a representative or exhaustive sample of all relevant issues on the subject, but as a reflection the perspectives of participants and the issues they chose to discuss in this instance.

Findings

I. Untangling “Local” and “Ownership” in the Context of Peacebuilding

“In the peace process, local ownership is the very backbone of an accepted and sustainable peace” – Anonymous participant

While the term ‘local ownership’ has been in use within the peacebuilding sector since the 1980s and 1990s, it has only recently been widely acknowledged by multilateral actors as a key principle of sustainable peace¹. Since the publication of the ground-breaking *Pathways for Peace* report and the UN’s *Sustaining Peace Agenda*, ‘local ownership’ has been increasingly referenced in policy documents and within project and programme plans. However, the increased adoption and implementation of the term has taken place in the absence of a clear definition or even consensus regarding what it actually means, both in theory and practice. At the start of the consultation, participants were therefore asked to ‘unpack’ the term local ownership, including through a specific discussion of the two key terms from which it is comprised: “local” and “ownership”.

“Local”

Throughout the discussion, the majority of participants agreed that “local” refers most clearly to the “proximity of the crisis or the conflict and those who are the first to be affected by any consequences of any decision and action to be taken” (Amjad Saleem, Participant). However, proximity to the conflict and its associated impacts was often viewed as not necessarily spatially-bound, but as more related to the social, economic, political and cultural ties that bind people to a sense of place and belonging. An anonymous participant articulated this sentiment and said, “In the context of peace, the locals are the natives. Those whose grandparents lived in the area. *Those whose lineage is recognised as belonging to the community.* [translated from the original French]”

There are multiple levels of nuance that should be taken into consideration in this regard. For instance, Sawssan Abou Zahr identified various categories of people and actors who operate internally within conflict contexts, including “women, youth, civil society...ethnic and religious minorities, political prisoners, survivors of atrocities, etc.” However, although not within the geographic confines of the conflict-affected state, Abou Zahr noted that refugees and diaspora are also included: “Most of my Syrian friend activists are in exile. Of course, they are “locals”. They were forced to leave to escape death and/or prison. They received threats and were in danger...*They are “locals”.*”

Similarly, Ashima Kaul argued, “There are many kinds of ‘local’. Some represent the local political representations...There are local ethnic groups who only work for the cause of their groups or regions. Some local groups are seen as mainstream and some as marginal or apolitical”. Adding to this, Ashima noted, “They may not be in a particular geographic area (are displaced to some other country/region) but they still have *emotional, legal, ancestral rights/connections to their region.*”

1 See Wong 2013

In contrast, some participants placed greater emphasis on the internal geographic representation of the 'local'. For instance, Siyoum Shay argued, "Local' can be understood at various levels (i.e. national, sub-national and community level). For the purpose of this discussion, 'local' is interpreted as the range of actors / people / the community *"located in a specific geographic area that are affected by, and have an interest in resolving that conflict."* This local-global binary was challenged however by one anonymous participant who felt that the terminology itself perpetuates existing power imbalances between internal and external actors for a given country or context: "When you talk about 'local ownership' you talk from the perspective of the 'outsider', as the population/people affected would not identify themselves as 'local' but just as people or community. So, in that sense the terminology as currently used makes the relationship or position unequal."

From these various interpretations of "local" discussed by participants, it is clear that those who intend on building peace outside of their own local context must be keenly aware of how local actors are not to be viewed as a homogenous group. In developing peace interventions, actors must be clear on what categories of local actors they intend on working with and why, and what the implications of this might be for a specific peacebuilding process.

"Ownership"

When discussing the concept of "ownership", participants tended to emphasise the centrality of local peoples' agency and autonomy over peacebuilding activities, specifically how directly these activities or processes are controlled by local actors. As noted by Siyoum Shay, "Ownership is used as a relative term that describes the *varying capacity* of the actors based at the local level to lead or participate in conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities". Similarly, Shukri Adan characterised ownership as local actors being able to proactively "establish homegrown solutions to solve disputes", while Pife Muliro claimed that ownership is the ability for local actors to handle their own affairs and advocated outright for the "appropriation of peace processes by local actors".

Some participants further argued that local ownership comes with a sense of responsibility and belonging in a peace process due to the fact that local actors inevitably face the consequences

of peace interventions, be it positive or negative. As such, Lumenge Lubangu argued that a "willingness to take responsibility" is part and parcel of developing local ownership, while Oliver Byamungu equated ownership directly with self-responsibility and accountability. As noted by one anonymous participant, "ownership" can be seen as the "result of a community approach" where the activities and processes comprising peacebuilding are not "an imposed, imported business"...*"The community must come to see peace as their work, their way of life in which everyone in the community is an artisan.* [translated from original French]"

Underpinning these views is the normative belief that local communities have the right to self-determination and have the means, knowledge and abilities to solve their own problems. Siyoum Shay emphasised how recognition of existing capacities and an enabling environment for local empowerment are central components of local ownership, while an anonymous participant argued that "[Local ownership] is believing that the local people have a rich experience of peace building and conflict transformation, which enable them to solve their problems by themselves. They have also the skills and knowledge to manage and administer different programs if they are supported reasonably."

Finally, employing both an 'ethical' and 'strategic' framework, one anonymous participant noted that "Ownership creates a sense of belonging and confidence for local people...From an ethical point of view, it is common to hear "nothing about us without us" as a slogan from local communities around the world. *People generally don't like other people trying to solve or impose solutions to their problems.* From a strategic point of view, the people closest to a context are most likely to understand local capacities for peace and local drivers of conflict. *To exclude them is a costly mistake.*"

Notably, these various framings of "ownership" touch upon concepts of 'cost-effectiveness' in peacebuilding that have emerged within academia and practice over the past few years as a powerful argument for ensuring localisation of peace processes. Within these arguments, local actors are viewed as vital not only from an ethical standpoint, but precisely because of the rationale that their knowledge, experience, and commitment to their own context lends itself to more efficient, effective and sustainable peace processes.

II. Challenges in Implementing Local Ownership

“The notion [of local ownership] is flouted because people do not agree on certain principles related to the substance and the form of ownership of the peace process, and local communities continue to suffer the negative consequences.” – Lumenge Lubangu

The importance of local ownership in securing sustainable peace has been well-established academic research.² However, actually translating theories and concepts of local ownership into practice has faced significant operational challenges.³ In many cases, these shortcomings have been clearly linked to power imbalances inherent to the international aid sector and the fact that interpretations of “local ownership” continue to be channelled through a Western lens. During this session of the consultation, participants were asked to critically engage with these challenges and to highlight key issues and opportunities for embedding local ownership in international policy and practice.

Undervaluing local knowledge

Conflict settings are highly complex and fragmented, often experiencing fractured social contracts and parallel systems of governance and accountability that make external analysis of the situation particularly difficult. Despite this, international actors tend to prioritise technocratic toolkits over local knowledge and expertise. Participants argued that this neglect for local understanding is an inherent part of the challenge. As Zack Gaya explained: “Outsiders to the conflict try to intervene and this intervention is sometimes considered elitist, lacks understanding of local dynamics and is therefore non-responsive to the issues that caused the conflict.”

Prince Charles Dickson added: “I have seen situations where pre-designed interventions are wonderful but do not take into picture the local context, local resources, elite/masses structure of the community and other such matters. They naturally fail to carry the locals, the community, even at times the local implementing NGO.”

Furthermore, important points were raised regarding how the failure of international actors’ ability to ensure local ownership of activities or programmes may have larger implications for how peacebuilding is viewed in general. Specifically, when externally driven peacebuilding operations fall short as a result of poor local ‘uptake’ or a lack of

contextualisation, the credibility of peacebuilding itself can be called into question. As noted by Florence Gbnigie, “The Western approach being implemented without due consideration being given to the diversification of different cultures and traditions of various people is a key factor of undermining the support of local knowledge in international settings. This is a deliberate attempt to make the whole exercise count as a failure.”

Paternalistic behaviours and attitudes

For some participants, the devaluing of local knowledge is part and parcel of paternalistic attitudes of international actors towards local actors, where funders, INGO partners and other external actors feel they have a level of intellectual or material legitimacy due to their relative position within the system. Most often, this comes at the expense of local knowledge. In some cases, local knowledge is even viewed as “too political” or “too embedded” within the context. Reflecting on this dynamic, one anonymous participant stated, “There is a general human belief ‘that we know better’ or ‘we know what you need and what is good for you’. Resulting in: if am the one putting money in it, it is me who decides what you do with it.”

This paternalism not only results in a failure to meaningfully engage with what local actors need in a peace process, but it also both indirectly and directly perpetuates a dependency syndrome, where locals are forced to rely on international bodies to drive forward peace processes. Zack Gaya commented on the way this dynamic leads to external actors viewing locals as lacking in agency: “One other challenge in realising local ownership is the attitude that locals including local organizations are incapable of resolving conflicts in their backyard and therefore need to be ‘saved’.” Prince Charles Dickson agreed, adding that “The relationship from the onset is not exactly steeped in good footing, there is the feeder and the fed, the problem and the solution, there are many outlooks that give the impression that one is leading, and the other is following.”

2 For example, see Hughes, Ojendal, and Schierenbeck 2015; Autesserre 2014; Anderson and Wallace 2013; McGuinness 2012; Mitchell and Hancock 2012; Sending 2009; Zelizer and Rubinstein 2009; OECD-DAC 2008; Paris Declaration 2005

3 See Autesserre 2014; Sending 2009; Anderson and Olson 2003

Participants felt strongly that this addressing dynamic will be a key part of embedding true local ownership within the mindsets and practice of international peacebuilders. Notably, participants argued that local ownership cannot take root in a system where local actors are viewed as incapable, unknowledgeable and unfit for the very work they have spearheaded. More so, when external actors continue to dominate the peacebuilding landscape, the existing initiatives and efforts of local actors are significantly undermined. Summarising this feeling, Maria Kontarini argued that “Breaking the dependency syndrome is key to local ownership of any peace process. The ones who have the power need to use it in a way in order not to foster the dependency but to break it. [...] If international actors are fixing things for the locals they take away their power without realising it.” A key lesson for external actors will therefore be how they choose to assess their own actions and the impact these actions (funding modalities, partnership principles, etc.) have on disenfranchising existing local work.

The challenge of complexity

In practice, operationalising local ownership in peace processes comes with its own complex challenges. Among other things, it includes continuously prioritising local knowledge and responding to ever-changing circumstances, both of which require careful judgment and a strong ability to coordinate interactions at different levels between external and local actors. However, the time and funding commitments required for this often go beyond current external aid frameworks, and thus local ownership is consigned as a “second order issue” that is too costly to implement.⁴

Lina Maria Jaramillo Rojas elaborated further on the downsides of this instrumental approach: “If local knowledge of good practices at the local level does not benefit the business model of international actors, then support for local knowledge is neither promoted nor prioritized. *Gathering, documenting and transferring local knowledge are very expensive tasks and implies work for long periods of time*; now international cooperation has restricted agendas with two-year implementation deadlines, thus it is not possible to implement processes to strengthen local knowledge in such a short period of project implementation.” This highlights challenges that have become endemic within the larger aid system around funding modalities, particularly regarding the impacts that short term, projectised and non-

flexible funding have on the capacity of actors to approach projects in an intentional and considered manner. When budget deadlines and reporting requirements take precedent, local ownership is viewed as both too time intensive and lacking in cost-effectiveness. As one anonymous participant further explained: “Taking into account the knowledge from people affected makes things (and thus possible interventions) much more complicated and layered. [External actors assume] it is much ‘easier’ to solve a conflict with just a bit understanding instead of bringing on board all the dynamics at play. I am not saying this is done on purpose, *but it is done out of comfort.*”

Others highlighted key inhibiting factors that undermine local ownership, such as language, restrictions in civic space, and the self-interest of mediating actors. Conversely, some participants noted how parallel peace processes at the grassroots level are taking place at the same time as national and international initiatives, and ensuring collaboration and coordination between these efforts will be an essential part of increasing local ownership and of shifting normative behaviour that continues to view local ownership as a burden.⁵

Disconnect from local concerns

When externally-driven peacebuilding initiatives fail to internalise concepts of local ownership, they are often faced with indifference or passive resistance on the part of local actors because approaches are inherently disconnected from local realities⁶. Diambéré Sylla alluded to how this issue actually reinforces an absence of local ownership as a result: “Local ownership has been difficult to achieve in peace processes because local people do not feel involved in the projects; peace interventions work through projects that do not include the concerns of local people. [translated from original French].” In this sense, internalising local ownership within international peacebuilding is both a cause and effect of the historic neglect of local actors in peace processes.

Participants further criticised how traditional peace processes often relegate local buy-in to the implementation phase once high-level negotiations between warring parties are completed, and that this in turn undermines the ability of peace agreements to be accepted in sub-national or regional contexts. Lina Maria Jaramillo Rojas noted how this relates specifically to high-level processes that neglect sub-national dynamics: “Local ownership is difficult because it is a concept

4 See Bojicic-Dzelilovic & Martin 2016

5 For further discussions on both the challenges of funding modalities and of coordination and collaboration with and between local civil society in terms of local peacebuilding, see Lucey and Kotsiras 2020; Renoir and Guttentag 2018; and Renoir et al. 2020

6 See Lemay-Hebert & Kappler 2016

we have over-used in some stages of peace processes, for example, is well used in peace process implementation, but in negotiation stages that local ownership is sometimes completely absent. Peace negotiations depend more on national powers and usually are centralized exercises that *lack determination of the specific factors and relationships featuring local conflicts and realities. If national actors are negotiating things that are far from local realities, implementing those agreements would be far more difficult.*"

An anonymous participant concluded: "[Local ownership] is at the starting point, and if that is not where the process started then don't add 'local ownership' in further down the process." This reflects the broad sentiment expressed by participants that local ownership cannot be an afterthought, and that effective and sustainable peacebuilding can only occur when local ownership is viewed as a fundamental, non-tokenistic part of the full range of peacebuilding activities in a given context.

III. Moving Towards Greater Local Ownership

"Focusing on the peace process itself rather than on its outcomes is a way of encouraging local actors to see the process as their own. This makes it more sustainable and productive." – Marius Ruhanamirindi

As evidenced thus far in this report, in order to achieve genuine local ownership in peace processes, inclusion must go beyond offering local actors consultative or participatory roles to inform the interventions of external actors. When developing international peacebuilding initiatives, local actors must be given priority for directly identifying the challenges to peace, jointly developing and implementing peacebuilding strategies, and playing a key role in monitoring the effectiveness of those strategies. Broadly speaking, local peace actors need to have the *first and final* decision-making power over how a formal peace process is defined, negotiated, implemented and evaluated. As such, to overcome the challenges that have undermined local ownership to date, there needs to be a fundamental rethinking of peace processes.

To that end, Principles for Peace proposed four fundamental shifts that could significantly improve local ownership: (1) supporting local leadership, (2) focussing on the process rather than the results, (3) having international actors take a back seat, and (4) shifting towards responsibility-sharing. During this last session, participants were asked to critically reflect on these four elements and to consider what other steps are needed to ensure genuine local ownership in peace processes.

Changing the role of international actors

Many participants recognised the added value that international actors bring to a peace process, notably in their ability to provide technical expertise and facilitate spaces for dialogue. However, the majority of participants agreed that a rethinking of the role and support of international actors is necessary to

prevent them from controlling the process directly. Highlighting the fact that international actors should seek to compliment rather than circumvent or replace local peacebuilding efforts, one anonymous participant argued, "You need space and time for transformation, from within. That doesn't mean that the International Community can sit back and relax and do nothing. You need to reassess and re-discuss the type of external support that empowers and enables these transforming processes. The question then is: *with what can I/we support what is already there (compared to taking over processes)*".

Echoing this sentiment, Maria Kontarini stated that "international actors should act more as facilitators to the peace process instead of imposing and implementing." Noting the inherent power dynamics and recalling the fact that international efforts often disempower locals in the process, Maria continued and argued: "How the person in power uses his/her power can either allow the other party to get empowered, develop agency and solve his/her own problems or stay disempowered in the victim position".

Participants agreed that at the heart of this issue lies a need for international actors to take a step back and recognise that they do not have all the answers. Amjad Saleem explained: "The number one value that I think is missing is the concept of humility, to recognise that perhaps we as international actors do not have all the answers or the assumptions that we are coming with may be wrong. *We need to be open to learn and unlearn.*" This sentiment is not new within the peacebuilding sector, and in fact reflects a long history of scholarship that interrogates the

weaknesses of liberal peacebuilding perspectives and Western approaches that assume dominance at the expense of indigenous knowledge and practice.⁷

Empowering local leadership

One way of proactively addressing this sense of international hubris is to focus on how local leadership can be prioritised and facilitated by international actors. Many participants emphasised this as a process of identifying and cultivating local leadership, and noted that working with these [pre-existing] leaders is an effective way of 'localising' peacebuilding work. Diambéré Sylla stated, "In each locality, there is a natural leadership that it is important to identify and set up as a focal point. [translated from original French]" However, this is not without its challenges. In cultivating local leadership, international actors must also be conscious of the diversity of actors that play vital roles in representing the complexity of a given society. Clementine Dupont highlighted the need to take an intersectional approach to this: "Regarding the first point on "fostering and developing local leadership", there is a crucial need to adopt an intersectional approach and particularly include youth actors to have their specific needs and experiences reflected in the peace processes but also in the outcomes."

Siyoum Shay opted to provide a number of indicators to guide thinking on how local leadership can be enabled: "There are indicators that show successful examples of peace processes that prioritised local leadership and ownership. Some indicators of local ownership where the central attention point is: *who takes the key decisions?* - *Who defines the problem?* - *Who sets the agenda and the priorities?* *Who convenes?* - *Who manages the trajectory, rhythm and time of the intervention?* [...] Do they refer to it as 'our process', 'our programme', 'our institution', 'our results' ...?" The point here is that successful attempts at ensuring local ownership are ones that have been able to proactively question and assess the extent that local expertise has informed their activities throughout a project or programme cycle.

Moving towards shared responsibility and learning

Finally, participants discussed the ways in which international and local actors can work together to develop shared skills and strengthen the outcomes of peace processes overall. Several participants talked about the need for more relationship- and trust-building between local and international actors in particular and identified accompaniment approaches as a useful mechanism for doing so. Nouran Mahran argued, "All evidence (from literature, our work, testimonies from people on the ground etc) points to the need for joint analysis, design, and implementation with the relevant stakeholders, and primarily local actors. Without meaningful engagement, durable and sustainable peace cannot be achieved."

However, some participants noted that even within this accompaniment and joint-learning process, local leadership must still be placed at the centre to ensure collaboration does not become another way of enforcing external approaches. As argued by Prince Charles Dickson, "Responsibility sharing is key, but for it to work, locals must take lead, internationals must do a lot of listening and learning. Learning how best to cooperate with the locals, in our experience, we insist that ideas for intervention are from the locals. When the bottom-up approach is utilized, and successes are seen as that of the locals, local leadership gives more effort than when strings are pulled from the top." Dickson continued, noting that the ideal relationship is one of true partnership between local and international actors: "I love the term '*Glolocal*' (global and local), an interwoven mutually beneficial relationship centred on where provision of funds is well understood, and capacity building is needs based and understands the local context."

Summarising this discussion and alluding to the other key aspects of leadership, empowerment of locals, and a reduced dominance of international actors, participants talked about how a 'reimagined' relationship can take shape. Central to this discussion was the idea that the interests, perspectives and needs of local actors should be the true driving force of peacebuilding. Maria Kontarini expressed this sentiment: "By allowing the local actors to take the lead. Let them ask for what kind of external support they need, on what, when and how. Offer external support when *THEY* ask for it. In the meantime, provide empathy, congruence and acceptance to the locals so as they get empowered and start moving."

7 See Anderson, Brown and Jean, 2012.; Kurtenback 2010; Newman, Paris and Richmond 2009; and Autesserre 2009

Conclusion

As conflict continues to increase around the world, ensuring the effectiveness of peace processes is paramount. During the consultation, the participants engaged in a rich discussion on the barriers to genuine local ownership in these processes and shared concrete recommendations for how it could be improved.

Participants agreed that a critical consideration is that those most affected by a conflict have agency, autonomy, and a leadership role in peace processes. The benefits of local ownership are well-established and plentiful, from helping international actors and peace processes to be contextually appropriate, to creating better conditions for the sustainability of any peace process. As such, local communities should be at the helm to ensure that all activities are accountable to the community, wherein peace processes can create space for their leadership while the international community reaffirms a commitment to recognizing that local communities are knowledgeable, skilled, and have an inherent right to self-determination.

The challenge lies in the paternalism of international actors. Participants emphasised how the insistence on adopting standard high-level approaches to peace processes results in local actors distancing themselves from it, leaving international actors to direct the peace processes. The negative impact of the resultant cycle of dependency and increasing local detachment cannot be overstated. Throughout the consultation, participants agreed repeatedly that the primary and most significant impediment to meaningful local ownership is the approach of the international community, a finding that aligns with barriers that the Principles for Peace initiative initially identified.

- 1. Recognise the unique abilities and access of local peace actors:** Local actors have a profound contextual understanding and this knowledge and sensitivity ensures that the peace processes are contextually appropriate and relevant. Furthermore, local actors have a vested interest in the sustainability and suitability of the outcome of the peace process as they will experience the consequences long after the departure of the last international actor.
- 2. Revisit established peace frameworks and adopt context-specific approaches:** Peace processes are too often rooted in perspectives and understandings of peace and conflict that are removed from those of local communities. Admitting that international approaches may not always suit and being open to adopting context-specific approaches will require the meaningful inclusion of local leaders and further generate local buy-in.
- 3. Ensure the meaningful inclusion of local leaders:** For genuine inclusivity, peace processes must have local actors in leadership positions at every stage of the initiative. The two aforementioned recommendations address the primary requirements in developing the necessary relationships with local communities to be able to identify the communities' leaders.

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