

# The Role of Local Governance in Sustaining Peace

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## Conversations on Prevention for Sustaining Peace

We are beginning to understand what peace is—the structures, attitudes, and institutions that underpin it, and the motives that drive people to work for it. Still, peace remains largely an elusive goal, often negatively portrayed as the absence of violence.

It has been assumed that if we can understand the complexity of war and violence, we will be able to foster and sustain peace. We do not study peace, and therefore we tend to focus on the problems of conflict and aggression rather than the solutions associated with peace.<sup>1</sup> With this approach, prevention is viewed as a crisis management tool to address the destructive dynamics of conflict after they have occurred, typically through short-term and externally driven responses.

To address this peace deficit, IPI has been seeking to reframe prevention for the purpose of sustaining peace rather than averting conflict through a series of conversations from October 2016 to December 2017. The overarching aim was to build a shared understanding of what sustaining peace and prevention look like in practice at the national and international levels.

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## Introduction

The joint resolutions on sustaining peace passed by the UN Security Council and General Assembly suggest that “sustaining peace should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account.” More specifically, they also identify good governance as integral to the promotion of sustaining peace.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of the resolutions, however, is on national governance; the local level is conspicuous in its absence. This reflects a broader trend whereby the UN and other external actors tend to incorporate local perspectives into their peacebuilding work as background information while primarily engaging with national counterparts in capital cities.<sup>3</sup>

This focus can be problematic, particularly when the central government is fragmented or lacks broad legitimacy. Recognizing this, the Advisory Group of Experts on the 2015 Review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture recommended that “new approaches need to be found, which understand peacebuilding, at least in its early phases, as having more to do with strengthening local domains of governance than trying to re-establish strong central authority.”<sup>4</sup>

“Local governance,” as defined by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), refers to subnational institutions, systems, and processes that provide services to citizens and through which citizens “articulate their interests and needs, mediate their differences, and exercise their rights and obligations.”<sup>5</sup> Local governance is delivered through “a complex set of political relationships between many different actors—formal and informal, national and local—which interrelate with each other in diverse ways.”<sup>6</sup> These actors could include, for example, a mix of municipal governments, traditional

1 Peter Coleman, “The Missing Piece in Sustainable Peace,” Earth Institute, November 6, 2012, available at <http://blogs.ei.columbia.edu/2012/11/06/the-missing-piece-in-sustainable-peace>.

2 Security Council Resolution 2282 (April 27, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2282; General Assembly Resolution 70/262 (April 27, 2016), UN Doc. A/RES/70/262.

3 Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, Introduction to “Leveraging Local Knowledge for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in Africa,” International Peace Institute, March 2015, available at [www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/IPI-Rpt-Leveraging-Local-Knowledge-rev.pdf](http://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/IPI-Rpt-Leveraging-Local-Knowledge-rev.pdf).

4 United Nations, *The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*, June 29, 2015, p. 16.

5 UNDP, *Local Governance in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings: Building a Resilient Foundation for Peace and Development*, 2016, p. 3.

6 Anuradha Joshi and Markus Schultze-Kraft, “Localising Governance: An Outlook on Research and Policy,” *IDS Bulletin* 45, no. 5 (September 2014), p. 5, available at [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7341/IDSB\\_45\\_5\\_10.1111-1759-5436.12099.pdf?sequence=1](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7341/IDSB_45_5_10.1111-1759-5436.12099.pdf?sequence=1).

chieftaincies, community-based organizations, and religious institutions.<sup>7</sup>

This paper explores how good local governance can contribute to sustaining peace in three ways: (1) by delivering services and promoting sustainable development more effectively and efficiently; (2) by giving people voice in a representative and inclusive way; and (3) by nurturing political will to resolve conflict and sustain peace. It will also highlight how local governance actors can undermine peace if they do not fulfill these functions effectively.<sup>8</sup>

## Managing Resources Effectively and Efficiently

Perhaps the most visible function of local governance structures is to deliver basic services such as healthcare, education, water, sanitation, justice, and security. Managing delivery of these services at the local level can contribute to sustaining peace in several ways. People are best-positioned to describe their own needs and aspirations, and local governance actors are closer to the people than national authorities or international nongovernmental organizations. This enables them, at least in theory, to respond to people's needs, address local-level inequalities, and leverage existing capacities for service delivery.<sup>9</sup>

When provided by local governments in a fair, equitable, and reliable manner, service delivery can also increase the visibility, credibility, and legitimacy of the state.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly true in the wake of conflict or instability, when the provision or restoration of basic services can be seen as “the materialization of the peace dividend,” showing people the benefits of peace and increasing their commitment to sustaining it.<sup>11</sup> Even in countries at

peace, effective local service delivery can increase citizens' trust in the state at both the local and the national levels.

Beyond service delivery, local governments have an important role to play in sustainable development more broadly. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes this in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11—“make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”—which was largely included in the agenda thanks to a campaign by local governments.<sup>12</sup>

But local delivery of services and promotion of sustainable development do not inherently support peace. It should not be assumed that local actors will respond to local needs in an equitable manner; local governance structures may be controlled by elites who are corrupt or represent a narrow set of interests, leading to services that favor certain groups over others. Moreover, local governments often lack sufficient financial, technical, or human resources or statutory authority, causing them to fail to meet expectations. A failure to respond to people's needs or to meet their expectations can undermine peace, as seen in South Africa's widespread community-level protests (see Box 1). Decentralization, therefore, needs to come with the transfer of significant authority, responsibility, and resources to local governments and mechanisms to hold local service providers accountable.<sup>13</sup>

Although local governments are generally in front when it comes to service delivery, other local actors can also play a role. This is particularly the case when a state's authority does not extend to the local level. In Syria, for example, local coordination committees “provided support for victims and families of prisoners, organised alternative hospitals, took charge of water distribution and

7 For example, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan identifies eight distinct modes of local governance in West Africa. See “The Eight Modes of Local Governance in West Africa,” *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (March 2011), p. 24, available at [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7586/IDS\\_B\\_42\\_2\\_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2011.00208.x.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7586/IDS_B_42_2_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2011.00208.x.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

8 On these three dimensions, see D. Hemson, J. Carter, and G. Karuri-Sebina, “Service Delivery as a Measure of Change: State Capacity and Development,” in *State of the Nation: South Africa 2008*, P. M. Kagwanja and K. Kondlo, eds. (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009).

9 Derick W. Brinkerhoff, “State Fragility and Governance: Conflict Mitigation and Subnational Perspectives,” *Development Policy Review* 29, no. 2 (March 2011).

10 Dion van den Berg and Michael James Warren, “Acting Local: How Decentralized Government Can Help Build States,” *IPI Global Observatory*, September 16, 2015, available at <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/09/syria-assad-local-government-peacebuilding-colombia/>.

11 Martijn Klem and Georg Frerks, “How Local Governments Contribute to Peace-Building,” in *City Diplomacy*, Arne Musch et al., eds. (The Hague: VNG International, 2008), available at [www.vng-international.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CityDiplomacyRole\\_of\\_Local\\_GovernmentsEngels.pdf](http://www.vng-international.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CityDiplomacyRole_of_Local_GovernmentsEngels.pdf).

12 General Assembly Resolution 70/262 (April 27, 2016), UN Doc. A/RES/70/262; United Cities and Local Governments, “The Sustainable Development Goals: What Local Governments Need to Know,” August 2015, available at [www.uclg.org/en/media/news/sustainable-development-goals-what-local-governments-need-know](http://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/sustainable-development-goals-what-local-governments-need-know).

13 Dele Olowu and James Stevenson Wunsch, *Local Governance in Africa: The Challenges of Democratic Decentralization* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004).

bakeries, collected garbage and informed the population through a wealth of local magazines and alternative radio stations.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, to prevent parallel systems from emerging, governments need to coordinate with non-state actors on service delivery, such as by engaging in dialogue,

mutually agreeing on their respective roles, or setting policy goals.<sup>15</sup> In countries at peace, too, service delivery can provide an opportunity for local governments to cooperate with civil society organizations and other local actors.

### Box 1. Dissatisfaction with local government in Mbizana, South Africa

In recent years, South Africa has come to be called the “protest capital of the world.” Between 1997 and 2013 there were an average of 900 community protests a year. More recently, the number has climbed as high as 2,000 a year.<sup>16</sup> This apparent frustration was borne out by a survey by Good Governance Africa indicating broad dissatisfaction with government performance. The survey also found that the majority of respondents thought people were attracting attention to their grievances through violent protest. This dissatisfaction permeates all the way to the local level, where the perceived effectiveness of service delivery, economic development, and administration varied widely among municipalities.<sup>17</sup>

The worst-performing municipality was found to be Mbizana in Eastern Cape province—particularly significant to South Africa as the birthplace of Oliver Tambo, a stalwart of liberation who wished for “peace and prosperity for all South Africans.” Over the past twenty-three years, the municipality has not yielded the fruit of democratic transformation, and citizens are dissatisfied with local governance, posing a risk to long-term development and peace.

A local-level survey by Good Governance Africa found the population in Mbizana to be financially precarious, with low personal income (a median of \$55 per month), mass unemployment (47.3 percent), and heavy reliance on government grants and “passive” forms of remuneration. Access to services was found to vary significantly within the community, with only moderate access to the most basic services, whether provided by the municipality, provided by the community, or self-enabled. For example, 77 percent of respondents accessed sanitation through toilets located outside their house, while 11 percent had no access to toilets at all. In terms of economic development, the municipality is trying to unlock opportunities, including through the Mbizana Rural Enterprise Development Hub, but the economy is dominated by the retail sector, with few opportunities in manufacturing and agriculture. Moreover, much of the money made in Mbizana is invested outside the municipality.<sup>18</sup>

When people were asked what areas the municipality should address most urgently, employment creation topped the list, followed by healthcare and nutrition, water and sanitation, education, safety and security, and land and housing. Resoundingly, people communicated their dissatisfaction with the municipality’s inability to deliver on its own vision to fight poverty, provide affordable services, facilitate a people-driven economy, build sustainable communities, protect and preserve the environment, and strengthen a culture of performance and public participation.<sup>19</sup>

Mbizana is not only the worst-performing municipality in South Africa; it also has one of the highest levels of protest. These protests have been found to be attributable to poor service delivery and unresolved community complaints, as well as political disagreements within the municipal council and crime-related incidents.<sup>20</sup>

14 Doreen Khoury, “Syria—Organising for the Future: Grassroots Governance and National Peace,” *Accord* 25 (2014), available at [www.c-r.org/accord/legitimacy-and-peace-processes/syria-organising-future-grassroots-governance-and-national](http://www.c-r.org/accord/legitimacy-and-peace-processes/syria-organising-future-grassroots-governance-and-national).

15 Richard Batley and Claire McLoughlin, “State Capacity and Non-state Service Provision in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States,” Governance and Social Development Resources Centre, February 2009, available at [www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/eirs3.pdf](http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/eirs3.pdf).

16 Carin Runciman, “South African Protesters Echo a Global Cry: Democracy Isn’t Making People’s Lives Better,” *The Conversation*, May 18, 2017, available at <https://theconversation.com/south-african-protesters-echo-a-global-cry-democracy-isnt-making-peoples-lives-better-77639>.

17 Good Governance Africa, “Voter Sentiment on Governance in South Africa,” March 2017, available at [www.gga.org/gga-voter-sentiment-survey-summary/](http://www.gga.org/gga-voter-sentiment-survey-summary/).

18 Good Governance Africa, “Mbizana Municipality Local Governance Report,” October 2017, available at [www.gga.org/mbizana-citizen-survey-report-2017/](http://www.gga.org/mbizana-citizen-survey-report-2017/).

19 Ibid.

20 Christopher Ugochukwu Nwafor, “Factors Influencing Community Protests in the Mbizana Municipality” (master’s thesis, Durban University of Technology, 2016), available at <http://opendata.dut.ac.za/handle/10321/1570>.

## Giving People a Voice

Another important function of local governance structures is to give people a voice, both by representing their constituencies and giving them opportunities to participate at the local level and by relaying their interests and needs to higher-level actors. In particular, this can give a voice to historically disadvantaged groups or those that are underrepresented at higher levels of government.

In India, for example, reserved seats for women, lower castes, and tribes in local governments have helped bring previously excluded voices into local-level decision making (see Box 2).

Just as easily, however, local governance can reflect exclusionary local power dynamics. For example, while many states have sought to recognize “traditional” local governance arrangements such as chieftaincies, such arrangements may reflect “patrimonialism; predation and

### Box 2. Empowering disadvantaged groups at the local level in India

In 1992 India ratified a constitutional amendment establishing a new system of local government (the *panchayati raj*) to decentralize administration to the local level. The amendment reserved seats in local-level panchayats for “scheduled” castes and tribes (those listed in the constitution as being historically disadvantaged) in proportion to their share of the population. It also reserved one-third of panchayat seats for women; more than half of India’s states have now expanded this reservation to 50 percent. In addition, the amendment reserved one-third of posts for the heads of panchayats for these groups. This change had the potential to give voice to those who had traditionally been excluded.

Simply in terms of numbers, the results were impressive. In 2014 nearly 3 million Indians were elected to almost 250,000 panchayats, of whom 19 percent were from scheduled castes, 12 percent were from scheduled tribes, and 46 percent were women (by comparison, only 12 percent of national parliamentarians in India are women).<sup>21</sup>

In practice, the effect on inclusion has been more complicated. In some panchayats, representatives of dominant castes forced their colleagues from scheduled castes to sit on the floor or on separate chairs, or they supported weak candidates from these castes in order to manipulate them once in office. But in another panchayat, representatives from a former untouchable caste have been “vocal, freely expressing their views and taking full advantage of various welfare schemes.”<sup>22</sup> One study also showed that members of scheduled castes or tribes serving as heads of panchayats delivered more benefits to the village as a whole and to their group specifically.<sup>23</sup>

Studies have also found positive effects of the increased representation of women in panchayats. At least initially, studies showed that women elected to reserved seats were generally less experienced and more likely to turn to their husbands for help. At the same time, however, in panchayats headed by women, more women have participated in village meetings, and these panchayats have invested more in issues such as drinking water and sanitation.<sup>24</sup> Over time, moreover, villages with women-led panchayats have seen more women running for and winning elections, as well as the weakening of gender stereotypes.<sup>25</sup> This increased inclusion of women has the potential to make peace more durable in India: evidence has shown that “increasing women’s participation and representation in leadership and decision-making positions leads to higher levels of peacefulness and better development outcomes for society.”<sup>26</sup>

21 Open Government Data Platform India, “All India Level Number of Elected Representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions from 2001 to 2014,” available at <https://data.gov.in/catalog/number-elected-representatives-panchayati-raj-institutions>.

22 B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew, eds., *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009).

23 Pranab Bardhan, et al., “Impact of Political Reservations in West Bengal Local Governments on Anti-Poverty Targeting,” *Journal of Globalization and Development* 1, no. 1 (2010).

24 Lori Beaman, et al., “Political Reservation and Substantive Representation: Evidence from Indian Village Councils,” in *India Policy Forum 2010/11*, Suman Bery et al., eds., National Council of Applied Economic Research and Brookings Institution (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2011).

25 Lori Beaman, et al., “Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Bias?,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124, no. 4 (2009).

26 Delphine Mechoulan, Youssef Mahmoud, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Jimena Leiva Roesch, “The SDGs and Prevention for Sustaining Peace: Exploring the Transformative Potential of the Goal on Gender Equality,” International Peace Institute, November 2016, available at [www.ipinst.org/2016/11/sdgs-goal-gender-equality](http://www.ipinst.org/2016/11/sdgs-goal-gender-equality).

corruption; patronage; [and] absence of real accountability to the people.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, while local elections are the most democratic way to pursue inclusive local government, they do not guarantee inclusivity; in fact, they may reinforce identity-based politics, especially when turnout is low.<sup>28</sup>

Local governance actors, therefore, need to be held accountable, including through public participation beyond elections. Local governance can be a laboratory for innovative, participatory approaches to policymaking, such as the participatory budgeting model that emerged and spread from city governments in Brazil. Even when the actual role of citizens in such processes is small, they can contribute to sustaining peace. For example, a study in the Netherlands found that local participatory policymaking not only makes people “feel more responsibility for public matters” but also “increases public engagement, encourages people to listen to a diversity of opinions, and contributes to a higher degree of legitimacy of decisions.”<sup>29</sup>

## Nurturing Political Will for Peace

In addition to managing resources effectively and giving people a voice, local governance structures can also nurture political will for sustaining peace. Effective decentralization can allow local governments not only to deliver services but also to serve as fora for people to engage in dialogue with each other and negotiate local-level issues. When there is intense local-level competition between groups, for example, local governments could provide opportunities for power sharing. In Northern Ireland, power-sharing arrangements between Nationalists and Unionists emerged in local councils well before the Belfast Agreement

provided for power sharing at the national level.<sup>30</sup> Such efforts at local-level conciliation can help build political will for peace at the national level.

More informal local arrangements can also build political will for sustaining peace. Local peace committees, for example, can create opportunities for dialogue between representatives of communities in competition at the local level. This can help mitigate localized violence, resolve local disputes, and empower local peacebuilders.<sup>31</sup> In the Central African Republic, for example, formal and informal committees have mediated agreements on local issues such as allowing people access to markets or cemeteries.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, however, such efforts to sustain peace often fail to transcend the local level and can easily be swamped by national dynamics. Local peace committees and similar local initiatives are most effective when part of a broader “infrastructure for peace” that links the national and local levels.<sup>33</sup> For example, South Africa’s 1991 National Peace Accord set up a three-level infrastructure for peace: (1) a National Peace Committee and National Peace Secretariat; (2) regional peace committees; and (3) local committees and local-level peace monitors. These levels each had distinct but complementary roles and coordinated with each other during the country’s three-year transition period.<sup>34</sup>

Another challenge is that local governance actors do not always have the political will for peace. They can include “warlord fiefdoms, crude protection rackets meting out vigilante justice, or communal enclaves that advance the security interests of one group at the expense of others.”<sup>35</sup> They can also act as spoilers that complicate national efforts to sustain peace. Indeed, when it comes to local governments, there is little empirical evidence that

27 De Sardan, “The Eight Modes of Local Governance in West Africa.”

28 UNDP, *Local Governance in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings*.

29 Ank Michels and Laurens De Graaf, “Examining Citizen Participation: Local Participatory Policy Making and Democracy,” *Local Governance Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010).

30 Colin Knox, “Emergence of Power Sharing in Northern Ireland: Lessons from Local Government,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 16, no. 1 (1996).

31 Andries Odendaal, “An Architecture for Building Peace at the Local Level: A Comparative Study of Local Peace Committees,” UNDP, December 2010, available at [www.un.org/en/land-natural-resources-conflict/pdfs/UNDP\\_Local%20Peace%20Committees\\_2011.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/land-natural-resources-conflict/pdfs/UNDP_Local%20Peace%20Committees_2011.pdf).

32 Marie-Joëlle Zahar and Delphine Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces? Local Mediation and Sustainable Peace in the Central African Republic,” International Peace Institute, November 2017, available at [www.ipinst.org/2017/11/local-mediation-and-sustainable-peace-in-the-central-african-republic](http://www.ipinst.org/2017/11/local-mediation-and-sustainable-peace-in-the-central-african-republic).

33 Paul van Tongeren, “Potential Cornerstone of Infrastructure for Peace? How Local Peace Committees Can Make a Difference,” *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (March 2013).

34 Hans J. Giessmann, “Embedded Peace: Infrastructures for Peace: Approaches and Lessons Learned,” Berghof Foundation, 2016, pp. 24–27, available at [www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/infrastructures-for-peace--approaches-and-lessons-learned.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/infrastructures-for-peace--approaches-and-lessons-learned.html).

35 Ken Menkhaus, “Local Governance and Peacebuilding: Challenges of Legitimate Representation,” *Accord* 25 (2014), available at [www.c-r.org/downloads/Accord25\\_LocalGovernanceAndPeacebuilding.pdf](http://www.c-r.org/downloads/Accord25_LocalGovernanceAndPeacebuilding.pdf).

decentralization on its own significantly reduces conflict.<sup>36</sup>

These challenges highlight the importance of looking at the local level to see what is already working and what is not. This can help channel support to build on promising local efforts to sustain peace that are already in place—and, importantly, to link these to efforts at the national level.

## Conclusions

The UN sustaining peace resolutions have a gap when it comes to the local level. Good governance is integral to sustaining peace, but only if achieved at the national and local levels. At the same time, local governance actors do not always help sustain peace at the local level or contribute to national-level efforts. National, regional, and international actors should keep the following in mind when supporting local governance as part of an approach to sustaining peace:

- **Support to local governance must be context-specific:** To an even greater extent than at the national level, context is critical at the local level. Those supporting local governance need to be wary of generalizations and focus on the particular political cultures, power relations, and existing capacities in the areas where they engage. Failure to do so can make such support unsustainable and unrepresentative, at best, or undermine peace, at worst.
- **Local governance is not just about local government:** Efforts to improve local governance should first look at what is already working, and they should look beyond state structures. Local governance is generally provided by a complex network of formal and informal actors. Buy-in and participation from key private sector actors, civil society organizations, or traditional leaders is often pivotal to success. This means that strengthening local governance is not synonymous with decentralization and local elections. Focusing on these formal processes without understanding how they relate to informal arrangements can ensure their failure and undermine existing institutions, inadvertently increasing the risk of conflict.
- **Not all local governance is “good governance”:** Local governance should not be romanticized. As with the national government, local governance structures will only contribute to sustaining peace if they are inclusive, effective, and accountable. This means that national governments and international supporters should give local governments the capacity and authority to deliver while also ensuring the communities they represent have adequate mechanisms to hold them accountable.
- **Neither local nor national governance can sustain peace in isolation:** Sustaining peace writ large often starts with concrete, small-scale progress at the grassroots level. But local-level efforts to build peace are generally not sustainable on their own; local dynamics driving conflict and peace are inextricably linked to national dynamics. Local and national governance structures can both more effectively contribute to sustaining peace if working together as part of a national “infrastructure of peace.”
- **Support to local governance is inseparable from support to development:** Improving local-level service delivery and economic development can be an entry point for sustaining peace. Likewise, peace will not be sustainable if people do not see its dividends in their day-to-day lives. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including Goal 16, which calls for “effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels,” can provide a framework for linking local governance and local development, particularly through service delivery.



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