

LOCALISING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY RADIO IN GHANA

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Abstract

There seems to be little knowledge and awareness of the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among communities in Ghana. The study's main objective was to find out how the 22-member Community Radio (CR) stations of the Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN) – the umbrella organisation of community radio in Ghana, mobilise their communities to tackle development needs and aspirations within the framework of the SDG 1 to 6. The study employed a qualitative research design. Specifically, a case study approach was adopted. CR stations' mission is to promote community development in a participatory manner. The expectation is that CR stations would facilitate efforts to tackle development needs and aspirations of communities within the framework of the SDGs. The study found out that even though the application of the participatory communication methodology is central to the work of CR stations, particularly increasing community members' awareness and understanding of the broad meanings of particularly SDG goals 1 to 6, they were unable to sustainably employ the methodology because of resource constraints. The implication is that CR stations need to devise innovative ways of raising resources to enable community members actively participate in radio programmes.

Keywords: SDGs, community development, participatory communication, responsiveness, Ghana

Introduction

The SDGs are articulated in a human-centred and environmentally sensitive and inclusive manner. The question of how to achieve the 169 targets of the SDG goals remains a task, which hinges on how communities can take a centre stage in their realisation. It is the desire of every progressive country to do everything humanly possible to ensure the wellbeing of its citizens living in geographically dispersed communities. It has been observed that the distribution of well-being has five concerns – extreme poverty, inequality, social mobility, discrimination and social cohesion (Sachs, 2015, p. 11). An appropriate appreciation of these concerns needs to be looked at from an interconnected perspective of how well or not the economy, society, environment and governance is functioning in a sustainable manner for the common good.

A paramount concern for many communities in developing countries is how to extricate themselves from extreme poverty and aspire to a better standard of living. Perhaps it was to capture this core aspiration of communities, particularly rural ones that in the final outcome document for the Rio+20 Summit (“The World We Want”) notes:

[The SDGs] should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their inter-linkages... We also underscore that the SDGs should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities... Governments should drive implementation of the [of the SDGs] with the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, as appropriate (United Nations General Assembly, 2012, para 246-7).

It is important to note that an emphasis is placed on making the SDGs “action-oriented” with the “active involvement of all relevant stakeholders”. In the context of communities, the SDGs would seem “easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, taking into account capacities and levels of development” when programmes aimed at implementing set targets of the SDGs are based on the development philosophy that sustainable development must start from within a people’s culture, worldview, and inherent potentials as a basis for solving problems and engendering transformation and sustainability in their development processes. The communication dimension in the SDG implies the relevance of Participatory Development Communication – “the systematic design and use of participatory activities, communication approaches, methods and media to share information and knowledge among stakeholders in a rural development process in order to ensure mutual understanding and consensus leading to action” (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 1998, p. 10).

Action-centred approach to meet some of the goals of the SDGs in this study requires a human-centred development approach. Such an approach can be rolled out by considering some key factors in the process to achieve positive outcomes. Human development is the process of enlarging the capabilities, choices and opportunities of people, especially the rural and poor, to lead a long, healthy and fulfilling life. This process includes the expansion of people’s capacity and skills to gain access to and control over factors that affect the basic needs essential to their lives. These needs include freedom from poverty, food security and availability of safe drinking water and improved sanitation. Other needs involve access to primary health care and basic education as well as the opportunity to participate effectively in the social, economic and political affairs of their societies and nations (FAO, 1998, p. 6).

The realisation of the development needs of communities requires the systematic design and use of participatory activities by stakeholders. However, it seems that the methods and media of sharing information and knowledge among stakeholders on development initiatives on targeted SDGs in rural communities is problematic. Some main factors that seem to have slowed down human development is the lack of people’s participation in the design and implementation of policies and programmes that affect their lives, coupled with rural people’s low sense of power. The main question the study seeks to answer is: How can SDG goal 1 to 6 be achieved in participatory, responsive, inclusive and sustainable ways to empower communities to develop?

The philosophy underpinning the establishment of operations of CR stations seems to be in support of democratic principles. People’s right to freedom of thought and expression, freedom to assemble and initiate activities and programmes, which can drive them towards making better use of available resources in responsible ways. The right to access information to make informed decisions in various spheres of human endeavours, makes it imperative for communities to have a powerful voice to champion their aspiration and needs. The fundamental operational orientation of CR stations is that of championing causes of the marginalised and promotion of peace. Therefore, some main features, which distinguish CR stations from other types of radio include ownership by the communities, working to promote peace and social justice, and community participation. To achieve this, the following five steps, which Hochheimer proposed (Hochheimer, 1999, p. 247), seem relevant for community radio to adopt/adapt:

- Identifying the participants.
- Defining the issue or problem.
- The problem-solving process and resource identification.
- Setting goals and objectives including assigning roles and responsibilities.
- Design of action plan and community feedback.

The implementation of such a process demands a lot of resources and commitment from operators of CR stations than non-community-based radio stations. It is these community-based programmes that the audiences and other development partners tend to appreciate and co-sponsor because in the long run, they positively impact the lives of people (Diedong & Naaikur, 2012). The production of community-based programmes requires the application of a multi-media approach. However, what is sometimes overlooked is that for radio to become a medium for active seeking of information, for education or for bringing about social changes, other media must support it. White (2000, p. 179-189) noted for example that, the radio schools in Spain and Latin America have been an alternative form of

education and social change, but their effectiveness have depended largely on a combination of radio with print, discussion groups, interpersonal contacts, and action groups. The production of video documentaries by these action groups also has been an important factor for enhancing social change.

It is important to note that the true worth and uniqueness of CR stations programmes can only be appropriately evaluated based on the development philosophy that sustainable development must start from within a people's culture, worldview, and inherent potentials as a basis for solving problems and engendering transformation and sustainability in their development processes. Despite the liberalisation of the broadcasting sector in Ghana, CR stations are far from implementing community agenda-driven news and social issues capable of making people have greater self-consciousness and autonomy to define their developmental agenda collaboratively with stakeholders. Stephen (2012, p. 137-138) notes that community radio performs important roles in communication, community building and promoting local cultural forms. Therefore, it is important that community radio empowers the communities they serve. Melkote and Steeves (2001, p. 44) define "empowerment as the process by which individuals, organizations and communities gain control and mastery over social and economic conditions, over democratic participation within their communities, and over their stories." It is the function of community radio to provide a platform for interactive discussion about important community development issues.

Also, the civic-forum and agenda-setting function of CR helps in diverse ways such as enhancing citizen awareness on a broad of issues affecting them, and participation in policy issues. According to a Department for International Development report (DFID, 2008) cited in Naaikuur (2020) the DBU's supported project to the Malawian Development Broadcasting unit (DBU) to produce participatory broadcasting programmes to generate dialogue about development activities, shows how the programmes motivated poor people in the country to voice their needs and concerns that went to influence government policy and service provision. As an impact, DBU helped solved many village-level issues such as entitlements from government, transparency, HIV-AIDS, and improving the delivery of a wide range of government services.

In operationalising the empowerment theory, CR stations appear to use the dialogical approach of communication to raise important questions focused on individual choice, social norms and deprivations that can undermine capabilities, entitlements and outcomes. However, as a point of scholarly curiosity, how deep is community participation in the content design and development of CR stations' programmes as a way to mobilise communities to solve development problems within the framework of the SDGs? There is dearth of literature in this area of research. This therefore makes a study that examines how the inputs of community members and stakeholders are factored into the programmes of CR stations, unique. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to examine how SDG goals 1 to 6 (no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality and clean water and sanitation) are embedded as core thematic areas of communication via participatory development communication approach.

Participatory Development Communication Methodology

Key informant Interviews were carried out with a focus on collecting success stories and cases from community radio representatives. The data collected was evaluated based on an approach focusing on how and why results were achieved. Four CR stations that had participated in the "Participatory Community Radio and The Right to Communicate - A Singular Pathway to the SDGs" project, namely Radio Gruni, Radio PAD, Royals FM and Radio Peace were sampled for data collection. These four radio stations were selected because aspects of the content of their programmes dealt with SDG 1 to 6, which were of interest to the project. Also, they were selected because they had received expanded capacity building support from the project sponsors – Crossing Borders. A desk review of relevant documents on the topic was carried out. The study zones were divided into two main clusters – southern and northern clusters of Ghana. A combination of telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires were the primary tools used to collect data. All the data from the Southern Cluster was gathered through self-administered questionnaires, based on the respondents' preference for that method, apart from the community-level interviews, which were conducted through phone.

Thirty people participated in the interviews. The interview questions were related to the relevance of applying participatory development communication methodology for mobilising communities to

tackle development problems. From all the participants, ten were community members from each of the CR stations whilst 11 were local community and local authority stakeholders such as the National Commission on Civic Education. Eight members from the Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN) were interviewed, including project management team and council representatives, and the Crossing Borders project team. One of the authors of this paper participated in a final advocacy seminar titled: “Community Radio Problem-facing / Solution-searching Forum towards the SDGs and amid COVID-19” provided a unique opportunity to harvest lessons learned and success stories from different stakeholder groups participating directly in the event.

SDGs as a Tool for Local Development and Participation in Communities Across Ghana

This study has found some evidence to support local communities’ enhanced knowledge and use of the SDGs for local development purposes as a result of project activities. Not only are marginalised communities being heard articulating their SDGs aspirations on GCRN stations across Ghana, but these hitherto silent voices in the development discourses, are now increasingly being taken into account by local authorities and service providers. This can be seen from selected cases featured in case studies below (Case Study I-IV). This study found abundant evidence of local government responsiveness due to pressure from ordinary people to improve services in health, education, sanitation and roads. In many cases, including the ones identified for this study, the SDGs represented an abstract or even unknown phenomenon for both community members, local authorities and service providers. However, the project has proven particularly successful in communicating the relevance of the SDGs for local development by amplifying the local communities’ needs and demands through this common framework.

Some results have materialised for local communities beyond the 5km broadcasting limit through CR stations’ deployment of GCRNs participatory methodology. This bears special relevance for the “leave no one behind” slogan, as communities beyond the line have little or no means to communicate their basic needs. Four randomly-selected cases are presented below on how SDGs are influencing the operations of community radio stations in Ghana to support human-centred development approach.

Case Study I: Emphasising the Need for Education - SDG 4

A community member from Murugu in the Savannah Region noted that Radio PAD had enabled them to confidently express their views to the local authorities in charge of development, about serious development problems in the community such as lack of potable water, poor road networks and low-quality education. According to the community member, through voicing out their concerns to the Ghana Education Service regarding the truancy of some teachers in the community, the efforts yielded positive results. After voicing these concerns on CR, teachers now appeared more committed in their work and enhanced their cooperation with parents to ensure effective teaching and learning in schools in the district.

Case Study II: Local Elections as Platforms to Educate People to Vote Candidates to Champion their SDGs aspirations – SDG 4

CR stations took active part in educating communities during the 2019 Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assembly (MMDA) elections by underscoring its connection to the SDGs. The education did not only stress the responsibilities of the local communities to participate in the elections but also emphasised the need for them to vote for candidates capable of championing their SDGs-aspirations. Evidence on the ground abounds to show that in particular, linking the SDGs to the 2019 MMDA Elections has had multiple effects of enhancing citizen participation in the elections. In addition, there are several indications of improved relationships between the CR stations and their Local Assemblies on the SDGs while contributing to local authorities’ accountability and responsiveness to local needs. Different approaches were used to engage with local authorities including SDG quizzes and magazines where representatives were presented a chance to showcase their knowledge and commitment to the SDGs.

Case Study III: Local Elections and Gender - SDG 5

At ROYALS FM, the only elected female Assembly Member in the Wenchi Municipal Assembly, where the station operates, won the elections due to her demonstrated knowledge on the SDGs and plans to achieve them to improve the living conditions of her electorates. According to a local authority respondent, the Presiding Member Interviewee of the Wenchi Municipality (a leader of the elected assembly members), the ROYALS FM's programme team contributed to the representation of women during the 2019 MMDA Elections in each of the community organised by the station. The then only Assembly female candidate "beat her male contenders miserably because she impressed the electorates with her knowledge on the SDG issues and could relate the SDGs to the community priorities needs, health, water, education, etc."

Case Study IV: Access to Water – SDG 6

At Radio Peace in the Central Region, the Head of the Station narrated: "Following a community engagement and broadcast of radio programmes on the SDGs in Silverkrom, leaders from a rural community in the Effutu Municipal Assembly resolved to send a representation to the Municipal Assembly to seek audience with the Chief Executive. The intention was to let the Chief Executive know about the challenges they were going through and ask for support. This step was seen as a positive outcome as Silverkrom had previously not thought of such a step. They had always relied on the mercy of their Member of Parliament who they thought was the only one in a position to help with their issues. A couple of days after that move, the leaders of the community organised a press conference. At the press conference, the elders talked about their challenges and how over the years they had been ignored. They said contrary to the slogan of the SDGs "leave no one behind", their community had been left behind. The result is that the community now has potable water, ending years of dependence on streams and rivers for their water needs."

Community radio station plays a frontline role by highlighting development communities that communities, especially those in the hinterlands face. Radford FM, a community radio based in Tumu, which is located in the Upper West Region of Ghana, carried out a vigorous campaign to stop the wanton harvesting of rosewood by smugglers. Though the radio station had to face a lot of resistance from interested parties benefitting from the destruction of the forest, it eventually succeeded in the fight. In 2018, the Government of Ghana placed a ban on the harvesting, transporting and sale of Rosewood. By embarking on such proactive campaigns and programmes, CR stations draw attention of duty-bearers to take measures aimed at tackling the issues raised. Busolo and Manalo (2022) note that globally there has been a continuing increase in the number of community radio stations. Even the number of radio station stations in Ghana is over four hundred, currently genuine community radio stations are less than twenty. Within this context, there is the need to better understand the strategic orientation community radio should take towards addressing local pressing development issues. Indeed, documented (Abdul-Malik, 2011) point to the fact that philosophically, community radio programming is human-centred as they are geared towards providing services, which can ameliorate the living conditions of rural communities and foster social cohesion.

According to Alumuku (2006, p. 13) community broadcasters in Africa are making attempts at placing issues of poverty, health, agriculture and development at the forefront of the broadcast agenda, keeping these issues in the spotlight and demonstrating that broadcasting can tangibly influence development. Indeed, Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN, 2006, p. 3) notes that "the content of programming at a community radio shall in particular give voice to and support the advancement of the most marginalized groups in its listening community; i.e those who are disadvantaged due to poverty, gender, age, disability or any other factor." The GCRN programming code practices and re-echoes one of the issues emanating from a set of regional perspectives focused on those countries and regions where development policies have already included communication for development and where there is capability in applying it to sustainable development. The key issue in the process of sustainable development is about how "communication for development or communication with development – is

not a matter of experts saying what type of development people need, but of getting people (ordinary citizens) to define development (FAO, 2007, p. 82).

However, it is important to note that though the liberalised broadcasting regime in Ghana and some parts of Africa seems to be eulogised by some social commentators and academics, yet programming that actually put the poor at the centre leaves much to be desired. The main issue of contention in scholarly discourse on the political economy of the Ghanaian broadcasting sector is, how the poor people and marginalised groups are prioritised and featured. Programming for poor people seems inadequate and at best tokenistic. Mare (2013, p. 31) contended that, “This ‘cosmetic’ liberalisation of the airwaves has done little to broaden the voices of marginalised groups.” Karikari (2020, p. 47) could not have captured this situation better when he noted: “In a turn of phrase, the poor are visible but unseen; they are present in huge numbers and visible everywhere but they are neither heard nor seen in the media. The exclusion of the poor and the marginalised undermines the argument that the huge numbers of broadcasting outlets translate into plurality.” The community radio broadcasting sector manifests some promising signs of broadening the frontiers of broadcasting to poor people and marginalised within a broadcasting regime, which is decked with a number of challenges.

Prospects and Challenges of Using Participatory Development Communication Methodology for Mobilising Communities to Tackle Development Problems

It emerged from the interviews that the implementation of the project in various communities using the Participatory Communication Methodology is a strategic and credible approach for CR stations to mobilise their communities for community problems identification, thinking through and devising solutions. It is evident that CR stations can serve as effective facilitators to ensure that Independent Government Institutions (IGIs) and other duty-bearers satisfactorily account for their roles in community development. A notable index of functional participation is the formation of Radio Listener Groups, which the CR stations need to form and sustain. However, it seems that management of CR stations are either oblivious of the relevance of capitalising on listenership surveys to enable them to design impactful programmes or perhaps it is the usual lamentation of lack of funds to carry out such important surveys. In study on “Listenership Survey and Reflective Review Let’s Think, Let’s Change: Promoting Diversity through Popular Culture,” Miller (2017) highlights the importance of listenership survey by noting that it is believed that higher listener retention rates will produce stronger results if attained in the future.

At the 25th Anniversary of Radio Progress Radio in Wa on 08/12/2022, as part of his presentation on the theme, “radio and sustainable development,” Dr. Gabriel Gbiel Benarkuu, an organisational development expert conducted a listenership survey of Radio Progress station among participants during his lecture to gauge the extent to which their inputs are factored into the programmes of Radio Progress. It was quite revealing from the findings the extent to which the rich perspectives and needs of listeners are overlooked in the content of programmes of the radio station. The lack of conducting Listeners’ Surveys to enrich the content of programming is not peculiar to only Radio Progress but cut across the entire radio broadcast sector in Ghana. There is little available literature on how radio stations prioritise listenership surveys as an avenue to ‘listen and build synergies’ for development as Dr. Gbiel put. Radio stations need to overcome this challenge as a tangible demonstration of their commitment to realising SDG goal 17: “building partnerships for the attainment of the goals.” Given that community broadcasting is a form of public broadcasting, which serves a community rather than a whole nation and operates with a minimal staff and budget, it presupposes that community members need to support CR stations financially.

However, CR stations find it difficult to get the needed financial support from community members due to a number of factors. For example, when CR stations are controlled by religious organisations, or have been established by an international non-government organisation, which anchor the running costs of such stations, the community often has little window for participation. It is important to point out that there is no doubt CR stations in Ghana appreciate the importance of the use of participatory methodology in programme production. The application of such a methodology requires functional action groups in the catchment areas of CR stations. There is an apparent gap in Ghana regarding attempts by CR stations to facilitate the formation and sustenance of such actions groups in a drive to

make such groups the heartbeat for social change initiatives in communities. The review of literature on action groups has some evidence of how from very humble beginnings, action groups grew and developed into productive organisations with well-designed communication structures.

White (1976, p. 99) reports that the homemaker' clubs in southern Honduras developed a regionallybased daily programme, which was directed to specific projects and problems of the clubs. Letters to the programme were discussed, the supervisors reported on innovative projects of a particular women's group or presented a tape-recorded visits to communities, and leaders of particular groups came to the station to speak to all of the clubs. Improvement of the socio-economic conditions of women in poor communities demands that their voices are heard so that duty-bearers and development partners can support them to realise their development needs. According to Farnworth and Mahama (2012), productivity levels of on women-managed farms are lower than productivity levels on men-managed farms not because women are inherently less productive, but rather because of unequal intra-household resource allocations. CR stations can have well-planned programming focusing on women's economic empowerment initiatives and the gender-based constraints that create disadvantages to them as farmers and value chain actors. Such constraints combine to keep women's farms less productive and women's businesses small. The role of CR in championing discourses about such gender-based related issues is vital. When radio functions well along these lines it supports and encourages a horizontal and vertical dialogue between participants to address development problems in an integrated and sustained manner.

Another important requirement for a truly participatory methodology in programme production is the visual (video, pictures) dimension of the multi-media approach in action groups, which is completely missing in CR programme formats in Ghana. Rodriguez (2001, p. 122-124) reports that in Columbia, through participatory video production, projects women's groups trying to break what programmers consider as "televisable." The collective redefines its identity during the process, shifting power roles and creating new self-images and relationships. It is worth noting that communication for development uses participatory activities, media and materials to empower people to articulate and share their own opinions, needs, problems and abilities both among themselves and with outside development agencies. This enables the people to influence the decision-making processes of formulating and implementing projects and programmes intended to satisfy their needs and solve their problems (Anyaegebunam et al., 1998, p. 11).

One of the main features of a community radio allied to participation is access. Access and participation are more or less twin concepts, which are crucial pillars of CR stations. Access implies the availability of broadcast services to all citizens, participation implies that the public is actively involved in planning and management, and also provide producers and performers. Despite participatory development communication being criticised (see Mosse, 2005; Waisbord, 2008) for its cost factor as well as the challenge it poses regarding purely technical programmes, which are sometimes funded by international organisations, participation can be meaningful if well utilised for fostering mutually beneficial interactions among people of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Participation paves the way for people who play different roles in society to come together for common societal good (Bratton, 2006).

However, the question is: with limited access to the services of CR stations in Ghana, how can participation be possible to enable community members have a real share and feel of CR to motivate them to contribute financial and other resources to support radio stations? The issue of access is a hindrance to efficient and effective operations of CR stations in Ghana. The limited or lack of access to CR stations' services seems to defeat the concept of CR. According to the Windhoek Charter on Broadcasting in Africa "community radio is broadcasting which is for, by and about the community and whose ownership and management is representative of the community, which pursues a social development agenda, and which is non-profit." In Ghana CR stations operate in a legal regime, which limits how far they can broadcast to reach their targeted audience.

In the course of 21st century, the role and influence of communications have changed dramatically. The emerging advances in technological capacities and the challenges they pose for people and media organisations, particularly CR stations need to be tackled. According to Somavia (1981) this significant evolution is in sharp contrast to the relative paralysis of the legal framework to cope with and respond to these changes. Karikari (2022) has noted that it is quite bizarre that since the coming into force of the 4th Republican Constitution of Ghana, no broadcasting law is enacted to regulate the broadcast industry. In such a context, Karikari observes that it seems 'wealthy people want it so.' Consequently,

the development of CR stations is problematic. How come that within the legal framework of Ghana - the 1992 Constitution that guarantees freedom and independence of the media in chapter 12 - CR stations are prohibited by the NCA from broadcasting beyond 5km radius? This question remains to be answered despite efforts made on some platforms by the GCRN and some stakeholders to engage the NCA on the issue of limited coverage for CR stations and related matters.

Based on the available data, the positive impact of the CR stations activities and programmes on the SDGs, especially goal 1-6 (No Poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality and clean water and sanitation), far outweighs any unintended actual or potential negative ones. CR stations influence in facilitating the mobilization of communities to pursue their own development agenda and advocating for social justice and good governance is receiving the attention of development agencies albeit in an inconsistent manner.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that through collaborative initiatives of the GCRN and some development partners, especially Crossing Borders, community members' awareness and understanding of the broad meanings of particularly SDG goals 1 to 6 is increasing albeit at a slow pace. Evidence from the study support the transformative power of CR as a tool for educating communities about their socio-economic problems and what they can do to tackle them. However, the gains elaborated upon in this article are difficult to sustain in a broadcast landscape, which is gaining notoriety of its programme content being overly politicised and commercialised (Karikari, 2022).

Public concerns about how frequencies are allocated to people based on partisan considerations raise questions about the need for the enactment of a broadcasting law to address the issue (Azuri, 2023). Currently, the NCA limits CR stations' broadcast signals to 5km radius. The implication of this limitation is that rural-folk who are in most need of the services of CR stations are at a disadvantage because of limited access. This development contradicts the slogan that attempts by nations to achieve the SDGs should not "leave no one behind."

One of the main principles, which distinguishes CR stations from other media is that they should be the voice of the voiceless. This implies that CR stations ought to consistently listen to the people and voice their concerns about important development topics, and how collectively, communities can take initiatives to improve the quality of their lives. However, the gap in listenership surveys by CR stations seems to suggest that the inputs of listeners do not matter in kind the of news and programmes, which are broadcast. It is important to underscore that given the revelation of this study that local communities seem to connect their lives aspirations to the SDGs, CR stations need to design and implement projects and activities with their local and international partners through functional action groups, which serve as vital conduits for meaningful articulation of these connections.

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