

**AN ANALYTICAL EVALUATION OF THE REINTEGRATION
PROCESS OF FORMERLY ABDUCTED CHILDREN IN NORTHERN
UGANDA AND THE ROLE OF THE VARIOUS ACTORS**

By Grace Maina

Grace Maina is currently a Doctoral Researcher at the University Of Bradford, UK. Her current research is on the process of reintegration for formerly abducted children in post-conflict scenarios. Grace has a MA in Development Studies from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in South Africa. She also has a Bachelor in Arts (BA) degree majoring in Political Science and Sociology from the University of Nairobi, and a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B) degree from the University of Nairobi.

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Abstract

In the aftermath of civil conflict the international community and national governments have been quick to suggest, to draft, and to implement programmes to enable children who were victims of the war reintegrate back into normal life. Different actors and international agencies continue to play a vital role in the reintegration of formerly abducted children in Northern Uganda. Though well intended these programmes have not been analysed for their utility and efficacy in achieving their desired objective which is to grant the returning children a civilian lifestyle that is reasonably free from fear and want. This paper analyses the activities of reintegration, the gaps in the current reintegration literature and practice and the role played by the various actors present in the region in enabling abducted children attain their civilian standing.

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Introduction

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been fighting the ruling government for over two decades. The conflict is prevalent in the northern region of Uganda and has adversely affected the Acholi community. The Refugee Law Project argues that the two major causes of this war are the great history of violence and the marginalization of the people in the North. The existence of a North-South divide is explained in terms of the economic imbalance that was created during the colonial era (Refugee Law Project, 2004). The LRA has been known for forced conscriptions, large scale atrocities, abductions of children, as well as rape and forced marriage of their female abductees. It is believed that thousands of children have been abducted into the LRA and as an initiation ritual been forced to kill members of their families and communities. This internal war has generated internally displaced persons (IDPs) and has caused the physical destruction of most of the socio-economic fabric of the Northern and Eastern part of Uganda. This paper is a discussion of the role of different actors in the reintegration of children affected by war

It has been recently anticipated that there will be an end to the Northern Uganda conflict. The international community and the local government have responded by engaging in different interventions and mechanisms that will ensure the peace. A fundamental intervention that has been formulated and administered to this end is the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme. DDR refers to that process of demilitarizing official and unofficial armed groups by controlling and reducing the possession and use of arms, disbanding non state armed groups and reducing the size of state security services and assisting former combatants to reintegrate into civilian life (Ball & Van de Goor, 2006). DDR finds its place in both the development and security agendas and a properly administered DDR gives peace-building a better chance of success.

Reintegration has been defined by the United Nations as any assistance given to former combatants to enable them to reintegrate back into civil society. Consequently reintegration is economic, political and even social in nature. Reintegration must therefore include medium to long-term programmes, including cash compensation, training or income generation meant to increase the potential for economic and social reintegration of former combatants and their families (Ball & Van de Goor, 2006). Reintegration must be merged with the socio-economic development of the country as a whole. Successful reintegration depends to a large extent on how short term concerns about security and political stability are not only addressed but also effectively reconciled with long term strategies for economic reconstruction and development (Berdal, 1996).

Often the term reintegration has been confused with reinsertion. It has often been presumed that merely placing an individual back into their community constitutes reintegration. Different programmes on the ground have marked their success by their successful reunification of the former combatants with their family. This action, while it may be a component of reintegration, is in itself not reintegration. Reintegration has to do with securing the life of an individual to ensure their freedom from fear and free from want. This notion of freedom is informed by the need to ensure the security of the post conflict environment. The human security of individuals and local communities forms the backbone of any successful post-conflict environment. It is only when individuals have their needs met and feel secure from harm that we can then speak of

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proper reintegration. The action of placing an individual back into his community, on its own does not ensure such freedoms and more needs to be done past the reunification to ensure effective reintegration. While the term reintegration has commonly been used to cover all activities after demobilization in practice reintegration has been limited to providing reinsertion and resettlement assistance only (Alden, 2002). This can be attributed to various factors such as lack of funding, lack of good preparation or the deliberate action of DDR practitioners. This article makes an argument for the holistic security of the individual as a necessary component of proper reintegration back into the community. Human security which has in its objective the purpose of making the individual the primary concern of security therefore provides a useful benchmark to address the relevance and efficacy of the different reintegration initiatives of formerly abducted children. This necessary benchmark provides for the security and provision of the individual thus the freedom from fear and want. The central quest of this paper is to critically investigate the process of reintegration and how this process has been implemented in the context of formerly abducted children in Northern Uganda. This paper also aims to discuss the key components of reintegration and how different actors have played a role in the resumption of these abducted children back into the community. This analysis is based primarily on empirical research carried out in Gulu in 2008. The field research was conducted through interviews and survey questionnaires of about 110 individuals in Northern Uganda. The respondents in this study were: former child combatants; members of the local community; officials of the different reintegration programmes; government officials; political elites; and religious leaders. This article is premised on the fact that following civil wars many organisations and the international community at large always rush in to assist and to restore societies, while these actions are necessary as they are noble it is imperative to find out whether these actions are useful for the present peace and for averting future conflicts in many of these post war societies.

Much of the existing literature on reintegration has been more focused on the reinsertion component of reintegration. The bias in this literature has been centred on the activities of the reception centres such as World Vision, GUSCO and such like organizations which have played and continue to play a fundamental role in tracing the families and communities of the abducted children. Very little research however, has been done on the activities of these formerly abducted children once they have been reinserted back into their communities. This stage is a significant component of the reintegration process and it is this phase of the reintegration process that is the focus of this paper.

The first part of this article will therefore critically analyse the contributions of the Ugandan Government to the process of reintegration upon the return of the formerly abducted children. Consequently this article will discuss the crucial components of reintegration and how the different actors involved in reintegration carry out the mandates of the process. The three organizations used for analysis in this paper are: Child Voice International (CVI);¹ St. Monica's;²

¹ CVI is a Christian international organization that seeks to restore the voices of children silenced by war.

² St. Monica's is a centre that was founded in 1975 by the Italian Missionaries Sisters. The school was created to promote disadvantaged girls and young women in pursuit of social justice. In recent years the school is run by indigenous Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and has worked to provide skills to formally abducted girls who in most cases are also child mothers.

and the School of War Affected Children (SOWAC).³ These three institutions will enable this paper to analyse the activities of an international organization initiative, a local indigenous initiative and a government aimed at helping formerly abducted children properly reintegrate back into the community. It is imperative to note that while the international community takes credit over the accomplishments of the reintegration process there has been very little analysis made on what have been the causes of success and what that success really means (Berdal, 1996). This paper therefore seeks to highlight the elements crucial to the success or failure of reintegration thus setting out a yardstick against which these reintegration programmes should be analysed. This paper will draw to a conclusion that all programmes in the reintegration of formerly abducted children must be structured to rid them of fear and want. While absolute freedom may not be possible in a post-conflict environment the author will argue that there has to be reasonable freedom from fear and want.

The Process of Reintegration In Northern Uganda

There is a process by which formerly abducted children returning from the 'bush' would ideally go through. This process varies and is not consistent for all the returning children. The Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) is a crucial actor in the process of return and its main objective is to rescue the children forcefully conscripted and held against their will in the rebel ranks. Even though the UPDF's main role in the process is to rescue the children a large proportion of the children do escape by themselves from the rebel faction and some could have been released by the rebels; as is evident in the representation below.

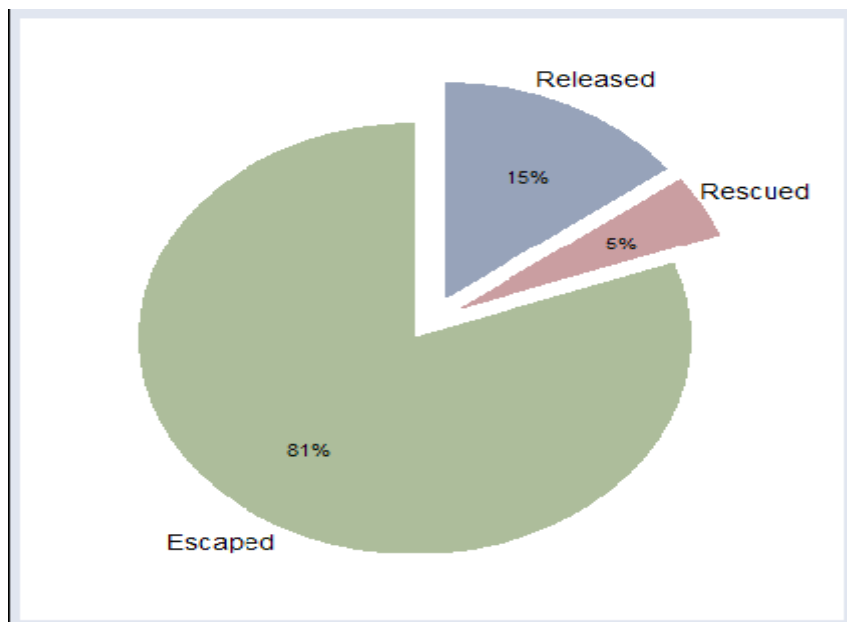


Figure - Illustration of how the ex-child soldiers return to their communities adopted from the Survey of War Affected Children Report of 2006.

³SOWAC is a boarding school facility built and funded by the Government of Uganda and the Belgium Government.

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The Amnesty Act which is the legislation that guides the DDR process in Uganda does carry within itself provision for those individuals who escape or are released from the LRA. The Act provides that these individuals should report to the UPDF or to the local authorities, either the chief or the police who would then take them to the UPDF for debriefing. Other than rescuing the children and debriefing them the UPDF do offer some psychological support through radio programmes and drop leaflets with amnesty information in LRA territory to inform the children and other reporters of the desire of the UPDF to rescue them. The UPDF usually then organizes for transport to the nearest Child Protection Unit (CPU) where returnees are offered food and medical services through their personnel and hospitals (UPDF Public Relations Officer, 2008). Most returning children are kept within the UPDF for a maximum of 48 hours. The ages for many of the returning formerly abducted children varies, with some being as young as 8 years old. Once care has been administered these formerly abducted children are then transferred to a reception centres. It is in this reception centres that returnees from the LRA are provided with basic supplies and basic 'counselling' to enable them to return to their communities. These CPU centres are vital for those who have special needs or vital information due to their involvement with the LRA (Allen, 2006). The CPU centres are run by officers, medical personnel, and intelligence detail with specialized training in dealing with children. In interviews with the UPDF official information given was that the CPU staff did engage in follow-up initiatives to ensure that the returnees were getting along well in their training and employment. However, in carrying out field research, the researcher found that none of the respondents indicated any action of follow up by the UPDF, and most of the returnees were adamant that the UPDF did not go further to seeing to their welfare after the debriefing.

The UPDF is determined to have this system run almost seamlessly so that nobody goes directly to a reception centre since the Act is clear that amnesty can only be granted to those who have reported to official local authorities and been debriefed (Allen, 2006). There are however some individuals who go straight to reception centres or straight into their communities without necessarily reporting to the UPDF. Upon return some of the formerly abducted children are anxious about reporting to the UPDF, and they fear being tortured or punished because of their involvement with the LRA that most of them forego receiving the amnesty certificates. Some of the other children report that due to the responsibilities they have at home they are unable to go through the process. A large number are ignorant of the process and of the consequences of not obtaining an amnesty certificate, the number of those who circumvent the UPDF however is not that high (Allen, 2006).

The UPDF, upon the conclusion of its activities, then transfers children to the reception centres where they receive further help before placement back into their communities. The UPDF does offer the option for those children who have already attained the age of majority, which is 18 years, an opportunity to join the UPDF forces in the North. Many individuals have taken up this offer and joined the forces to help defeat Kony and the LRA. A good example of this is the 105th battalion which was formed by the LRA returnees. This unit was instrumental in recovering hidden arms and showing secret locations (UPDF Public Relations Officer, 2008). This battalion however has since been disbanded and the members redistributed to other UPDF factions.

Analytical Evaluation of the Reintegration Process

To be able to consider the reintegration programme a success, then the process must be judged on the extent to which it has freed formerly abducted children from want and fear. Though it is not possible to achieve complete freedom from want and from fear, it is reasonable to expect that these programmes will achieve basic freedom ensuring that these children have an opportunity to survive in an environment where they feel safe.

The concept of reintegration implies that there is a recipient community to receive the returning children. Community involvement is critical to any success of reintegrating formerly abducted children and any programme that operates devoid of the opinion of local community cannot be sustainable. Many reintegration programmes have tended to have a top-down approach ignoring the input of the local community. Local involvement deals with issues of impunity and allows communities to feel involved in accepting the returning children, who in many instances served as combatants, on their own terms and in accordance to the dictates of their culture. Such local ownership of the process of reintegration is a vital component of any meaningful reintegration and consequently proper peace building. A good illustration of local involvement is in how the St. Monica institution involves the locals in drafting and determining programmes. This is done through forums where the director holds public meetings with members of the community and discussions are held and local initiatives in the different reintegration programmes are encouraged. A good illustration is when the Director of this institution held a meeting in the Atiak region about the possibility of starting a centre in that region. The women were excited and contributed to what they would want to learn, while the older men, the elders suggested what their community contribution would be (Sister Rosemary, 2008). The community must be treated and considered a legitimate stakeholder in the reintegration process. All the organisations interviewed claimed to involve the local communities in the crafting of the programmes that were implemented. When the members of the community were questioned about their involvement many of them narrated their own personal encounters with the formerly abducted children. Most of them said they had helped to feed a returnee, clothed a returnee, or shown kind gestures to these returning children. It was only those respondents in positions of authority such as the chiefs who seemed involved in the programming of reintegration. It is important to note that whilst the local leaders seemed involved, their work seemed limited to the cultural practices of accepting the children back into the community and not in designing the programming for reintegration. When the children were asked about the reintegration programming and what they thought about it or how it could be improved most of the children did not think it was their place to suggest what should happen and they mostly dismissed the question as the responsibility of the government or the international organisations. The fact that the returnees did not seem to engage with the programming was a clear indicator of the fact that they did not feel that their views counted for anything. Effective reintegration requires that all stakeholders contribute and the contribution of the local community cannot be overemphasised. All the different players: the government; the international organisations; the local indigenous community based organisations; the local leaders; and members of the local community must as a team work to establish proper reintegration programmes.

The aim of reintegrating formerly abducted children is to provide them with an alternative civilian lifestyle that promotes peace. Ideally one of the main objectives of reintegration has to do with providing ways to help the combatants become economically independent and

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psychologically healthy. The reality however is starkly different from what one would envision. The lack of job opportunities and rehabilitation facilities for most of these returning children have often driven them into committing crimes to ensure survival. It is imperative to take note that most nations devastated by war simply do not have the resources to provide for proper reintegration. This is why the programming for the reintegration process by the different actors is vital. It is necessary to take into consideration, 'who' is responsible for drafting the programmes and how they go about crafting the reintegration process. In SOWAC the programmes were crafted by government officials in the Ministry of Education. In CVI while the larger workforce was indigenous and they consulted with the locals their programmes were drafted by international expatriates based in Gulu. From observation it was clear that programmes that were crafted by the indigenous persons took into consideration details that were relevant in the local community. The programmes run in St. Monica's for instance were relevant to the local people and the structure of the institution was greatly informed by the fact that the sisters who run the centre were members of that same community. It was interesting that the choice of activities and the structure of the school were greatly influenced by the background of the administration. Many of the staff members and instructors in this centre had experienced firsthand the devastation of the war; they had also lost their relatives, friends, homes and now were committed to restoring their communities. Their personal stake in the matter gave them legitimacy with the local communities and as such the reconciliation between the children they reinserted back into the community and the locals stood a chance at success.

To be able ensure effective reintegration it is critical that the training undertaken for former combatants be matched with the local market opportunities. In deciding on the overall components of the reintegration process it is vital that the social, economic and institutional characteristics of the country be considered more closely (Ozerdem, 2002). It is common practice in post conflict environments for there to be massive training in a particular vocation leading to massive unemployment on the completion of training. A good example of this is in Gulu where most of the returning girls are placed in a tailoring school. For reintegration to be considered successful research needs to be done on what the local economy needs so as to inform the implementers of reintegration which vocations are needed. Failure to understand the socio-economic conditions, the local labour markets and lack of innovative ideas on how to kick start employment for former combatants can drastically undermine the reintegration process. In St. Monica's for example there are currently 270 girls enrolled in a tailoring course that runs for approximately one year. To ensure that their girls are able to survive in a market that is already flooded with tailors, St Monica's is involved in bulk production of school uniforms and school bags. In this way many of the girls are engaged in employment for the skills they've been taught. The sisters also work to obtain employment placements for some of the girls once they complete their training (Sister Rosemary, 2008). These placements provide good socio-economic support to the formerly abducted girls. It is clear that the institution then uses its credibility to assist the girls, some of whom could be easily stereotyped as unreliable and violent, and gives them a chance at a good life (Christine, 2008). Currently, St. Monica's is planning to equip most of the girls that are trained in tailoring with a sewing machine, which can be a capital asset for their small business. The Director is working to start a cooperative where the girls can work together to produce crucial bulk items for the market. This trend however is not replicated in some of the other organisations and it is evident that after the skills training many of the formerly abducted children are often left jobless.

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To ensure successful reintegration it is crucial that one establishes what the demobilised population thinks of the process. The success of any one reintegration effort is tied to how those being reintegrated view the reintegration process and whether they regard it as meaningful or not (Berdal, 1996). Their opinions cannot be down played or replaced with other 'good ideas', their interpretation of life and what they would view as success is crucial and differs from one community to another and the same must be considered to ensure successful reintegration. A bottom-up approach will perhaps be the most important imperative to ensuring that there is sustainability (Ozerdem, 2002). A factor that could hinder peace agreements is the way in which former combatants view their absorption into the community at the end of a conflict (Assefa, 1992). CVI develops individualized reintegration plans for the different girls and this is done by talking to the girls and finding out what a successful life would be to them. This differs with every girl to one success could mean psychological stability, to another it could be owning two huts and to another it is the acquisition of vocational skills (CVI Programme Manager, 2008). In St. Monica's the girls are also consulted in improving the provisions of the programmes and it was significant to observe the relationships that had been fostered between the sisters and the girls. The Centre Administrator explained that upon return many of the girls had trust issues, and were often very quiet not bothered to ask questions or make suggestions but with time the girls had become confident and are able to share and talk about things that bother them (Sister Asumpta, 2008). This kind of involvement goes a long way in ensuring that the returning children reintegrate properly and live peacefully amongst the rest of the population.

It is important to be able to make judgement on the efficacy of the different reintegration programmes in Northern Uganda so as to be able to facilitate future improvements that would benefit the returning children. All these programmes have the sole objective of ensuring proper rehabilitation and reintegration into the community. To be able to fulfil this mandate the programmes must have a programme that seeks to establish these children within the community. It is not enough to train these children and give them skills; it is important that institutions and organizations plan to ensure that they will have opportunities within the community (Sister Rosemary, 2008). St. Monica's for example has put in place a working system in which they approach future employers and also the existence of a business tailoring unit in which most of the girls get employment. An organisation such as CVI however seemed more concerned with giving skills and helping the girls recover but there was no indication of a future institutional plan and this was communicated to the girls to ensure that they did not have any unrealistic expectations. The ability of a programme to provide opportunities upon its completion for a number of the children is a reasonable step to freedom from want and fear.

There has been a lot of criticism about the isolation of formerly abducted children, with many arguing that there was a need to mix the formerly abducted children with the rest of the children and adult members of the community (Hon. Norbert Mao, 2008). This is because it creates a 'them' and 'us' mentality. The purpose of reintegration is to reconcile the children back into the community. It however defeats the purpose if the formerly reintegrated children are grouped on their own and secluded from the rest of community. This action perpetuates stigmatization and further discrimination thus enhancing fear amongst the returning children. SOWAC for example is a school that is built for formerly abducted children and admission is based on the production of an amnesty certificate. The other programmes have attempted to mix the children with those who were not formerly abducted and though they understand the harsh experiences that some of

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the children have gone through they have attempted to provide structures in which all these children abducted or not can experience childhood. Though the idea in SOWAC is noble the effectiveness of restoring these children back into community after alienating them by educating them separately might be difficult. It is also important to note that in a community that is so impoverished and where there is a struggle for children to attend school, preferential treatment of the children who had been aggressors in the past over those who had not been in the bush further complicates the dynamics of reintegration.

A critical point of comparison is that of the three programmes only SOWAC had attempted to mix the genders. The other two organizations had created programming that was targeted only for the girls. St. Monica's and CVI were of the opinion that the girls were the most vulnerable group; this is because those who had returned with children were often stigmatized and rejected (McKay, Robinson, Gonslaves, & Worthern, 2006). With time communities have however become moderate and have moved towards accepting the girls but this has not been extended to the children they got in the bush (Chrobok & Akutu, 2008). In the bush the girls were mostly wives and many of the ones who were not were raped by their male counterparts (Chrobok & Akutu, 2008). It is therefore questionable that the action of putting them in the same environment as the boys will help them reintegrate into normalcy, it seems to be a recreation of the bush structure in a formalized setting. In a recent article research amongst these girls has shown that the ex-LRA rebels do still harass the girls who they consider to be their wives (Namubiru, 2008). An environment where the girls and boys are mixed enhances fear for some of the returnees and gives back negative power to others. The high drop-out rate is enough evidence of the defective system structure in SOWAC.

Since a significant number of the female returnees come back to the communities with children. Many of the programmes have failed to cater for these special circumstances. In carrying out this empirical study the researcher asked the young child mothers how they managed to survive, many of the girls said that their family members and relatives had played a significant role in supporting them to take care of the children. The return of the girls with their children has also presented an unplanned burden for many of these communities with most of the families now having to take care of a child that they had not anticipated. The chances also of these girls doing anything to enhance their lives are greatly reduced by having a child. Many of the girls who return from the bush are unable to go to school or to join any vocation teaching centre because they bear the responsibility of taking care of their children (Sister Rosemary, 2008). This is a dynamic that must be taken into consideration if reintegration is to be considered effective. In Northern Uganda one in every five females has no education and only one in every three is functionally literate with most of the returning females with children unable, disallowed, or unwilling to attend school (Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006). St. Monica's has a running day-care facility in which the girls who are enrolled in the institution get to leave their children to be cared for and taught while they undertake their training CVI does also take into account the children of the returning child mothers when planning their programming. It is self-evident that girls in these programmes feel more socially accepted and this in turn enhances their participation and return back into the community.

Conclusion

To ensure that the reintegration process is successful, each phase of it must be given adequate attention. The focus and energy has mostly been placed on the reinsertion phase of reintegration. It however is more critical for research, development and post-conflict reconstruction that more effort and attention be directed to what follows the reinsertion phase of returning children. The reality in which these returning children are placed and the manner in which it is done is critical to ensuring positive peace building.

The manner in which children are engaged in life and the different activities must be such that their fears and needs are addressed. Programmes must aim to provide economic independence to these children within the reality of their community. This is why it is imperative that the Government development plan involves and integrates the activities of reintegration. The involvement of the Government in receiving the returning children back into the community and the issuing of the amnesty certificate is representative of a social contract (Ozerdem, 2009). In this contract the Government undertakes to ensure the safety and opportunities to those who give up the rebel lifestyle and surrender. The role of the Government in ensuring relevant and effective reintegration programming cannot be ignored and the same must be enhanced.

These organizations must craft programmes that can address society's needs and to ensure that the trade and skills they teach formerly abducted children are relevant. The involvement of the local community and the returnees in crafting the reintegration programmes must be encouraged to ensure effective post conflict reconstruction in those communities.

While much of the research and attention has been given to the reception centres and the reinsertion activities there is need for more work to be done on other actors in reintegration. This is because it is these institutions that carry out the largest task of reintegration in ensuring that those who have returned obtain a civilian lifestyle. The work and efforts of these organizations are therefore crucial to ensuring that formerly abducted children successfully reintegrate and live reasonably free from want and fear.

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