



Briefing paper

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Learning from partnership

Effective donor support to civil society-led peacebuilding



**CONCILIATION
RESOURCES**
working together for peace

Learning from partnership: effective donor support to civil society-led peacebuilding

Donor governments and multilateral institutions recognise that a diverse, resilient and effective civil society is key to increased peace and stability in conflict-affected contexts.

Yet there are counter currents, which make donor support to civil society-led peacebuilding activities difficult in practice. Institutional donor prerogatives and constraints can lead to prescriptive programming and skin-deep engagement with civil society actors.

However, peaceful change in conflict contexts is not linear, is dependent on multiple factors, and cannot be imposed or sustained from outside; instead, effective donor support requires an institutional approach which enables civil society-led action, and allows for flexibility and creativity as conflict contexts evolve.

This brief explores through two case studies how a particular model of civil society engagement – peacebuilding partnerships between ‘insider civil society’ such as local organisations and networks and ‘outsider civil society’ such as international non-governmental institutions (INGOs) – functions effectively to facilitate peaceful change.

It puts forward – using the partnership approach as an example – three recommendations for how donors can better accommodate and support civil society-led peacebuilding, mindful of the institutional pressures they face. In doing so, it offers reflections from practice for how donors can realise commitments on partnership with regards to civil society actors contained in both international frameworks¹ and in donor-specific policies and strategies². These efforts are particularly pertinent in light of the widely accepted global problem of declining civic space³, with areas that are experiencing conflict and instability some of the worst affected.

Donor recommendations

- 1. Invest in relationship building and relationship management.** Create (or maintain) embassy posts with the remit to engage widely and deeply – with an emphasis on non-governmental actors located beyond the political centre. Ensure continuity of personnel in these posts to build the trust of civil society, context expertise, and the ability to identify and sustain promising civil society led initiatives.
- 2. Build the political space for civil society to operate autonomously.** Make the case for civil society-led initiatives in formal policy environments (both in conflict contexts and within one’s own institution). Engage local civil society to collectively determine when and how it is constructive for donors to play a direct role in their peace initiatives, and draw on INGOs as a sounding board for how best to position donor involvement.
- 3. Create procedures and processes that value co-creation, learning and adaptation** in order to leverage the comparative strengths of local civil society. INGOs can act as a useful intermediary to manage donor-local civil society interaction and ensure project financial accountability. In return, donors should require INGOs to demonstrate clearly their contribution to the development of local civil society capacity and the quality of their partnership relationship, with evidence of their impact.

1. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 2282 [2016]; Sustainable Development Goal 17, target 17; UN/World Bank report *Pathway for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* [2018]
2. For example, DFID’s *Civil Society Partnership Review* [2016]: www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-civil-society-partnership-review
3. Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2019: democracy in retreat* [2019]: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat>

Partnership stories

Mindanao, Philippines

Peace outcome:

A 30-year inter-community conflict is successfully mediated in Central Mindanao, Philippines.

Summary and significance:

Conciliation Resources works with two local organisations in the Maguindanao province of Mindanao – Tenduray Lambangian Women’s Organisation (TLWOI), a network representing Indigenous People (known colloquially as ‘IP’ or *Lumad*) women, and the United Youth for Peace and Development (UNYPAD), a predominantly *Moro* (Muslim) youth organisation based in Cotabato City working to promote peace in the region through dialogue and reconciliation.

Together with Conciliation Resources, TLWOI and UNYPAD developed a Community Safety Working Group (CSWG) project to resolve *rido* – inter-clan conflicts caused by competition around access to land and resources, political rivalries and matters of family honour. *Rido* pose a threat to people’s livelihoods and everyday security, and undermine community cohesion. They also threaten to derail a fragile national-level peace process between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Government of the Philippines.



Conciliation Resources, TLWOI and UNYPAD meet with Minister Sinarimbo of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to discuss Community Safety Working Group activities. © Conciliation Resources

In 2014, the Government of the Philippines signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) with the MILF, ending a 50-year insurgency on the island of Mindanao. In the subsequent years it proved difficult to enact CAB into Philippines law, leading to frustrations among local constituencies with the lack of implementation. In this period of uncertainty, any escalation of *rido* had the potential to trigger a renewal of wider conflict between the Armed Forces of the Philippines, MILF members and other armed groups, eroding trust in the viability of the Government-MILF peace process.

Over a period of two years, Conciliation Resources, TLWOI and UNYPAD successfully engaged warring communities in South Upi, Maguindanao – one a *Moro* community, the other an IP community – to broker a dialogue and find practical solutions to the triggers of the *rido*. In particular, TLWOI and UNYPAD’s willingness to work together as joint mediators was particularly effective, given their own affiliations as IP and *Moro*-identity organisations.

On a local level, these efforts resulted in a drastic reduction in levels of everyday violence. In June 2016 the communities held a ‘Kanduli’ – a celebration to honour the rebuilding of relationships between both communities – following a series of agreements on the cessation of hostilities, joint community conflict management mechanisms, and land tenure demarcation. Since the Kanduli, no attacks or disturbances between the two clans have been reported and members of both communities enjoy freedom of passage across the others’ territory.

Importantly, the resolution of *rido* also assists the process of ‘normalising’⁴ the 2014 agreement between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines; creating conditions of trust between different identity communities in Mindanao will be vital as the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)⁵ is established following a plebiscite in January 2019. TLWOI, UNYPAD and Conciliation Resources will continue to work together to resolve *rido* through the CSWG as the BARMM is developed by a transitional authority ahead of regional elections in 2022.

4. The concept of ‘normalisation’ in the context of the Mindanao peace process is explained in Herbolzheimer, Kristian. ‘The peace process in Mindanao, the Philippines: evolution and lessons learned’. *Conciliation Resources/NOREF Report December 2015*: p3-4
5. ‘What you need to know about the Bangsamoro plebiscite’ (*Rappler.com*, 18 January 2019) offers a concise explainer of the process leading up to the plebiscite on the BARMM: www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/221232-things-to-know-bangsamoro-plebiscite



Georgian-Abkhaz context

Peace outcome:

The UK's Chevening Scholarship programme introduces a regional application option for students across the South Caucasus.

Summary and significance:

Before 2014, the Chevening Scholarship, a UK government awards programme aimed at developing global leaders, required applicants to list their country of origin as part of their application, as is the case with most international study programmes. This requirement had prevented young people in Abkhazia, a de facto independent and partially-recognised territory which broke away from Georgia following a war in 1992/3, from completing an application.

As a result of protracted ongoing conflict, Abkhaz youth have had few opportunities to engage internationally, limiting their access to education and professional development, their ability to build networks, and the development of new thinking and creative problem-solving, including in relation to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Since 2000, Conciliation Resources has convened a series of dialogues between Georgian and Abkhaz civil society and political actors to exchange information and analysis and jointly develop practical solutions to problems which remain stumbling blocks in the peace process. Participants of the most recent iteration of this dialogue, the Limehouse Discussion Platform (LP: 2012-present) identified education in the South Caucasus as an area of common interest and cooperation, and the issue of access to international study programmes for young people living in Abkhazia as a priority issue to address.

For over two years, Conciliation Resources and LP participants liaised with Georgian, Abkhaz and UK authorities to gain political support for an arrangement that would allow students from Abkhazia to apply for a Chevening Scholarship, while resolving practical issues that blocked progress, such as the lack of English-language testing facilities in Abkhazia. In 2014 Chevening adopted the regional 'South Caucasus' application option and a number of Abkhaz students have since participated in the scheme.

This apparently small technical change has profound socio-political implications: it is seen as a tangible step towards engaging with the needs of the population in Abkhazia and contributes to a sense within Abkhaz society that constructive dialogue with Georgians can bring about concrete improvements to people's lives. Importantly, it is seen as a principled, lasting improvement, rather than a one-off exception.

The Chevening Scholarship achievement has had an amplifying effect. It has created a precedent for other institutions in the UK and elsewhere in Europe to follow. The German Academic Exchange Service, for instance, has found creative solutions to provide short-term study opportunities in Germany for young people across the South Caucasus, and to improve German language teaching in Abkhazia.

It has also spurred enthusiasm for new areas of dialogue: the success of the LP's education initiative is credited by participants for having sparked more recent cooperation on practical initiatives relating to sustainable development and environmental issues in the Georgian-Abkhaz context.

*Above: Students outside Abkhaz State University in Sukhum/i
© Ibragim Chkadua*

Effective peacebuilding partnership: reflections from practice

Discussions between civil society partners and Conciliation Resources identified three broad success factors which enabled their partnership to realise the peace outcomes.

Complementarity of roles

In both partnership stories, Conciliation Resources and partner organisations brought complementary mandates, profiles and skillsets to their joint peacebuilding initiatives, allowing each partner to achieve results that would not be possible alone.⁶

In Mindanao, this complementarity was evident in both the conceptualisation and implementation of the *rido* settlement work. Conciliation Resources drew on the breadth of its comparative knowledge to introduce to Tenduray Lambangian Women's Organisation (TLWOL) and United Youth for Peace and Development (UNYPAD) a community security methodology⁷ developed from peacebuilding practice across multiple conflict contexts. TLWOL and UNYPAD reviewed the methodology and suggested adaptations to make it applicable to local conflict dynamics and clan-based resolution techniques.

In the implementation phase, Conciliation Resources acted as connector and facilitator, using its relations with security actors and government officials, built through its participation in the International Contact Group⁸ (ICG), to generate the political consent necessary for the organisations' involvement in *rido* settlement work. UNYPAD and TLWOL's respective local legitimacy with Moro and IP communities meant they were well placed to initiate the mediation of clan disputes and coordinate quick responses to any escalating tensions.

In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, Conciliation Resources convened dialogue spaces for local participants to share analysis and reach agreement on a focus on access to education as an issue of common concern and potential action. Abkhaz civil society partners consulted a range of people

living in Abkhazia – including students, higher education professionals and decision-makers – on their needs and perceived obstacles to change.

Conciliation Resources acted as a connector to international platforms, enabling partners to bring the case for education as a constructive theme of engagement. A key milestone in the realisation of the outcome was a Wilton Park conference on Conflict Resolution in Georgia and the Region in 2013 at which Conciliation Resources and LP participants presented the idea to a range of diplomats and experts, including UK and Swiss Government officials, as an initiative that they could support. Georgian and Abkhaz partners also engaged their own constituencies to create sufficient social and political support for the initiative, working in tandem with Conciliation Resources to engage people in positions of influence in international organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Trust and agency built through long-term accompaniment

In deep-rooted and often protracted conflicts, partnership based on long-term accompaniment and engagement⁹ is crucial in building the trust that enables civil society actors to take forward innovative and sometimes challenging initiatives towards peaceful change.

A core component of this long-term accompaniment is a commitment to support beyond financial cycles. Collaboration which starts and stops in line with funding opportunities is inimical to the incremental nature of change in volatile or politically-sensitive contexts. The importance of ongoing and sustained engagement was stressed in the partnership stories as vital to the achievement of the outcomes, and a powerful indicator by both 'insider' and 'outsider' civil society of their trust in the other's commitment to positive change in the context.

6. Conciliation Resources. *Partnership in peacebuilding: lessons from Conciliation Resources' practice* (2018) p5: www.c-r.org/resources/partnership-peacebuilding

7. Saferworld. *Community Security handbook* (2014): www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/806-community-security-handbook

8. Conciliation Resources. *Innovation in mediation support: The International Contact Group in Mindanao* (2013): www.c-r.org/resources/innovation-mediation-support-international-contact-group-mindanao

9. Conciliation Resources. *Partnership in peacebuilding: lessons from Conciliation Resources' practice* (2018) p4: www.c-r.org/resources/partnership-peacebuilding

Throughout 2016 and 2017, the partnership in Mindanao was unable to secure dedicated funding for its work. Conciliation Resources, TLWOI and UNYPAD modelled a plan of 'light' activities to ensure that it could maintain the CSWG until further funding could be sourced. Conciliation Resources committed unrestricted organisational funds to maintain its Mindanao programme during this period, while UNYPAD and TLWOI staff communicated to communities engaged in CSWG activities both the restrictions brought about by the funding situation and their commitment to continuing their support.

A sustained accompaniment beyond financial cycles builds continuity and momentum, aggregating networks of contacts and momentum developed through previous or ongoing initiatives. This in turn leads to widening outreach and interest, and can open up new opportunities to further peaceful outcomes.

The success of both partnership stories was attributed in part to the cumulative impact of previous work – in terms of generating the access to, and involvement and enthusiasm of, other key stakeholders. LP participants referred to the EU-funded People's Peacemaking Perspectives project (2010-2012) as an initiative with Conciliation Resources that had developed the appetite of international actors to engage directly with needs identified by Abkhaz civil society; that project itself built on a series of civil society dialogue initiatives spanning two decades. In Mindanao, Conciliation Resources' good standing due to its role as part of the ICG helped to placate initial concerns of the MILF and the Joint Normalisation Committee¹⁰ that an attempt to mediate *rido* conflict could lead to an escalation of violence.

Consensus in understanding and approach

Fundamental to a partnership relationship is that key decisions and choices are made together. This means joint choice and co-design of the intervention strategy, transparency about budgets, clarity about respective responsibilities and reciprocal accountability, and joint decisions about programme adaptations. Such equitable behaviours need to deal with multiple asymmetries that occur in most partnerships.

Participants in both contexts agreed that the process leading to the successful peace outcomes were driven by a commitment to consensus, driven by regular joint analysis, reflection and decision-making. In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the Chevening Scholarship initiative was guided by the principle of asymmetric engagement – the idea that since Abkhazia's isolation constituted a core stumbling block for efforts to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the focus of initiatives undertaken by LP participants with the aim of building confidence in the peace process should be weighted towards Abkhazia.

Asymmetric engagement is an agreed framework for the LP group. It has, however, at times proved contentious amongst Georgian participants, and can complicate relations with the Georgian government and Tbilisi-based donors. Regularly validating this principle in joint analysis sessions – both to ensure continued consensus amongst LP participants and to assess how best to align this approach with evolving political dynamics – was an important factor in the success of the Chevening Scholarship work, as well as other LP initiatives.

In Mindanao, an openness to adaptation and flexibility by all partners was cited as a reason for the identification of *rido* settlement work as an area in which Conciliation Resources, TLWOI and UNYPAD could deliver tangible benefit to the peace process.

An example of this willingness to adapt is the emergency planning that was undertaken by Conciliation Resources and its partners to assess the impact of the Mamasapano incident of January 2015 and to chart next steps. The Mamasapano incident, in which 44 government military personnel and 18 MILF fighters were killed in a gunfight, devastated political and public confidence in the Mindanao peace process. Following the incident, the partners made a joint decision to shift the focus of their work towards *rido* settlement, recognising that preventing the escalation of local conflict was a more immediate priority than engaging directly with the formal peace process and passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law¹¹, which had become mired in political recrimination at the national level.

10. Herbolzheimer, Kristian. 'The peace process in Mindanao, the Philippines: evolution and lessons learned'. *Conciliation Resources/NOREF Report December 2015*: p4

11. The Bangsamoro Basic Law, later revised as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), provided the legal basis for the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanano (BARMM). The BOL was ratified by the Congress of the Philippines and President Duterte in July 2018.

Accompanying the partnership: effective donor support to civil society-led peacebuilding

Our partnership stories suggest that donors who seek to apply a partnership ethos to their own action – including the three success factors identified in the previous section – are in a better position to enable peaceful change initiated by civil society. Discussions with partners from both contexts identified the following ways in which donors can play a constructive and engaged role:

1. Invest in relationship building and relationship management

A component of successful donor support was the license given to embassy staff to proactively engage with a broad set of actors from the context, including non-governmental stakeholders located beyond the political centre. Specific UK representatives in each context – a regional conflict advisor in Tbilisi and a 2nd Secretary in Manila – were namechecked regularly during discussions as having made a concerted effort to talk to a wide range of national and local stakeholders to develop their analysis of the context's political and conflict dynamics. In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs was similarly praised for the value it placed on participatory conflict analysis, and the participants emphasised the importance of a specific Swiss government interlocutor in facilitating this analysis over a period of time. Importantly, these donor representatives were respected for their willingness to listen first – allowing them to reflect on donor strategy in light of discussions and information and to seek out constructive adaptations where necessary.

The continuity of donor personnel – and thus continuity of engagement – was seen as an important complement to this remit to engage widely and deeply with civil society. As one participant from the Georgian-Abkhaz context noted: 'the longer internationals engage with the process, the more effective they become'. Staff who were able to stay in post for longer stints of

3 to 5 years were seen as far more likely to play a positive role in accompanying civil society-led peace work than those on quick rotations. Turnover of other relevant embassy postholders and representatives of multilaterals disrupted the momentum of initiatives due to the loss of relationships that individuals had built and of institutional memory during changeovers. In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, partners felt that the scrapping of the role of the UK regional conflict advisor for the South Caucasus in 2017 had limited the UK Embassy's ability to identify opportunities to support efforts towards peaceful change.

Donors with more centralised structures, or less extensive geographical reach, may not have the capacities to commit resources for sustained in-country engagement with civil society. However, coordination amongst donor missions to enable shared consultation and analysis with civil society can help to offset this. At the headquarters level, donors and INGOs can put in place more regular meetings with visiting civil society actors – framing these as conversations rather than briefings, and organising these regardless of whether the donor is funding a project conducted by the civil society actors in question.

2. Build the political space for civil society to operate autonomously

A strong investment in relationship management can help donors to understand how best they can position their support, so that this support reinforces but does not encroach upon domestically-led peace initiatives. Reflecting on the extent to which donors should engage, local civil society participants stressed the importance of the legitimacy of their work within their societies; the perception that civil society was working towards externally defined priorities set by donor governments could be used as leverage to sabotage politically-delicate peacebuilding efforts.

In both contexts, constructive donor engagement involved building political appetite by making the case for the relevance and importance of civil society-led initiatives within their own donor institution, the wider diplomatic community and with national policymakers – while following civil society’s lead in determining when and how it was constructive for donors to play a direct role in discussions. INGOs are often well placed to act as a sounding board for donors to assess the nature, extent and timing of this. Donor efforts to expedite administrative requirements such as visas also demonstrated goodwill and reinforced the sense amongst civil society of the donor as a partner in effecting change.

3. Create procedures and processes that value co-creation, learning and adaptation

Consultations with donors revealed a range of institutional pressures and dynamics which complicated their ability to support and meaningfully engage with civil society. These include pressure to spend budgets in full within rigid budget cycles; resource-intensive reporting mechanisms to assure financial accountability; pressure to demonstrate quick-impact, value-for-money results; limited staff capacity; and a lack of recognition within guiding policy documents of the importance of supporting the role and capacity of civil society in peacebuilding.

Pressure to spend budgets in full within fixed timeframes and with limited staff capacity can lead to a preference to fund fewer, larger external organisations offering delivery and spend at scale over a number of smaller civil society organisations embedded in a context processing smaller parcels of funding. The need to ensure financial accountability limits the appetite of certain donors to fund local civil society, for fear that the latter might not have the organisational capacity to process funds in line with their financial management and reporting requirements.

Partnerships between international and local civil society organisations can help to alleviate some of these concerns. INGOs can act as a

useful bridge between donor and local civil society – on the one hand, assisting local civil society partners to navigate donor priorities, and on the other, shouldering some of the burden of financial management and providing accountability for financial reporting to donors. This type of arrangement can also help important individuals or groups operating informally or with looser institutional structure – such as local peace committees or cross-conflict dialogue process participants – to access support from donors.

Yet, in many cases, donor procedures and processes could and should play to, rather than against, the advantages of local civil society partnerships in achieving peace outcomes – and the case for this should be made within donor institutions. While this may require greater resourcing – for example, through more hands-on grant management and oversight – our research shows it can result in a more grounded, granular analysis of a context and the enhanced perception of a donor as a committed partner for peaceful change.

Civil society actors involved in this study identified a number of areas in which donors could adapt their processes and procedures to enable civil society-led peacebuilding and successful partnerships:

- **Increase ‘small but steady’ funding streams** with consistent year-on-year cashflow over 4-5 year project periods, which would enable civil society to ensure its fiduciary requirements while enabling project adaptation in light of context developments or in-project learning (with the participation of donors encouraged in these reflections).
- **Establish sufficient time between call for proposal/invitation to tender and application deadlines**, to ensure international and local civil society actors have the time to assess the proposal against the context, discuss their ambitions for the work with donors, reach out to new groups and networks and effectively co-create a proposal. A commitment to a 12-week window between funding announcement and application deadline would enable this.



Limehouse Discussion Platform participants at a workshop in Berlin, 2017. © Conciliation Resources

- **Avoid ‘commercialisation’ of language and process** when working with civil society in conflict contexts. Donor pressure to ‘scale up’ or ‘innovate’ ignores the incremental nature of change in politically-sensitive contexts and can increase risk for individuals already bearing significant pressure from their participation in peacebuilding work and achieving what is possible in a given context. Outsourcing procurement processes to third party companies with little contextual knowledge can also serve to hinder effective project development between civil society and donors during the application phase.
- **Require INGOs to demonstrate their commitment to equitable and supportive civil society partnership in grant applications** through evidence of one/some of the following: partnership relationship to date; co-creation and management of the project in question; institutional or individual capacity development of local civil society; and measures of the quality of partnership through the project in question.

These steps would help show that civil society efforts carried out in partnership between INGOs and local civil society align with, and do not detract from, the localisation¹² agenda.

Participants also noted two areas for improvement for civil society to match donor efforts to promote civil society-led peacebuilding. Firstly, civil society should more proactively engage with donors outside of funding arrangements to demonstrate the impact of their peacebuilding work, with international civil society organisations maximising opportunities to create these linkages. Secondly, civil society actors should produce a more engaging and accessible evidence base so that allies within donor institutions can promote peacebuilding as an effective approach to peaceful change, and the importance of civil society in driving this forward.

12. Localisation is an ongoing process to reform the international aid agenda so that national and local actors are more prominent in determining and leading actions (whether humanitarian, development or peacebuilding) and receive a larger share of available funding directly from donors in order to do so.

Methodology

Two workshops were held with partners in autumn 2018 – one in Davao City with Mindanao partners (12 participants – 7 male, 5 female), and another in London with Limehouse Discussion Platform participants from the Georgian-Abkhaz context (11 participants – 5 male, 6 female).

Participants were invited to identify a key peace outcome from their work with Conciliation Resources. A chronology of developments leading to this outcome – including key actors, moments of significance, internal challenges and key decisions – was then developed as a means to gauge how the partnership functioned in working towards the outcome. In parallel, a consultant undertook a series of short, indicative conversations with eight representatives of donor government and multilaterals with mandates on global peace, security and development.

In early 2019, a roundtable brought together civil society workshop participants and donor organisation interviewees to jointly assess understandings of, and support to, civil society-led peacebuilding partnerships. Perspectives, notes, discussion papers and presentations from these activities fed into this briefing paper.

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Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a three-year research programme which generates evidence and lessons for policy-makers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas.



Funded by UK aid from the UK Government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We provide advice, support and practical resources to help divided communities resolve their differences peacefully. We take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.

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Cover image: Conciliation Resources' partners TLW01 and UNYPAD engage Community Safety Working Groups in Mindanao, 2018. © Conciliation Resources
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