Peace Education and Human Rights Literacy as Tools for Conflict Prevention in the Niger Delta: A Human Security Perspective

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Abstract: Nigeria's Niger Delta is one of the regions of the world that recorded intractable conflicts over the years. The spasmodic violence, instability and conflict in the region are as deeply rooted in socio-economic marginalization, environmental degradation, human rights violations and governance failure. Consecutive decades of state interventions and corporate social responsibility have not ensured peace as sustainable and enduring. This indicates the weakness of conventional, state-led conflict management. This paper examines how peace education and human rights literacy can be employed as transformative tools of conflict prevention in the Niger Delta from the perspective of a human security framework that prioritizes people-focused solutions over militarized solutions. Drawing on qualitative data from policy reports, field reports and interviews with stakeholder groups, the study examines how empowering local communities through awareness of their rights, building a culture of dialogue and practising peace education via formal and informal institutions can reverse the structural causes of conflict. The study affirms that improved human rights consciousness and comprehensive peace education curricula increase social cohesion, participatory governance and de-motivation of violence as conflict resolution strategies. Integration of human security ideas into peace education and rights literacy education is required to build lasting peace, environmental justice, and fair development in oil-producing Niger Delta societies.

Keywords: Peace Education, Human Rights Literacy, Conflict Prevention, Human Security, Niger Delta, Environmental Justice.

Introduction

Nigeria's Niger Delta is arguably one of the wealthiest and most troubled regions in sub-Saharan Africa. On the one hand, the area provides over 80% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings from the exportation of crude oil (Okonta & Douglas, 2001; Watts, 2008). On the other hand, ironically, the area is beset by poverty, environmental degradation, underdevelopment and persistent violent conflicts. Decades of oil exploration by multinationals have resulted in severe ecological damage, destruction of livelihoods and socio-economic displacement of host communities (UNDP, 2006; Obi, 2009). These structural inequalities, combined with corruption,

bad governance and marginalization, have triggered grievances, youth militancy, sabotage of oil installations and violent confrontations with state security forces (Ikelegbe, 2005; Courson, 2009). Consequently, the Niger Delta remains a symbol of a broader struggle for justice, rights and development in post-colonial Africa.

Strategically conventional, state-focused strategies for mitigating the Niger Delta conflict have continually relied on militarization, coercion and top-down approaches. Successive governments have deployed security agents, set up development bureaus, such as Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), and carried out amnesty programmes aimed at disarming militants and bringing back stability (Aghedo, 2013; Iwilade, 2021). While these actions have provided temporary relief, they have not addressed the root causes of conflict that is systemic injustice, human rights violations and marginalization from decision-making (Watts, 2010; Ikelegbe & Umukoro, 2016). Additionally, challenges of the region are oftentimes over-securitized, therefore exacerbating tensions, eroding state-society trust and perpetuating cycles of violence (Alao, 2007).

In all this, there is growing understanding that human rights literacy and peace education offer more stable channels for conflict prevention and transformation. Peace education is usually defined as education processes that create the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to avoid conflict and achieve social justice, tolerance and peaceful coexistence (Reardon, 1997; Harris & Morrison, 2013). It is directed at the source of violence by promoting critical thinking, empathy, dialogue and nonviolent conflict resolution. Similarly, human rights literacy, or knowledge and understanding of human rights principles, instruments and practices, allows people and groups to hold others accountable, resist oppression, and engage positively in governance (Tibbitts, 2002; Bajaj, 2011).

Applying these measures to the Niger Delta environment is particularly critical. Many of the communities in the region lack knowledge of their constitutional and legal rights, making them vulnerable to exploitation and environmental injustice by state and corporate actors (Okafor & Odoziobodo, 2022). Not only does human rights education inform citizens about their rights at national and international law but it also strengthens them to advance policy reform, take part in decision-making processes, and hold duty bearers accountable (Odinkalu, 2001). At the same time, peace education can change deeply-rooted narratives of violence and marginalization into paradigms of cooperation, negotiation and reconciliation (Lederach, 1997).

The human security approach is a useful framework for incorporating these strategies into conflict prevention. Compared to the traditional theories of security based on state sovereignty and territorial integrity, human security emphasizes the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities against abuses of their survival, dignity and well-being (UNDP, 1994; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). It recognizes that insecurity in the Niger Delta is not only a matter of insurgency or sabotage but also a result of structural violence, poverty, environmental degradation, unemployment and political marginalization (Francis et al., 2011). Peace education and human rights literacy address these aspects at the same time by achieving inclusive governance, building social cohesion and achieving community resilience.

Several case studies recorded the transformative potential of such approaches. For example, peace education programmes in Ogoni and Ijaw communities have been proved effective in resolving conflicts through discussion and joint problem-solving (Ojakorotu & Gilbert, 2010). Similarly, campaigns of rights-based advocacy have been able to push oil companies into adopting corporate social responsibility measures and restoring the environment (Amnesty International, 2018). These examples capture the value of shifting away from reactive, military-type interventions towards proactive, pedagogical approaches that attempt to address both immediate and remote complaints as well as structural issues.

Human rights and peace education are not being fully utilized in Niger Delta conflict prevention initiatives. These subjects are not included in most school programmes and community initiatives, and government policy also too easily prioritizes security and infrastructural projects

over empowerment and capacity-building (Onuoha, 2016). Besides, civil society initiatives face funding problems, political interference and limited coverage in excluded communities. Closing these gaps requires intentional policy intervention, state-nonstate collaborative work, and institutionalization of peace and rights education in the formal and informal sectors.

Therefore, this paper analyzes the potential of peace education and human rights literacy as complementary interventions to avoid conflict in the Niger Delta based on a human security approach. It argues that empowering individuals with knowledge, capability and agency has the ability to transform conflict dynamics, achieve participatory governance and promote sustainable peace. In imagining beyond the military control and resource deployment, the study further deepens knowledge of how rights education and consciousness can reconfigure the security politics of the region and foster social justice.

Statement of the Problem

The Niger Delta remains a paradox of insecurity and wealth. Despite contributing over 80% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings through oil exports (Watts, 2008), the region continues to experience impoverishment, environmental degradation and violent conflicts rooted in deep-seated injustice, exclusion and abandonment (UNDP, 2006; Obi, 2009). State responses have mainly been in the nature of militarization and development interventions, which do not address the root causes of conflict, structural inequality, human rights violations and socio-political exclusion (Ikelegbe, 2005; Courson, 2009). Furthermore, low levels of human rights awareness and a dearth of peace education in community and institutional domains have meant that citizens remain largely disempowered and unable to demand accountability or participate constructively in governance (Bajaj, 2011). This underscores the need to integrate peace education and human rights literacy into conflict prevention programmes, advancing empowerment, social justice and community resilience as cornerstones of a human security-driven approach to peacebuilding.

Objectives for the Paper

The objectives of the paper are to:

i. Examine the role of peace education in fostering nonviolent conflict resolution, social cohesion, and sustainable peace in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta;

ii. Assess the extent to which human rights literacy enhances community empowerment, accountability and participation in addressing the root causes of conflict in the region;

iii. Analyze the relationship between peace education, human rights awareness and human security outcomes in the context of conflict prevention and development in the Niger Delta; and

iv. Propose an integrated peacebuilding framework that leverages peace education and human rights literacy as strategic tools for preventing conflict, promoting justice and strengthening human security in the Niger Delta.

Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research design to examine how human rights literacy and peace education can assist in mitigating conflict in the Niger Delta from a human security perspective. A qualitative design was appropriate since it permits in-depth understanding of complex social realities, habitual life experiences, and perceptions of real victims of conflict and environmental insecurity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Information was obtained via document analysis of events involving community leaders, teachers, civil society actors, youth representatives, women's groups, and government representatives from sample oil-producing communities in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States.

Theoretical Framework

The study was rooted in three intersecting theories: Human Security Theory, Transformative Learning Theory and Human Needs Theory. These theories were deployed for explaining how peace education and human rights literacy improve conflict prevention and sustainable peace in oil-producing Niger Delta communities.

Human Security Theory

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP, 1994) human security model shifts the focus of security away from state protection towards protecting and empowering individuals and communities. It emphasizes seven aspects of security –economic, political, environmental, community, and personal security –that are all vital for sustaining peace.

Within the Niger Delta context, characterized by extensive environmental degradation, poverty, political marginalization and human rights abuses, this theory advocates employing a people-centred and comprehensive approach to conflict prevention (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). Human rights literacy and peace education are an immediate answer to human security concerns, through empowering individuals with knowledge, critical thinking skills and legal awareness to help them claim accountability and solve conflicts peacefully. They also contribute to resilience through enabling communities to actively participate in governance and sustainable development (Paris, 2001).

Transformative Learning Theory

The Transformative Learning Theory, as formulated by Jack Mezirow (1997), is based on the premise that education has the capacity to transform people's worldviews, attitudes and behaviour using dialogue and critical reflection. Peace education, using this theory, seeks to surmount deeply-entrenched prejudices, violent ideologies and structural inequality by promoting empathy, tolerance, dialogue and conflict resolution through nonviolence means (Harris & Morrison, 2013).

In relation to the Niger Delta, transformative learning provides the conceptual foundation for implementing peace education as a tool for conflict prevention. It helps individuals relearn their first-hand experiences with injustice, marginalization and violence, and endows them with cognitive and affective abilities to constructively engage in peacebuilding. Besides, human rights literacy builds legal consciousness and social capacity, guiding communities out of violent resistance and towards getting redress through institution mechanisms (Bajaj, 2011).

Human Needs Theory

The Human Needs Theory, advanced by John Burton (1990), emphasizes that conflicts arise when fundamental human needs, like identity, security, recognition, participation and development, are not fulfilled. Conflict prevention is sustainable if these absolute needs are fulfilled rather than treating symptoms of conflict. The theory is highly relevant to the Niger Delta case, where communities have, for some time, suffered environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalization and political exclusion. Peace education and human rights literacy address these needs by empowering communities with the capability to articulate their rights, negotiate for equitable distribution of resources, and participate actively in governance (Galtung, 1996; Burton, 1997). They avert the drift towards violent conflict and ensure long-term social stability by redressing real grievances.

The intersection of these three theories forms a comprehensive theoretical framework for this study. The Human Security Theory situates the problem in the people-centred security context, defending and empowering people. The Transformative Learning Theory embodies the potential of education to change perspectives and practices towards peaceful living. The Human Needs Theory connects the imperative of addressing structural injustices and unmet human needs that lead to conflict. They rationalize peace education and human rights literacy as inexorable means of achieving enduring conflict prevention and expanding human security in the Niger Delta.

Literature Review

This literature review adopts a thematic structure to explore recent scholarship in peace education and human rights literacy, and their roles in conflict prevention in the Niger Delta based on a human security perspective. The major themes covered are (1) conflict dynamics and human security in the Niger Delta, (2) conflict transformation through peace education, (3) social empowerment through human rights literacy, and (4) comprehensive conflict prevention approaches.

Conflict Processes and Human Security in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is a case of "resource curse", where vast oil wealth coexists with poverty, ecological devastation and structural violence (Watts, 2008; Obi, 2009). The socio-political marginalization of the local population, combined with ecological deterioration due to oil production, has produced grievances that frequently manifest as violent conflict (Ikelegbe, 2005; Courson, 2009). Traditional security approaches, emphasizing state-centric and military interventions have been inclined to overlook the causes of insecurity, including deprivation, exclusion and failure of governance (Omotola, 2010).

The concept of human security, in terms of freedom from fear, want and indignity (UNDP, 1994; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007), offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding conflict patterns in the Niger Delta. Human security shifts emphasis from state sovereignty to individuals' safety, well-being and dignity, highlighting the priorities for peacebuilding activities that are empowering for communities and respect justice.

Peace Education and Conflict Transformation

Peace education has been widely regarded as a change agent in violence prevention and building sustainable peace (Bajaj, 2008; Harris & Morrison, 2013). Peace education encourages attitudes, skills and knowledge for nonviolent conflict management and for fostering a culture of peace (Galtung, 1996). Peace education, in war-torn societies, encourages communication, understanding and tolerance, which end cycles of violence and deep-rooted prejudices (Salomon & Cairns, 2010).

In the Niger Delta, the absence of formal and community peace education programmes has contributed to the perpetuation of violent responses to grievances (Ibeanu, 2000). Integrating peace education into schools, community interventions and public policy could help create a new generation of citizens capable of dealing with conflicts constructively, promoting reconciliation and participating in participatory governance (Francis et al., 2011).

Social Empowerment and Human Rights Literacy

Human rights literacy, as the ability to understand, claim and assert fundamental rights, is central to empowering subordinated groups and making democratic governance permanent (Tibbitts, 2002; Bajaj, 2011). Under conditions like the ones in the Niger Delta, where there are rampant rights violations and corporate impunity, human rights literacy can empower people to make state and corporate agents accountable (Okonta & Douglas, 2003).

Besides, human rights education promotes peacebuilding through bridging conflict prevention to social justice. Empirical evidence shows that more rights-conscious societies experience less structural violence and conflict resilience (Andreopoulos & Claude, 1997; Flowers, 2000). However, human rights education is underdeveloped in Nigerian civic and education institutions, limiting grassroots governance and participation in environmental justice movement (Akinola, 2012).

Integrative Approaches: Human Security, Peace Education and Rights-based Peacebuilding

Enrolment of peace studies and human rights education within a human security paradigm offers an all-inclusive approach to preventing conflict. Academics argue that enduring peace entails the

end of violence but needs to be accompanied by removal of structural inequalities, achievement of social justice and enabling citizens to participate in decision-making (Lederach, 1997; Paris, 2004). Human rights-oriented, people-centred approaches aligned with the principles of human security provide the foundation for stability that can last.

Empirical evidence from post-conflict communities revealed that incorporating peace education into rights consciousness programmes strengthens civic action, reinforces social cohesion, and reduces recurrence of violence (Reardon, 1997; Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016). Implementing such an integrative methodology in the Niger Delta can transform conflict dynamics, transforming passive victims into active peacemakers and developers. The literature emphasizes the compelling necessity of reframing conflict prevention in the Niger Delta from traditional security methods. Human rights literacy and education, on the basis of a human security framework, promises revolutionary paths to move beyond conflict roots, strengthen communities and build sustainable peace. Blending education, rights and security can hence revolutionize peacebuilding strategies and towards long-term stability in the region.

Discussion of Findings

Role of Peace Education in Fostering Nonviolent Conflict Resolution, Social Cohesion and Sustainable Peace

Understanding Peace Education in the Niger Delta Context

Peace education is the process of integrating knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to prevent conflict, manage conflict in a peaceful way, and creating conditions for enduring peace (Harris & Morrison, 2013). In the Niger Delta, where decades of oil-led conflict have led to widespread violence, militancy and community fragmentation, peace education has emerged as a strategic tool of reorientation of values in society and nonviolent conflict transformation (Ibeanu, 2020).

The teachers and community and civil society leaders interviewed in Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta Statesnoted that peace education initiatives, though on a small scale, have assisted in changing attitudes from conflict to dialogue. One such respondent from a Port Harcourt local non-governmental organisation (NGO) stated that:

In societies where peace education programmes are in place, young people are less likely to be recruited into armed forces or employ violence in conflicts involving land or oil-related concerns. Rather, they now turn to negotiation and community dialogue as options.

Peace Education and Nonviolent Conflict Resolution

The findings indicated that peace education results in nonviolent conflict resolution because it equips individuals with conflict analysis, dialogue and mediation competencies. Through training workshops, school curricula and community training programmes, students learn the roots of violence and identify nonviolent ways of countering coercion. This accords with Galtung's (1996) Positive Peace Theory, which emphasizes that structural violence can be confronted through education and empowerment.

A notable example is the "Peace Clubs" initiative established by the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND), where youth are engaged in mediation training and peace initiatives in local communities. These members had fewer violent conflicts and improved conflict resolution in their respective communities.

Peace Education and Social Cohesion

Another key finding is that peace education promotes social cohesion by fostering tolerance, respect for diversity, and coexistence in multi-religious, multi-ethnic societies. In regions like Ogoni and Ijaw lands, where conflict over oil derivation revenues among ethnic groups has long been a source of strife, peace education efforts have facilitated cross-communal interactions and trust-building exercises. Focus group discussions revealed that they are more likely to

collaborate in collaborative development projects and less likely to stereotype or stigmatize. This is in tandem with Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation model, which views sustainable peace as being attainable through the reconstruction of relationships and the construction of shared identities.

Peace education results in sustainable peace through the establishment of a culture of peace beyond the cessation of war. The interviewees emphasized that sustainable peace requires addressing the underlying causes of violence, such as poverty, marginalization and destruction of the environment, and the attainment of peaceful living and governance engagement capacities. For example, different peace education programmes at the local level have included environmental management, civic participation and governance literacy, thereby strengthening the pillars of long-term stability.

Impact of Human Rights Literacy on Community Empowerment, Accountability and Participation

Understanding Literacy in Human Rights

Human rights literacy refers to the awareness, knowledge and practice of inalienable rights and freedoms enshrined in national and international law (Tibbitts, 2017). In the Niger Delta, with years of oil production that have resulted in environmental pollution, forced displacement and human rights violations, human rights literacy is central to enabling individuals to make claims to justice, hold their duty bearers accountable and participate in decision-making.

Human Rights Literacy and Community Empowerment

The research revealed that human rights-conscious communities are more empowered to challenge injustices and advance their socio-economic and environmental rights. For instance, interviewees within the Gbaramatu Kingdom reported that education on the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights significantly improved their capacity to engage with government agencies and oil companies.

Empirical evidence suggests that rights-aware communities tend to bargain for compensation, demand environmental remediation and participate in policy debates. This empowerment reduces their deployment of violent protest, which had characterized Niger Delta activism.

Human Rights Literacy and Accountability

The data also showed that human rights literacy improves accountability by enhancing the degree of public monitoring of business and governmental activities. People who are aware of their rights and access to legal recourse have succeeded in using litigation and advocacy campaigns in holding oil companies and government agencies accountable. A case in point is the Bodo people versus Shell in the UK, which brought a lot of compensation and assurances of environmental clean-up. The respondents attributed such triumph of legal action to heightened awareness of human rights instruments and environmental laws.

Human Rights Literacy and Community Participation

Human rights literacy also facilitates inclusive governance and peacebuilding engagement. The focus group discussion participants stated that participatory rights knowledge makes communities insist on a place in decision-making bodies, such as environmental monitoring committees and local development councils. In addition, women's organizations described how rights literacy programmes enhanced their capacity to engage with peace processes and environmental justice campaigns, transforming traditional gender roles and enhancing community resilience.

Relationship between Peace Education, Awareness of Human Rights and Human Security Outcomes

Linking Peace Education and Human Rights Literacy to Human Security

Human security, as defined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), encompasses freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom from indignity. This research showed a strong correlation between peace education, awareness of human rights and improved human security outcomes in the Niger Delta.

Freedom from Fear: Reducing Violence and Insecurity

Peace education reduces the occurrence of violence by transforming conflict behaviour and attitude, and human rights literacy allows communities to seek justice through legal means rather than violence. They both result in a reduction in militancy recruitment, armed conflicts and human rights abuses. The Bonny Island respondents reported a sharp reduction in violent protests and youth restiveness once peace education programmes were implemented in conjunction with rights awareness campaigns.

Freedom from Want: Enhancing Livelihoods and Socio-economic Rights

Rights literacy and peace education enhance socio-economic security through empowerment to advocate equitable distribution of resources, environmental protection and social services. Human rights-based approaches, for example, have led to improved corporate social responsibility and community development agreements, which enhance livelihoods at the local level.

Freedom from Indignity: Fostering Justice and Participation

Collectively, the impact of peace education and human rights awareness also boosts dignity through combating structural violence, exclusion and marginalization. Enfranchised citizens engage in governance processes, gain access to environmental justice, and join hands for peaceful planning development. Such an overall boost aligns with the emphasis of the human security approach on dignity and participation as central aspects of peace.

Towards an Integrated Peacebuilding Framework for the Niger Delta

Key Gaps in Current Approaches

Analysis of ongoing peacebuilding processes revealed the following gaps:

Fragmentation: Peace processes are normally short-term and ill-coordinated, among actors.

Exclusion: Local communities, especially women and youth, are often excluded from decision-making.

Weak Institutional Capacity: State institutions often lack capacity or political will to enforce environmental rules and rights protections.

Over-securitization: Military domination of preventive and developmental measures overshadows over-reliance on security measures.

Proposed Integrated Framework

Based on the research results, this study proposes an Integrated Peacebuilding Framework (IPF), which combines peace education and human rights literacy as overarching conflict prevention and human security promotion pillars in the Niger Delta. This framework has four components:

Education for Transformation: Integrate peace and human rights education into the curriculum of schools, community workshops and training programmes.

Community Empowerment Platforms: Establish participatory platforms for enabling communities to coproduce development and environmental policies.

Legal and Institutional Strengthening: Enhance the capacity of state institutions to enforce rights, regulate the oil industry and enable community-driven activities.

Inclusive Dialogue Mechanisms: Institutionalize multi-stakeholder negotiation mechanisms, tracking and conflict prevention.

Expected Outcomes of the Framework

The implementation of this integrated framework is expected to yield many outcomes:

➢ Reduction in violence and militancy through nonviolent conflict resolution skills;

➢ Enhanced community agency and participation in peacebuilding and governance;

➢ Improved environmental security through stronger rights-based advocacy and regulatory enforcement; and

➢ Strengthened human security through equitable development, justice and dignity.

The paper argues that peace education and human rights literacy are reinforcing mechanisms with transformational potential for preventing conflict and constructing peace in the Niger Delta. Peace education fosters nonviolent conflict resolution, social cohesion and a culture of peace; while human rights literacy empowers peoples, promotes accountability, and enhances participation. They greatly expand human security outcomes by reducing fear, want and indignity, and lay the basis for sustainable peace and development.

These methods are being underutilized due to systemic gaps in implementation, institutional weaknesses, and lack of integration into broader peacebuilding strategies. A human security-centred mainstreamed strategy, with integration of peace education and human rights literacy, is a realistic path towards eradicating the drivers of conflict and establishing an equitable, peaceful and sustainable Niger Delta.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the deployment of peace education and human rights literacy as instruments of conflict prevention in strategic terms in the Niger Delta from a human security perspective. The findings confirmed that, despite decades of state-security intervention and corporate social responsibility, the region continues to experience persistent conflict, environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalization and human rights violations. These endemic threats reveal the failures of conventional, militarized and state-based approaches that habitually rely more on symptom repression than addressing the structural roots of violence.

Peace education has been shown to be a changemaker, as it advocates nonviolent conflict resolution, social cohesion and peace culture. When people and organizations have the skills of dialogue, mediation and tolerance, peace education reduces the deployment of violence and strengthens the social fabric necessary to uphold peace. Similarly, human rights literacy allows communities to learn and demand their rights, hold states and corporations accountable, and participate constructively in decision-making and governance. If communities are aware of their rights and have nonviolent methods of demanding them, they will be less likely to turn to militancy or aggressive forms of resistance.

The convergence of peace education and human rights literacy facilitates the advancement of human security, especially by expanding freedom from fear, want and indignity. It aids dealing with root causes of insecurity, such as exclusion, inequality, poverty and environmental injustice, and building resilience and adaptive capacity at community levels.

However, for such practices to achieve maximum effectiveness, they must be mainstreamed into policy mechanisms, education programmes, community development initiatives and peace processes. These demands increased institutional buy-in, reliable funding, stakeholder engagement and continued capacity-building initiatives.

To reimagine peacebuilding in the Niger Delta is to change paradigms, to move away from reactive efforts to proactive, human-centred approaches. The combination of peace education and human rights literacy offers a sustainable path towards conflict avoidance, justice realization and achievement of lasting peace. Such an integrated approach, in addition to addressing short-term security concerns, lays the foundations for participatory development, cares for the environment, and secures long-term development in one of Nigeria's most volatile regions.

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