

Empowerment and Right-based Approaches for Indigenous Communities in the South American Gran Chaco

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The South American Gran Chaco region or Tri-national Chaco is a 1,000,000 sq. km region located in the center of South America. Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay share this ecosystem, which is considered one of the regions with the greatest environmental and biological diversity on Earth, and the largest forest area of the continent after the Amazon region. This region has a rich cultural diversity, is home to twenty-five different indigenous groups, including the Guarani, the Wichi, the Qom and the Enxet Sur, who, for centuries, lived as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. It is also a region of great inequality that impacts the most marginalized populations; indigenous communities, small farmers or peasants, and the inhabitants of peri-urban settlements.

This paper presents two successful examples of coalitional advocacy led by indigenous peoples and rural populations in the Argentine province of Salta, near the southern border with Bolivia. These actions aimed at fostering the fulfillment of two basic human rights: the rights to land and water. This paper starts with a description of the methodologies, techniques and tools adopted by indigenous organizations and communities, promoted by the local supporting agencies and accepted by other key stakeholders (government agencies, donors). Following this description the paper develops the case studies of the aforementioned advocacy activities. While further research and reflection is needed, we believe these tools, techniques and methodologies will continue to play a major role in efforts to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (especially 1,6,10 and 17) in ways that empower indigenous peoples of the Gran Chaco region.

In Salta, indigenous and *campesino criollo* organizations have partnered for decades with local NGO Fundapaz and a few other local NGOs which, partnered with international faith-based development agencies like Church World Service (CWS) and regional and global coalitions like the International Land Coalition's Semiarid Platform. This paper presents the views of Fundapaz and CWS.

Grassroots organizations and NGOs in Chaco salteño, a brief history.

One of the defining characteristics of the Chaco and its people is its environment. From the environmental point of view, the Gran Chaco region is divided into two parts: Humid Chaco in the East, and Dry Chaco in the west. The Spanish conquerors initially settled in the eastern area, and the western area of the Chaco was free from settlers until the second half of the 19th century. By the beginning of that century, the region was divided between Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia with the creation of the nation states. In the second half of the 19th century the new nation states started to occupy the Dry Chaco, promote immigration initially for the exploitation of its natural resources such as timber, and later for livestock production. New settlers, including small cattle breeders, started to compete for the land with the region's indigenous communities. Often with violence and with the complicity of government agents, this competition for the use of land and natural resources between indigenous peoples and new settlers continued during the entire twentieth century and into the twenty first.

Nowadays, the indigenous peoples of the Chaco region, including those in the province of Salta, are in a situation of neglect and subject to human rights violations by the states responsible for safeguarding them. From an environmental point of view, the soils have been progressively deteriorated and the natural resources have been depleted as a result of decades of mismanagement, indiscriminate logging and overgrazing. Regarding the social dimension, the population is of about 30,500¹ people, poverty rates reach 71% of the population with Unsatisfied Basic Needs (UBN) and 92% have no access to drinking water. 6.6% of the population of the province is indigenous and there is no data disaggregated by Department.

There are hundreds of indigenous and *campesino criollo* organizations in the Argentine Chaco. Although there is a wealth of peoples and communities, we can divide them into two main groups: indigenous communities (there are 13 ethnic groups in Argentine Chaco) recognized by the Argentine Constitution, and *criollo* organizations (persons of non-aboriginal origin) who, just like the indigenous peoples have problems regarding access to land, water and the necessary resources to improve their production and living conditions.

The life of *campesino* and indigenous organizations is quite dynamic, and they experience years of growth and years of political and internal crises that hinder or facilitate the generation of proposals among their members. National contexts with policies having more or less affinity with indigenous and rural communities play a key role when it comes to approaching the government to raise certain issues. Economic growth or recession cycles lead to a higher or lower speed of agricultural expansion that always comes into conflict with the local use of the territories by the communities.

Today's indigenous and *criollo* organizations were created some thirty years ago with technical assistance of local NGOs like Fundapaz or Asociana. An administrative

¹ Argentine National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC). National Population, Households, and Dwellings Census. Buenos Aires: 2010.

requirement and condition of government agencies, after years of training and technical and legal assistance these organizations were legally incorporated as civil associations. Being legally registered was and continues to be a condition to achieve legal access to land and water and to demand basic services such as education, health, roads and electricity. The registration process, while bureaucratic, frustrating and time consuming, contributed to empower indigenous men and women leaders.

The organizational process of the indigenous and rural population of Chaco Salteño or Argentine Chaco is accompanied by local civil society organizations and international cooperation agencies. This has created solidarity, political and joint working networks and alliances that, with their progress and difficulties, generated enough political and technical influence that allow the communities to move forward towards the recognition of their rights, further detailed in the discussion below.

Fundación para el Desarrollo en Justicia y Paz (Fundapaz) is an organization of the civil society that has been working in the Argentine Chaco for 46 years. It supports rural development programs regarding access to land and water, management of natural resources, organizational strengthening and political advocacy with indigenous and rural population. Fifteen years ago, Church World Service (CWS), ecumenical NGO of the United States founded in 1946, formed an alliance with Fundapaz and other organizations of the region in order to promote a tri-national integrated program focused on fostering the effective implementation of the rights of the indigenous communities in the region. In 2013, Fundapaz together with other Latin American NGOs members of the International Land Coalition (ILC) created the Semiarid Platform in order to improve the living conditions of the indigenous and rural communities and of the communities of African descent in the semi-arid regions of Latin America, from the cohabitation with the semiarid regions, regional integration and social justice, with a gender and generation approach, where the communities develop their life systems integrated with their territories, respecting their cultures and the natural ecosystems.

This partnership between indigenous and non-indigenous grassroots organizations, a small group of local accompanying NGOs and international organizations has been instrumental in promoting the successful experiences presented herein.

An overview of three empowerment-centered methodologies, techniques and tools adopted by indigenous organizations and communities to advance their rights to ancestral communal land and water.

Contingent with factors such as: prevailing local political conditions, the particular situation of the indigenous and criollo organizations, the more or less favorable national and international contexts, and the willingness to build strategic alliances, the three methodologies presented below were sometimes used in parallel and others sequentially.

The three empowerment-centered methodologies, tools and techniques are:

Exchange of Lessons Learned

The “Exchange of Lessons Learned” is a popular technique in the Gran Chaco that consists of visits of leaders and technical teams from grassroots organizations and NGOs who travel to other territories to get first-hand knowledge of the new technologies, methodologies and organizational experiences, and learn from them. During the visit, context analyses are performed and life stories and lessons learned are shared. These will subsequently be replicated by the participants in their own communities of origin, developing an Innovation Plan during the months following the exchange. It is of the

utmost importance that the development of proposals is directly linked to the reality of the organizations involved so that they can implement successful projects with a social impact. Crucial to ownership and future replication of the knowledge acquired and produced during exchange visits is that indigenous organizations participate actively from the beginning of the process.

Participatory mapping

Participative mapping a tool that contributes to evidence-based conflict resolution as developed in the 1980s to research into spatial perceptions and the knowledge of indigenous and rural communities. It is also conceived as a tool to empower the local communities in the decision-making processes regarding the management of natural resources in a specific territory, to plan actions and to monitor the results. In the last decades, the participative mapping technique has been essential in Latin America in the defense and recognition of rights to territory and natural resources, playing a key role in guaranteeing the legal recognition of communal property rights.

In the last few years, Fundapaz, supported by CWS and other organizations and networks such as the Latin American Semiarid Platform, has developed its own Geographic Information System (GIS), where it has systematized the institutional information collected in the last twenty years of work in different categories related to access to land, type of productive use and access to water, among the main categories. This GIS comprises 9,000 georeferenced points of Tri-national Chaco (Argentina – Bolivia – Paraguay) capable of systematizing information and generating maps for technical and political uses.

The mapping process is participatory in nature and fully involves the indigenous and *criollo* communities in the map-building process, by using GPS tools. The resulting map is a clear expression of a certain problem or situation seen from the point of view of the community, just as they see it. It is a “photograph” of what they observe and live every day in their territory. Therefore the map is useful in the next dialogue stage, in which the rural and indigenous organizations use the information of the maps to make a problem public and to substantiate a problem or a need before other stakeholders of the public or private sector and their proposal for solving it. That is to say, the map is used as a tool for dialogue, trying to influence a certain stakeholder and to promote a negotiated solution to a conflict or need.

Local issue-based multi-stakeholder roundtables

Roundtables are a methodology of increased use in the Chaco, roundtables or *Mesas* are formed by indigenous and *criollo* organizations, local Community Based Organizations (CBOs), civil society and municipal, provincial and federal agencies. Multi stakeholder roundtables are action-oriented mechanisms to generate safe and effective spaces for dialogue and decision-making among various stakeholders. They are aimed at responding to concrete problems, community demands or policy priorities, searching solutions, monitoring and evaluating the actions performed.

Roundtables are efficient when the objectives, diagnoses and proposals of the indigenous and *criollo* communities are clearly defined. The decision of establishing a Roundtable is not the result of a linear process, but it is usually result of a previous process of knowledge generation, evidence-based advocacy and participatory priority-setting. This knowledge can be found in different formats such as maps, documents of context analysis, systematization of best practices and exchanges with other local and regional organizations.

On the other hand, the relationship between the civil society and the state is essential in order to move forward with the solutions. This relationship, completely free from partisan practices, should focus on the role each one of the participants plays in the creation of public policies, where it is essential to establish what each one contributes and how a proposal that would improve the reality to be changed is built.

When putting these methodologies into practice, the stakeholders join forces and participate to make progress towards the solution of problems they all want to solve. Each sector contributes with their rationality and their resources, and discusses their particular interests. However, as it is a collective process, trust and negotiation relationships start to develop and they will finally manage to unravel the problems identified. This road is not free from setbacks and complications, and not all the stakeholders participate at the same time in all the stages or with the same degree of commitment. Therefore it is essential to be considering changing contexts and interests all the time, in order to be able to enter into partial agreements until finally reaching a final agreement.

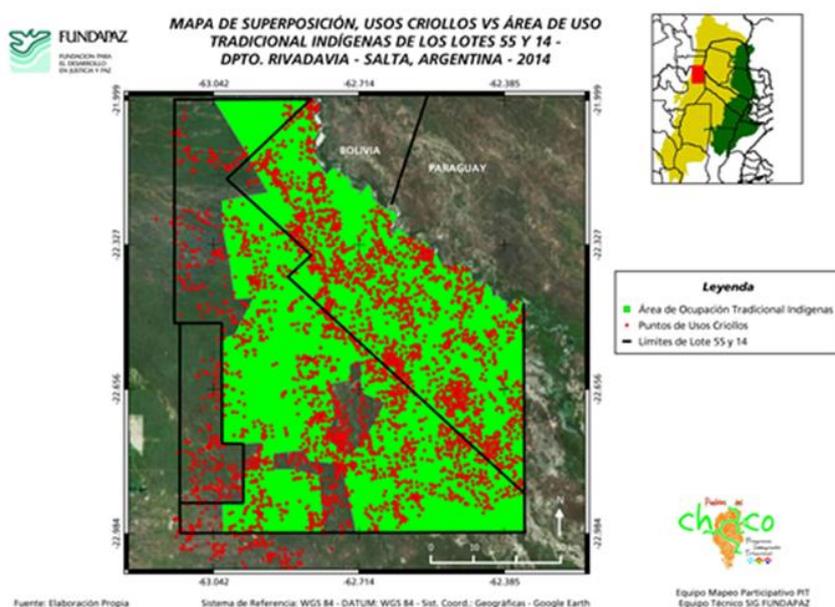
Empowerment-based tools and methodologies at work: two case studies

Case 1. Access to land and territory of indigenous communities and rural families of plots 55 and 14 of Chaco Salteño (Department of Rivadavia, Municipality of Santa Victoria Este).

It is difficult to live in the Municipality of Santa Victoria Este, Salta province, Argentina, mainly because of the lack of water, but it is rich in natural resources for extraction such as oil, gas and hardwood timber. In this region, indigenous communities and *criollo* families occupy the same territory and recovering ancestral communal land and clarity on land tenure was top priority for indigenous communities.

The map below summarizes the extent and complexity of the problem and it is the result of many years of working together with the leaders of the indigenous and criollo organizations. The map shows the overlapping in the use of the land: the green area claimed by the indigenous communities, and the red spots marking the areas of the criollo families.

Map 1



Map 1: Overlapping of the land use: *criollo* uses versus areas traditionally used by indigenous communities in plots 54 and 14 - Department of Rivadavia - Salta, Argentina 2014. Source: Fundapaz GIS team.

The indigenous families in Santa Victoria Este decided to claim their ancestral lands. It was a long, tiring and complex process that included all branches of provincial and federal government and the Inter-American human rights system.

After exhausting all provincial and national judiciary instances, in 1998 the Aboriginal Communities Association Lhaka Honhat (Asociación de Comunidades Aborígenes Lhaka Honhat), which brings together the indigenous communities of the region, filed a complaint before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, case no. 12 094) due to the construction of important works of infrastructure without any previous consultation, requesting the State to recognize their right to the community property. This complaint was sponsored by Argentine NGOs Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) accompanied by Asociana, a Foundation of the Anglican Church. The international claim process is based on the indigenous right to ancestral land; however, as the claimed land was occupied by hundreds of *criollo* families it was necessary to take into consideration the rights of the *criollo* people in order to achieve general agreements of land and resources distribution involving all the stakeholders (indigenous and *criollo* families).

In the year 2000 the “Pilcomayo Project” was launched, supported by Misereor and Bread for the World Germany. Asociana and Fundapaz started accompanying the two groups in legal aspects, their organizational strengthening and capacity-building and the beginning of a dialogue and negotiation process between both groups in order to create concrete policies for land and territory distribution which make everybody’s rights to land effective. This was done alongside with and somehow in synergy with the international judicial strategy before the IACHR. It is important to note that beyond its real basis (*criollo* families living in indigenous ancestral lands), the indigenous-*criollo* conflict was ignited by stakeholders who did not want a solution to the problem but encouraged the differences between the groups to justify a different solution that did not involve the real owners of the territories, who had been poor and marginalized by the State for more than a century

The participative mapping experience carried out for four years by the Aboriginal Communities Association Lhaka Honhat (Asociación de Comunidades Aborígenes Lhaka Honhat) and the Organization of *Criollo* Families (Organización de Familias Criollas - OFC) within the framework of Pilcomayo Project was born in order to generate information and proposals for an equitable land distribution. The maps, together with a census of the population, a socio-economic survey and a study on the situation of the natural resources in the area have been the result of a survey conducted by the *criollo* and indigenous representatives, supported by the NGOs, which were in charge of training the mappers. Using GPS technologies, they proceeded to target, describe and pinpoint in the space a series of significant sites of specific interest.

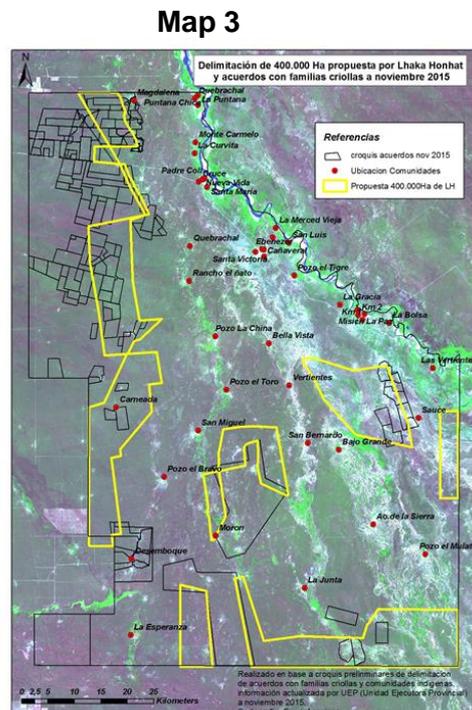
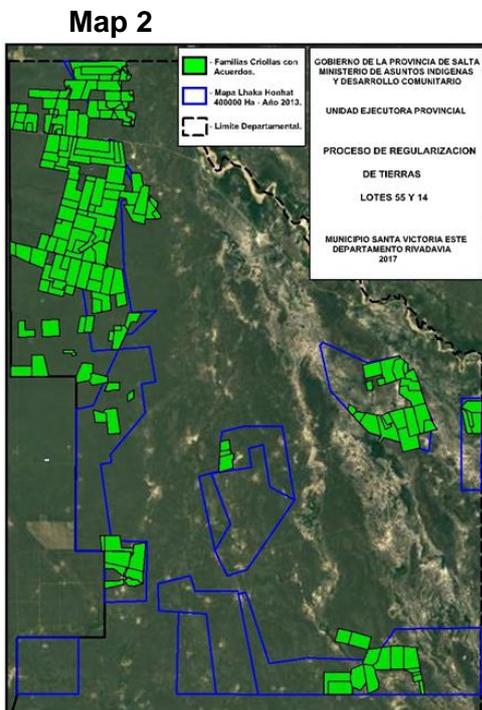
The collective mapping process on the shared territories allowed for a reflection on the rights and raised awareness on the way both indigenous and *criollo* people live in, use and own their lands and territories, and it set the basis for an institutionalized dialogue between the organizations and the Government, allowing them to move forward in a land distribution proposal.

In October 2007 (seven years after the beginning of the Pilcomayo Project and after an agreement reached between Lhaka Honhat and the OFC) the government of the province of Salta signed decree 2786/07, which allotted 643,000 hectares distributing

400,000 to 42 indigenous communities and 243,000 ha to 462 *criollo* families, fully institutionalizing the agreement reached by the organizations and establishing a mechanism aimed at raising the necessary funds for the survey and legal registration of the lands.

This map-focused methodology for dialogue built with great effort by the organizations themselves in order to move forward in the agreements of the parties on the disputed territories proved to be the most important valid strategy to achieve a shared solution that is seen as “fair”. Finally in 2014, after thirty years of claims, the government of Salta gave official status to decree 1498/14, recognizing and transferring lots 55 and 14 (state-owned land until that moment) to collective ownership of indigenous communities and to joint-tenancy to the *criollo* families.

The current situation can be seen in the following maps, which show how we are moving forward in the agreements, and each family’s plot is being identified thus freeing the territory of the communities that, as set forth by the National Constitution, must be handed over to the indigenous communities.



Map 2: *Criollo* families with settlement agreements. Source: Government of the province of Salta, Ministry of Indigenous and Community Affairs.

Map 3: Delimitation of 400,000 ha proposed by Lhaka Honhat and agreements with *criollo* families by November 2015. Source: Asociana.

Case study 2. Water Access and Management Roundtable of the Department of Rivadavia, Salta.

Although the families and communities may have some permanent sources of water, generally speaking the water in Semi-arid Chaco is of poor quality and scarce, non-potable due to the presence of salt and arsenic, which makes it undrinkable since it causes physical malaise among children and adults. In general, the communities lack good water reservoirs and cannot meet their basic needs.

Access to freshwater in the region is extremely complex due to various reasons:

- Long periods of drought followed by seasonal rains only in some months of the year;
- Poor quality groundwater, with high levels of salinity and arsenic;
- Dispersed population;
- High investment costs to drill deep water wells in each case;
- Bad or nonexistent public infrastructure.

After a series of mutual exchange visits, indigenous, criollo, government officials and civil society partners were inspired by the results of the grassroots mobilization to promote rainwater harvesting in the Semi-arid region of the Northeast of Brazil in the last twenty years that resulted in public policy and a government-funded rainwater harvesting program (A Million Cisterns program). With Articulation in the Brazilian Semiarid (ASA) as a key player, the program succeeded in providing safe water to five million Brazilians who used to lack access to this resource. One of the successes of the One Million cisterns campaign was to shift the public's attention from "responding to drought" to "life in the Semi-arid" which increased the value of the region, focused on its strengths and on the need to generate context-appropriate strategies and policies to the region.

Hence, with partial CWS (and FIDA) support, the ILC's Semiarid Platform carried forward an intense training and knowledge management process was performed, transferring Brazilian experience to the Chaco. Specific actions started to be developed, thus becoming a key tool to start generating political spaces where the civil society and the state meet to devise and formulate a concrete strategy to solve the problem.

Guided by the example of the work done for decades in Brazil by ASA, indigenous and criollo organizations and civil society partners gathered in Latin American Semiarids, the Tri-national Integrated Program supported by CWS and the Government of Salta formed the Water Table for the Department of Rivadavia with International Land Coalition and CWS as international observers. The roundtable uses the participative mapping made by Fundapaz and the Province of Salta to pinpoint, prioritize and develop specific works for access to water, strengthening at the same time the relationship between the civil society and the state with the participation and involvement of the indigenous and rural organizations. The National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA), national programs and other NGOs joined the roundtable. Therefore the Water Access and Management Roundtable of Chaco Salteño was created to standardize diagnoses, define funding sources, generate specific works and promote a water handling and management training program. The local indigenous and criollo organizations are central to the roundtable's legitimacy and accountability.

A map with 2000 cases of families in need of water solutions was prepared in a participatory and transparent manner and the top 200 priority cases were identified to be address as funding became available. The map and priorities listing have allowed for reporting of progress to and by communities.

All this work led to the passing of a bill of law in the state legislature of Salta province (with preliminary approval of its lower house of representatives) that will mandate the state to include rainwater harvesting technology in all new and/or remodeled public facilities (housing, health care centers, community buildings, etc.) to be built in the regions affected by water problems. That would be a quantum leap towards an effective solution for thousands of families in the region.

This experience in Salta's Rivadavia department, is being observed by other regions and information has started to be exchanged to replicate the case in the Municipality of

Yacuiba in Bolivia and in the Municipality of Irala Fernández in Paraguay. Like in Brazil's model, rain catchment systems are built locally by indigenous and criollo construction crews trained for that end. Indigenous women crews are being formed in the Bolivian and Argentine sides of the border.

Lessons learned, observed achievements and Advancing SDGs in the Gran Chaco region of South America.

1.- Lessons learned. The methodological tools and techniques used in the two case studies presented in this paper share some common features:

- They all contribute to more effective indigenous-led advocacy by putting new arguments, knowledge and evidence in the hands of the indigenous and criollo organizations in support of their demands.
- They are all compatible and appropriate with long and very long-term advocacy process like those in remote and isolated parts of the Chaco region, where problems are often multicausal and interconnected.
- While not expensive, they all demand a sustained dose of culturally-appropriate technical assistance.
- They are not exclusive for use by NGOs and can all be adjusted to include active government participation if the local conditions demand it.
- Easy to replicate
- Need to promote indigenous peoples' active participation and ownership in all steps of the process to ensure long-term sustainability.

2.- Achievements. After thirty years of struggle, organizing and peaceful resistance, 15,000 indigenous and criollo people gained legal title to their land in Salta province, in the Argentine section of the Gran Chaco region. The organizations that represent them and the NGO partners that accompany them -with funding and accompaniment from mostly international faith-based organizations- adapted and adopted a variety of tactics, methodologies, tools and legal mechanisms like participatory mapping and learning exchanges. In all cases, empowerment was both a means and an end.

Once the land tenure issue was solved, access to water emerged as a key priority for indigenous and criollo families, rainwater harvesting was identified as an appropriate solution and a multi-stakeholder roundtable was created with indigenous and criollo organizations and government agencies at the center and local and international civil society partners and allies' active participation.

In the hands of indigenous community leaders and members, Participative Mappings methodology has been extremely useful to solve conflicts over land tenure and use.

3.- Advancing SDGs in the South American Gran Chaco. The three techniques, methodologies and tools presented in this paper are demonstrating their effectiveness in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals in the semiarid Gran Chaco region. Especially, goals (I) no poverty, (IV) clean water and sanitation, (10) reducing inequality, and (17) partnerships for the goals. It is clear that none of the four goals can be tackled in isolation, and it is necessary to develop more and better relationships with the organizations acting in the area, whether fellow organizations or associations and groups of the local population.

Despite progress made, failure and difficulties occur, but in our experience sustainable improvement in the quality of life of thousands of families that now live in vulnerability and inequality is through working approaches based on: methodological rigor, active

participation of the communities, long-term view, political dialogue and active participation of the civil society. The path is long and difficult, but feasible and exciting.

Final remarks

1.- Appropriate technology in the hands of empowered indigenous communities who, in turn, add their ancestral knowledge of the territory, result in high-impact technical and public policy proposals to solve access to land and water issues.

2.- In the ethnically diverse Gran Chaco region of South America, confidence-building is central to create effective spaces for multi-stakeholder negotiation, likely to reach long-lasting agreements. This process is very time consuming but has proven to be efficient.

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