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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:  
Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Gender & Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgde20>

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Available online: 15 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Becca Asaki & Shannon Hayes (2011): Leaders, not clients: grassroots women's groups transforming social protection, *Gender & Development*, 19:2, 241-253

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2011.592634>

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# Leaders, not clients: grassroots women's groups transforming social protection

Becca Asaki and Shannon Hayes

*Grassroots women in poor communities are creating their own innovative social protection mechanisms, and often moving beyond this to foster economic growth and prosperity. In this article, we propose an expansion of common understandings of social protection to include these activities initiated by citizens themselves. In this article, we describe strategies being led by grassroots women's community-based organisations in Kenya, Brazil and Peru, where women's self-help groups, networks, federations, and supporting NGOs, have been leading and organising livelihoods, health and food security initiatives for the benefit of their members and communities. Many of the objectives of social protection can best be met by creating a social protection framework that recognises and builds on grassroots women's own initiatives. This would reposition poor women in the social protection debate: recasting them from 'beneficiaries', to become active agents of change, and formal partners with government and development agencies.*

*Key words:* grassroots women; organising; home-based care; community-led development

## Introduction

Social protection is generally understood as state-provided transfers such as welfare funds, food distribution, and healthcare. It is meant to provide a means of alleviating poverty, on which the poorest women, men, and children can fall back, mitigating its effects in poor communities and households, and ideally helping to give poor families a safety net from which they can climb out of poverty, or at least be prevented from sinking further into poverty.

However, governmental social protection mechanisms have so far proven largely inadequate to provide for the many people living in poverty, particularly in the developing world of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. They have often rarely gone beyond immediate poverty relief, to build longer-term resilience to shocks and crises. Rather than waiting for government assistance or only advocating for its improvement, grassroots women in poor communities are creating their own innovative social

protection mechanisms, and often moving beyond this to foster economic growth and prosperity.

In this article, we propose an expansion of common understandings of social protection to include these activities initiated by citizens themselves. The experience and argument that we present here have practical implications for social protection policies and funding frameworks, since we seek to demonstrate that many of the objectives of social protection can best be met by creating a social protection framework that recognises and builds on grassroots women's own initiatives. This would reposition poor women, and poor women's groups and organisations, in the social protection debate: recasting them from 'beneficiaries', to become active agents of change, and formal partners with government and development agencies.

In this article, we describe strategies being led by grassroots women's community-based organisations in Kenya, Brazil, and Peru, where grassroots women's self-help groups, networks, federations, and their support non-government organisations (NGOs) have been leading and organising livelihoods, health, and food security initiatives for the benefit of their members and communities. The contexts in which these are taking place include high levels of poverty, weak infrastructure to deliver basic services including health and education, and poor governance; food insecurity; post-disaster recovery; frequent drought; and high HIV prevalence.

The grassroots women's groups, networks and support NGOs that are implementing these strategies aim, like all social protection agencies, for:

- immediate poverty relief for the poorest and most vulnerable;
- strengthened livelihoods support to reduce long-term and chronic poverty, and increase resilience to shocks;
- increased access to social and health services for the poor and marginalised; and
- the creation of an enabling environment through the strengthening of laws, policies, and regulations, and the mechanisms through which those are implemented.

What makes these initiatives unique is that they are planned, implemented, and managed by organised groups of grassroots women in their own communities, and that they are based on principles of collective organising, women's empowerment, community accountability, and principled partnerships with government and other stakeholders. In our view, these principles are not incidental, extraneous or 'feel-good' factors, but rather are exactly what account for the long-term success and sustainability of the initiatives. We end by recommending that governments and development agencies interested in promoting social protection and long-term social security for citizens living in poor communities actively partner with grassroots women's groups and invest in the scale up of their initiatives to achieve long-term resilience and sustainability.

## Why do we need to expand our understanding of social protection?

A broad view of social protection, going far beyond the narrow conceptualisation of just economic safety nets for poor people, is now widely accepted and informing a variety of development institutions. The synergistic relationship between promoting social protection, and addressing other development issues such as promoting food security (Levy 2004), preventing and mitigating the impact of HIV (UNAIDS 2010), and promoting climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction (Davies *et al.* 2009) has also been substantively and persuasively analysed.

This article builds on work by Overseas Development Institute (2010), the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (2007), and the Institute of Development Studies (Devereux and Sabater-Wheeler 2004), and in particular, work by Cecilia Luttrell and Caroline Moser (2004), all of which build a case for the importance of investing in social protection to alleviate poverty, and also the importance of tackling social protection with a gender lens. The argument is that social protection policies can and should be designed to address severe and long-term poverty, stop shocks, build assets, promote well-being, address inequitable social relations, and redress inequality. To do this, complementary measures are needed, to address the causes of vulnerability (for example, poor people's right to land access and ownership, and their need for government improvement of basic services). In addition it is important for citizens to be aware of their entitlements, social protection programmes, and reducing costs of accessing entitlements (*ibid.*).

Yet there seems to be a gap between academic and policy understandings of the 'whys' of social protection, and the 'hows' of implementation. There is no clear framework or set of principles guiding how to implement broad-ranged social protection with immediate and long-term transformative effects for vulnerable or marginalised people, households, and poor communities.

There are multiple specific challenges in many government social protection programmes, particularly for women. Barriers to women's access to social protection are widely understood. They range from macro-issues, such as women's absence from formal employment (which excludes them from common social protection schemes such as pensions or unemployment insurance), to the daily issues that come from being poor, such as not being able to afford transport to a health clinic or social services office. Luttrell and Moser (2004), 6) speak of 'gender-imposed constraints', for example, cultural beliefs within institutions that limit or restrict women's access to government and private sector social protection entitlements.

Successful conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes have tried to address some of these barriers, particularly the 'opportunity costs' (that is, the cost of the time spent on doing something when it could have been spent in a different way) for poor women and men of investing in a longer-term benefit (examples of this are sending children to school rather than having them help in the home, or spending a day at the clinic

getting a child vaccinated rather than working). But while cash transfer programmes such as Mexico's *Oportunidades* have had some immediate benefits for women and families, they are dependent upon government funding and commitment, and, unless women develop their own ways and mechanisms for ensuring that the income they receive is used in some way translated into longer-term stability and strengthened position in society, their transformative effects are limited.

The practical experience of our grassroots network bears out the fact that grassroots women's groups are capable of responding to and overcoming these challenges, both by addressing the barriers to accessing existing programmes, and designing new initiatives to respond to the needs of members, their families and communities. As Cecilia Luttrell and Caroline Moser (2004) point out, most women mitigate risks through their own informal mechanisms, including the types we discuss in our case studies. These informal mechanisms, though common and relatively successful, are rarely taken seriously by policymakers. This is because these mechanisms and schemes are viewed as marginal or merely stop-gap, and so are left out of formal assessments of communities' or countries' social protection mechanisms.

In our view, this neglect of informal mechanisms and the people who provide them is a detriment to poverty reduction and development efforts. And therefore with this article we suggest an alternative: that grassroots women's initiatives can be a holistic, sustainable *approach* to development that merit recognition and support from governments and development institutions. As will be demonstrated in the case studies, grassroots women are not only providing social protection in response to the daily needs of their families and communities, but they are also establishing longer-term safety nets, participating in government social protection services, working to change the legal environment, and raising awareness so that community members understand and can claim their entitlements. Further, positioning and supporting grassroots women's initiatives within a social protection framework has the potential to promote women's leadership, thereby reducing their social exclusion from public decision-making, and supporting women's empowerment from the bottom up, with decidedly beneficial outcomes directly for those women, as well as for their children, family and other dependents, and for development as a whole.

We do not wish to imply with our argument that the government should not be held accountable for its responsibility to its citizens or that in the face of ineffective state services, civil society should take up government's responsibility. We recognise the danger of exploitation of women and their traditional caring roles. Quite the contrary, we believe that when governments work with community women's groups in a formal manner to implement social protection or increase access to existing social services, governance and women's leadership can actually be strengthened.

## **GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission<sup>2</sup>**

Our framework emerges from the experiences of our networks: GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission, and the challenges and inadequacies of existing social protection mechanisms as experienced by our member organisations. GROOTS International, founded in 1989, and the Huairou Commission, founded at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, are both focused on promoting grassroots women's leadership and involvement in decision-making in the development processes that directly affect their lives and communities. GROOTS is a north-south-east-west network composed of grassroots women's groups and NGOs, working in 25 countries around the world. The Huairou Commission is a global membership and partnership coalition that empowers grassroots women's organisations to enhance their community development practice and to exercise collective political power at the global level. GROOTS International is a member network of the Huairou Commission, with representation on the Huairou Commission's governing body. Additionally, many grassroots organisations that are members of GROOTS lead or participate actively in the Huairou Commission's campaigns and programmes.

Through peer-learning events, consultations, support for on the ground activities and field visits, there have been many opportunities for GROOTS and the Huairou Commission to learn about the activities of the coalition members, and to distil lessons from these. Activities include in-depth conversations between and within the member organisations, in order to build a comprehensive understanding of the reality women in poor communities face as they try to care for their families and communities through their self-help groups, networks and federations. Various initiatives of different organisations seeking to organise and support these women in the absence of state services or social protection have been researched, and the findings recorded and published in reports, on which the information in the next sections is based.

## **GROOTS Kenya and the Home-Based Care Alliance: social protection for people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS**

Over the past decade, there has been growing recognition of the importance of social protection to respond to a range of challenges faced by developing countries, including food insecurity, chronic poverty and the HIV pandemic. HIV-sensitive social protection can reduce vulnerability to HIV infection, improve and extend the lives of people living with HIV, and support individuals and households. Achieving social protection for people and households affected by HIV is a critical step towards the realisation of universal access to prevention, treatment, care, and support (UNAIDS 2010). The information in this section on one intervention building on these principles is adapted from the Huairou Commission (2010e).

Social protection is emerging as a key strategy to reduce poverty and improve health outcomes for people living with HIV – in essence providing a safety net of assets and services that will make HIV medical treatment effective. Social protection is shown to increase HIV prevention and treatment uptake and adherence, increase access to primary healthcare and women's empowerment, and in helping people overcome the structural inequalities that drive the epidemic (UNAIDS 2010). In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty is the norm, public health services are limited, and HIV rates are very high. Home-based care provided by women in communities has emerged as the primary source of care and support for people living with, and affected by, HIV (Huairou Commission 2010a).

By organising into groups and mobilising communities, caregivers directly provide social protection for people living with HIV, orphans, vulnerable children, and widows, and also have helped to make government-provided social protection funds and services more effective and accessible. By advocating for support for this work, home-based caregivers' organisations and networks have, in some places, also increased social protection for themselves, and, by extension, for their families and the people they care for.

In Kenya, HIV prevalence is currently estimated at about 7 per cent, down from a high of over 10 per cent in the 1990s (National AIDS Control Council 2008). Many people are living with HIV (and living longer, due to increased numbers of people gaining access to anti-retroviral treatment – ARVs). But jobs are scarce, and there is no large-scale social protection from the government. There are also many orphans and widows, who often lack income and assets. This prevents orphans and the children of widows from going to school, or receiving job training or opportunities (Huairou Commission 2010b). The practice of land-grabbing from widows and orphans is also relatively common, and the legal system has not been effective to the community level to enforce women's land rights (*ibid.*).

In September 1999, the government launched the National AIDS Control Council, with decentralised bodies at the Provincial, District and Constituency levels to respond to HIV. Yet there have been criticisms that lack of resources, poor information flow, illiteracy and poverty, stigma and discrimination, and corruption have hampered a comprehensive, effective response to HIV (Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission 2010). Most Kenyan communities lack a comprehensive, well-funded or organised care and support response to HIV, and consequently community home-based caregivers and other community-based groups have stepped in to provide social protection for people living with and affected by HIV.

Beginning in 2003, GROOTS Kenya – a national network of 2,500 grassroots women's self-help groups – began organising a Home-Based Care Alliance. This is a bottom-up federation of home-based caregivers, which aims to link caregivers together. Home-based caregivers provide care and support for people living with HIV and other chronic health conditions, and the elderly, orphans, vulnerable children,

and widows. Providing care to people living with HIV requires a broad range of services, including clinical and psycho-social care, and a range of social protection services that ensure adequate social, economic, nutritional and legal/human rights support are available (UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development 2008). This includes direct clinical care in the home, and finding money for food, transport to the clinic, and simple medications (generally out of the caregiver's own pocket, or from group contributions), psycho-social counselling, housekeeping support, and linking to social services. In some communities, caregivers specifically reach out to sex workers, and also establish support groups for other groups made particularly vulnerable to HIV infection by social and economic realities, such as young women.

GROOTS hoped that the Alliance would lead to greater co-ordination and peer learning, which should enable carers to advocate for recognition of their work, and greater integration into formal health responses to HIV, and also enable them to strengthen their livelihoods. The immediate effects of the Home-Based Care Alliance have been related to work and livelihoods: informal caregivers have been supported in their work, and in some cases their care workload has lessened. Self-help, savings and credit, revolving loan, and income-generating initiatives have been created, to help caregivers make a living while caring. In some regions, caregivers have started health mutual funds, to defray the costs of health care. This practice was learned from colleagues at Swayam Shikshan Prayog in India, who talked about this idea during a GROOTS International-organised peer exchange in 2009, in which caregivers from Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, and Nigeria travelled to Maharashtra (GROOTS International 2009). Finally, caregivers have spearheaded the creation of Watch Dog Groups – partnership bodies between community members and government officials to prevent and redress land-grabbing from widows and orphans.

The other major kind of impact that the Alliance has had is to create a network for communication and information-sharing, by bringing together all of the caregivers in a particular region or province. By organising into an alliance, the caregivers have been able to increase their effectiveness through information-sharing, eliminating duplication of services and, key, by linking to the government and NGOs to influence them so that they direct resources, programmes, and funding for those people most in need in communities.

Beyond the immediate effects of the Alliance, some women have gained seats on decision-making bodies. They have increased the accountability of AIDS and development resources, with more funding being granted to home-based care groups, as their profile has grown. Caregivers have also strengthened their own livelihoods, through savings and credit/revolving funds. An important finding from evaluations of the impact of the Alliance is that because of the Alliance's organising and community mobilisation efforts, when new programmes and resources come into communities, they can be of immediate benefit to the community, because they can build on, and invest in, what has already been prioritised.

## CONAMOVIDI: women's collective response to food insecurity in Lima, Peru

Food insecurity and chronic malnutrition are facts of life for many people in Peru. In many regions, unfavourable climatic conditions for farming has caused mass migration from rural regions to cities by people seeking employment, leading to a growth of squatter communities. Prices of staple foods have increased regularly, and poverty and food insecurity have been heightened by sporadic earthquakes (IFPRI 2011).

To address these vulnerabilities, women across Peru have developed collective kitchens – public kitchens that prepare hot food for those in the community, mainly run by women. CONAMOVIDI is a national network of 10,000 collective kitchens founded in 2005 (Huairou Commission 2010c). This style of organising has a long history in the region as a response to crisis and economic austerity (Garrett 2001). These community kitchens are self-managed and self-funded, with each member contributing labour into cooking the meals on a rotating schedule. They then receive a reduced price on the meals, which are sold to other community members also, at prices which are much lower than restaurants. The women running the kitchens collectively purchase ingredients, and have been looking to local farmers to help create a market for struggling farmers. Beyond addressing the basic need for affordable food, involvement in the collective kitchens has also offered women a space for political activism. This has allowed the groups to go beyond the practical needs to address vulnerabilities through strategic organising, advocacy and women's empowerment.

As they have fought to secure fulfilment of their daily needs for food, the women of CONAMOVIDI have secured public policy transfers for mothers to support the kitchens, thereby institutionalising community-controlled delivery of something that otherwise would have been a government-owned social service. CONAMOVIDI has been working to increase grassroots women's awareness that they are not only housewives or mothers, but bearers of rights – women and citizens (*ibid.*).

Women involved in collective kitchens have gone on to advocacy and activism on wider issues. An example comes from the small town of Cañete. Women from here have moved beyond the provision of food via collective kitchens to become health advocates who are working to increase women's roles in service delivery. Networks in each district of Peru have been pressuring their local governments to have women represented in the local and national levels. They are also negotiating with the government to ensure that grassroots women are consulted in the planning for the implementation of the Law of Equal Opportunities. Grassroots women have trained to become 'rights advocates', and pressured leaders at the municipal level, to ensure that government processes benefit poor women's priorities.

## Pintadas: adaptive social protection in Brazil

There is growing recognition that social protection strategies, in combination with climate change adaptation, have potential as an effective response to the long- and short-term risks posed by climate change to poor communities in developing countries. The concept of 'adaptive social protection' integrates these strategies, for those facing poverty and the effects of climate change and natural disasters (Davies *et al.* 2009).

In a semi-arid region such as Pintadas, in the north-east of Brazil, drought can mean absolute devastation to a farming family which is already struggling ((Huairou Commission 2010d). Women often spend much of their day walking 6 kilometres or more to find and collect water. In times of extreme drought, many families do not have enough water to feed both themselves and their livestock. This lack of water and energy infrastructure in Pintadas continuously undermined the productivity of family farms, and periodic drought caused a migration of the men to seek work in cities for half of the year, leaving women as so-called 'widows of living husbands' (Soares Santos 2009, 3).

Many of the families living in Las Pintadas have received cash transfers from a government social programme called *Bolsa Familia*. Small payments, of around 22 *reais* (\$12) per month per child with a maximum payment of 200 *reais*, are available for families who make below 800 *reais* (\$440) a month (*The Economist* 2010), and support 12.5 million families (*The Global Post* 2010) in Brazil. The programme was initially created to increase attendance rates at schools by bolstering family income, so children are not pulled from the educational system to engage in income-generating work. The transfer has often been used to purchase food, but can barely cover food costs for a family.

Women in Pintadas face the responsibility of caring for their children and livestock, and cultivating their land, in times of drought. Though women have been involved in social movements of the region and within the Pintadas community savings and credit co-operative, they formed a women's co-operative in 1993, with the aim of using women's knowledge, and the values of past generations, to improve the quality of life in the region. They now form the Pintadas Network, together with ten other organisations. The network was founded in 2003.

Water scarcity being the most pressing concern, the women of the Network began by making various low cost water collection devices for their homes and farms. Soon they took on larger projects such as constructing water ponds and utilising drip irrigation systems. Two hundred and forty cisterns and 32 water ponds were built to store collected water and make this available for all the 11,000 inhabitants, including 7,000 in remotely rural areas of the region for family use and agriculture (Soares Santos 2009, 3). One of the founders of Las Pintadas, Neusa Coadore, was elected as mayor and then to the state legislature, and prioritised water security in the government agenda at the local, state, and federal level. After years of organising, developing and

implementing their water security initiatives, and creating partnerships with their local governments to scale up these initiatives, the municipality of the Pintadas reached 100 per cent water security in 2005 (*ibid.*, 9), creating a giant leap in the quality of life in the region.

Through organising, the Women's Association gained a more holistic understanding of the structures that contributed to the situation of poverty in Pintadas. After mapping the situation of poverty in their region, the women in Pintadas realised it was caused 'an unfair social structure, and [was] not a natural consequence of lack of rain only' (*ibid.*, 1). This inspired them to shift the focus from water security alone, to add food security, sustainable agriculture, sustainable livelihoods, and social justice.

Recognising the interconnectedness between agriculture and water usage, the Women's Association began cultivating indigenous crops that use less of this valuable resource. They also began actively linking their own daily agricultural work to the economic and consumption decisions people in the region were making. Various activities aimed at supporting livelihoods and increasing knowledge and skills were instigated. For example, to encourage the cultivation of indigenous drought-resistant fruits, and enable farms to sell surplus crops and by-products, so boosting incomes, the Women's Association of Las Pintadas held workshops at the Community Centre built by members, offering training in fruit juice manufacture, and discussions on the health benefits of these juices in comparison to the imported drinks purchased at the supermarkets. Through selling their excess crops and by-products such as juices, jellies, and jams at local markets, women were able to raise the income of the family farms. The Women's Association also partnered with the local government to provide the produce used for lunches in the local municipal schools securing a stable and local market for their crops and nutritious, locally grown food for their children who are also now learning the connections between the food they eat and the work of their parents. The Women's Association also set up and ran a restaurant managed and administered by the women that use only locally-grown produce, creating jobs in the restaurant, and supporting the local agricultural economy.

Finally, the work of the Women's Association has made government-provided social protection programmes more effective. As farmers in Pintadas increasingly have a secure income from their farms, the *Bolsa Familia* funds are increasingly invested in farms to make them more productive and sustainable, rather than being used on daily needs. Without the community organising which has addressed the issues of water and food security, the cash transfers would serve only to stave off the very basic effects of poverty. Grassroots women have instead been able to shift the thinking of the community to invest their *Bolsa Familia* funds into their agricultural livelihoods activities, thus creating an environment where children are not needed to generate income.

## Analysis

As is evident from this rich diversity of case studies, grassroots women are taking on major leadership roles to improve their lives and livelihoods and build social safety nets that extend throughout their communities through innovative organising. They are actively building partnerships with government, with the aim of increasing the accountability of government to local people, and improve people's access to government services. They are working to create an economic, legal, and social environment that promotes social security, equality, and development in the long-run. While the practices take place in diverse contexts and use a variety of organising strategies, they are united by several common factors that we believe account for their success, including:

- **Collective organising** – organising is a vital first and ongoing step to bring together people in communities to respond to issues and create a base for a vibrant democracy. Once established, community-based organisations and networks serve as mechanisms for information dissemination, and are a platform for communities to respond to challenges and opportunities as they arise. Community-based organisations (CBOs) and self-help groups are particularly important for grassroots women who face multiple discriminations because of their sex, class and often ethnicity.
- **Women's groups engaging and linking to public services** – once organised, CBOs need to map out and understand the state- and NGO-provided social services that already exist, including social protection schemes, and what entitlements they hold. They can identify the challenges in how they are implemented and build partnerships with government to improve the services.
- **Grassroots women take the lead with NGOs in a support role** – in all of the examples provided, sustainable success lies in the fact that women in their own communities are taking the lead, mobilising their own neighbours, and linking to the government officials and institutions that are technically accountable to them. Their responses are not dependent upon funding or the technical expertise of NGOs. Rather, NGO staff position themselves as supporters of the grassroots initiatives, taking the lead from the grassroots leaders and helping to find resources and skills as they are needed.
- **Organising around livelihoods as a basis for action on other issues** – securing livelihoods for women through savings and credit, or income-generation is the basis for successful responses to other issues. In these initiatives, meeting the daily economic needs of poor women becomes the basis for empowerment and action on wider-ranging issues, such as water security, food security, HIV/AIDS, and health.

The case studies demonstrate that the benefits of informal social protection programmes can go beyond offering immediate, practical benefits for individual households. Instead, social protection can be a tool to promote longer-term, more sustainable resilience to poverty by forming a part of a wider process of economic and social development, and promoting women's empowerment, democratic practices,

and community ownership over development processes. Informal social protection can also augment formal, government sponsored social protection programmes, building on these and increasing their effectiveness.

Unfortunately, without a source of technical and other support, an opportunity for women in communities to organise and develop their vision, or resources, these informal mechanisms usually do not thrive or go beyond day-to-day risk management. But with the proper support, grassroots women's social protection mechanisms can thrive and work in concert with existing formal social protection, and enable major progress to be made towards social protection objectives. Given this, we recommend that existing and emerging social protection programmes analyse, build on, and add value to grassroots women's initiatives, rather than squeezing them out. The first step in this is for governments and development agencies to recognise grassroots organisations and networks as equal stakeholders in the social protection development process, by bringing them into the agenda-setting and policymaking process.

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## Notes

- 1 See: [www.groots.org](http://www.groots.org) and [www.huairou.org](http://www.huairou.org) for more information.

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