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Search for
Common Ground
Confiance, Collaboration, Percées

MU GINA GOBÉ • BUILDING TOMORROW

Contributing to the stabilization of border communities in the regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua.



It all began with the "Mu Gina Gobé" project, which means "Building Tomorrow" in Hausa. Thanks to generous funding from the European Union's Instrument for Contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and the tireless efforts of the world's largest peacebuilding organization, Search for Common Ground, this project got off the ground in 2020. With a budget of €5 million and the support of the Nigerian government, Search set out to lay the foundation for long-term stability in the Tillabéri and Tahoua border regions as part of the Intervention to Support Security and Stability in Niger (I3S Niger) program.

But this was no easy task. In recent years, non-state armed groups have launched countless attacks in the border areas with Mali and Burkina Faso, resulting in widespread violence and destruction. The consequences have been devastating, with schools burned, infrastructure destroyed, and livelihoods threatened. Yet, amidst this chaos and uncertainty, "Mu Gina Gobé" provided a glimmer of hope.

Through inclusive and participatory processes, the project created spaces for dialogue between communities, security forces, and government authorities to address security challenges together and improve their lives. With innovative approaches such as participatory theater performances, community dialogues, and radio roundtables, the project engaged key stakeholders and gave them the skills and tools to prevent and respond to conflict. Indeed, Search trained members of the security forces, community and religious leaders, civil society representatives, and women, providing them with the knowledge and expertise to conduct conflict analysis and lead the development of stabilization projects in six municipalities in the regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua.

And the results speak for themselves. "Mu Gina Gobé" generated 59 projects that directly addressed the population's needs in areas such as health, education, agriculture, livestock, and natural resource management. Moreover, the project created 122 income-generating activities for 760 women and young people, enabling them to build resilience and lead self-sustaining lives.

But perhaps the most inspiring aspect of the project is the success stories that have emerged from the communities it has served. We've heard stories of women who became agents of change, youth who found purpose and hope, and communities that came together to rebuild their lives. With "Mu Gina Gobé," we've seen how an inclusive and participatory approach can lead to concrete and lasting results in stability and peace. So, join us in this mission, and together, let's build tomorrow.

Building Trust, Collaboration, and Unity: Empowering Communities for Positive Change.

Building Trust and Collaboration:

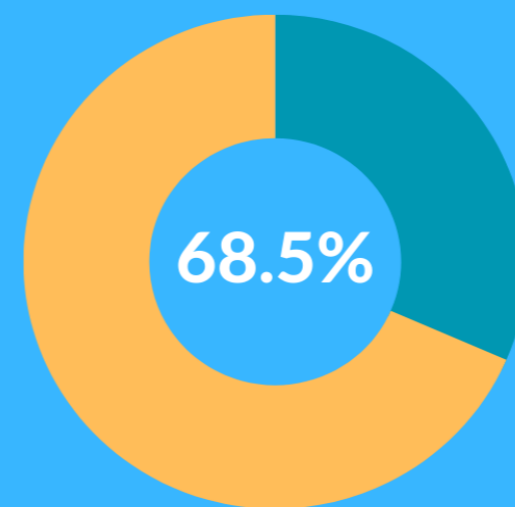
Our efforts to bring people together and foster collaboration have yielded remarkable results. Training and capacity-building activities have boosted confidence among the Security and Defense Forces (SDF), authorities, and the local population. From soccer matches to community clean-ups, we've taken concrete actions that have rebuilt trust and strengthened collaboration. In fact, the final evaluation shows a remarkable increase in trust and collaboration, with **68.5% of respondents acknowledging improvement compared to just 35% before the project started.**

Inclusive Decision-Making and Appreciation of Authorities:

By empowering community leaders and providing conflict transformation training, we've created more inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. This has led to greater appreciation for the services provided by authorities. Young people and women now have a voice in local governance and conflict mediation, enhancing the legitimacy of decisions made by local leaders. An impressive **80.2% of respondents now express trust in their commune's ability to handle local conflicts, a significant increase from the previous 35% baseline.**

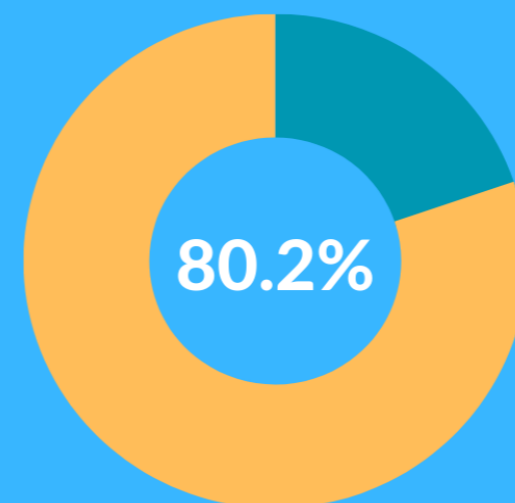
Cohesion and Reconciliation:

Peace ambassadors, traditional leaders, and communal peace committees have played a crucial role in promoting unity and reconciliation. Through community dialogues and mediation, they have brought conflicting communities closer, addressing security and stability issues. Additionally, income-generating activities have brought people from different communities together based on shared economic interests, transcending divisions. Young people and women have taken on mediation roles, influencing conflict dynamics and promoting reconciliation. The impact of these initiatives is evident, with the final evaluation reporting a remarkable **rise from 40% to 99% in the percentage of people interacting with other community groups.**



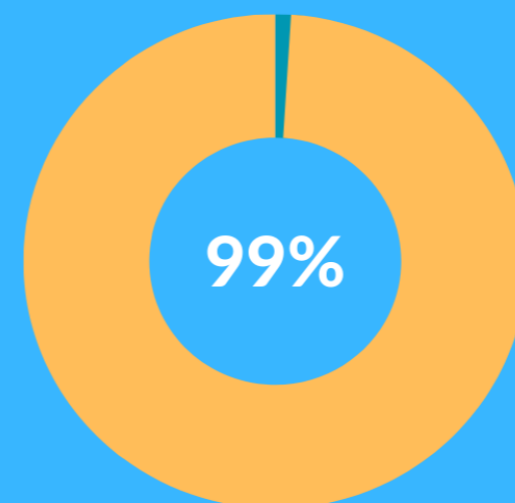
Trust & Collaboration Improvement:

- Baseline: 35%
- **Final Evaluation: 68.5%**



Inclusive Decision-Making and Improved Appreciation of Authorities:

- Baseline: 35%
- **Final Evaluation: 80.2%**



Promoting Cohesion and Reconciliation:

- Baseline: 40%
- **Final Evaluation: 99%**

MOCTAR

Youth ag- ainst in- security

From exclusive leadership to shared governance: How the youth of Ayorou took charge

"Nature abhors a vacuum. Unfortunately, the danger hovering over youth idleness feeds recruitment by extremist groups," explains Moctar, 27.

In Ayorou, the lack of opportunity is not the same as a lack of will. When Moctar finished his studies, he returned home from university full of hope, but the growing insecurity in the Tillaberi region had already taken its toll. Economic opportunities were scarce. "I have a degree in geography, but I had to resort to working in markets. I earned about 2,000 CFA francs (\$3.20) a day, not enough to live on."

Moctar was not alone. The young people in his neighborhood were facing the same difficulties. Given the uncertainties of daily life, tensions arose, and "the youth started to divide into two groups." The election of the leader of the neighborhood's youth structure, "made on a market day, where many were absent," struck the final blow.

Within the youth, "we now had one privileged group, and the other marginalized, excluded from decision-



MOCTAR

-making and socio-economic opportunities. Sidelined, idleness felt like it was being forced upon us once again.”

Through the “Mugina Gobe” project, funded by the European Union’s Instrument for Stability and Peace, Search intended to support young people on several fronts. To alleviate their financial struggles, Search provided 100 young people with training and resources to support income-generating activities.

This time, “no one was left out. All communities were involved.” Moctar was also selected. But for him, the real change was less material. Search’s training on positive communication and conflict analysis and transformation provided momentum for greater far-reaching impact.

“It was the first time I had the opportunity to speak in front of so many

EXCLUDED, THE MARGINALIZED PERSON IS MORE VULNERABLE TO VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

people, to feel included. The other, privileged group was also there. And it was together that we were listening to the trainers talk about the consequences of marginalization.”

Indeed, the examples used during the training deeply resonated. “We had to choose fictional scenarios

to fuel our thinking while this problem was in our midst.” Moctar also realized “that excluded, the marginalized person is more vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups.”

Things needed to change. “We don’t want young people to be the authors of instability in our community.” Back home, Moctar shared what he had learned with other young people. And it had a ripple effect. “They said they would no longer stay silent. Until then, we had all avoided confronting the problem. But it was time to find a solution.”

So Moctar brought the youth in conflict together with the adults. “We shared our difficulties and the risks involved. Then we asked how they could help us so that we would be included.” Soon after, another election was held, and this time, leadership was shared among the young people from different communities in Ayorou.

Today, Moctar would like to continue this momentum. Indeed, “there is also an issue of marginalization in the surrounding villages. There is a lot of instability there. The project agents who are not from Ayorou cannot go there, but we can. If we interact with these young people, we could empower them to change.”

Rakia's transformation: changing the way we look at each other to build peace.

"I had a grudge against certain ethnic groups," Rakia confesses. "In particular, it was considered that a specific community was acting on behalf of the armed groups. So I was siding with my community."

In Ouallam, a town in the Tillaberi region of Niger, one's identity can prove fatal. Fear of the "other" — whether they are displaced people, refugees, herders, or soldiers — permeates every aspect of life. At each fault line, mistrust grows, and violence erupts.

As resources become scarcer, the overlap between occupation and community affiliation amplifies the risk of violence, particularly between pastoralists and farmers. "In the past, pastoralists would go to Mali during the rainy season. But today, insecurity at the border forces them to stay. Due to the lack of grazing areas and crossing corridors, the cattle end up in farmers' fields, where they destroy their crops." Growing insecurity also encourages the cross-border circulation of weapons. "Everyone now has access to them," she adds, "which only exacerbates the situation."



RAKIA

In 2021, Rakia joined the Mugina Gobe (Building Together) project to end this cycle of violence. With funding from the European Union's Instrument for Stability and Peace, Rakia became a peace ambassador. Alongside local authorities, security and defense forces, representatives of the displaced, youth, and women, Rakia was trained in conflict analysis and transformation.

However, for this to work, Rakia needed to transform her perspective. "When we discussed the issue of identity, I understood that we cannot exclude someone because of who they are," she explains. "And if there is conflict, the problem does not stem from one side. We must dig beyond what we see to understand the root of these problems if we want to solve them. Without that, conflicts will be endless." This transformation allows Rakia to facilitate dialogues that bring together all groups in conflict.

During one such dialogue, "a woman came to confide in me. People were not accepting of her; she was the only one from her community in a site for displaced people." She was from the same community that once inspired fear in Rakia. "Her husband and brothers-in-law were killed in a community conflict. She was now alone with two children." Rakia befriends her, forging a bond that was once impossible. "I have contacted the authorities and the camp manager to get her help. In the meantime, I do what I can to make her life easier."

WE SEE EVERYTHING AND WE SHARE EVERYTHING WITH EACH OTHER. INFORMATION FLOWS BETWEEN US. IF THERE IS A THREAT TO THE SAFETY OF THE COMMUNITY, WE ARE ON THE FRONT LINES TO PREVENT IT FROM HAPPENING.

Other women also share their pain and experiences during community dialogues. Rakia recalls another session that aimed to reconcile differences between the security forces and the community. Once again, shared experiences echoed, building bridges between people.

"A member of the security and defense forces emphasized that they are also husbands and fathers who risk their lives to protect communities. At that point, a woman stood up with tears in her eyes and told the crowd that it was indeed her husband who was killed in the line of duty while she was pregnant. Everyone was moved. It triggered something".

But Rakia knows that women share more than just their pain – they are also crucial partners in building peace. "Too often, men are either killed or leave to find work, leaving women alone to care for their families and educate the next generation," she says. As primary caretakers, women have the powerful role to either perpetuate a fear of the other or, like Rakia, promote peaceful coexistence beyond differences.

Moreover, Rakia believes that women are the eyes and ears of the community. "We see everything, and we share everything with one another. Information circulates through us. If there is a security threat in the community, we are on the frontlines to prevent it," concludes Rakia.



Rakia, a peace ambassador for the Mugina Gobe project, has overcome her prejudices and made new friendships with people she once considered enemies. Through the community dialogues she organizes, Rakia helps build bridges between conflict groups and recognizes women's crucial role in promoting peaceful coexistence across differences.



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Training for change

SOUMANA

The metal that unites torn communities: Soumana's inspiring story.

"In my workshop, I make doors, windows, anything that requires ironwork. The demand has kept increasing since I started," says Soumana. The sound of hammers hitting metal rings through the air as Soumana and his team of five workers from diverse communities work tirelessly to fulfill orders.

But Soumana's life was not always so prosperous. Insecurity in Niger led to a state of emergency that had a double-edged impact, saving lives while plunging others into hardship. "I was a mechanic when motorcycles, a primary means of transport for armed groups, were banned. So I lost my job," he says. As daily life became increasingly difficult, the economy shifted towards a logic of survival. "I was not the only one to lose my job. I saw many young people joining armed groups or providing them with food or gasoline to earn some money."

However, through the "Mugina Gobe" project, funded by the European Union's Instrument for Stability & Peace, Search set out to ease this burden and provide other alternatives for youth. As a result, Soumana joined 60 young people in training on association and simplified business manage-



SOUMANA

-ment and the trade of their choice. After the training, they received support and equipment to start their new businesses. "What struck me was that Search's team first asked what we wanted and needed. Nothing was imposed on us. So I chose to learn how to weld," adds Soumana.

These young people from diverse communities formed the city of Tera. However, initially, Tera only appeared to work at the surface level as behind closed doors, "communities stayed among themselves; some considered themselves superior to others." From an economic perspective, "the trades were tied to identity, with some dedicated to specific communities. So, for instance, if someone repaired a motorcycle for armed groups, it could lead to an entire community being singled out."

Fortunately, besides providing more job opportunities, "Mugina Gobe" also focused on building better relationships between communities. "It was the first time we were asked to mix and work together. So each learning group included youth from each community."

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Working side by side, the mosaic started to develop a solid foundation. "The trades used to be tied to identity; some were dedicated to specific communities. So, for example, if it turned out that someone had repaired a motorcycle for armed groups, an entire community was singled out."

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Soumana and the youth were trained in conflict transformation, embodying the role of peace ambassadors within their communities. "Back

home, we would share what we learned and raise awareness among other young people on conflict prevention." Then, following the model of Soumana's workshop, the community mixed and interacted with one another, whereas before, "no one attended weddings of certain communities, now everyone contributes and celebrates together."

Today, Soumana wants to share his experience with others. His next mission is to hire other young people in his workshop to keep them "away from armed groups."





Through the Mugina Gobe project, Soumana and other youth in Téra have found an alternative to poverty and insecurity, and have helped to strengthen social cohesion in their community.

Cultivating Peace: The inspiring story of two cooperatives that overcame their differences to plant the seeds of change.

When war broke out in Libya, Boubacar, a farmer, didn't let it get him down. Instead, he returned to his hometown, Tchintabariden, in the Tahoua region of Niger, to create a gardening cooperative to revitalize the agricultural sector in this primarily pastoral region.

"The task was arduous," Boubacar acknowledges, "as we faced severe water constraints." However, through perseverance, the cooperative began to see the benefits of its labor. Three years later, the authorities relocated the cooperative to a 20-hectare site, which it shared with another cooperative whose vocational objectives were similar, but whose working methods differed.

"Our cooperative worked in a structured way, adhering to the texts that governed its management," Boubacar explains. "For instance, we contributed to maintenance work and kept accounts. The other cooperative, mostly illiterate, relied on 'feeling' management."

As time passed, mutual incomprehension increasingly strained their cohabitation, exacerbated by a growing lack of water. "The water was no longer sufficient for the 20 hectares. So we formed a union and proposed to work together on 6 hectares and share the profits," Boubacar relates. Again, mutual mistrust hindered the cooperative's progress.



BOUBACAR

"They thought we were relying on our academic background to outsmart them. We could spend the day side by side without talking to each other. Our differences began to impact production." Boubacar found himself in a difficult situation, torn between his cooperative and his family ties with members of the other cooperative. As a result, members of his cooperative accused him of favoritism when he tried to mitigate conflicts.

Despite the challenges, Boubacar refused to give up. Through the "Mugina Gobe" project, funded by the European Union's Instrument for Stability and Peace, Search addressed both relational and structural issues. As water was at the heart of the community's needs and a source of conflict, the project addressed this challenge first.

"Search replaced the pumps, allowing for the supply of the 20 hectares. They also fenced off the plot to protect it from livestock and equipped it with solar panels," Boubacar adds.

As part of the project, Boubacar received other valuable tools. Boubacar teamed up with the other cooperative's leader to become a peace ambassador, receiving training in conflict transformation and mediation. Together, they learned to identify and analyze the causes and triggers of conflicts, implement preventive actions, and transform conflicts peacefully.

"I learned a lot from a module on active listening. I realized I could have been a better listener, especially in conflicts. Yet, you must be able to listen to the other person and understand their point of view to solve problems. I can now create

that space, which is an integral part of my role as a peace ambassador."

With these new skills, the two cooperative leaders joined forces to sensitize their members to conflict transformation and the importance of dialogue. "This has helped to clarify things and to divide the tasks. This allowed us to set up collaborative frameworks like a site management and maintenance committee."

THANKS TO OUR AWARENESS- RAISING AND MEDIATION ACTIVITIES, WE HAVE REACHED NEARLY 1,000 PEOPLE.

The new mutual understanding extends beyond work: "Workers from both groups eat and have tea with each other. And when site-related difficulties arise, we work them out together." These efforts have spread beyond the farm, with the peace ambassadors scaling up their efforts to include the entire community.

"Through our sensitizations and mediations, we have reached 1,000 people. Water was a problem for the whole community, and people blamed the authorities for not solving it. But the dialogues highlighted the efforts made. It calmed the community and inspired other young people to become peace ambassadors."

Today, with a thriving cooperative and improved access to water, Boubacar hopes to take the next step: "We created this initiative with the idea that we wouldn't have to go back to Libya, or anywhere else, in search of better living conditions. Today, we want to propose this to others: to develop our activities to recruit young people and reduce the lure of migration and armed groups," concludes Boubacar.



United for Water, United for Peace: How a market gardening cooperative transformed a largely pastoral region through the perseverance and mediation of peace ambassadors.

Today, this is what we want to propose to others: to develop our activity to recruit young people and reduce the attraction of migration and armed groups.



From mistrust to friendship

YACOUBA

Breaking barriers with Yacouba: A civil-military partnership in Ouallam to overcome insecurity

"We had never had a military presence in Ouallam. It was new to us," says Yacouba. In the Tillaberi region, insecurity is tightening its grip. Some of the most violent extremist groups spread terror, carrying out deadly attacks, thus driving thousands of people to flee. Two military units took positions in Yacouba's village to stop their endless advance.

"The bases were set up in the fields where many of our young people worked; overnight, they were forbidden access without compensation," adds Yacouba.

At the same time, the announcement of a state of emergency hit the communities hardest. Because motorcycles were the preferred mode of travel for the armed groups, the state of emergency's measures banned their use. "We were no longer allowed to use motorcycles; everything had to be done on foot. As a result, many lost their jobs, like motorcycle cabs and mechanics." Motorcycles are often used as ambulances, "people were dying because they could no longer reach health centers. It was a real step backward."

Trust between the community and the military units deteriorated. "It had gotten to the point where people would



YACOUBA

rather see a member of an armed group than a soldier. Unfortunately, these groups took advantage of this. Some of our youth joined them or even gave false information to the military to mislead them."

In the weeks before Search arrived in Ouallam to implement the "Mugina Gobe" project, the increase in violence was significant. "There was an urgent need to make people understand that they could not take justice into their own hands."

With funding from the European Union's Instrument for Stability and Peace, a civil-military committee was created, bringing together authorities, security and defense forces, and civil society to collaborate on finding joint solutions to security threats affecting communities. Yacouba, Ouallam's youth leader, was one of them.

Diving into the heart of the matter, "we brought together a spokesperson from the security and defense forces and about 300 youth for a dialogue session."

"The communities realized they would be the next target when the armed groups were done with the military. We see this in other localities

where these groups have taken control. They steal or collect taxes on livestock and attack communities."

"It was up to us to end this insecurity."

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MEMBER. UNFORTUNATELY, THESE
GROUPS TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THIS.**

With new beginnings came new solutions, "the ban on motorcycles has been relaxed. We can drive around during the day." And as ties strengthen, "collaboration with the armed groups is decreasing. They no longer have a strong presence in the community, and cattle rustling and tax collection by the armed groups have disappeared."

Now, military and community members regularly come together. "They come to ceremonies, sit with the youth, play soccer together." They also shared their grief when "16 security and defense forces members were killed." "The whole community was mourning; we closed all the businesses, and everyone went to the funeral."

But most importantly, they continue to celebrate what brings them closer together, "they are now part of the community. Even my sister just got married to a soldier. We have become one family."



MOHAMMED

From Classroom to Conflict Resolution: A Teacher's Struggle for Education and Peace in Bankilare

In Bankilare, "there are now only five schools open out of 132. Extremist groups are targeting government officials, including teachers and health workers," says Mohammed, a teacher.

As we enter the third year wherein many children are denied their right to education, Mohammed confides, "It touches me because these children are like my own." And when the educational vacuum provides fertile ground for extremist ideologies, "an unschooled child becomes a threat. As important as education is at home, schools have the power to make significant changes," he adds.

In 2021, Mohammed took on a new role that would also drive change. With funding from the European Union's Instrument for Stability and Peace, Mohammed was appointed as one of the municipality's 10 Peace Ambassadors.

To empower him for the task, Search trained Mohammed in conflict analysis, prevention and transformation, community dialogue, and facilitation techniques. With these new skills, Mohammed then facilitated a conflict prevention session in a familiar territory: a school.

MOHAMMED

"At the end of the session, two brothers asked to see us," he adds. At the heart of that encounter was a dispute involving the leadership of that school. "They were arguing over the leadership of the school's decentralized management structure." This structure placed the community at the heart of the school's operation, involving them directly in identifying and responding to the school's needs, such as contributions to the canteen or the construction of classrooms.

"One brother accused the other, the president, of embezzlement, leading a real campaign among parents." Soon, the conflict spilled over, directly impacting the children's education. "He was asking parents to keep their children at home, causing the collapse of that structure and the school."

So Mohammed blended his knowledge as a teacher with that of a mediator to help the two brothers. "Together, we went over all the details of how this structure works, as well as the role and duties of its manager." By clarifying the grey areas, the two brothers reconciled. And, since the conflict was born of a misunderstanding, "the structure was only made stronger afterward because everyone now spoke the same language."

With the community's trust also restored, "the children are returning to school" to shape Bankilaré's future.

**What has been
innovative
is that the
skills we have
received can
now be used
completely
independently.**

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

Search for Common Ground (Search) is an international organization committed to conflict transformation around the world since 1982. We work in 34 countries with over 900 employees, 95% locally recruited, and have reached more than 309.430 participants through our 839 local partner organizations. We have collaborated with 313 radio stations and 26 television channels to reach 39.3 million people through media programs in some of the world's most challenging conflicts. Our work is recognized globally, as evidenced by our nomination for the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize.

Our Common Ground Approach («CGA») is a proven methodology that aims to transform the way we respond to conflict by emphasizing collaboration over confrontation and violence. We apply the guiding principles of this approach to the design and implementation of our peacebuilding programs, enabling us to generate tangible, positive results.

Since 2011, we have been working in Niger through eight programs focused on youth empowerment and leadership, conflict prevention and community stabilization, restoring trust and dialogue between communities and security and defense forces, preventing violent extremism, and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.

We have a main office in Niamey and three sub-offices in Tillabéri, Tahoua, and Diffa. Our staff of more than 90 is actively involved in promoting constructive youth leadership, supporting effective media for peacebuilding, and empowering government and civil society to address challenges and promote social cohesion jointly.



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