

# Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

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## Empowering a new generation of adolescent girls (ENGAGE)

NEPAL

AUGUST 2018 – MARCH 2023



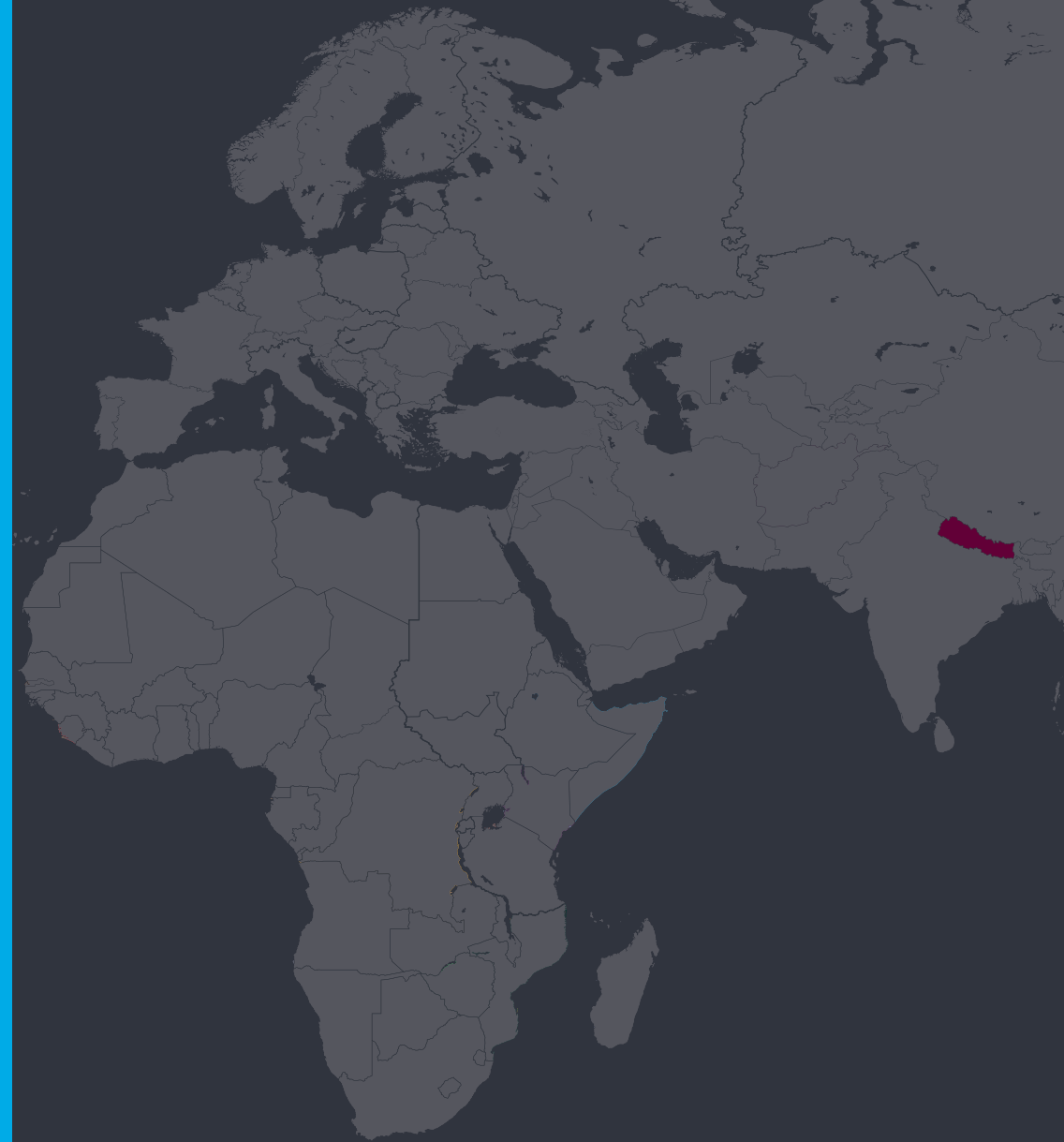
Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



VSO Lasting change  
through volunteering

**“Through the ENGAGE project, I have started to support Little Sisters by conducting Distance Teaching and Learning (DTL) classes, peer mentoring, parental awareness and coordination with respective schools. After joining as a Big Sister, I have started my Bachelor’s Degree study and supported my siblings to continue their education. I discontinued my education because of the poor economic conditions of my family. Now, I am so happy to continue my education and support Little Sisters for their dignified life.”**

Asha Kumari Sah, Big Sister



● Nepal

# What did the ENGAGE project do?

ENGAGE helped improve learning outcomes and empowered 2,525 highly marginalised adolescent out-of-school girls (aged 10 to 19) – including those with disabilities – across three underserved districts and 34 schools in Nepal’s Terai regions. The girls were out of school for many reasons. These included domestic duties in the household, little value placed on their education (and a lack of encouragement), economic barriers and child marriage. Research shows that married girls in Nepal are ten times more likely to drop out than their unmarried peers.<sup>1</sup>

The project aimed to improve girls’ basic literacy and numeracy skills and increase their access to quality and inclusive formal or non-formal education and employment opportunities. Girls were also supported to pursue suitable transition pathways after gaining new skills. There was an emphasis on learners with disabilities. The project also worked to build girls’ life skills (including adolescent sexual and reproductive health), decision-making and self-efficacy. It also helped them gain financial literacy and offered vocational training to help girls transition to safe employment/entrepreneurship. At the end of this training, those with viable business plans were provided with micro-grants, trade materials and other support to start up their businesses. The project also worked with microfinance institutes (MFI) and linked girls with business plans to these institutes.

ENGAGE worked at different levels, such as school, community, local government, and with parents. The project worked with community and government partners to set up and equip 27 Community Learning Centres (CLCs). To improve learning, girls had opportunities to attend bridge and preparatory classes (braille and sign language) in communities and remedial support classes in schools. The project also implemented the Big Sister mentoring approach, where older female mentors in the communities helped their Little Sisters with their learning and provided encouragement and support. They were also mobilised to sensitise parents on the importance of sending girls to school, and they followed up when girls were absent.

An important aspect of the project was that support to girls was individualised through the personalised social support component, which aimed to enable girls to be self-reliant. Individual needs were identified, and the project responded by providing individualised support to address each barrier.

**“We have been empowered, and because of this project, now we can read, write and have some skill, and we can use it to uplift our life. The confidence that we have now is all because of the help from the project and Big Sisters.”**

A girl from Banke



<sup>1</sup> MICS survey 2014, Nepal

The project worked with parents and communities to build a social support system for girls. The strengthening of 98 parent groups was facilitated, and these groups were oriented on the importance of girls' education, gender-based violence and its mitigation, child marriage and harmful traditional practices. An important aspect of the project was also changing the negative attitudes of parents and communities towards the education of learners with disabilities. The project also worked closely with school management committees (SMCs) and parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to make schools more inclusive and improve safeguarding policies. The project also provided materials to schools to support teaching and learning.

Improving teaching quality by enhancing learner-centred pedagogical practices, which include inclusive education and gender-responsive pedagogy. Child safeguarding practice was also an important aspect of the project. Structured training was provided to both teachers and mentors. The project also engaged with school leadership and school management committees to ensure improvement plans were inclusive and gender-responsive, the infrastructure was disability friendly, and that complaint reporting mechanisms were in place.

The project also worked to sustain interventions by developing the capacity of local governments in policy planning and data-based management, engaging parents and improving parental attitude and support towards marginalised girls and their education, and establishing the Girls and Inclusive Education Network (GIEN). ENGAGE focused on inclusivity, including support to the Government of Nepal to adopt new standards in disability assessment and identification.

## // BHAWANA'S STORY

### **Big sisters supporting little sisters to thrive in education and beyond – Bhawana's story:**

In Grade 5, Bhawana was shy. She found learning difficult, and at times, she could not understand what was being taught in class because she only understood Bhojpuri – a different dialect. Kumari, her Big Sister, visited her in the evenings to help her with her studies and gain the confidence to speak in class, helping Bhawana learn to talk happily with anyone in and outside her school. If she has a question now, she will stand up in her classroom to ask her teacher, and she can also now read and write in Nepali and English.

Not only did Bhawana overcome the fact that she could not understand the language her lessons were taught in and become successful at school, but she also escaped early marriage. Thanks to her Big Sister Kumari, she stayed in school to pursue her education.

This could have been a different story as Bhawana was almost married to a man 13 years her senior. The intervention of her Big Sister and Aunty Champion was able to stop the marriage.

The groom's family demanded a large dowry and did not want Bhawana to attend school. Together, the Big Sister and Aunty Champion brought in the police to stop the marriage. Kumari even recruited the help of her father to stop the marriage.

Bhawana is happy she was saved from marrying early and can continue attending school. She is now passing her exams, and in future, she hopes to be a teacher and work in her community.



# How did ENGAGE adapt during COVID-19?

As COVID-19 impacted Nepal in March 2020, schools and community learning centres started to close. ENGAGE faced many challenges in implementing its planned activities. The biggest challenge was to ensure girls' learning and progress continued, particularly for the most marginalised girls and learners with disabilities. With adaptation in the activities and innovative approaches, the project was able to continue to reach girls.

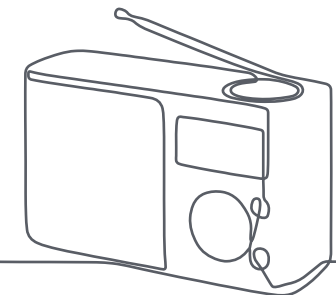
The main adaptation was the pivot to distance teaching and learning. This was done through several avenues:

- radio programming
- peer-to-peer education
- national volunteers who supported learners with disabilities through one-to-one coaching
- household visits
- material and video dissemination
- psychosocial support
- small group learning (with protocols) focused on maths, English, Nepali and science.

The Big Sister approach also pivoted, and the existing relationships between the mentors and girls and the motivation of the mentors were leveraged. It worked well because of the Big Sisters' dedication to their Little Sisters and their physical proximity to each other in their communities. Big Sisters were already equipped with mentoring skills before the pandemic and were well-placed to support girls academically and emotionally. During COVID-19 restrictions, the Big Sisters helped strengthen safety and security measures to ensure all their Little Sisters were safe. They provided crucial messaging on learning continuity. They also supported distance teaching and learning through the distribution of self-learning materials and by engaging with parents and girls, helping girls with their lessons over the phone. When restrictions were lifted, they resumed visiting Little Sisters. Training for teachers and mentors was provided and monitored virtually through phone and virtual platform-based meetings.

**“We have witnessed the change in Little Sisters in terms of their willingness to learn and their self-confidence. In the beginning phase, girls were irregular, but after some time, because of proper guidance and counselling from us, girls are regularly attending the classes.”**

A Big Sister from Banke





**“I feel confident I can convince my parents that I want to study. I say to them that I want to be respected like Big Sisters in community, respected by all.”**

A girl from Banke

# What did ENGAGE achieve?

**Improved learning outcomes.** The project's Endline Evaluation shows that girls' learning outcomes improved significantly from baseline to endline. The average Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) score was 41.98 at baseline, which increased to 110.75 at endline. Likewise, the Early Grade Mathematical Assessment (EGMA) average score at baseline was 16.22, which increased to 42.18 at endline. These improvements in learning outcomes can be attributed to the various educational interventions such as bridge and preparatory classes, remedial support classes after school, engagement with parents and Big Sisters mentoring. In addition, teacher training helped ensure the quality of education and inclusive teaching and learning processes. Adaptations to teaching and learning approaches during COVID-19 were also important to ensure the continuity of learning and activities such as peer-to-peer mentoring, publication of audio-visual learning material, and support to access radio programmes were instrumental in ensuring learning continued, even though the regular classes were interrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Improved access and attendance in formal school.** Improvements in learning outcomes are linked to improved attendance in school, and in the last reporting period of the project, 94% of project girls in school attended regularly. The project successfully integrated 1,064 marginalised girls and learners with disabilities into formal schools after they attended bridge classes. The project provided seed money and bicycles to motivate girls to attend school and improve their attendance. The project also engaged parents to convince them to send their daughters to school regularly. The project also ensured that the teachers followed appropriate pedagogical methods to ensure classrooms and materials were learner-friendly so that girls were encouraged to attend the classes regularly.

**Improved outcomes for learners with disabilities.** The learning and daily life skills of learners with severe and profound disabilities have also improved by more than 60% from baseline to endline through parent/caregiver training, the provision of assistive devices, physiotherapy and counselling. Seventeen learners with hearing impairment were supported to study in deaf resource schools, and 11 learners with visual impairment were supported to study in resource schools. Ninety-two learners with disabilities transitioned to livelihood pathways. The physical development of children with severe disabilities has also improved, and the Endline Evaluation attributes this to the provision of rehabilitation services, assistive devices and home modifications. The project has also witnessed positive changes in parents' and communities' attitudes and perceptions towards the education of children with disabilities.

**Improved self-esteem and self-efficacy.** The Endline Evaluation used the general self-efficacy tool to assess girls' self-belief to cope with difficult situations. This quantitative data showed that the average self-efficacy of girls had risen from 60% at baseline to 90% at the endline. The girls reported that they are more self-confident. Big Sisters enhanced the confidence and self-esteem of Little Sisters. Girls said they can set plans and have more agency about their future. These plans included starting their own business for older girls, while the younger girls had plans for continuing their education. The parents also highlighted that their daughters can assert themselves and are more confident in making decisions. It should be noted that while this is a positive trend, there are still wider cultural and gender norms at play which still limit girls' decision making and final decisions on larger issues such as sending girls to school and child marriage are generally still taken by parents.

**“If a girl is educated or earns for the family, she has the upper hand in making decisions. I don't want her to be married early because I don't want her to be like me.”**

**A mother from Kaudena, Sarlahi**



**Building agency, leadership skills and the Girls and Inclusive Education Network (GIEN).** A huge achievement of the project was establishing GIEN at school, municipal and provincial levels and making them functional and sustainable. With ENGAGE support, the network has been strengthened in 82 schools, 30 municipalities, six districts and five provinces. This network is under the stewardship of the government's Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD). It is now an active forum that advocates for inclusive education, focusing on girls. The network has expanded to include all other GEC projects and organisations outside the GEC. It aims to raise the voices of marginalised girls, lobby local authorities, influence policies, promote girls' rights to education and protection, and raise awareness of climate change.

Throughout the project, they have worked on ensuring classrooms are child-friendly and violence free. Rights-based advocacy focuses on eliminating early, forced and child marriage, gender-based violence and gender-based discrimination. The project has supported the CEHRD in making the network functional and its strategic planning. Further, municipalities have allocated their budget for GIEN members and to support the function of the GIEN after project closure. One success has been allocating a budget to cater to the needs of girls. There is evidence of municipalities allocating increased budgets to equip girls with the social-emotional and life skills they need.

**Improving the quality of education.** The Endline Evaluation shows that a positive learning environment has been created, with the score for teachers displaying learner-centred pedagogies moving from 38% at baseline to 64% at the endline. Teachers were trained on early-grade reading and maths, inclusive education strategies and learner-centred pedagogy. There was also a focus on addressing the needs of learners with disabilities, with training topics such as how to use appropriate language and communication strategies and how to modify teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse learners. Other factors that improved the quality of education were the provision of teaching and learning resources. The training was also provided to stakeholders other than teachers, such as headteachers and school management committee members, on areas such as early grade reading and maths assessments, complaint mechanisms and inclusive pedagogy.

**Increasing parental and Big Sister support for girls.** The project successfully provided holistic support to marginalised girls by working with school staff and parents, community members and mentors (or the Big Sisters). The project has witnessed positive changes in parents' and communities' attitudes and perceptions towards the importance of girls' and children with disability's access to quality education, and parents were also more engaged with schools. One major barrier to girls' learning was the time they had to spend on household chores. However, through sensitisation work with parents – in which the Big Sisters played an important role – parents reduced girls' domestic duties and ensured they had time to study at home. The Big Sisters played an important role in engaging parents. They made a positive difference to their Little Sisters by motivating them to enrol in school, improving their education outcomes and building self-confidence.

**Improving knowledge of Adolescent and Youth Reproductive and Sexual Health (AYSRH).** The Endline Evaluation showed a positive result and created an open adolescent learning environment. The girls were assessed for AYSRH knowledge, attitude and practice focusing on menstrual hygiene and family planning.

Indicators of ASYRH knowledge	Baseline	Midline	Endline
Heard of safe menstrual practices	55%	89%	97%
Heard of the Family Planning concept	26%	57%	64%
Knowledge of the legal age of marriage for girls	77%	96%	98%
Knowledge of the legal age of marriage for boys	93%	99%	98%

Girls shared that they found the ASYRH sessions conducted in the bridge class to be useful for getting acquainted with the knowledge of sexual and reproductive health. They were especially interested in the sanitary pad-making training and the contents of menstrual hygiene. Moreover, the girls report taking this knowledge into their homes and communities. They credited this to the Big Sisters' regular home visits, counselling and motivation. All the girls were aware of the consequences of early marriage on their health.



## // THE COMMITMENT OF EVERY LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT TO STRENGTHEN GIEN

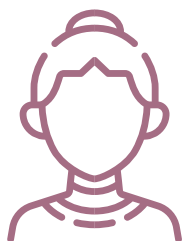
The ENGAGE project strengthened the GIEN through capacity-building initiatives and enabled them to lobby and collaborate with local government. The aim was to increase the allocation of resources to implement school improvement planning and build a connection with the Municipal level Education Plan. The project has realised many successes through mobilising and building the capacity of municipalities to promote girls' education and inclusion. One such municipality – the Pokhariya Municipality of Parsa demonstrated its strong commitment towards the GIEN and has aimed to increase the number of girls who access education within their municipality.



The municipality has allocated NPR 100,000 for capacity-building events targeting municipal GIEN representatives and shared their commitment to continue more allocation to sustain GIEN activities for promoting girls and inclusive education. There has been an encouraging commitment to GIEN by the federal, provincial and local governments towards sustaining the GIEN interventions. On a national level, the GIEN has been included in the Education Equity and Inclusion theme, and as a result, the Annual Strategic Implementation Plan and the Annual Work Budget and Plan for FY 2022/2023 incorporated actions and allocated budget to GIEN activities:

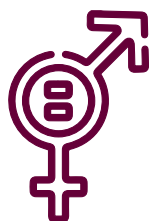
- Development of GIEN procedures/directives: NPR 500,000
- Capacity development and extension of the GIEN at the province/local level: NPR 2.1 million
- Dissemination of GIEN: NPR 1 million
- Development of standards related to inclusive education: NPR 500,00

# The ENGAGE project in numbers



Number of girls supported to transition to, and learn in, formal schools

**1,064**



Number of schools that are more inclusive and gender-responsive

**34**



Number of beneficiaries that were referred to get disability cards

**276**



Number of learners with disabilities that received assistive devices

**88**



Number of girls participating in community learning activities

**2,525**

Learning hubs established: **27**

Girls supported to set up their own business: **88**

Big Sisters trained to mentor and coach direct beneficiaries: **422**

Teachers received training on pedagogical skills: **62**

Parents/caregivers received parenting education on supporting girls' education and employment pathways: **4,042**

Municipalities received training on data management and monitoring systems for disability screening: **7**

GIEN established in the municipality and schools: **118**

# What did ENGAGE learn?

**Big Sisters were instrumental in ensuring girls continued learning during COVID-19.** The Big Sisters were engaged early in the project, and before the pandemic, they had been working with Little Sisters, parents and communities for some time. This positioned them well to support girls as schools closed, as they had formed relationships with girls and built trust with parents. During COVID-19 restrictions, the project was able to leverage Big Sisters to support girls' learning, to ensure all their Little Sisters were safe and well, and to provide crucial messaging on learning continuity. They supported the rollout of distance education and stayed in contact with girls and their parents through phone calls, home visits and small groups when protocols allowed. Two important aspects of the success of this component were, firstly, the proximity of Big Sisters to girls in the communities, meaning it was easier for them to stay in touch. Secondly, they were dedicated to their Little Sisters' learning and well-being because they had already formed a relationship with the girls.

**Personalised social support was a key element in helping girls reach their potential.** Personalised social support (PSS) helped to ensure an individualised and tailored approach to supporting girls. The major aim of PSS was to empower the girls towards self-reliance and remove individual barriers to girls' achieving their goals. The project built the capacity of district and field staff in the approach, and they worked with girls, communities and parents to identify individual needs. The project would then provide support to overcome these needs – again working alongside key stakeholders. For instance, based on the PSS, a girl with a severe disability was provided with assistive devices to support her daily activities. Similarly, when another girl's needs were assessed, she was not interested in the learning intervention and was thus supported to transition onto the employment/business track of intervention.

**Girls need to continue to be supported once they transition to formal school – getting them there is not enough.** Out-of-school girls need holistic support to transition to formal schools, so support from the project was multi-faceted. First, girls attended nine-month bridge classes at community learning centres where classes were taught by trained facilitators and the running of the classes was overseen by communities. In these classes, girls regained their self-confidence and learning ability. An important aspect was engaging parents and the Big Sister mentors to support girls, and this support helped girls as they transitioned to formal school. Big Sisters followed up with girls who had low attendance or were falling behind academically. Remedial support classes were provided to girls struggling with their academic performance. A key lesson was that girls need intensive and holistic support once they have transitioned to formal school.

**Working closely with government and community partners ensures interventions are more effective and likely to continue.** Once the project has completed its activities, the government partners at the local and provincial levels will continue to support gender-responsive and inclusive education. Therefore, local governments needed to be closely involved in project interventions from the start. The project has worked closely with these partners to build capacity and institutionalise approaches. For example, the project worked in all government schools across seven municipalities to build the capacity of teachers on the Washington Group Questions to help identify learners with disabilities; 14,346 were assessed, and schools are regularly using this practice beyond the project.

**“Big Sisters went to school with us for some days to give us company. She always helped in explaining the lesson no matter how many times we asked her to repeat.”**

**A Little Sister from Parsa**



A second example is establishing the database management system in municipalities where focal education personnel and municipal stakeholders were trained in data management. At the community level, Big Sisters, parents, teachers and various stakeholders who have been a part of the project will be in the same communities even beyond the project. They will continue to be 'agents of change'.

**Linkage with micro-finance institutes (MFIs) has enabled girls to pursue their livelihoods successfully.** The project linked girls with MFIs, who provided them access to credit with low-interest rates and saving facilities. Five-year contracts and memorandums of understanding were drawn up with the local implementing partner, the MFI for five years, and the local government, the monitoring body. This helps ensure girls' access to credit beyond the project's life cycle.

**GIEN provides a platform and voice for the most marginalised girls beyond the project period.** The GIEN provides an opportunity to voice the concerns of the marginalised, including girls with disabilities and provides them with opportunities to actualise their leadership skills. The network was set up at the school level (in 84 schools) and the municipal level (in seven municipalities), which was important to ensure networks were sustained once the project closed. There have already been promising indications that local governments are committed to the networks as they have already committed resources to support them. For example, Khajura Rural Municipality has allocated a budget of NPR 1.5 million for activities with community volunteers and activities to support the ongoing work of GIEN.

**Role division and clarity among consortium partners helped harness each partner's expertise.** VSO's and Humanity & Inclusion's blend of their unique expertise and experience helped to make the project more effective and helped with the smooth running of the project. Clarity around roles and responsibilities and regular and clear communication were also important. This was particularly important during COVID-19, which necessitated many changes and adaptations to approaches. Regular meetings to discuss issues and come up with solutions were important during the project's life cycle and helped ensure coherent and effective programme delivery.

**“I strongly agree that the ENGAGE project has changed the mentality of the parents towards girls' education.”**

**A teacher from Parsa**



Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



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**Find out more:** [www.vsointernational.org](http://www.vsointernational.org) | [www.girlseducationchallenge.org](http://www.girlseducationchallenge.org)

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