



A series of Research Briefs designed to bring research findings to policy makers

Place-based initiatives and Indigenous justice

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Introduction

Indigenous communities possess unique strengths but also face significant challenges. The challenges faced by some communities, such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, social dysfunction and violence, have not been addressed through traditional models of government service provision, which have failed to draw on the strengths of communities. In the past decade, Australian governments have implemented a number of place-based initiatives in Indigenous communities with the overarching goal of addressing disadvantage. These initiatives attempt deep changes in the local operation of government agencies and their relationships with communities and each other.

Place-based initiatives do not usually have an explicit justice focus, but prioritise physical infrastructure, employment, education and community capacity building. However, it is clear that communities with inadequate infrastructure, high unemployment and low levels of education and community capacity almost invariably suffer from crime problems both against property and people (Vinson 2007).

In this research brief consideration is given to the effectiveness of place-based initiatives in reducing disadvantage in Indigenous

communities. It is concluded that while the evidence is not, and may never be conclusive on this issue, evaluations and expert opinions suggest that these initiatives have real potential to facilitate change.

Definition

There is no generally accepted definition of 'place-based initiative'. However an essential element appears to be an activity in a specific geographical location, rather than a state or nation-wide initiative. Recent Australian and international literature suggests that place-based initiatives should involve all levels of government and the local community (see for example ASIB 2011; Bradford 2005). In the words of the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services (discussed below),

'Key elements of a place-based approach are that, beyond existing coordination efforts, it requires governments to ensure that the usual program structures are more responsive to the specific needs of a particular place and facilitates community-driven development (CGRIS 2011: 8).'

Accordingly, in this brief the focus will be on initiatives that have attempted to coordinate the activities of different government departments and different levels of government, and

to work closely with local community organisations and individuals.

Why place-based?

There is evidence that government activities and investments as currently organised are not effective in reducing disadvantage in Indigenous communities (Hunt & Smith 2007; Australia. Department of Finance 2010). In particular, governments have failed to respond to community needs and priorities, or to take advantage of community strengths and abilities. Further, funding arrangements often impose a great administrative burden on Indigenous organisations, as they must apply to multiple agencies for funding, each with different purposes, application guidelines and reporting requirements (Hunt & Smith 2007). Place-based initiatives have the potential to address these problems, as they require community engagement and participation, and can incorporate integrated funding mechanisms.

However, place-based initiatives require governments to make deep changes on at least two fronts. First, to change the delivery of services which is traditionally done through functional agencies at either a State/Territory or Federal level, with only minimal coordination between those agencies. Second, to shift away from the fairly uniform delivery of services, with priorities determined by centrally

located government officers and without significant input from the communities intended to benefit. Place-based initiatives challenge governments to move towards less familiar methods characterised by networks, collaboration, community engagement and flexibility (Ferrie 2008; Reddel 2008). There is widespread agreement that moving beyond the traditional government silos and entering into genuine partnerships with communities is essential for alleviating long standing disadvantage (see Australia. Department of Finance 2010; Australia. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2011; ATSIJ 2011).

Available evidence

A review of the literature identified three evaluations of place-based initiatives conducted in Australian Indigenous communities in the last ten years:

- the *COAG Indigenous Trials* conducted at eight sites around Australia between 2002 and 2007
- the *Meeting Challenges, Making Choices* project in Cape York, 2002 - 2005
- the *Communities in Crisis* initiative in 18 communities, 2003-2007.

In this brief these evaluations are described, with a particular focus on the lessons that can be learned from those initiatives. *The Cape York Welfare Reform Trial* in Queensland (2008 - ongoing) has not yet been evaluated as a whole, however the implementation of one element of the Trial has been reviewed, and this will also be examined.

A number of other place-based initiatives are presently underway, but evaluations are not yet available. These include:

- the *Lake Tyers 10 year Community Renewal Project* in Victoria
- the *Fitzroy Futures Forum* in Western Australia
- the *National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery* in 29 remote communities across Australia.

The objectives and methods of these initiatives will be described in this brief. Finally, consideration will be given to the evidence available from place-based initiatives in non-Indigenous communities.

Evaluated initiatives

COAG Indigenous Trials (2002 – 2007)

The aim of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Trials was 'to explore new ways for government to work together and with communities to address the needs of Indigenous Australians' (Morgan Disney 2006). The trials took place in eight sites: Australian Capital Territory, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (SA), Murdi Paaki (NSW), Shepparton (Victoria), North Eastern Tasmania, East Kimberly (WA), Wadeye (NT), and Cape York (Qld). A Secretary of a Commonwealth Department oversaw each Trial site. Six of the sites established trial steering committees, while two worked through existing structures. In four sites land councils or community councils represented the Indigenous community, while others used negotiated structures. Methods used for promoting intergovernmental work included:

- issue-based working groups with government and Indigenous members
- joint officers' groups for information sharing and coordination
- lead agency meetings
- forums of regional managers
- existing state-based senior executive meetings
- local or regional place managers.

The Commonwealth Government commissioned evaluations of the eight trials. Formative evaluations were undertaken, which examine the implementation or delivery of a program, rather than its outcomes (Scriven 1967). This type of evaluation was in keeping with the objective of the trial, which was to make changes to the way governments worked, and how they

worked with communities. However, the synopsis review of the eight evaluations reported that many of the community members and government officers involved believed that the purpose of the Trials was rather to address the major issues faced by the communities involved (Morgan Disney 2006). This review noted that it was unrealistic to expect to achieve improved outcomes in the time frame of the Trial.

Lessons learned

The Morgan Disney review found that 'significant learnings have occurred in all sites with some evidence of improved whole of government, cross government and partnership links' (2006: 5). The role of the Secretary in modelling a whole of government approach was important, as was the existence of identifiable Indigenous communities with strong, representative leadership.

Challenges included a lack of clarity about objectives and difficulty in identifying manageable priorities. Government officers in some cases lacked cultural competence, and failed to develop respectful relationships with Indigenous partners. Some government officers also lacked skills and experience in whole of government and intergovernmental approaches. Frequent changes in government personnel exacerbated the skills deficits and disrupted relationships with community partners. Some community leaders lacked skills in community governance, engagement and capacity building. The evaluation recommended that these skills deficits should be addressed, and also called for a focus on 'shared responsibility', effective coordination and decision making mechanisms and less reliance on 'quick wins' (Morgan Disney 2006).

COAG initially intended to conduct outcome evaluations on the trials in 2007/8 (Morgan Disney 2006). This did not occur. No formal announcement of the end of the Trials was made but it appears that the Trials ended in 2007 at most sites.

Meeting Challenges, Making Choices (2002-2005)

One of the COAG Trial sites, Cape York, has been the subject of a number of place-based initiatives. After the *Cape York Justice Study Report* (Fitzgerald 2001) highlighted the many social and economic problems in the region, the State Government responded with an initiative known as *Meeting Challenges, Making Choices* (MCMC), which addressed 19 communities (not all in Cape York). The evaluation reported that the MCMC was ‘an ambitious and highly complex plan for change’ (Goodbun et al. 2005: 6). The MCMC aimed to foster community capacity and locally based solutions, and its community engagement methods included community development plans, negotiation tables and action plans. Public sector reforms were undertaken to simplify arrangements with Indigenous communities, improve recruitment, training and retention of staff, and address budget and strategy issues.

Lessons learned

According to the evaluation, the MCMC had significant achievements, including the introduction of alcohol restrictions (but not demand reduction measures), legislative reform to support community governance and community justice groups, operating negotiation tables in most communities, and making business grants. However, the perceived need for immediate and urgent action meant that the initiative lacked sophisticated planning and did not tailor strategies to the specific needs of each community. The evaluation indicated that better communication strategies within government and with communities, more effective coordination mechanisms and work on building community capacity were necessary. Learning from the MCMC contributed to the *Partnerships Queensland: Future Directions Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy in Queensland 2005-2010* (Goodbun et al. 2005) and to the *Remote Service Delivery* approach (CGRIS 2011).

Cape York Welfare Reform Trial (2008 – ongoing)

The Cape York Welfare Reform Trial was initiated and designed by the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, and implemented in partnership with the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments. The four communities of Coen, Hope Vale, Aurukun and Moss Gorge agreed to participate in the trial, which has four streams - social responsibility, economic opportunity, education and housing – and 15 projects. It is not a typical place-based initiative as, rather than focussing on government services and infrastructure, its overarching goal is behavioural change within the four communities. While justice is not a discrete stream, a desired outcome is ‘lawful and safe communities’ (Courage Partners 2009).

There has been no overall evaluation of the initiative, but there has been an implementation review of one element of the Trial, the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC). The Commission is an independent statutory body consisting of a legally qualified Commissioner and six Local Commissioners for each of the four participating communities. It holds conferences with community members who have not met their social obligations, which include caring for children, sending them to school, obeying the law and abiding by tenancy agreements. It refers participants to support services and attempts to reach Family Responsibilities Agreements with participants. Those who do not attend or who breach agreements may have their welfare payments managed by Centrelink. The evaluation indicates that there has been a reduction in violence in two of the four communities where it has been implemented, and this may be associated with the Commission and other Trial activities (KPMG 2010). The Trial has been extended until the end of 2012 (Macklin 2011).

Lessons learned

The evaluators noted that ‘the process of establishing the FRC system has been more difficult than

anticipated, but this is not unusual for changes in which collaboration across organisations at all levels is required’ (KPMG 2010: 5). They indicated that developing the system should focus on strengthening links between the Commission, other agencies and support services. They also found that community understanding of the aims and process of the Commission was not broad, and continuing communication strategies were necessary.

Communities in Crisis (2003 – 2007)

The aim of the Commonwealth Government’s Communities in Crisis initiative was to ‘stabilise communities suffering from intolerable levels of alcohol, substance and child abuse, violence and high rates of suicide and self-harm’ (SGS 2007). More specifically, State and Commonwealth governments were to work together to re-establish basic services, develop local plans of action, build governance, capacity and leadership, help communities engage with government and improve service delivery. Eighteen rural and remote Indigenous communities were part of the initiative, and total funding was approximately \$9 million over four years.

The evaluation (SGS 2007) considered the strategy overall and examined four participating communities in detail (Balgo, Beagle Bay, Kalumburu and Yalata). No baseline community data was available, making it difficult to measure change. There had been improvements regarding stability and essential services in some communities, but outcomes in developing local action plans, governance capacity, engagement and service delivery were more elusive.

Lessons learned

The evaluation found that the initiative was based on an inadequate understanding of the causes of crisis, resulting in a focus on short term administrative responses. The focus on issues of governance, essential services and capacity building was appropriate, but a deeper

understanding of the crisis could have contributed to a more comprehensive response. Formal consultation with stakeholders during the design of the policy would have contributed to a stronger design (SGS 2007). The evaluators recommended that future interventions be designed on the basis of a long term development approach, and pursue 'the qualities of planning, equity, empowerment and sustainability' (SGS 2007: 11).

Initiatives yet to be evaluated

Lake Tyers Community Renewal Project (2004 – ongoing)

The Lake Tyers Community Renewal Project was initiated by community Elders who were concerned about leaking sewerage systems, poor housing, safety, alcohol abuse, poor school attendance, child protection problems and unemployment. They approached the Victorian Department of Justice for assistance. The Secretary of the Department convened an interdepartmental committee which included wide representation from the many agencies with responsibilities in Lake Tyers.

The committee adopted the neighbourhood renewal approach that had been used by the Department of Human Services for mainstream (non-Indigenous) place-based programs in Victoria, and worked with residents on problem solving, planning and designing services. Capacity development through mentoring, coaching and on the job training was emphasised. A ten year commitment to the project was made. \$3.2 million was allocated to the renewal project over the first four years from 2004, and separate funds were made available for housing and infrastructure needs. An unpublished evaluation (Victoria. Department of Justice 2010) reported on a survey which showed improved satisfaction with housing, infrastructure and facilities, but continued concern about safety, violence, alcohol abuse and unemployment.

Fitzroy Futures Forum (2000 – ongoing)

Fitzroy Valley is a remote area of the Kimberley region, Western Australia. The Fitzroy Futures Forum began as a consultation between the local government and local Traditional Owners regarding the town plan, known as the Fitzroy Futures Plan. The Forum is 'an informal and open community forum' (ATSIJC 2011: 82) and the Fitzroy Futures Governing Committee includes representatives from each of the four main language groups, representatives from local, State and Commonwealth governments, and three community representatives. The Western Australian Government established a Fitzroy Futures Fund and the Governing Committee makes recommendations to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs as to how this money should be spent. The Governing Committee has become the main interface between the community and government.

Fitzroy Crossing is one of 29 towns taking part in the National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery (discussed below) and the Fitzroy Futures Forum is playing a key role in this initiative. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner has described these processes as 'having the potential to permanently restructure the relationship' between Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people and the three tiers of government in the Fitzroy Valley (2011: 90).

National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery (2009 – ongoing)

This initiative is a partnership between the Commonwealth, four State Governments (NSW, QLD, SA and WA) and the NT, focussing on 29 remote communities. The parties are committed for six years. The *National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery* indicates that its objectives are to improve access to services, raise the standard and range of services available, improve governance and leadership within communities, increase economic

and social participation and promote personal responsibility (cl 15). The methods include integrated service planning, a single government interface in each community, Local Implementation Plans, cultural competence measures for government employees, changes to land tenure and a range of other outputs (cl 17).

The Australian Government report to COAG on the initiative noted that by June 2011, single government interfaces were operating in each of the 29 communities. Local Implementation Plans had been developed in all locations and signed off in 23 locations. A range of new projects had been funded including vocational training, suicide prevention planning, community gardening and healthy eating, a youth drop-in centre and parenting support services. Challenges included agreement on the delivery of government and leadership programs, delays in developing Local Implementation Plans, and securing land tenure. The government parties are working towards establishing an annual evaluation process, which was expected to commence in late 2011-12 (Australian Government 2011).

A Coordinator General for Remote Service Delivery is required to report to the Commonwealth Minister on the development and delivery of government services and facilities. These reports have highlighted a range of achievements. The most recent (CGRIS 2012) indicates that there has been 'good progress' but raises concerns about delays to the development of the evaluation framework and in signing up the final five Local Implementation Plans. It also notes that more systematic effort is needed in relation to 'developing the capacity of government staff to work in partnership in a community development approach' (CGRIS 2012: 2). Some projects are being held up because of lack of staff housing, and in some cases this is due to lack of progress in resolving land tenure issues.

The third Coordinator General report (CGRIS 2011(a)) included more detail about community safety issues, and indicated that police

stations were being refurbished, community night patrols established and alcohol management plans developed and implemented. The fourth report (CGRIS 2011(b)) also highlights achievements, but noted that development of community safety plans has been slow. The Coordinator General suggested that Justice Departments could show more leadership in this area (CGRIS 2011(b): 62).

Initiatives in non-Indigenous communities

A number of place-based initiatives in non-Indigenous communities have taken place in the last decade, and some published evaluations are available. Few of the evaluations examine outcomes related to disadvantage, such as change in employment rates, the incidence of crime, or school attendance. Instead, they examine outcomes such as building relationships, forming partnerships, establishing structures and frameworks, rather than reducing disadvantage - see for example the evaluations of the Brisbane Place Project (Thompson et al. 2002), Penrith Neighbourhood Renewal Program (Elton Consulting 2006) and the Goodna Service Integration Project (Woolcock & Boorman 2003). These evaluations include recommendations as to how such projects could be more effectively implemented, but do not directly address the question as to whether these projects have successfully addressed disadvantage and inequality.

One exception to this rule is Neighbourhood Renewal, a Victorian initiative that began in 2001. The intervention takes eight years and has been completed in ten areas. There are eleven current projects (Victoria. Department of Human Services 2010). The evaluation (Victoria. Department of Human Services 2008) examined a range of administrative data (including crime reports) and a survey of community perceptions.

Most indicators showed improvement, and a decline in the gap between Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) areas

and the rest of the state. However, a closer examination of the indicators regarding crime and safety illustrates one of the difficulties of measuring the success of place-based initiatives. The evaluation revealed that reported crime against property fell by an average of 27.3% in NR areas between 2002/3 and 2006/7. However this only resulted in a small narrowing of the gap between NR areas and the rest of the state, suggesting that the rest of the state also experienced a decrease in reported crime against property. Over the same period, NR areas experienced an increase in reported crimes against the person of 7.5%. The state average for crimes against the person also increased, most likely because of the changed Victoria Police response to domestic violence in 2005 (Victoria. Department of Human Services 2008).

Evaluation challenges

Place-based initiatives typically feature multiple interventions over several years, and it is therefore difficult to link an intervention with an outcome (ASIB 2011). Further, as the Neighbourhood Renewal evaluation shows, there are always variables beyond the local area that can complicate efforts to measure outcomes. Similarly, the Coordinator General for Remote Service Delivery commented

‘it can be difficult to separate the influence brought to bear by existing initiatives, the Remote Service Delivery approach, or indeed this office, in achieving improvements in community wellbeing (CGRIS 2011(b): 10)’

Population mobility can further confound efforts to measure success. Particularly in areas with high levels of public housing, a place-based initiative that effectively links residents with education and employment opportunities may result in newly employed residents leaving the area, and being replaced by people from other disadvantaged areas. The success of the initiative would not be reflected in local employment statistics (ASIB 2011).

The difficulties of evaluating these

complex projects means that, despite the significant amounts of money that have been invested in them, firm evidence may never be available as to whether they effectively address disadvantage. Instead, they can be assessed against the intermediate goals of improving the coordination and the responsiveness of governments’ efforts. As noted earlier in this paper, there is widespread agreement that the standard approach, where Indigenous communities must negotiate with a range of government actors who operate within silos and without accountability to communities, is a major barrier to progress.

Place-based initiatives & Indigenous justice

As noted above, place-based initiatives generally have not had a specific justice focus. While attempting to address disadvantage, these initiatives have not attempted to directly address the drivers of crime, which include substance abuse, unemployment, poverty, the abuse and neglect of children and, in the Indigenous context, the social disorganisation caused by colonisation, dispossession and child removal policies (Allard 2010). The recent place-based initiatives in Indigenous communities discussed above have included efforts to address community safety problems, but there is no evidence yet of their effectiveness.

It is likely that specific attention needs to be paid to the drivers of crime. Vinson’s (2009) discussion of place-based disadvantage calls for a focus on parenting skills and ‘problem solving’ law enforcement to address crime and violence. Other crime prevention activities could include home visiting, early intervention for children showing behavioural problems, activities to promote school attendance and support the transition to further training or employment, and healing / substance abuse / behaviour change programs for offenders (Allard 2010). The Cape York Welfare Reform Trial (discussed above) incorporates a new approach to issues around substance abuse

and family responsibilities, and should provide useful evidence about the effectiveness of this approach.

Justice reinvestment, a place-based strategy that has rapidly gained some support throughout the United States and the United Kingdom, has been recognised as being potentially suitable for application in Indigenous communities in Australia (ATSISJC 2010; Schwartz 2010). Despite limited evidence of its success to date, commentators have highlighted the fit between the principles underpinning justice reinvestment and principles for effective and sustainable development in Indigenous communities.

The overarching objective of justice reinvestment is to reduce imprisonment through the diversion of public resources from imprisonment to initiatives aimed at reducing offending within a community. The strategy focuses on communities with high numbers of offenders and involves the redirection of a proportion of the imprisonment expenditure calculated for a particular community, back into that community to address both drivers of crime and systemic causes of imprisonment. The former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma, has recommended that justice reinvestment pilot projects be implemented in targeted Indigenous communities in Australia (ATSISJC 2010; Schwartz 2010).

Factors for successful place-based programs

The following discussion is informed by evaluations of the place-based initiatives discussed above, as well as by commentary on some other recent Australian place-based initiatives.

Preconditions

Commentators and evaluations have identified certain preconditions that appear to be necessary for successful place-based work, although these are not based on rigorous outcome studies. These include:

- a clear mandate from senior levels (Bourke 2003) and a willingness

to do things differently, including devolution of decision making, power sharing, and changes to accountability and funding at a central level (ASIB 2011; Steuart 2003);

- governments being prepared to make the cultural change from a hierarchical, rules based system to a flexible, collaborative system (Ferrie 2008);
- having clarity of purpose and a common mission (Smyth 2008);
- agencies developing incentive systems that support behaviours that contribute to whole of government work, build relationships with Indigenous communities and increase community capacity (Hunt & Smith 2007; Morgan Disney 2006); and
- an adequate budget, including funds for staffing, implementation, communications, data collection and evaluation (Bourke 2003).

Creating the structures

Ferrie reported that 'the most successful place-based projects are those that have robust and collaborative governance arrangements' (2008:7). There should be senior level representation from all levels of government, structures for community participation and a clear communication strategy for residents and stakeholders (Bourke 2003). Reporting requirements and the allocation of responsibility should be clear, and funding and accountability mechanisms should support whole of government work (ASIB 2011). A place manager who is the first contact point for both community and government participants, and is responsible for addressing and resolving problems, is also important. Where possible, the initiative should build on existing mechanisms for coordination, rather than creating entirely new structures (ASIB 2011). Governance mechanisms must be developed to fit each community – one size does not fit all (Morgan Disney 2006).

Another key element of developing and running place-based initiatives is the importance of maintaining consistency in personnel, where

possible. For example, the COAG Trials evaluation found that while Indigenous communities maintained consistent leadership across all sites, frequent changes in government personnel in some sites had a considerable impact on trust, understanding and commitment (Morgan Disney 2006).

Establishment

Some place-based initiatives begin with a community meeting or forum to introduce the project and invite participation. In Indigenous communities, it will be necessary to take time to ensure that there is appropriate community representation, especially where there are a number of different language groups in the area. Steuart (2003) indicates that place-based initiatives should begin by mapping the needs and assets of the location. This should include mapping of economic capacity, and involve major local employers and educational providers (ASIB 2011). However, as the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma has noted, some Indigenous communities have been subject to repeated community profiling and, while reliable data is essential, data collection should not substitute for action (ASTISJC 2007).

The preparation of action plans done with the collaboration of the community is critical for identifying priorities, negotiating realistic expectations, and clarifying roles and responsibilities. The activities of a place-based initiative must be informed by the priorities and needs of the community. ASIB (2011) has suggested that activities should focus on building local capacity, particularly economic and human capital capacity; physical infrastructure; and social capital, including leadership and governance capacity.

Communication

A communication strategy is necessary to maintain community engagement, and attention must be paid to building and sustaining networks (Reddel 2008) and reviewing participation to ensure that decision-making bodies remain

representative (Thompson et al 2002). If decision-making structures become inefficient, agencies should work to improve the existing structure rather than take actions outside of the agreed structure (Morgan Disney 2006). Ongoing data collection, the monitoring of progress and the dissemination of findings back to stakeholders is fundamental (Smyth 2008).

Long term initiatives

Many commentators have pointed out that where disadvantage is entrenched, rapid progress should not be expected, and that initiatives should therefore be conducted over the long term. Vinson (2007) suggests that 7-8 years is a suitable time period. He cautions that short term interventions can raise hopes that are then dashed when support is withdrawn, leaving residents demoralised.

Ideally, a place-based initiative would conclude when the coordinating structures can be incorporated into mainstream government processes, and where both government agencies and communities have the skills to work together through conventional means. The initiative should leave behind greater capacity in the community and government, empowered communities, improved infrastructure and stronger networks between agencies, educational institutions and employers.

Conclusion

Place-based initiatives have the potential to answer the call from Indigenous people for governments to coordinate their activities and work in partnership with Indigenous people. The evaluations discussed above indicate that place-based initiatives have, thus far, had only limited success in achieving these goals of coordination and partnership. It is heartening to see that more recent initiatives have learned from the successes and failures of past efforts, but it is not yet clear whether those more recent initiatives will be any more successful. There are significant challenges, including the need for government actors to make significant changes to their

practices, and the need to build community trust and community capacity, yet 'business as usual' is not an acceptable option.

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All URLs were correct in June 2012.

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