Kaduna, Nigeria | *Emmanuel Bamidele for Mercy Corps*

ADVANCING PEACE IN A CHANGED WORLD

COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond

SEPTEMBER 2020

Introduction

Dire predictions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on armed conflict and violence have proliferated since the pandemic began. One notable forecast projects that thirteen countries are likely to experience new conflicts in the next two years due to the exacerbating effects of the pandemic. COVID-19 is now widely understood as a potential threat multiplier that can amplify existing conflict drivers, as well as an accelerant of existing conflict processes that can hasten a spiral into deeper instability. **Research from past pandemics, like HIV/AIDS and Ebola, makes clear that exposure to infectious disease increases the risk of armed conflict. Conflict, in turn, tends to exacerbate disease transmission and hinder public health responses.** Pandemics have a similar effect as other external shocks, such as natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and droughts), extreme temperature rise, declines in export prices and economic crises—all of which are associated with the outbreak or **intensification of conflict within a year of onset**, especially in low-income and ethno-linguistically fragmented countries.

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On the other hand, COVID-19 could present opportunities for governments, donors, and practitioners to catalyze some positive trends toward peace while blunting the political, economic, and social consequences of the virus. Before these opportunities recede, the international community must ensure that crucial investments to address conflict drivers—both those that predate the pandemic and those that have been exacerbated by it—are not diverted elsewhere, while proactively anticipating and preventing COVID-19's worst impacts in conflict-affected contexts. History suggests that the conflict-intensifying effects of pandemics can linger for years after the outbreak ends. We urge policymakers and practitioners to 1) **incorporate conflict sensitivity in all COVID-19 responses**; 2) **address the impact of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics** by strengthening social cohesion, improving state-society relationships, combating mis-/disinformation, and extending economic assistance; and 3) **seize 'windows of opportunity' created by COVID-related disruptions to advance peace**. In aggressively addressing these impacts, we have an opportunity to bolster communities' resilience to COVID-19 and build the foundations for lasting security.

Beyond the Hypothetical: Conflict Impacts on the Ground

Six months into the pandemic, Mercy Corps program teams from more than 40 countries are sharing whether and how it is affecting peace and conflict. In some places, grim predictions regarding the conflict-inducing effects of COVID-19 have not yet panned out. In others, however, we are already seeing evidence that COVID-19 is both aggravating existing conflicts and increasing the risk of new ones, while interfering with conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and humanitarian assistance efforts. Across conflict-affected contexts, Mercy Corps programs are experiencing the effects of COVID-19 in five core areas (see Figure 1) that either directly result from the pandemic and government responses to it or that predate COVID-19 but have intensified. These impacts threaten stability by deepening underlying causes of conflict and by creating new, proximate drivers. They also, in turn, raise the risk of transmission by creating barriers for people to seek assistance from health facilities, promoting rumors and conspiracy theories about the virus, and impeding contract tracing and other containment measures.

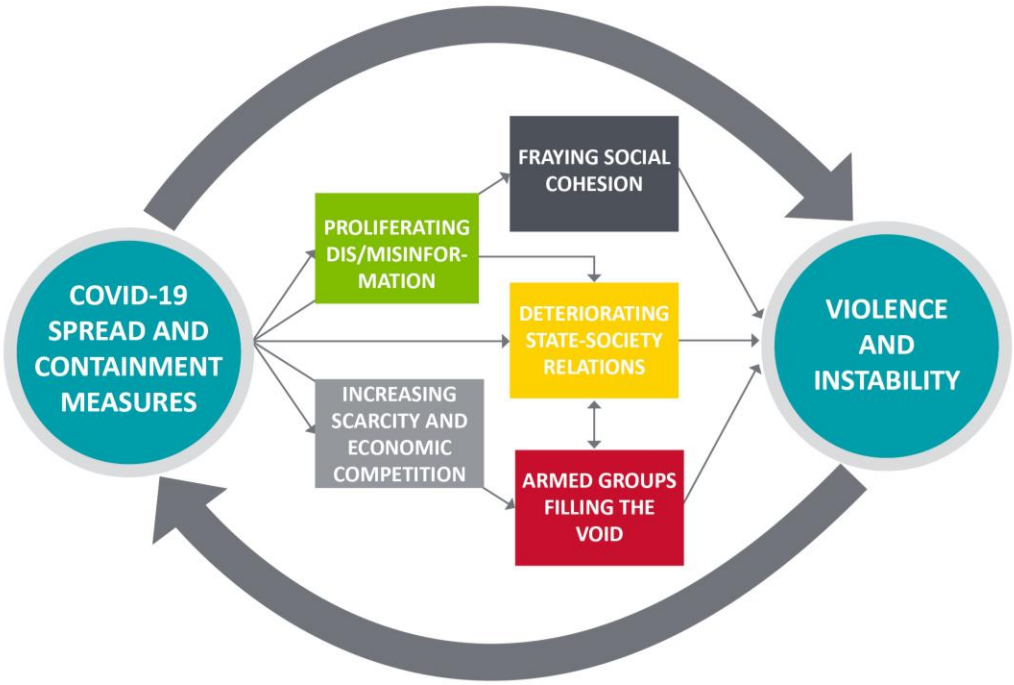

Figure 1. COVID-19 and Conflict: A Virulent Cycle

1. Fraying social cohesion

Social cohesion—which describes a sense of shared purpose and trust among members of a community and the willingness of its members to engage and cooperate—is a key ingredient for peace and prosperity. Where tensions between identity groups, political factions, and generations already existed, COVID-19 is increasing stigmatization and scapegoating across groups. In many fragile countries, mobs have attacked healthcare workers, foreigners, and individuals thought to be carrying the virus. In 22 countries where Mercy Corps is active, program teams reported that the pandemic has contributed to deteriorating relationships between local groups, while only four countries reported an improvement in social cohesion.[1] Increased resource competition and fear of economic ruin (see below) have deepened social cleavages in some contexts, contributing both to an uptick in violence as well as amplifying identity-based divisions that will become more difficult to bridge as the pandemic wears on.

- In **Nigeria**, movement restrictions have forced herders to remain in place, increasing competition with farmers over natural resources such as land and water and intensifying conflict between primarily Fulani, Muslim pastoralists and Christian farmers. The spike of attacks has been justified using the narrative that "people are here to spread COVID-19."
- In **Yemen**, the pandemic has contributed to deteriorating relations between Yemenis and vulnerable migrants from the Horn of Africa, who are blamed for bringing the virus into the country. Violence has escalated in Yemen, and while not directly linked to COVID-19, the continued fighting is detracting attention and resources from the pandemic response.
- In **Colombia**, tensions are escalating between host communities and Venezuelan migrants, as fears around the spread of COVID-19 have accelerated existing xenophobia and competition over government assistance, and have prompted an increasing number of migrants to return to Venezuela.

Tudun Adabu, Nigeria | *Michael Madukwe for Mercy Corps*

2. Deteriorating state-society relations

Fragile social contracts are further eroding where COVID-19 is seen by local populations as an opportunity for corruption, incompetence, and exclusive or repressive behavior by governments. In some countries, the inability or unwillingness of the state to respond to citizens' needs, and the diminishing ability of civil society to hold authorities accountable, is deepening mistrust and legitimacy gaps and weakening civic engagement—the hallmarks of governance-related drivers of conflict. Already, public demonstrations and anti-government protests, while initially declining during the onset of the pandemic, have started to rise again in some countries, often as part of a reaction to government lockdown and mitigation measures. There has also been a global increase in mob violence, particularly against state forces, since the declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organization in March. Security forces in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Uganda, and Zimbabwe have further aggravated the situation by responding to protests with increased repression and by imposing lockdowns through force. In

[1] Mercy Corps (July 2020). COVID-19 Secondary Impact Analysis.

some places, distrust of government is extending to public health agencies, discouraging cooperation with states' containment efforts and increasing the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

- In **Iraq**, the federal government tried to enact policies to respond to the public's recent unrest and new challenges posed by COVID-19. An internal assessment by Mercy Corps found that 85% of survey respondents reported feeling unhappy with the government's handling of the pandemic.
- In **Ethiopia**, tensions between political factions have deepened following the decision to postpone the August 2020 elections due to COVID19. This presents a great challenge to the ongoing democratic transition in Ethiopia.
- In **Mali**, protests against the management of COVID-19 and those demanding the departure of the president—which culminated in a military coup on August 18--are symptomatic of the growing dissatisfaction of the population. Some people believed COVID-19 was being used as a political tool by authorities, based on rumors that the government exaggerated the number of cases in order to receive more funding from the international community.
- In **Uganda**, excessive use of force by police and security forces has deepened animosity between citizens and the state. Police in Kampala used tear gas and live ammunition to disperse traders attempting to reopen shops in violation of government guidelines. Uganda's top opposition leaders joined efforts to demonstrate against what they see as the government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 response.

3. Proliferating mis-/disinformation

The widely discussed "infodemic"—in which people spread incorrect information unintentionally (misinformation) or intentionally (disinformation)—not only hampers public health outcomes, but also contributes to inflaming fears and misperceptions across groups, while deepening mistrust of government officials and health experts. Data collected by researchers at Princeton University indicates that COVID-19 disinformation is rife and covers a wide range of topics, from the nature and origins of the virus to unproven cures and emergency responses. Most disinformation comes from individuals—rather than states, companies, or media—some of whom pose as health officials or government representatives. The power of social media is amplified as people increasingly rely on polarized, self-isolating digital spaces to receive news and share opinions. This can contribute to conflict directly—by further stoking social tensions and anti-government hostility—and indirectly, by risking greater COVID-19 infections. During the Ebola epidemic, mortality rates were higher in countries suffering from significant misinformation because citizens were less likely to comply with public health guidelines.

Helmand, Afghanistan | *Toni Greaves for Mercy Corps*

- In **Kenya**, memes and short videos have cropped up online claiming that COVID-19 does not exist, and that the government is lying about the numbers in order to "eat" funding from international donors.
- In **Libya**, many people believe the pandemic is a ploy to enable authorities to embezzle public funds. Repeated statements by health authorities to dispel these rumors have had little impact. The daily increase in COVID-19 cases has bolstered public perceptions of government incompetence and corruption.

- In **Northeast Nigeria**, rumors have spread rapidly online that the virus is not real or is not as severe as officials claim. Other rumors posit that COVID-19 restrictions are a ruse to prevent people from practicing their religion, or a way for the government to get money, and these tensions are spilling over to relationships between communities and traditional leaders where the latter support containment measures.
- In **Myanmar**, early on in the pandemic, news of a Rohingya man returning from Bangladesh who tested positive inspired some anti-Rohingya disinformation on social media. "I think they were sent back to Myanmar on a suicide mission armed with COVID-19," one user wrote under a news story posted to Facebook. A pattern of hate speech and rumors persist on social media against "foreigners" or others returning from abroad, due to fears that these individuals may carry the virus.

4. Armed groups seeking to fill the void

Armed groups, including violent extremist organizations (VEOs), are capitalizing on heightened grievances, lackluster government responses, weakening state institutions, and increasing social fragmentation to expand their activities and influence, and to gain sympathizers and supporters by winning the hearts and minds of the local population. While many VEOs are subject to COVID-19-related restrictions that prevent physical recruitment and training, some are now taking advantage of a swell in online activity and the diversion of government and security forces to lay the groundwork for future recruitment.

- In **Afghanistan**, the Taliban has ramped up attacks on Afghan forces despite the recent US - Taliban Agreement, and have ignored calls for a 'humanitarian ceasefire'. During recent months, as the government sought to support an already fragile healthcare system, the Taliban provided public health guidelines and assistance to populations in areas it controls. The increased pressure on the government to manage the COVID crisis in addition to the ongoing conflict has provided the group a further opportunity to gain ground and emerge from the pandemic stronger than it was before.
- In **Somalia**, Al-Shabaab has escalated its assaults on Somali and AMISOM troops and set up a COVID-19 treatment center, seeking to demonstrate its commitment to citizen welfare in contrast to the government.
- Across East Africa, including **Uganda**, "there is a rapid growth of Islamic WhatsApp groups targeting Muslims who have reached a certain level of 'sophistication' (radicalization)."[2]
- In **Mozambique**, violent extremist organizations have stepped up attacks and are celebrating the impact of COVID-19 on the West in propaganda videos.[3]

Emali, Kenya | *Ezra Millstein for Mercy Corps*

5. Increasing economic scarcity and resource competition

Heightened competition for increasingly scarce resources, weakened resource management, and a significant reduction in economic activity due to movement restrictions and business closures are contributing to an uptick in tension and violence. Not only is scarcity contributing to fraying social cohesion

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] "Covid-19 and Violent Extremism in East Africa." June 2020. Wasafiri, Mercy Corps, and the UK Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund. From the Collective Resilience against Extremism (CREATE) program.

and fracturing state-society relationships (as described above); it is encouraging theft and looting in some cases. According to the World Food Program, the pandemic could lead to an 82% increase in food insecurity globally, which research has shown heightens the risk of violence and social unrest. Further, most conflict-affected countries rely on agricultural economies, and the inability of pastoralists and farmers to access local markets, and to obtain products and services, has led to a loss of income and increasingly unstable livelihood situations.

- In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, areas with increased prices due to COVID-19 border closures have experienced higher rates of conflict. In South Kivu, there was a spike in armed gangs and Mai Mai groups imposing illegal taxation systems on citizens**,** which was potentially connected to rapidly deteriorating economic conditions and limited availability of cash and goods due to COVID-19 movement restrictions.
- In **Iraq**, vulnerable communities have faced increased competition over resources since the start of the pandemic, especially over food, water, health supplies, and livelihood opportunities. For example, more than 13,000 internally displaced persons voluntarily returned to ISIS's former stronghold in Nineveh governorate--despite COVID-19 movement restrictions. These areas lack services, and water security has become increasingly endemic due to purification supply shortages brought on by border closures, lockdowns, and curfews, amplifying frustrations and tensions.
- In **Niger**, there has been an increase in intercommunal clashes around certain water points, as tensions escalate over increasingly scarce communal resources due to adverse economic impacts of the pandemic mitigation measures.
- The southern region of Kayes in **Mali** has historically depended heavily on remittances from the diaspora, but the global economic downturn has drastically reduced resource flow into the country. As a result, people in the region have become economically strained, increasing tensions over land and other resources.

Looking over the horizon. Beyond these five immediate effects, the consequences of COVID-19 are likely to reverberate well into the future and pose a long-term threat to stability and peace. In the case of Ebola in West Africa, areas hit hard by the virus observed an increase in civil violence starting between six and nine months after the outbreak, and the effect persisted, lasting up to three years after the epidemic ended. The economic downturn resulting from measures aimed at containing COVID-19—which has included a sharp drop in oil revenues, remittances, and tourism; shifts in the value of agricultural products; and a significant loss of income due to business shutdowns and movement restrictions--is shrinking government revenues, diverting limited public resources, and increasing an already yawning wealth gap. Given the well-documented link between inequality and civil war, new **grievances around inequality and relative deprivation** are likely to strengthen motivations for joining armed groups. Both isolation resulting from social distancing and frustrations by youth over a lack of social and economic mobility are known risk factors for recruitment into violence and extremism. **Factors such as inequality require time—in some cases, years—to take root and manifest as acute conflict drivers. However, that they are invisible now makes them all the more threatening down the line if they go unaddressed by governments, donors, and practitioners.** COVID-19 may also compress this timeline due to its varied impacts on different segments of society, which has laid bare these inequalities in a stark way.

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Rethinking peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development interventions

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, Mercy Corps' and other implementers' peacebuilding work not only continues; it is more important than ever, particularly as plummeting state revenues leave many governments cash-strapped and increasingly unable to offer meaningful assistance. While the pandemic has spurred calls for ceasefires in some conflicts, in other cases, peace talks and diplomatic efforts have been delayed or curbed.

COVID-19 is affecting societies in different ways, and we should neither exaggerate the influence of the pandemic on conflict dynamics nor treat its impact as uniform across countries and contexts. More research and evidence are needed to better understand how each of the five COVID-related pathways influence the timing and severity of conflict and violence. We also know that in conflict settings that endure the worst impacts of the pandemic, women and girls are especially vulnerable to its secondary impacts--including a heightened risk of domestic violence--so interventions must identify and then address gender-specific needs and ensure inclusive participation to make responses more effective. While our understanding of the links between pandemics and conflict provide ample cause for concern, there is also reason for some optimism. Research suggests that international aid can play an important role in helping reduce conflict risk in the wake of external shocks, and, along with peer organizations, Mercy Corps has published extensively on 'what works' to reduce support for—and participation in—armed groups. Many communities, where the virus has not led to an increase in conflict, are proving resilient to potential secondary effects of COVID-19. Practitioners need to better understand how these sources of resilience build on or differ from resilience to other conflict shocks in specific contexts, and then leverage them for peace impacts.

As governments and donors understandably turn their attention to the public health response to COVID-19, **diverting interest and investment away from conflict** would amount to a missed opportunity, and potentially allow violence entrepreneurs to fill power vacuums, extremism to gain greater currency, and root drivers of conflict to take a firmer hold in more communities. This would undermine the very measures being undertaken to control the pandemic, while making future responses to conflict and violence all the more challenging. **Policymakers must recognize that now is the time to double-down, not let up, on conflict and violence prevention,** both to help contain the pandemic and to stave off the need for much larger investments down the line to respond to conflict and social upheaval.

Mercy Corps' responses to these impacts fall into three primary categories. We recommend that donors and other implementers adopt these modes of response as part of a comprehensive approach to preventing and reducing conflict in a COVID-19 world:

Ensure that all COVID-19 responses and programs are conflict-sensitive: Donors, INGOs, and multilateral organizations like the World Health Organization implementing COVID-19 responses should work to **identify and analyze the specific conflict drivers that are both exacerbated by the pandemic and that will inhibit uptake of COVID-19 messaging and mitigation measures.** They should then proactively mitigate those factors using the Do No Harm approach, leveraging humanitarian action to build connections across groups and communities in tension. History indicates that quickly evolving humanitarian and development responses such as this create opportunities for actively and inadvertently deepening societal cleavages, as well as missed opportunities to lay the groundwork for longer-term peace. Mercy Corps has created guidance for all programs to be conflict- and gender-sensitive while addressing COVID-19 and its impacts on communities as well as individual men, women, boys, and girls, whether for water, sanitation, and hygiene; social and behavior change communication (SBCC); or other types of interventions. Guidelines include recommendations for context monitoring, such as tracking the degree to which mistrust

and stigmatization are linked to tensions between groups, and ensuring that the humanitarian intervention does not exacerbate those tensions and instead strengthens inter-group cohesion. Further examples of conflict sensitivity and best practice include analyzing and addressing the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on different identity groups, as well as promoting community engagement with government to promote inclusive, participatory, and effective pandemic response.

Address the impacts of COVID-19 on social cohesion, public trust, and conflict dynamics by adapting existing programs or investing in new ones. Existing programs that seek to prevent or manage conflict must have the flexibility to pivot to address new conflict dynamics. This requires thorough, timely analysis to identify the ways in which COVID-19 affects specific contexts and a culture of adaptive management. To address COVID-19-related risks, programs should seek to **strengthen or protect essential ties between identity groups** by facilitating joint community-owned development, bolstering market connections, and managing conflict through dispute resolution. Programs should also seek to **increase the transparency and accountability of government institutions, promote responsive service delivery,** and reinforce or create feedback channels that encourage civic participation and enable **greater citizen-government interactions.** Peacebuilding programs should also **promote access to timely, reliable and trusted sources of information** and actively combat disinformation in both on- and offline spaces. Finally, programs should **account for the differential economic impacts of the pandemic on different groups** and communities. Interventions that address conflict drivers should adapt to the specific needs and constraints posed by the pandemic, which will promote a virtuous cycle of both encouraging and enabling good public health behaviors while strengthening the foundations of good governance and peace.

Examples where Mercy Corps has adapted programming to address emerging impacts on conflict include:

- In **Northeast Nigeria,** Mercy Corps is piloting a rumor and myth tracker that will enable local leaders to collect and analyze rumors, foster discussion and spread accurate information within their communities, and to develop localized, conflict-sensitive responses. This is critical both for mitigating conflict and for stemming COVID-19: there is evidence that Nigeria was so effective at tackling Ebola because swift, non-partisan messaging delivered by authority figures was able to counteract misinformation.
- In **Kenya,** our preventing violent extremism (PVE) programming was designed to increase the social capital of at-risk individuals. While it initially sought to connect individuals to job opportunities through referral pathways, in light of COVID-19's economic impacts, it is now exploring how to directly provide economic assistance through cash transfers and loans. Such support can curtail armed group recruitment in two ways: First, it can combat the narrative spread by recruiters that the government and civil society are abandoning marginalized people. Second, it can bolster those who are one financial crisis away from accepting alternative assistance offered by VEOs.
- In **Haiti**, our social and behavior change communication (SBCC) program seeks to increase healthy behaviors and reduce stigmatization and violence against the infected. The program has disseminated more than two million health messages to 38,000 people on social media using different approaches including interactive 'rumor quizzes' and storytelling that seeks to reduce young people's fear of marginalized groups. The program has also assisted governments and providers on managing children's mental health and increasing protection of vulnerable people.

- **Myanmar**: Through an existing youth development program, Mercy Corps hosted an essay competition on Facebook for youth to imagine a unified response to COVID-19. The team gained local attention for the initiative as a way to respond to hate speech and is planning to facilitate a youth-led digital community center to generate dialogue about COVID-19 impacts. At the same time, Mercy Corps is working with local government officials to help them address the challenges they face in garnering trust around COVID-19 response and enforcing restrictions, enlisting youth to both improve compliance with public health measures and build stronger linkages between state and society.

Sittwe, Myanmar | *Aung Lwin for Mercy Corps*

In addition to these kinds of program adaptations, simpler adjustments must be made to ensure that all peacebuilding interventions adhere to health guidance, along with thinking through smart ways to transfer interventions to a digital or mobile space in a way that fosters connections across groups. For example, in North Central Nigeria, our peacebuilding program has started to use an SMS platform to send alert messages with lifesaving information, support responders, and collect participant feedback so that people's voices can be heard. These mobile surveys enable the team to map the escalation or triggers of violent conflict in order to deploy more targeted responses.

Seize 'windows of opportunity' created by COVID-related disruptions to advance peace outcomes. The pandemic marks a turning point for many societies, and what we do now will have repercussions down the line. Just as other external shocks have placed pressure on conflict parties to reach a negotiated settlement--such as the 2003 tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal--COVID-19 could create opportunities to promote or incentivize peace. In limiting the movement of international actors, the pandemic also provides an impetus for expanding local ownership of peacebuilding initiatives.

Donors and practitioners must not only seek to combat urgent, proximate drivers of conflict, but also maintain their sights on root causes by **reconstructing power balances**, **strengthening government action to reduce grievances**, and **building resilience to future shocks**. For example, Mercy Corps has acted on COVID-19-induced shifts in government attitudes to advance peace. Through our PVE programming in East Africa, governments across three countries have requested increased support in strategic communications, recognizing the importance of countering online and offline VEO narratives in a conflict-sensitive way; similarly, in Nigeria, government partners have increased their commitment to early warning mechanisms to track emerging tensions in areas affected by COVID-19 movement restrictions.

Other potential investments include programs that focus on **positive youth development** and **economic strengthening**, **promoting civic engagement** between vulnerable populations and governments, and supporting civil society to advocate for **inclusive, pro-poor economic policies** in response to the economic fallout from COVID-19. Finally, donors and practitioners should revisit their strategic use of technology and accelerate existing positive trends in **using technology to increase the reach and quality of programs**. Capacity-building that once required in-person engagement may now better serve the needs of participants through remote, digital support that more closely mirrors successful mentoring models than one-off trainings. The international community can use this moment of massive change and reflection to steer investments toward more creative and sustainable solutions, accelerating progress toward lasting peace.

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About Mercy Corps
Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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