

'Communities of practice': prospects for theory and action in participatory development

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'The myth of community' permeates both the understanding and the practice of participatory development. Yet the idea that communities exist as coherent units of people who inhabit bounded geographic spaces and are ready to be mobilised for development restricts the very agency that participation promises. This article offers an alternative model of community: one that is more compatible with the ideal of people-centred, participatory development. Using Etienne Wenger's concept of 'communities of practice', and drawing on narrative theory and cognitive approaches to policy analysis, the article argues that community should be created and sustained around shared meanings.

« Communautés de pratique »: perspectives pour la théorie et l'action dans le développement participatif

« Le mythe de la communauté » est omniprésent tant dans la compréhension que dans la pratique du développement participatif. Or, l'idée selon laquelle les communautés existent comme des unités cohérentes de personnes qui habitent des espaces géographiques délimités et sont prêtes à être mobilisées pour le développement restreint la capacité d'influence même que promet la participation. Cet article propose un modèle alternatif de la communauté qui est plus compatible avec l'idéal du développement participatif centré sur les personnes. En utilisant le concept d'Etienne Wenger des « communautés de pratique » et en s'inspirant de la théorie narrative et des approches cognitives de l'analyse des politiques générales, l'auteur de cet article soutient que la communauté devrait être créée et soutenue autour de significations partagées.

'Comunidades de prática': prospectos para teoria e ação no desenvolvimento participativo

'O mito da comunidade' está impregnado na compreensão e prática do desenvolvimento participativo. Porém, a ideia de que as comunidades existem como unidades coerentes de pessoas que habitam espaços geográficos delimitados e que estão prontas para ser mobilizadas para o desenvolvimento restringe a própria ação que a participação promete. Este artigo oferece um modelo alternativo de comunidade que é mais compatível com o ideal de desenvolvimento centrado nas pessoas e participativo. Utilizando o conceito de Etienne Wenger de 'comunidades de prática' e recorrendo às abordagens de teoria narrativa e cognitivas para análise de políticas, o artigo argumenta que a comunidade deve ser criada e mantida ao redor de significados compartilhados.

'Comunidades de ensayo': perspectivas para la teoría y la acción en el desarrollo participativo

El mito de 'la comunidad' atraviesa la teoría y la práctica del desarrollo participativo. Sin embargo, la opinión de que las comunidades son conjuntos inalterables de personas que habitan espacios geográficos específicos y están preparadas para ser movilizadas en pro de su desarrollo, reduce la autonomía que se supone surge de la participación. Este ensayo analiza un modelo de comunidad alternativo, más afín al ideal de desarrollo participativo centrado en las personas. Aprovechando el concepto utilizado por Etienne Wenger 'comunidades de ensayo', y basándose en teorías y enfoques cognitivos del análisis político, este ensayo sostiene que la comunidad debe fundarse y sostenerse en torno a conceptos compartidos.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Civil society; Methods; Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

Participation in development, defined by Guijt and Shah as the involvement of 'socially and economically marginalized peoples in decision making over their own lives' (1998: 1), is overwhelmingly conceived of and implemented as a community activity. In project-based development work, the idea(l) of community participation is based on two sets of assumptions: first, that there is a stable group of people who self-identify as members of that group and who have similar backgrounds, norms, interests, priorities, and aspirations; and, second, that this group of people will participate in development projects in uniform and predictable ways. In this way, 'communities of place' are conflated with 'communities of interests' (Cornwall 2002), and identities are created for project participants that prescribe and proscribe the nature of participation (Cornwall 2002; Guijt and Shah 1998).

This article throws the shroud off 'community' as it is often constructed in development discourses and practices, and re-conceptualises community as that which is created when individuals engage with each other in a shared enterprise. The article has its empirical basis in field research conducted between 2003 and 2005 with a sample of people from an income-generating project for poverty reduction in Amanee, a small town of approximately 2000 residents in the Afram Plains District of Eastern Ghana.¹ The primary data are a series of in-depth interviews with 25 out of 27 members of the Nhyira Beekeepers' Association, an income-generating project (IGP) initiated and funded by the Social Investment Fund (SIF). Supplementary interviews were conducted with residents of Amanee, government officials, and development workers, to obtain contextual information on the project. I also drew on archival material, policy papers, and official reports.

The Social Investment Fund and community development

Social Funds are generic programmes developed by the World Bank to provide a safety net for the poor, and for other vulnerable groups. They do this by providing funds to support community efforts to reduce poverty. The Social Investment Fund (SIF) in Ghana, signed into existence in 1998, has been a major channel for donor funds targeted towards poverty-related activities in poor communities. It receives funding primarily from the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the government of Ghana. The SIF attempts to reach the 'real poor' to provide them with 'alternative livelihood sources' (SIF 2003). The Fund subscribes to the notion of community participation as a vehicle towards

achievement of its goals, and requires that the entire process of setting up and running a project should be a community activity, as its brochure makes explicit:

All on board

The whole community must be actively involved in all stages of the sub-project, i.e.

Deciding on the sub-project

Planning the sub-project

Implementing the sub-project

Monitoring and Evaluating the sub-project

Sharing benefits of the sub-project

Ensuring that the project lasts for a long time. (SIF n.d.: 3)

The message is reinforced with illustrations of people sitting under a big tree, with captions such as 'Every member of the community has to be involved in the selection, planning, implementation and upkeep of the project' (SIF n.d.: 3). Participation thus takes on the tone of a directive.

In the following paragraph from SIF publicity material, the more inclusive aspect of participation is missing, and the ideal of community involvement gives way at the end to an almost coercive demand for everyone to be involved in SIF projects in predetermined ways.

A sense of ownership

It is important to establish a sense of ownership of the sub-project among the community. All shades of opinions, women, handicapped, young and old should be heard. The community has to contribute resources such as land, labour, materials etc. to the sub-project. (SIF n.d.: 3)

Despite the repeated references to 'community', in none of the SIF publications that I obtained was there an attempt to explicitly define community for the purposes of its operations. The term was used synonymously with 'settlements', 'villages', and 'community-based organisations'. Despite this lack of clarity, when the SIF requires that the 'whole community' be involved in community development projects, it projects on to its targeted groups an identity as a whole (that is, unitary and unified) group of persons engaged in the same project for similar ends. Thus the partnership that the SIF promotes between the agency and the poor is actually between the SIF on one side and an abstraction of the community on the other.

Inventing community

Community is a 'buzzword' whose meaning has become diffused, being applied variously to a village or ethnic group, among others (Sihlongonyane 2001). In project-based development work, 'community' usually refers to a geographically bounded area within which there is assumed to be a clearly defined group of people with shared interests, needs, and aspirations. Moreover, community is idealised in terms of personal and relational characteristics such as trust, reciprocity, norms of community service, and social engagement (Cleaver 1999; Williams 2004).

In its invocation in development rhetoric, community takes on the appearance of an unalloyed good which can be mined for development. Particularly, the assumed positive dynamics within community are perceived to be a foundation for development projects. These pre-existing 'communities' are then transformed into organisations that constrain individual action by institutionalising internal structures, actions, and interactions (Cleaver 1999). Further, participation in these organised communities – in standardised and controllable ways – is seen to be both the sensible and the responsible choice for people. Within this framework, the 'myth of community' (Guijt and Shah 1998) can thrive – the

myth of a homogeneous gathering of persons, ready and able to put their backs into the task of development (ibid.).

The myth leaves us with the problem of where to place the individual. This problem can be conceptualised at two interconnected levels: how the individual is situated in his or her social and cultural environment, and how the individual is situated in the invented community.

Cleaver (1999) points out that the relationship between the individual and the wider social structure is under-theorised. The individual is generally conceptualised as a being whose choices are primarily influenced either by economic calculations or by social and cultural norms. In either case, the person is stripped of other motivations (conscious and unconscious) that are unrelated to economic or social self-interest. Moreover, this individual is not correctly perceived as a dynamic being with multiple and shifting self-identities and social positionings over space and time. Finally, such anaemic views of the individual leave us with little insight into the 'non-project nature of people's lives' (Cleaver 1999: 599). These deficits in theorising the individual as a participant in development leave a big conceptual gap in the discourse of participation which, in this article, is addressed by the use of interpretive or cognitive approaches to policy making. These approaches to policy research show that people respond to policies within the framework of their personal history and socio-cultural settings (Yanow, 2000); that is, within the context of people's 'whole lives' as they experience it (Lewis and Maruna 1998).

The second related problem with the way in which the term 'community' is used in development discourse and practice is that it presents us with a picture of either a single unit of people moving harmoniously towards a common goal, or a grouping of atomised beings who make choices independently of each other. Differences between individuals within the assumed community are obscured, as is often the case with differences of or arising out of gender (Cornwall 2002). In particular, power differentials are ignored and conflicts glossed over. There is pressure towards conformity in thought and behaviour, and the 'agentic subjectivity of the individual' (Lewis and Maruna 1998: 236) is lost in the process.

Despite the critiques of the idea of community participation, it has remained popular for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is easier to plan development interventions for an identifiable and homogeneous group of people, rather than for the diverse needs and priorities that exist in any group. Further, community participation may be stage-managed by officials or powerful minorities, and the cloak of community can be used to mask tensions, stifle internal debates, and cover up the continued oppression of the socially disadvantaged (Amanor 2001; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Guijt and Shah 1998). This, then, is the primary reason why 'community' remains firmly fixed in the development lexicon; to put it simply, it is a political tool (Sihlongonyane 2001). Officials have their reasons for evoking community, but people themselves are complicit in this performance, as I go on to discuss.

Performing community

The members of the Nhyira Beekeepers' Association clearly understood that organising and representing themselves as a group, a 'community', was a prerequisite for SIF support:

Efo Koku: [They came to town. We went for a meeting. They said they will provide the community the amenities they need. If the community need (sic) water, toilet and other things, they will provide an amount and the community will also provide their side. And if there is a group going on, they will support them].

Osofo: [They said if we got together, the NGO would help us to form a 'cooperative'. And the work we would do, it would have to be something that would bring 'progress']².

Teacher Rose had been part of a pig-rearing group under an NGO before she joined the SIF project, and she compared the set-up of the two:

Teacher Rose: [This project... Okay, the first one was done on an individual basis. If you decided you wanted to rear animals, you went ahead with it and they helped you; they taught you how to go about it... But said it wasn't good to do it separately because then it would be – They said they wanted groups].

Interviewer: [Who said?]

Teacher Rose: [The officials. Mmm...].

Nana Kyei had come into the project with the expectation that, in the course of time, he would be able to branch out into a private venture. He blamed the SIF officials for obstructing his desire to go it alone: '*Those of us who joined the project originally, they made us to understand that we couldn't do it individually. That's how they broke (our spirits) – that's how they played with our minds.*'

Despite this insistence in the SIF brochures, there was an awareness on the part of SIF staff and the local government officials with whom they worked that the rhetoric could not always be translated into reality. One local (that is, district-level) government official spoke of the illusion of community participation that dissipated under the pressure of deadlines and reporting requirements, at which point SIF and local government staff either sidelined project participants, or pressed the groups to reach a quick 'consensus' on whatever decisions needed to be made.

If SIF officials were creating an illusion of community, project members could create the illusion of acquiescing. In fact, they could go to great lengths to keep up the performance of community, even when there was very little to go on. The leader of a SIF-supported beekeeping project in another village stated candidly that he was investing his own money to keep his group going, in the hope that they might eventually receive financial support. To that end he made frequent trips to the district assembly to keep his project on the assembly's radar and to lobby for funds. Meanwhile, the rest of the group's members met only sporadically with their leader to get updates, but hurriedly gathered when there was word that SIF or district officials were on inspection tours.

In the case of the Nhyira association, the performance eventually broke down over a conflict over the disbursement of project funds. The *modus operandi* of the SIF was to facilitate the organisation of a group within a settlement area, after which it would apply to the SIF for funds to set up an agreed-upon IGP. A minority of members claimed that SIF funds were intended to be divided among individual members. The executives denied that this was the intention of the SIF, and they were backed by the majority of the group. Three dissenters eventually left the group, and among those who remained there was lingering discontent and distrust.

Questioning community

What was the deeper cause of the problems in the Nhyira group, I asked? One set of responses from development officials, local government staff, and other researchers suggests that the attempt to base development on community is fundamentally unsound because community is not a viable concept in a place like the Afram Plains. They questioned whether community could flourish among migratory populations. Amanor (2001) similarly queries whether the concept of community development is relevant in a context where individualised economic activities are rapidly replacing kinship-based systems in agrarian societies, and where social mobility is becoming the new order.

And yet communal impulses were clearly evident in the ways in which members of the Nhyira Beekeepers' Association constructed the appeal and rationale of the project.

Maame Afua Anowa: [You can't do good work by yourself. . . I made up my mind to join the group, so we could all benefit from it].

Yaa Lamiorakor: [The group was set up so we could help one another. . . There is a lot of knowledge that you can gain from it, but as one individual, you can't take care of the hives].

Fred Gator: [They taught us how we could help each other, if we needed anything. Life here is hard. . . so we need to organize ourselves, so we can get a little money to look after ourselves. That's what encouraged us to get ourselves together, and to become part of this group].

Indeed, part of the Nhyira group's appeal was that it presented a somewhat familiar form of associational life. In the preceding quotes, Maame Afua, Yaa Lamiorakor, and Fred Gator each used the concept (*e)kuo*, which is Akan for 'a group'. The word subsumes a variety of organisational types whose conventions include an ethic of self-help and collective action for mutual benefit.³ For instance, six female members of the Nhyira association also belonged to a group called the Awerɛkyekyerɛ Kuo, a mutual aid society.⁴ In Awerɛkyekyerɛ, each woman contributed monthly dues, and this pool of money was used to provide welfare assistance to members in emergencies. Bortei-Doku Aryeetey and Aryeetey (1996) document in the case of such *susu* or rotating-savings club that the economic rationale of the group rests on social norms of reciprocity, consensus, and trust.⁵ These were the very same forms of social capital that members reported were relatively weak in the Nhyira association.

A group such as Awerɛkyekyerɛ is particularly important for refuting the argument that social and physical mobility makes community-based development untenable. After all, Awerɛkyekyerɛ was subject to the same 'disruptions' as the Nhyira group: members travelled unpredictably to take up a work opportunity in the city, to attend a funeral, or to visit relatives. They were also inconsistent in attendance at meetings during harvests and other demanding phases of the farming season. Thus, we cannot simply discard community as a concept that is incongruous with the changing structural and social situations of rural African towns like Amanɛɛ. The real problem lies in the assumptions about the nature of the community that should drive development. Community does not pre-exist in an essential form that can be readily harnessed for development purposes; it has to be purposefully created. And it has to be created on the basis of shared meanings, not shared geography or demography.

In the Nhyira project, both the SIF programme and the members assumed that because they were income-poor they would have the same understanding of the goals and potential benefits of the programme. In reality, the meaning that members made of the project and, consequently, the role that they assigned it in their personalised goals varied within the membership of the group and did not always coincide with the goals of SIF officials.

Rather than a conflict over the use of funds, what occurred in the Nhyira group was a conflict over meaning. Underlying the tension over the use of the SIF funds were different interpretations of the enterprise in which they were engaged. Members of the project variously interpreted it as future employment for their children; as a source of pension in their old age; as an add-on to their present economic activities; or as a means of gaining access to the local government. Further, each of these expectations was shaped by the person's life circumstances and aspirations; by his or her previous experiences of other development projects; and by the information that she or he had received about the project. The first major collective decision that the Nhyira group had to take on the disbursement of the fund exposed all these diverse motivations and interpretations.

Re-imagining community

The concept of communities of practice – ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an on-going basis’ (Wenger *et al.* 2002: 4) – offers prospects for a conceptualisation of community that takes into account the meaning-making processes that lead people to perform certain actions.

The foundation of the concept of communities of practice is the simple statement: ‘Living is a constant *negotiation of meaning*’ (Wenger 1998: 53, emphasis in original). Every action, all interaction, involves the process of meaning making. By implication, the activity of creating, maintaining, and participating in community involves the making of meaning.

The idea that meaning making is integral to every human activity has been picked up by researchers using cognitive or interpretive approaches to the policy process. These researchers argue that the policy process is one in which policy continually undergoes interpretation and re-interpretation by the various actors involved in its formulation and implementation (Ball 1993; Levinson and Sutton 2001; Spillane 2004; Yanow 2000). It makes sense, then, that those involved in policy, not as policy makers or practitioners but as ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘targets’, will also interpret policy.

A seminal idea in Wenger’s theory is ‘practice’. The increasing popularity of the concept in the social sciences derives from its ability to neatly encapsulate the complex interactions of human cognition, agency, and context. Levinson and Sutton (2001: 3) elaborate:

The idea of practice has emerged as a way of accounting for the situated logic of activities across a wide array of contexts. Practice gets at the way individuals, and groups, engage in situated behaviours that are both constrained and enabled by existing structures, but which allow the person to exercise agency in the emerging situation.

The phrase ‘situated logic’ in the preceding quote suggests that practice is cognitive engagement with the world. ‘Practice’, Wenger (1998: 51) concurs, ‘is, first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful’. Practice consists of *joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire* (Wenger 1998).

Joint enterprise

Wenger’s concept of communities of practice proposes that community is founded on ‘joint enterprise’; that is, community is built as people pursue an endeavour as immediate and specific as learning the business of honey production, or as long-term and broad as seeking to enhance one’s well-being. Wenger (1998: 79) says of members of a community of practice that

their individual situations and responses vary, from one person to the next and from one day to the next. But their responses to their conditions – similar or dissimilar – are interconnected because they are engaged together in the joint enterprise. ... They must find a way to do that together, and even living with their differences and coordinating their respective aspirations is part of the process.

The basis of community, then, is people coming together as a result of commitment to a common enterprise. In the Nhyira group, there was only the illusion of a common enterprise, because there was no real agreement about the nature of the project that they were pursuing. The very few preparatory meetings that were organised by the SIF officials to facilitate the formation of the group did not allow for these different meanings to be unearthed. As has become the norm, focus groups and other collective discussions were heavily used. These methods tap

into the notion of the mythical community, putting pressure on people to conform to group-speak. It might have been useful for project facilitators to speak to individuals in an attempt to understand the diversity and depths of interpretations that would potentially exist in the group. Moreover, within these group meetings, there should have been more direct discussion of individual aspirations for the project. Had this been done, it could have led to a negotiation at the outset of which goals could be accommodated within the project.

All of this is to say that the presence of different motivations *per se* was not the bane of the Nhyira group; the problem was that a discussion was never had. What sustains community is not a false consensus or a muffling of dissent, both of which have been associated with the practice of community development (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cornwall 2002). In fact, building community can even *create* difference, as people encounter different ideas, identities, and roles in the process of interacting with each other and with policy. A community that is created on shared meanings rather than on physical or social characteristics does not reject diversity as being incompatible with the building of community.

Mutual engagement

As people interact with one another, they negotiate meaning and reach agreements that form the basis of a joint enterprise. Discussions among group members

aid sense making because they bring to the surface insights and perspectives that might otherwise not be visible in the group. While interacting with each other, individuals can explicate tacit beliefs as they are prompted to summarize and articulate their interpretations. (Spillane 2004: 101)

Mutual engagement allows people to build relations that are strong enough to withstand friction. This is not community that turns on how people feel about one another; warm and fuzzy emotions are not necessary to a community of practice. The kinds of 'feeling' that are important are social resources of trust, reciprocity, and strong networks – what Wenger (1998: 74) calls 'dense relations of mutual engagement'. As well as being an outcome of mutual engagement, social resources provide an environment for further interaction (Spillane 2004).

The importance of mutual engagement for shared sense making of the kind that propels collective action is emphasised by its absence in the Nhyira association. There was a lack of the kind of communication that would have allowed the varied interpretations of the project to be brought into the open and discussed. The absence of these kinds of discussion meant that people did not have a basis on which to further negotiate meaning as the project continued.

It was not helpful that the Nhyira group, beyond the initial stages, met inconsistently and much less frequently than the once a month that their by-laws stated. The argument has been made that formal meetings and project activities are not the only contexts in which people share sense making: people engage with policy on an on-going basis, and outside recognisable policy settings (Cleaver 2001). But for the Nhyira group, interactions outside project settings tended to be restricted to subsets of people within the group. These interactions could not, by themselves, sustain community. At the very least, then, formalised and scheduled interactions would have helped to jump-start people into more meaningful engagement with one another. Instead, attendance at meetings was one of the commitments of project membership that was barely fulfilled, especially beyond the first year of the project.

Some members blamed the decline in attendance at meetings on the expansion of group membership; they claimed that the increased numbers made it difficult to have focused discussions or to reach compromises. While it is true that it is more difficult to have meaningful interactions in certain situations, this is precisely 'the work of "community maintenance"' (Wenger

1998: 74) – to actively encourage opportunities for the exchange of ideas under whatever circumstances.

One of the members, Maame Asantewaa, recalled a time when attendance at meetings was regular. This was when Nhyira was a women's group; they would go for meetings and have good discussions about the project and how it could benefit them. Maame Asantewaa's comments suggested that the original group valued the kinds of conversation about the project and about their lives that allowed them to maintain a sense of purpose and unity. This was not true of the new Nhyira group, and Maame Asantewaa blamed this situation (perhaps unfairly) on the male chair, Patrick Anku. Her lack of faith seemed to be validated when tensions arose over what some perceived to be Anku's authoritarian approach to the disbursement of project funds. Maame Asantewaa illustrates the fact that, within Nhyira, the absence of the kind of concerted engagement that engenders trust among members results in confusion about other people's intentions and the meaning of their actions, which acts as a further disincentive to investment in a common project. This was the crux of the problem for the Nhyira group: they were experiencing the effect of lack of trust that prevented people from seeking the very interactions that would generate the needed social resources.

Shared repertoire

Finally, communities of practice develop a shared repertoire coming out of mutual engagement in an enterprise. Such 'resources of negotiated meaning' (Wenger 1998: 82) represent a deposit of knowledge and norms that sustain a community. In other words, continuity can be found in the meanings that are negotiated within a community of practice.

The question of continuity is very important, because communities are not static and stable but are made up of dynamic and sometimes weak associations among people (Sihlongonyane 2001); even within the duration of a short-term project, people and their circumstances change. The Nhyira group did not have a shared repertoire or narrative to sustain them through these changes. For instance, when the chairperson recruited new persons into the group to make up the numbers required by the SIF, he first met separately with each prospective member to tell him or her about the group. The people who eventually joined were not well grafted into the existing group, again because no time was given to discussing their expectations. Some of these newcomers later broke away from the group, claiming that Patrick Anku had misrepresented the group to them as an avenue to obtain individual loans.

If these prospective members had been introduced to Nhyira Beekeepers' Association in the presence of all members, then the account they received about the purposes and processes of Nhyira would have been constructed by everyone. In further interactions, differences would be discussed and a set of shared experiences (activities, rituals, and conversations) would develop around which a community narrative could be created, rehearsed, revised, and retold.

Meaning is often constituted as a story or narrative (Bruner 1990). Most research tends to examine the narratives as the property of the individual, but communities also have narratives that are located in, and shared through, social interaction and performance (Rappaport 2000). More than that, a community needs shared narrative in order to sustain itself. A communal narrative can be a neutralising force against disruption and destructive conflict. In the case of Nhyira, a community narrative would have helped to communicate, for instance, the origins of the group, its original goals, its processes and procedures. The community narrative also provides resources for the individual narratives. We shape stories, but stories also shape us. As Rappaport (2002: 4) states, 'The nature of available community narratives is a key element in both individual and social change'. A good community narrative is a store of resources from which new and old members of any community project can draw on to inform their

personal stories of the project. Providing opportunity and resources for the development of community-creating and community-sustaining narratives, rather than the facile assumption and imposition of community, should be the focus of development efforts.

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Notes

1. The names of the income-generating group, its members, and the village in which the project is situated have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
2. Quotations in parentheses have been translated into English from Akan.
3. 'Self-help' is used here in the sense of community action, as opposed to initiatives from external institutions such as the state.
4. *Awerekyekyere* is an Akan word, meaning solace or comfort.
5. *Susu* clubs are similar to a group such as *Awerekyekyere* in being locally initiated organisations, although welfare assistance is optional in *susu* clubs.

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