

# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND COVID 19: CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING THE SDGS

## ARCTIC (INUIT NUNAAT AND SÁPMI) REGIONAL REPORT

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Photo: UNICEF/Vlad Sokhin



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## 1.0

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this context, the Arctic region is constituted by Inuit Nunaat and Sápmi, covering northern and high altitude areas of what is today known as Easternmost and Westernmost regions of the Russian Federation, USA, Canada, Kalallit Nunaat, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

There are studies on living conditions, economies, health and mental well-being carried out in the Arctic. These provide in-depth knowledge of some aspects and from some locations in Inuit Nunaat and Sápmi. Still the dominant picture is shortage of demographic data of our peoples, thus it is challenging to provide reliable analysis of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Inuit Nunaat and Sápmi.

The section on the COVID-19 situation is based on first-hand observations and experiences by Inuit and Sámi in the different communities. The various national statistics do not disaggregate data based on ethnicity, so there are no numbers of COVID-19 cases and related impacts on Inuit and Sámi. The best indicator for spread of the virus is thus based on geographical data.

The pandemic situation amplifies the lack of infrastructure and health services in Inuit communities. The Sámi communities have so far not experienced much impact by the COVID-19, but are mainly impacted by the lockdown, in particular related to border crossing and the economy and survival of small and microbusiness.

Photo: Arctic Council



## 2.0

# INTRODUCTION ARCTIC REGION

This report covers the Arctic region, Inuit Nanaat and Sápmi, the homelands and territories of Inuit and Saami. Inuit Nanaat comprises approximately 180,000 Inuit from Chukotka (Russia), Alaska (USA), Canada, and Kalallit Nunaat (Greenland). Sápmi covers the geographical area of reindeer husbandry in Norway and Sweden, the Saami administrative area in Finland and great parts of the Kola Peninsula in northwest Russia. There are no exact numbers of Saami people registered.

Inuit Nunaat covers a vast area with rural and remote Inuit communities. Many Inuit communities lack infrastructure, including potable water and sewer services, overcrowding due to lack of housing, and affordable, accessible broadband accessibility as very real and pressing issues. In addition, such conditions impact the interrelated food insecurity. Such challenges become starkly evident during a pandemic and increase the risks of spreading the disease. In this context, food security becomes an even more critical, essential element to ensuring individual and collective health and wellbeing.

Most of Sápmi is inhabited by a mixed population, Saami people and majority national population, as well as communities with people of other minority language groups. There is no ethnical disaggregation of data on COVID-19 cases of infections nor deaths in any of the four countries the Saami people inhabit. The distinction can only be made based on geography and knowing which communities traditionally and still today have large percentage of Saami population. The socio-economic situation for the Saami people does not differ largely from the overall population, even though the material content and culture of socio-economic foundation is distinctly different. The report focuses mainly on how the Saami communities are impacted of the lockdown.



Photo: [visitnorway.com](http://visitnorway.com)

In general, it seems to be less cases of COVID-19 and definitely fewer deaths from Covid-19 in the Arctic region than in the southern parts of the Arctic states. These data are not disaggregated by ethnicity. Those communities and leadership that have the authority, capacity and ability to limit travel to their communities and regions have made a substantial contribution to curbing the rise or outbreaks of Covid-19. Early and decisive action has been critical to safeguarding many Inuit communities, for example.

### 3.0

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARCTIC

Inuit and Saami were among the participants at the 6th Arctic Leaders' Summit in Roavvenjárga – Rovaniemi, Finland last year. The Indigenous leaders in the Arctic raised concerns about the rate of warming in the Arctic occurring at the highest rate of any region of the world. The Arctic regions are disproportionately more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of the changing climate, and the people, flora and fauna are the first to experience them directly. The Arctic environment continues to undergo profound, rapid, and unpredictable change and the Arctic communities both witness and are impacted by the effects of these changes. There are adverse implications for the health of animal and fish populations, the food security, as well as the harmful impacts upon the emotional, cultural, spiritual, and physical well-being, which are already being experienced by Arctic Indigenous peoples. The current State-led responses to climate change around the world are not sufficiently responsive to the dire circumstances, the Arctic Indigenous Leaders expressed concerns that while Indigenous Peoples' are taking responsibility to the traditional territories with its lands and waters, their voices are not being heard when actions are taken for these territories.



Photo: Arctic Council

The Arctic Indigenous Peoples have distinct ways of life that has facilitated the life and survival in the circumpolar North since time immemorial. This constitutes the right to maintain and adapt to the future in a way that is culturally relevant to the Arctic Indigenous way of life inclusive of fishing, hunting, reindeer herding, craftsmanship, art, songs, and dance.

From Indigenous peoples' perspective, there is a need to utilize holistic Indigenous health care when providing care for mental health and well-being. The mental health is valued to the same degree as physical health, so accessibility to mental health services should be proportionally accessible as compared to physical illnesses.

The above expressions enshrined in the 6th Arctic Leaders' Summit Declaration[1] could serve as a testimony of the perspectives as an aspiration for Indigenous Peoples' sustainable development.

### 3.1

## IMPLEMENTATION OF SDGS

Finland is submitting its report for the Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2020 and can thus serve as an example regarding data and statistics. Leaving no one behind is a central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Finland explains in its report that the Finnish statistical data do not necessarily allow the in-depth disaggregation required and emphasized in certain SDG indicators. For example, disaggregation on the grounds of vulnerable group status is seldom possible in statistics. Disaggregation on the grounds of race, ethnic minority grouping, indigenous status and disabilities are currently void from official statistics for ethical reasons. It has been considered inappropriate to pinpoint minority groups in statistics compiled for the needs of an equal and democratic society. The same attitude is observed in the other Arctic states. There is a need to ensure the capacity among the indigenous peoples' institutions to handle data and statistic of their own people that can serve as baseline for assessing the status of the SDG among Inuit and Saami. If that is deemed challenging, other methods should be sought to be established to strengthen the baselines on the living conditions of Inuit and Saami.

There is however some knowledge about the situation of Saami. Finland's 2020 VNR states that especially those who belong to the minorities face discrimination in different areas of life. National equality legislation and anti-discrimination policies aim to ensure that equal opportunities are achieved regardless of a person's background. The situation is likely similar in other countries. Studies in Norway finds that Saami people report more experienced discrimination than the majority population[2].

[1] <https://www.arcticpeoples.com/arcticleaderssummit#als>

[2] Ketil Lenert Hansen (student), Maria Melhus, Asle Høgmo & Eiliv Lund (2008) Ethnic discrimination and bullying in the Sami and non-Sami populations in Norway: the SAMINOR study, International Journal of Circumpolar Health, 67:1, 99-115, DOI: 10.3402/ijch.v67i1.18243



There is generally little contact between the state authorities and indigenous organisations on the implementation of the SDGs. There are some efforts to translate the goals to indigenous languages and Saami Council has recently adopted a strategy document to assist in implementation of the SDGs in Sápmi. Finland invited the Sámi Parliament to write their own section in the VNR. This is a good way to ensure that the indigenous voice and perspectives are reflected in the VNR.

There is pressing need for increased capacity in the indigenous organisation in the Arctic to work with the SDG and the implementation of them, both at local level, to follow up the national states and to engage at the UN level. It is however, challenging to report on the achievement of the SDG if there is no baseline to start from.

## 4.0

# IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 ON WELL-BEING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## 4.1

### INUIT NUNAAT

Overcrowding, food insecurity, lower life expectancy, and a high prevalence of tuberculosis are among the inequities experienced by Inuit that are linked to poor infrastructure. Many homes lack running water and a flush toilet. Many more depend on aging and deteriorating piped and haul systems. These conditions contribute to severe and multiple illnesses, including invasive pneumococcal disease that are among the highest in the world. Household overcrowding has numerous interrelated adverse impacts, from mental well-being to physical health.

Coupled with high rates of food insecurity experienced by many, these concerns are real and complex. The gaps in accessible medical facilities and services are also a very real and an even more pressing concern. If not addressed, they will contribute to increased risk of infection and potential loss of lives. While those outside of the Arctic are simply turning to technology for work and otherwise, access and availability to basic and affordable broadband across much of Inuit Nunaat, especially during this time of a global pandemic, has created an unfortunate and stark disparity. Connectivity is essential.

These disparities have been seen to have adverse effects in other populations and have shown to increase the rates of COVID-19.

Inuit are also challenged by the call for physical distancing and social isolation, while necessary to flatten the curve, it has direct impacts on the people and communities overall. For Inuit, as a distinct people, family is at the core. Sharing food, supporting each other and being together physically defines the culture. Though intergenerational relationships, such as those between young children and elders are heavily strained during these uncertain times new ways to keep connections and to support each other are being learnt.

Inuit are calling upon governments to close infrastructure gaps throughout Inuit Nunaat through major new investments in Inuit communities, prioritizing basic infrastructure such as housing, water, and sewer and broadband connections, which are echoed by other Indigenous peoples across the globe. Social and economic equity, and supporting population health, and reducing vulnerability to virus and disease is critical. These concerns are compounded by the long-standing infrastructure deficit; threats to food security due to adverse impacts of climate change and related decrease in sea ice; persistent organic pollutants; and a host of many other issues triggered from afar, but laid throughout the Arctic. Hence, basic health and well-being must be understood in the context of numerous elements that are now exacerbated by Covid-19. More details on Inuit and COVID-19 shared by the Canadian Government: <https://hillnotes.ca/2020/05/26/inuit-nunangat-and-covid-19/>

Inuit Nunaat or the traditional territory of Inuit covers vast distances, comprises approximately just over 40% of the Arctic region. Inuit communities are remote and rural, with access only by air or sea. On one hand, this made Inuit community response to the pandemic straightforward, with leadership responding to protect their respective communities from the pandemic. On the other hand, what is deemed “essential” by those in the south does not align with the necessities in the Arctic.

**INUIT ARE CALLING UPON GOVERNMENTS TO CLOSE INFRASTRUCTURE GAPS THROUGHOUT INUIT NUNAAT THROUGH MAJOR NEW INVESTMENTS IN INUIT COMMUNITIES, PRIORITIZING BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE SUCH AS HOUSING, WATER, AND SEWER AND BROADBAND CONNECTIONS, WHICH ARE ECHOED BY OTHER INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ACROSS THE GLOBE.**

## 4.2

### SÁPMI

Finland and Norway both imposed a lockdown in mid-March. Sweden remained open but provided strong advice on how to limit the virus. The Russian Federation also has strong restrictions in place.

There have so far been few COVID-19 cases in what we consider the Saami area. Except in Murmansk (Russian Federation), and Norrbotten (Sweden). These peaks seem to stem from ongoing industry projects with commuting workforce. Thus, there is relatively little experience of the disease in Sápmi and we have yet to test the health service and infrastructure when put under pressure of a peak of cases. In that sense, the lockdown has worked to reduce the spread of the virus and in Sápmi the peak is prevented to kick in during the most challenging weather conditions during winter. Time will show if a second peak will appear when the society is reopened this Summer, or in the fall, when society starts up again after Summer break.

The Saami people have equal access to the health services as the society at large. In some cases, that means the same challenges as well, related to long distances to hospitals, unacceptable weak emergency preparedness, access to few respirators and so on. Additional challenges for the Saami people is long recognized lack of cultural appropriate health services, lack of Saami speaking nurses and doctors. Previous demography studies have indicated that there are generally more elderly people living in what are dominantly Saami communities. (e.g. northern Norway except big towns such as Romsa/Tromsø, Álttá/Alta, Girkonjárga/Kirkenes). There is a general call to limit the contact with elderly people (65+, later 80+), which would limit the natural exchange and nurture of the relationship with elders which is so important in Saami culture. This is likely to impact the general health of the elders in the long run.

Both the national media and Saami media are probably the main sources of information for many people. The municipalities are the lowest level in the public administration, and they have used information leaflets, social media, and SMS to their residents for quick, short and direct local information of cases or where to get help. General advice on the Corona virus, COVID-19 and how to tackle it has been translated to several Saami languages and made available in media and on the national health authorities as well as Saami Parliaments' webpages and in Saami media.



Information is available in davvisámegiella/north Saami, julevsámgiella/julev saami, åarjelsaemien/south saami, anarâškielâ /anar saami, nuõrttsää'm̃kiõll / eastern saami. The measures taken and the material made, even though translated to Saami languages, are not culturally adapted to Saami circumstances.

So far, the virus has been most spread in the areas around the capitals and around the larger cities in the south. Local administrations in the north has been criticized for putting in place local restrictions for people flying in from the south, and called for quarantine for those coming in. Finland is the only country that limited travel around the densely populated region around the capital, the area with most cases of infection. This could have been done in the other countries as well. From a Saami perspective, the boundary could as well be set by the Arctic Circle while keeping the national borders north of the Arctic circle open instead. This would keep the natural movement for reindeer and people and kept large part of the Saami economy going.

The effect of the COVID-19 situation on people's mental health is not yet documented, but it is reason to believe that isolation and insecurity will have a negative impact on the health of individuals, and it is important that health care institutions prepare for this.

There are both negative and positive impacts on the Saami communities of the national lockdowns. In some areas the reindeer husbandry operates more or less on the national borders and migration and other movement is crossing the borders. In the cases between Norway and Sweden the national authorities rapidly came with an exception for reindeer husbandry and allowed these herders to cross the border without quarantining afterwards.

The Saami people lives across several national borders.



Photo: visitnorway.com

A months-long closing of these borders interferes with the Saami families living on different sides of a border, it interferes with the social life of Saami as a people. And not least it impacts the economy. Most of our lives are regulated by the laws and regulations of the respective national state and face the same challenges with the lockdown as the rest of the country. A great part of the Saami economy is Saami wide. The marked for duodji (Sámi handicrafts) stretches across the whole of Sápmi (across borders), the Saami festival audience does not know the borders, the same goes for many students, in particular those connected to the Sámi university of Applied Sciences that serves the whole Sápmi.

Many tourist companies report total stop in their activities due to the closed borders and no travel. In some cases, this will be positive for reindeer husbandry during Easter, this Spring and the coming Summer, a time when many tourists visit the mountains, as the reindeer herders would not need to go out and call for closure of access due to reindeer migration, calving or other activities. This will reduce the potential conflicts between reindeer herders and the tourist companies, and from that have less impact on the mental wellbeing of the reindeer herders.

A significant decrease in the cost of gas and diesel, will have direct positive impact on the bottom line in the reindeer husbandry accounting. But it is still uncertain how the pandemic will influence the price of reindeer meat.

A lot of the Saami businesses are small or micro businesses, maybe often in combination with several other activities. It will be interesting to see if Saami businesses has survived better than in other areas, in the sense of being small in the first place and traditionally combined with several activities. It will be interesting to see if this combination made them more vulnerable or more resilient for unexpected and abrupt changes. Or maybe this traditional way of doing business has been broken already by Western ideas of how to organise a business. The question is also at what level we measure resilience, at company level or personal economy level of the person behind the business.

Saami Parliament in Norway and the Norwegian government through the revised National budget has provided economical support to Saami business in general.



Photo: visitfinland.com

## 5.0

# IMPACTS, CONSEQUENCES, AND CHALLENGES OF THE RESPONSE MEASURES

## 5.1

### INUIT NUNAAT

The Arctic Indigenous Peoples are already experiencing rapid climate and environmental changes. The Inuit express concerns of being at the front line of changing climate; whose homelands are adversely affected by pollutants from distant regions; whose food security depends on wildlife health and tenuous supply chains; and whose ability to travel between scattered communities has been affected in some places by the collapse of the airlines which are our lifelines. While many other regions are turning to information technology to continue “business as usual”, availability and affordable access to such services is either non-existent or cost prohibitive. It should be noted that these infrastructure gaps and the overall deficit are pre-existing. But in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic they are being felt more acutely and compound the very real exposure and risk that we face both individually and collectively.

There are some examples of additional funding going to Inuit land claim regions in Canada, as part of a support package by the Canadian government Indigenous peoples. How the money was spent was up to the regions themselves and a lot of the funding is supporting people on the land, harvesting activities, etc. As well, a private foundation provided support to assist Inuit students to help transit to online learning. <https://mastercardfdn.org/1-million-mastercard-foundation-contribution-to-support-student-needs-during-covid-19-pandemic/>

Social distancing and isolation has been some of the steps taken to protect oneself from the virus, this is in some cases difficult due to small communities and crowded houses, but also in general against the social codes among Indigenous peoples. Both Saami and Inuit have identified this is a challenging issue. This separation causes stress for young children who cannot be with their grandparents, since these adults are often their closest relative and sometimes fill a parenting role. Isolation has created challenges to mental and emotional well-being of Elders who are especially isolated, and more so if in a home or assisted living facility.

## 5.2

### SÁPMI

As the great part of the society locked down for several months, many people operated from their homes, putting high requirements to have good bandwidth on the internet connection. While Sápmi is quite well connected, the most unconnected places are also small Saami communities. The greatest challenges are, however, faced in remote Arctic communities in Alaska and northern Canada and the Russian Federation. It is thus challenging in many cases expensive, to stay engaged in circumpolar cooperation. On the other hand, when it comes to tele-medicine and distance education, it is the northern communities and Saami teachers and pupils that already holds experience on this field, as few teachers and long distance between pupils have brought this technology into teaching as soon as it became available.

Through discussions in the media, some national and local politicians have called for rapid start-up of planned industrial development projects, also projects that are still under consideration, due to the need for investments and employment opportunities in time of rapid increasing unemployment. This approach from the Government is concerning as it argues for rapid opening of industrial projects in order to keep the economy rolling and ensuring labour opportunities will replace the opportunity of the traditional livelihoods and Indigenous industry to thrive.

**THIS APPROACH FROM THE GOVERNMENT IS CONCERNING  
AS IT ARGUES FOR RAPID OPENING OF INDUSTRIAL  
PROJECTS IN ORDER TO KEEP THE ECONOMY ROLLING  
AND ENSURING LABOUR OPPORTUNITIES WILL REPLACE  
THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE TRADITIONAL LIVELIHOODS  
AND INDIGENOUS INDUSTRY TO THRIVE.**

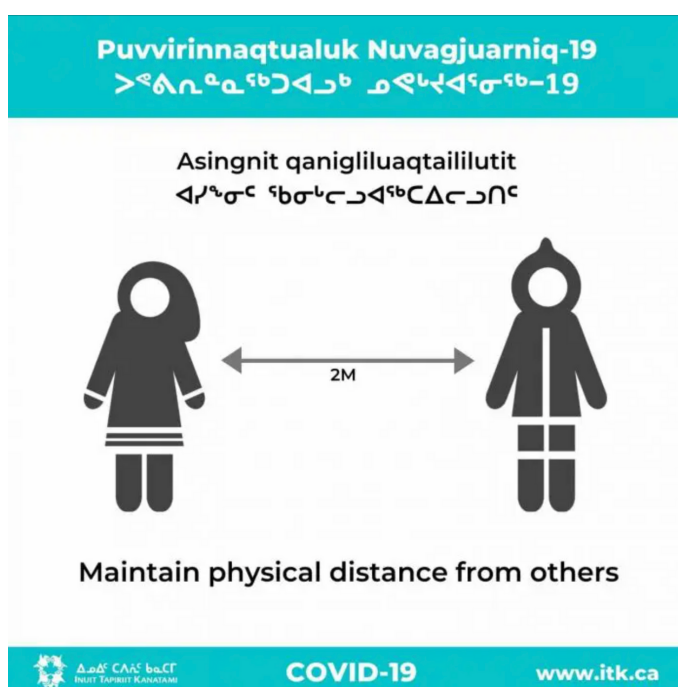
## 6.0

# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ADDRESSING COVID-19

## 6.1

## INUIT NUNAAT

Inuit-specific online activities have been developed, such as the apps, websites and games created by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and provided in Inuktitut and Inuvialuktun. These online tools include graphics to explain physical distancing and other pandemic safety procedures. The Canadian Government has injected funding (almost \$100 million CAD dollars) into the construction and operation of 12 new shelters for Indigenous women and girls and Pautuutit, an Inuit Women's Association, has called on the government to specifically dedicate some of these funds to Inuit women. <https://www.pauktuutit.ca/news/pauktuutit-inuit-women-of-canada-urges-prime-minister-to-reconcile-funding-of-inuit-shelters-for-women-and-children/>



Source: itk.ca

Canadian national Inuit organization, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), has also released infographics on how to safely prepare country foods and assures Northerners that marine mammals and other country foods remain healthy food choices.



## 6.2

### SÁPMI

The lockdown has prevented activities gathering people and have a great impact on the Sámi cultural life, as our festivals and markets, as well as conferences and seminars, are important meeting spots for us as a people. Many Sámi individuals and organisations make a living from organizing, or performing in, these events, and our duojárat, our handcrafters, are relying on these events for selling their products. As a result of the COVID-19 spread and lockdown, Sámi artists and organisers have lost their income. This is devastating for the cultural sector, which is so crucial for preservation and development of Sámi music, art, film, literature, and other cultural activities as well as for catalysing important discussions regarding the Sámi culture, our rights and our existence. The situation keeps evolving and restrictions are still in place over the Summer when reindeer husbandry moves into calf marking period that often gather up to 300 people. In the reindeer corral it is hard to keep distance to each other while working face to face and shoulder to shoulder. Guidelines on how to regulate human behaviour during this important event, are under discussion many places.

A positive measure enabled through The International Sámi Film Institute was the invitation to Saami film makers to apply for small grant to make short film about the COVID-19 situation. All together 15 short films will show experiences of the lockdown and the Covid-19 situation from a Saami perspective. The series is called Home Sweet home - Oru lea buoret gojodí (A Saami saying). The films became available in June[3]. <https://www.isfi.no/en/?post=home-sweet-home-significant-digital-premiere-of-sami-films>



**HOME SWEET HOME - SIGNIFICANT DIGITAL PREMIERE OF SÁMI FILMS**

Source: International Sami Film Institute

[3] <https://www.isfi.no/en/?post=home-sweet-home-significant-digital-premiere-of-sami-films>



## 7.0

## CONCLUSIONS AND SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

In general, there has been few cases of COVID-19 in the Arctic communities so far. The measures taken to stop the spread has worked. The pandemic has demonstrated great deficits in the infrastructure and health care system in Inuit Nunaat. This is a long-known fact, which it is high time to eliminate. Inuit call on Arctic governments to close the infrastructure gaps throughout Inuit Nunaat through major new investments in Inuit communities, prioritizing basic infrastructure such as housing, water, and sewer and broadband connections, which are similar demands being echoed by other Indigenous peoples across the globe. Social and economic equity, supporting population health, and reducing vulnerability to virus and disease is critical. The concern has only increased because compounded threats to the Inuit basic health and well-being are manifesting themselves. This would also be a leap in achieving SDG 4 to focussing among other things on universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all. Ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services would also support goal 11 on sustainable communities.

Sápmi is so far mostly impacted by the lockdown measures, restricting natural mobility across borders and the economy of small and micro businesses. The Saami express concerns about the ability of the present health care service to manage a great spread of COVID-19 in the north, as there are few respirators and long distances to hospitals. The Saami people living within four different national jurisdictions, our economies, and livelihoods, e.g. within reindeer husbandry, duodji (handicrafts), culture (festivals, artist) functions and markets do not know the borders. To facilitate and encourage policy consistency and alignment (e.g. coordinated mitigation measures) across the Nordic countries or even across the Arctic would be great support for the Saami culture. The stressful situation caused by the pandemic might increase already experienced discrimination reported by Saami individuals. Being mindful of making efforts to implement SDG 10 could reduce inequalities experienced by Saami in the daily life and those flowing out of the COVID-19 situation. More baseline data of the Saami population is needed. To draw attention to this deficiency, the Saami Council will investigate in the opportunities to make use of the Navigators[4] tool in Sápmi, to identify the rights situation among the Saami.

[4] <http://nav.indigenousnavigator.com/index.php/en/about/partners>

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