

A peer-reviewed open-access journal indexed in NepJol

ISSN 2990-7640 (online); ISSN 2542-2596 (print)

Published by Molung Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal

Article History: Received on November 11, 2022; Accepted on April 25, 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/mef.v13i01.56086>

The Preparation and Implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs): Its Implication in Improving Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

In the last two decades, Nepal's community (public) schools have been preparing, implementing and reviewing School Improvement Plans (SIPs) periodically. Schools submit SIPs to the Local Government (LG) to get disbursed school funds annually. One of the components of SIP includes learning outcomes (MoE, 2017). In this context, there is a general lack of research on the process of making SIPs and its effects on learning outcomes. To fill the existing lack of knowledge in this field, this research aims to answer two interrelated questions. First, what is the policy process of preparing SIP and how it is practiced? Second, what are the effects of teaching and learning process as envisioned in the SIPs on students' learning outcomes?

This research applies qualitative methods, analysing content of selected SIPs of three community schools of Kailali district from the far western region, especially focusing on the plans to improve learning outcomes. Building on these findings, case studies are conducted in the schools using semi – structured interviews by taking into consideration experiences of teachers, students, parents, SMC/PTA Chairs and members, resource persons and LG authorities (ten interviews in total) in July 2019, exploring how SIP has been understood and realized in practice on the ground. It is generally observed that the process of preparing and implementing SIPs has positive correlation with learning outcomes even if it is minimal over the time. In fact, the will – power on the part of school stakeholders is the key for the quality SIP, and the policy as envisioned at the centre has partially been implemented at grassroots.

Keywords: school improvement plan, community school, decentralization, learning outcomes, policy and practice

The Preparation and Implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs): Its Implication in Improving Learning Outcomes

In the last two decades, initiatives have been taken to decentralize the school education sector of Nepal through several acts and regulations (MoE, 2017). Stakeholders of the sector, such as the school management committees (SMCs), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), and head teachers (HTs) assume various roles and responsibilities in improving schools, including better teaching and learning outcomes. The SMC, as a school's governing body, undertakes the function of overall management, while the PTA engages with parents to promote their involvement in school activities.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 and the Local Government Operation Act 2017 have conferred powers and functions relating to the overall management and functioning of the school sector to the local governments (LGs). But, some ambiguities in jurisdiction still remain among different levels of the government.¹ As the policies of LGs should not contradict those of federal and provincial governments, LGs are reluctant to formulate education policy on their own given that there is no federal Education Act. This state of affairs has led to confusion among different levels of government. This confusion is also because of a conflicting provision in the constitution. In Schedule 8, the power of basic and secondary education is mandated to the LGs, but in schedule 9, education is listed as a concurrent power of federal, state, and local levels. However, policy initiatives show that powers and functions regarding education are gradually being devolved to the local level in recent decades, even if the extent of such power varies.

¹For more on this, see, Shak Bahadur Budhathoki, 'Address Local Educational Issues', *The Rising Nepal*, December 23, 2019, <https://risingnepaldaily.com/opinion/address-local-educational-issues> and Shak Bahadur Budhathoki, 'Making Local Education Policies', *The Rising Nepal*, November 11, 2018. For details, see, *The Constitution of Nepal* (2015).

As part of devolving powers and functions to schools, existing government policy envisions that schools prepare and implement periodic plans called SIP. The SIP is a document that covers plans for a school's functioning and development for five years, and its work plan section is annually updated after reviewing the previous year's progress and bottlenecks. The SIP consists of the school's introduction (historical, geographical, school's catchment area² and its population composition³, programs implemented in the school), analysis of the school's context (in terms of its physical infrastructure, management, and administrative aspects, economic condition and so on, its major challenges and solutions to them), framing of plans (school's vision, objective, identification of school's priority, identification of five years' activities, budget estimates), and annual implementation as well as monitoring plan (MoE, 2017).

School stakeholders chart out their strategic plans in the SIP. Nepal's community schools have been preparing and implementing SIPs mandatorily since the fiscal year 2001/02 (Budhathoki, 2021; CERID, 2003; MoE, 2014). The SIP should be aligned with existing government policy provisions, but the stakeholders, the SMC, the PTA, and the HT, take school-specific context into consideration as they understand their context better (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009).

Globally, the trend of decentralizing education began in the 1970s, and the reasons for this were the disintegration of centralized governments, financial globalization, and the emergence of new information and communication technologies to control systems (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Welsh & McGinn, 1999), and the SIP has been considered to be a tool for education decentralization. Over time, there have been different experiences of education

²School's catchment area refers to the geographic area where a school is supposed to provide its services and from where children come to the school to acquire formal education.

³The population composition refers to disaggregation of different groups of people in certain geographical areas such as percentages of ethnic and caste groups Tharu, Brahmin, Chhetri and so on.

sector decentralization across the world. It is hard to generalize such dynamics in their totality as they often manifest differently depending on country contexts.

But, it is important to review the contextual factors to determine why and how education decentralization has been successful in some contexts and not in others.

This paper attempts to contextualize Nepal's education decentralization process, taking the case of SIP preparation and implementation with a focus on teaching and learning processes and students' learning outcomes. Two decades after its introduction, the process of SIP preparation and its quality varies from one school to another. As observed, the willpower and initiatives of the HT and teachers play a crucial role in preparing a SIP. In general, these school stakeholders perceive that SIPs play a key role in improving the overall school education. The policy, as envisioned by the center, is only partially implemented on the ground, and Nepal's experience is similar to that of other countries to some extent in decentralizing the education sector.

The next section of this article provides a brief description of the methodology adopted for this research and then moves onto the introduction of SIPs and policy provisions governing them, and their implementation in the frontline, followed by analyses of SIPs of three selected schools and their subsequent effects on students' learning outcomes. Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the findings.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative methods. Content analysis of SIP documents of three randomly chosen public schools of the Kailali district was conducted. Of these, two schools were located in rural areas and one in urban areas. In doing content analysis, the SIP framework, as provided by the Government of Nepal (MoE, 2017), has been taken into consideration, and the focus has been on teaching and learning outcomes.

While doing the content analysis, the plans and activities as set out in SIPs for improving the learning outcomes were studied, and then their feasibility, relevancy, and usefulness were observed, assessed, and contextualized to generate meaning. The purpose of doing the content analysis was to see if school stakeholders follow the policy framework as envisioned at the center, contextualizing it in their context, including the process undertaken to come up with the plans and policies. Moreover, an attempt has been made to draw a pattern of portrayal of learning outcomes as depicted in the SIPs.

Based on the information generated from content analysis of SIPs, case studies of the schools were also conducted to understand the process of SIP preparation and implementation. The author participated in the SIP preparation and review meetings in two of the schools, which allowed them to observe and understand the context better. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted with HTs, teachers, chairs, and members of SMCs and PTA (ten respondents in total) in July 2019. The interviews lasted about thirty to forty minutes and were concerned with the process of SIP preparation and implementation, how they envisioned learning outcomes, and their subsequent effects on students' actual learning outcomes. After the interview, a general pattern is extracted by situating the findings in the school context and generating meaning. The limitation of this research is that it is conducted in the three schools of the western Terai region of Nepal. Therefore, the findings may be little generalizable in other parts and contexts of the country, such as hilly and mountain regions.

The Concept and Objective of SIP

Nepal's education sector was decentralized during the decade of 2000s with the seventh amendment of the Education Act 1971 conferring different powers and functions to local stakeholders, mainly school administration, i.e., the HT and the SMC. As power was distributed between the HT and the SMC, they would make key decisions on financial, administrative, and educational issues.

Therefore, Nepal's education decentralization tilts towards a mix of political-administrative models since it gives authority to school administrators as well as an elected body, the SMC, in operating schools.

In the changed context of federalism in Nepal since 2015, schools submit SIPs to LGs annually to get their funds. Hence, LGs should take account of problems, programs, and plans in the SIP while preparing educational policies and plans (MoE, 2017). This is an example of a bottom-up planning approach as envisioned in the seventh amendment of the Education Act of 1971 and Education Regulation of 2001 (CERID, 2003). As recent legal and constitutional provisions are in the process of implementation, how much decentralization initiatives will translate into practice in the upcoming years is yet to be seen.

The SIP has been practiced in Nepal's community schools as a tool for education decentralization since 2001/02 as a part of Basic and Primary Education Programme II (Budhathoki, 2021; CERID, 2003; CERID, 2005). Enhancing the learning environment is one of the major components of SIPs. For instance, the government's book designed to support SIP-preparation states, 'The major objective of SIP is to ensure better school, better teaching, and better learning for improving quality of education. SIP is a means to support schools to improve the quality of education with their own initiatives' (translated from Nepali) (MoE, 2017, p. 2).

The practice of planning has increased the engagement of local stakeholders in schools and brought about positive results. The government's guidebook further elaborates, 'Making such plans has enhanced stakeholder participation and capacity building. The concern, participation, ownership, and accountability of the local community have increased in making and implementing plans and mobilizing resources' (translated from Nepali) (MoE, 2017, p. 2). In the two decades since its implementation, the SIPs have resulted in

some positive outcomes at the local level. Yet, it is important to verify and validate context-specific outcomes.

In theory, schools should align SIPs with the policies, programs, and priorities set out by the federal, provincial, and local governments.⁴

Concomitantly, LGs should also include problems, concerns, and programs of SIPs in their education policies and plans (MoE, 2017). This is how bottom-up planning should be implemented in the decentralized context, but, in practice, it was observed that it was implemented only partially.

The SMC is required to form a taskforce of five members to prepare the SIP—the HT, representatives of SMC and PTA, a teacher, and a local educationist—from among the stakeholders (MoE, 2017). The taskforce holds consultation meetings, reviews the previous year's work, and comes up with new priorities. Then the action plan is updated in the annual section of the five-year SIP. Once the SMC approves the plan, a copy is submitted to the LG for the disbursement of school funds. The HT takes the lead role in implementing the plans, while the SMC monitors, evaluates, and reviews the progress (MoE, 2017). However, this policy provision is operationalized differently across schools for a variety of reasons. The next section makes a detailed discussion on how SIPs are prepared and implemented at the school level based on case studies of three schools.

The Practice of Preparing SIPs

At the local level, school stakeholders come together to write SIPs, form task forces, and share responsibilities as envisioned in the existing policy. This exercise had slightly improved in comparison to the practices in the previous years in the three schools where the case study was conducted. The SIP writing

⁴One HT shared that the finalisation of the SIP was on hold because the provincial and local governments asked them to wait for their policies and programmes (Interview on 5 July 2019 in Dhangadhi, Kailali).

process has gradually become a collective effort in recent years, which is a good change in many ways.

As it is observed, teachers and HTs can formulate good SIPs if they have the willpower and commitment. In one school, there were a few teachers who worked hard to produce a good SIP. A teacher at that school searched for the government's guidelines for writing SIPs online.⁵ With this small initiative, the teachers were able to accomplish much. In another school, a newly appointed HT engaged proactively in preparing the SIP by asking HTs of other schools with experience in preparing SIPs and learning how to write them. In an interview, a recently appointed HT said that he contacted 40 to 50 HTs to inquire about the process of preparing SIPs and the contents to be included in them, as it was the first time he had been directly engaged in preparing one. He was able to develop a good SIP for the first time in the school's history, working hard and in cooperation with other stakeholders. As indicated by the evidence, it is the HTs and teachers who are mostly engaged in preparing SIPs (Budhathoki, 2021; CERID, 2003). This scenario has not changed much over the years.

Most respondents said that data collection is a daunting task in the course of preparing a SIP. The schools need data regarding students' subject-wise and grade-wise learning outcomes of previous years, population composition of students by ethnic groups, number of school-age children, number of children with disability, and so on in the school's area. As it takes time to collect specific data, the writing too, therefore, often gets delayed.

The recently appointed HT struggled to gather data, and he had to visit the ward office and meet key authorities who had been involved with the school from the early years, as the school had no system of record-keeping. The previous HT

⁵The SIP Preparation Guidebook 2017 is available in the website of the Department of Education, Government of Nepal. Although the book mentions that it would be available to schools in physical form, most schools do not have access to it.

did not make a complete SIP as specified, and hence the required data was not available. Thus, the new HT had to start from scratch. The HT worked hard to collect correct information on the history of the school.⁶ All schools come across such hurdles, though they may differ in degree. Literature suggests that the process of data collection burdens teachers as ‘planning requirements often have the unintended effect of overloading teachers and administrators’ (Levine & Leibert, 1987).

It appears that need-based institutional support to write SIPs is lacking. For example, the recently appointed HT said that earlier, he had to copy another school’s SIP as he had to work entirely on his own. Of the three case studies for this paper, two HTs received a short orientation on writing SIPs from the LG,⁷ but whether they were useful remains questionable as the content of such training was unclear. In some cases, cooperation and coordination between schools and local and provincial governments in writing SIPs are observable. Still, there is no specific mechanism set out in this regard except the requirement that LGs should collect SIPs from schools. In cases where there is cooperation among them, it is primarily because of the initiatives of HTs. One of the case study schools cooperated with local and provincial governments to align the SIP with their policies and programs to make it easier for them to get some funding for the specified programs.⁸ To do this, the HT of the school has maintained a very good relationship with local and provincial governments. However, the coordination was possible because of the efforts of the HT rather than the institutional mechanisms in place.

⁶This is based on an interview with a recently appointed HT on 5 July 2019 in Dhangadhi, Kailali. According to him, there were disagreements about when the school was established, but he got the correct information after talking to key authorities who were associated with the school in its formative years.

⁷Based on an interview with an HT on 6 July 2019 in Dhangadhi, Kailali.

⁸Based on an interview with an HT on 5 July 2019 in Dhangadhi, Kailali.

The policy for writing SIPs has been implemented only partially. In particular, the participation of some stakeholders, such as parents, has been unsatisfactory, partly because they are unaware of these processes. Although there have been recent initiatives to promote parental engagement, only a few parents participate, and even when they do, they hardly voice their concerns.⁹ This is mainly because of existing power dynamics in public schools where parents are perceived to be inferior to teachers partly in relation to their low educational qualification in some cases.

As discussed above, the increased participation and engagement of stakeholders in preparing SIPs at the school level is a positive indication of the process of education decentralization. In fact, this process needs to be deeper and wider to address “school concerns” and “for relevant and appropriate engagement or interventions to occur” (Cleveland & Sink, 2018, p. 5). The more stakeholders take part in such processes in schools, they develop a better understanding of the school context, resulting in preparing better plans. Further, this process is likely to be more relevant and context-specific as stakeholders better understand the school context.

The Portrayal of Learning Outcomes

In this section, a brief discussion will be made on learning outcomes as outlined in the SIPs of case study schools. The term 'learning outcomes', which is an essential component of the SIP, generally refers to a statement on what the learner is expected to be able to do or know about and/or value at the completion of a unit of study and it is expressed in numbers in SIPs.

There is a great variation among schools on how they depict learning outcomes in SIPs—some schools do it impeccably, while others miss out on some

⁹The author spent seven hours at a school attending the SIP preparation meeting. He found that there were very few parents in attendance, and they had almost no say, mainly because they were not literate about such processes. So was the case in another school, where parents had hardly any idea on how to share their ideas and feedback for the SIP.

points or do not follow all the procedures for a number of reasons, including the capacity of the school leadership. For example, when asked about parents' concerns regarding learning outcomes, teachers said that most parents are highly concerned about their children's learning outcomes. This means parents are aware that children should learn better in school. Therefore, it is important to how such issues are included in SIPs and how stakeholders address parents' concerns.

One rural school presented detailed plans for students' learning outcomes at two levels. First, they provided data on grade-wise learning outcomes to be achieved in five years. Second, they presented data on targets of learning outcomes, expressed in percentage of the total achievement expected to be achieved every year for each grade and each subject. They used illustrations to show clear targets on the percentage of learning outcomes to be achieved for the upcoming years.

In the annual implementation plan section of the SIP for the following year, the school had provided students' learning outcomes to be achieved, expressed in percentage, on the basis of marks received by the students of each grade for every subject in the previous year. This enables everyone to compare the students' performance based on the academic result of the previous year. In this school, there was an average increase in the examination scores in all grades by about 3 to 4 percentage points except in grades 6 and 7. This means that the school achieved the target, though partially. Finally, the SIP also set a target for achieving 2 to 6 percent growth in learning outcomes for the current year. In this way, the plan seems to be rigorous, systematic, and achievable for the upcoming years.

In fact, this school did a wonderful job because it produced a good quality SIP which included all the contents as required, including fitting in data properly and reliably, even though the HT hardly took any leadership responsibility for the task. Instead, it was the vice-HT who took the lead role in this regard. For the last

few years, the teachers¹⁰ of the school have been preparing and finalizing the SIP. But this year, the SMC formed a task force that invited stakeholders to review and identify issues to be included in the SIP.¹¹ As an invitee, the author had an opportunity to participate in and observe the meeting.

The next school presented the current scenario of learning outcomes of students of each grade for every subject based on the mark ledger of the previous academic session. The school reviewed action plans of the previous years to improve learning outcomes for four subjects, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, and English, and found that there was an increase in learning outcomes of up to 2 percentage points in a year. Analyzing the data, it was pointed out that students performed poorly in English in the lower grades and in Mathematics in the higher grades. The reason behind their 'poor performance', as mentioned in the SIPs, was traditional teaching methods that made it difficult for students to conceptualize learning. By the term 'traditional teaching methods,' they generally meant teacher-centric teaching methods, which predominantly involved giving lectures and rote learning.

Although the SIP consisted of plans to increase students' learning outcomes for five years, they were not disaggregated subject-wise, unlike in the previous school. The plans were, therefore, a little vague. The SIP also included plans to increase students' learning outcomes by providing additional classes for students performing poorly, holding interactions with parents regularly, rewarding/penalizing teachers based on their performance, preparing and using local teaching materials, and so on. In short, the plan entailed an exhaustive list of action plans to improve students' learning outcomes in the following years.

¹⁰One of the teachers used to take the responsibility of writing the SIP in the previous years and he used to be paid for it. But this year, they have taken collective responsibility. This is based on an interview on 9 July 2019 in Dhangadhi, Kailali.

¹¹Based on an interview with a teacher of the school on 9 July 2019 in Dhangadhi, Kailali.

The third school outlined students' learning outcomes of the previous year for each grade for every subject, but it is unclear whether the learning outcomes were based on the mark ledger of the annual examinations or something else. The available data were not interpreted substantially, even though it was mandatory under the existing policy. Thus, it was difficult to understand the SIP.

Furthermore, it set the target of achieving growth in students' learning outcomes from 49 to 80 percent in five years without disaggregating present subject-wise learning outcomes of each grade. This made the target unreliable. Hence, the SIP of the school targeted growth in students' learning outcomes on a weak basis.

SIPs discuss little on challenges and opportunities in improving learning outcomes. They do not contextualize issues while setting priorities. Some schools list out priorities, while others set specific targets to be achieved annually. Thus, schools show great variation in preparing and implementing the SIPs. As discussed earlier, there are a number of contextual reasons for this state of affairs, including the pro-activeness of its stakeholders—mostly teachers and the HTs.

In order to make the planning and implementation process effective, school stakeholders must come together on a regular basis to reflect and review what they have achieved thus far, what remains to be achieved, and what measures are required for that purpose. Voort (2014) stresses the need to "allocate the necessary time and opportunity to reflect constantly on the improvements they have implemented, evaluate the effectiveness thereof to reach the intended outcome" (p.5). In fact, this review and planning process should be meaningful, participatory, and transparent to really affect the overall school condition in the short and long run. The collective efforts at the school level are critical for planning and achieving the goals as set out.

The Effects on Learning Outcomes

The existing literature on the relationship between SIP and students' learning outcomes has two dimensions. First, it is argued that SIPs have positive outcomes as 'Some saw benefits in developing them [SIP], particularly administrators and teachers in leadership positions at their school' (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002, p. 289). The system of preparing SIP could, directly and indirectly, contribute to students' learning outcomes and school atmosphere. Achieving what has been set out in the plans may be difficult to realize within the timeframe, but some components of the plans could be achieved by different means.

However, many argue that preparing SIPs have little effect on improving students' learning outcomes as it may be used as an excuse for the ineffectiveness of school leadership. Levine and Leibert (1987) state:

In some cases, individual school plans seem to serve the latent function of providing administrators with a means to legitimate low student achievement. That is, since all the steps in the planning process have been followed and a plan for improvement has been approved by central office personnel, how can the principal be criticised when improvement does not occur? (p. 399).

This shows that preparing the plans but not implementing them effectively may not result in positive outcomes as envisioned in SIPs.

The issue of whether SIPs are translated into action or not is an under-researched phenomenon, as there is inadequate empirical research dealing with this topic. In addition, the "published literature on the impact of planning on performance produces few results" (Fernandez, 2011, p. 343). Although planning should generally produce good results, little evidence supports this idea.

In discussing how provisions in SIPs affect students' learning outcomes, it should be mentioned that one of the three schools planned learning outcomes

targets poorly and did not interpret data as required in the ministry's guideline. Given this context, it is hard to believe that the school implemented what was written down in the SIP. Yet, two schools successfully fit in data in the required format in detail, and therefore, they could say that what they had envisioned had been achieved. Further, since they consulted with relevant teachers in preparing the plans, the teachers had a sense of ownership of the set targets. Reactions and results in terms of the effects of SIPs on students' learning outcomes is, therefore mixed.

The SIP preparation process involves discussions on students' learning outcomes. As a result, this issue gets incorporated into the SIPs, and some HTs instruct teachers to achieve the targets set out. In some schools, there was a practice that subject teachers provided detailed data, expressed in percentage points, of learning outcomes they intended to improve upon in the upcoming years. Such practices should have positive effects on improving students' learning outcomes, as planning is critical to improving such outcomes (Angelle & Anfara Jr., 2006).

SIPs mention many zero-cost activities that could be implemented in schools with the purpose of improving students' learning outcomes. For instance, adopting student-centric teaching and learning methods, taking attendance at the beginning and end of each day to reduce the number of absentees, preparing and utilizing local teaching and learning materials, and holding meetings with parents on students' learning outcomes periodically are some of those activities. These activities could be useful for enhancing students' learning outcomes, provided that they are duly implemented.

It is generally observed that preparing and implementing SIPs positively correlate with improving learning outcomes. Yet the way the SIP process gets implemented can have a vital role in this regard. Specifically, how SIP envisions and incorporates teacher participation in teaching and learning processes is critical

because they have a major say in regard to real. This is in line with Chu Ho (2005) in context of Hong Kong, who focuses on the importance of teachers taking the initiative, “teachers who build strong relationships with their students and support their learning create a positive disciplinary climate and a greater sense of belonging among their students, which in turn will likely improve students’ academic achievement” (p. 61). Therefore, teachers assume a vital role in improving students’ learning outcomes, meaning their responsibilities need to be clearly positioned in the SIPs.

Conclusion

This article explored and contextualized the policy and practice of preparing and implementing SIPs in Nepal’s community (public) schools. In recent years, the process of preparing SIPs appears to have gradually been systematized in the schools of case study after two decades of its introduction as parents, teachers, students, SMC and PTA chairs and members, and ward chairs are involved as envisaged in the policy provision. However, the influence of parents is still negligible as they are little vocal and are less powerful than teachers in terms of educational qualification in the school contexts to voice their concerns. This article showed that preparing and implementing SIPs at the school level positively correlates with improving learning outcomes because school stakeholders set targets for the same and mobilize available resources such as teachers, school infrastructure, and so on. This is also because school stakeholders prepare these plans that inculcate ownership and make them responsible for realizing the set goals. Moreover, the local stakeholders would take account of available resources in formulating plans that would make plans more contextual, relevant, and achievable.

Implications

After two decades of policy implementation, the contextualization of SIP making process is still in its early phase in schools, indicating that it takes a long

time to translate policy into practice in a real sense. Thus, this suggests that formulating policy alone is insufficient, but the focus should be on its implementation on the ground. Similarly, consideration needs to be given to making policies that are contextual, relevant, and flexible so as to adapt them in a creative and innovative way.

In the decentralized context of the education sector, there should be a system whereby school-level plans and policies are taken into consideration by the existing government mechanism in the planning process, such as at the local and provincial governments. By doing this, SIP making process will be meaningful, and school stakeholders will be hopeful and see the reason for writing their plans in contexts. It is also important that there is a system to provide required technical support to schools for preparing and implementing plans and policies on a regular basis.

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