



Article

Need of Market-based Skills Training to Create Employment Opportunities for Returnee Migrants in Madhesh Province

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Abstract

A Rapid Market Appraisal (RMA) was conducted with the aim of exploring market prospects or the specific occupational skills in demand in the local markets of Madhesh Province so as to reintegrate the returnee migrant workers into the Nepalese economic system. In order to collect data for RMA, major key informants that are also the key labor market players of Madhesh Province like returnee migrant workers (RMWs), employers of major three occupational sectors (Construction, Agriculture and Tourism), training providers, entrepreneurs, and rural municipal representatives were identified from different seventeen municipalities of seven districts of Madhesh Province. While interacting with 87 returnee migrant workers (RMWs-64 as FGD and 23 as KII), it was found that around 70% of the 87 respondents did not have any specific skills learned in their respective destination countries, and the general skills acquired by them in such countries were not applicable in the context of Nepal.

Based on the collected data from 204 key informants of labor market, 24 different occupations were identified as highly demanding occupations in three occupational sectors, nine were in the construction sector, eight in the agriculture sector, and six in the tourism sector. It was also found that the Province, having the largest area of cultivated land in Nepal, is very potential for employing a bigger number of youths and returnees in the agriculture sector. However, it was felt necessary to make the agriculture sector truly attractive in terms of technology, financial access like floating subsidized loans and value addition. Regarding the access to the training and employment service providers (T&Es), there is sufficient access of training but maintaining the quality of training is a challenging issue, for which a mechanism has been suggested.

Keywords: rapid market appraisal, returnee migrant workers, skills gap, agro enterprise, destination countries

Background

The Madhesh Province that lies in the south-eastern region of Nepal was formed after the adoption of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. It is Nepal's most populous province as well as the smallest province comprising of a total of

eight districts. It borders the Province No. 1 in the east, the Bagmati Province in the north and west, and India's Bihar state in the south. It has an area of 9,661 km² (3,730 sq. mi)-about 6.5% of the country's total area. It has a population of 6,126,288 as per the 2021

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Nepal census, making it the most populated province of Nepal. It has the high poverty rate of 24.2% (but lower than Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces) (Nepal Rastra Bank [NRB], 2021) and the lowest Human Development Index among seven provinces of Nepal (Provincial Policy and Planning Commission, Province No. 2, 2077). The National Planning Commission (NPC) stated that Madhesh Province reported the highest unemployment rate (20.1 percent) which was 8.7 percentage points higher than the national average and employment rate of 31.8% (lower than the national average 34.2%). Thus, it is rational enough to select this province to explore economic opportunities for the returnees and chalk out plans and programs for their economic reintegration through Support to Knowledge and Life Long Skills (SKILLS) project. Similarly, 23.9% of the total migrant workers belong to this province and a sizeable number of them has returned home due to the COVID-19 crisis. In this background, SKILLS project of UNDP realized the need to conduct the rapid market appraisal (RMA) to reintegrate returnee migrant workers so that they would be mainstreamed in the economic system of Nepal.

A report published by the Institute for Strategic and Socio-economic Research (ISSR), Nepal (2020) mentioned that more than 600,000 Nepali migrant workers were likely to return home within a span of one year not only because of job loss but also of mental anxiety triggered by the pandemic. A large number of Nepali migrant laborers are also returning home before the actual expiry of full term of their contract, largely due to the non-renewal of contracts from the Gulf and Malaysian employers. As mentioned

in a report published by the Institute of Migration (IOM) (2020), this will further exacerbate the already gloomy scenario of the unemployment situation in Nepal. Even though around 500,000 youths enter the labor market every year, a majority of them find themselves bereft of job opportunities. This reflects how alarmingly Nepal is afflicted with the problem of joblessness.

At the same time, the inflow of remittances, a mainstay of the national economy of Nepal, has also been severely inhibited. Regarding the impacts of the pandemic on labor migration, the International Labor Organization in Nepal (ILO, 2020) stated that it has affected all aspects of human life, including the world of work, and further exacerbated the financial crisis, job crisis, rise in oil prices and trade renegotiations. The major objective of conducting the RMA, thus, was to identify specific occupational skills in demand in the local market and also the skills learned and brought by the returnee migrant workers (RMWs) to reintegrate them into the Nepalese economic system. Considering these facts in mind, the SKILLS project of UNDP decided to conduct RMA in Madhesh Province and Lumbini Province of Nepal for which I was selected to conduct RMA in Madhesh Province.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from the targeted areas of the Madhesh Province (17 rural municipalities and seven districts out of eight districts, except Mahottari). First, key informants for data collection were identified. Then, the potential occupations in each of the given three occupational sectors (construction, agriculture and tourism) were listed in

consultations with the Network of Returnee Migrant Workers (RMWs), Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FNCCI) and Chamber of Commerce and Industries (CCIs) of Bara and Parsa including Nepalese Young Entrepreneurs Forum (NYEF) representatives.

In order to approach the returnee migrants, the list provided by the Returnee Migrant Network Nepal, and Migration Resource Centers at concerned District Administration

Offices were consulted to obtain the detailed information about returnee migrant workers. In case of Dhanusha, Saptari and Rautahat, since the detailed information was not available to the researcher, the snowball approach was used and 23 Returnee Migrant Workers were identified with the support from Migration Resource Centers of the concerned District Administration Office. In case of other four districts, Bara, Parsa, Mahottari and Siraha, FGDs were conducted with RMWs with the support of Returnee Migrant Network Nepal.

Table 1

Distribution of Key Informants, Data Sources and Methods

Primary Data Source	Methods of Data Collection	Secondary Data Source	Remarks
Returnee Migrant Workers	Focused Group Discussion (FGD) 4 (64)	Province Profile	FGD in Bara, Parsa, Mahottari, Siraha, KII in other districts
CCI	Key Informants' Interview (KII) - 23 KII -5	Periodic Plan of Madhesh Province	
Contractors' Associations	In-depth Interview-4	Reports of MOF	In-depth Interview with professional associations
Hotel Associations Experts and Entrepreneurs	In-depth Interview-6 FGD-3 KII-12	Report of IOM Report of RERP	
Local Government Representatives	KII-17	District Profiles	17 rural municipalities
Industries/Companies	KII-8	Annual budget and program of rural municipalities	

For the purpose of primary data collection from the identified key informants, key informants' interview was applied to 17 local government representatives, individual employers and industries, while 4 FGDs to RMWs and 3 FGDs to entrepreneurs of specific occupations. Based on the collected

data, skills gap (skills learnt by returnee migrant workers in destination countries or skills training they were interested in and skills demanded by local job market in Nepal) and numerical gap (additional skilled human resources demanded by local job market) were identified based on which

conclusion was drawn and recommendations made for the report.

Likewise, 10 in-depth interviews were carried out with the related employers' associations like Hotel Association of Nepal, Contractors' Association Nepal etc or large construction companies in order to explore the demands of specific occupations in the construction and tourism sectors in the particular districts. Such interactions were also zeroed in on exploring the trends of human resource demand for at least three years.

Limitations of the Study

Since it was difficult to reach all the employers and entrepreneurs of targeted seven districts individually- due to the

limited time and resources, major key informants were identified and approached for data collection as mentioned in the table 1 as per the thrust of RMA. There were only 35 days available for the surveyor including report writing. Analysis, interpretation, conclusion and implications are based on the responses received from only the identified key informants. However, the validation of finding has been carried out through the triangulation of the data from secondary source and the surveyor's own observations, notes made during the survey.

Major Occupational Sectors

Based on the primary and secondary data collected from different sources and analysis of collected data, the following are the major findings of the rapid market appraisal:

Table 2

Distribution of RMWs by their Occupational Interests and Training

Sector	Occupational interest	No.	Percentage
Agriculture	Village Animal Health Worker	8	27.59
	Fishery Technician	7	24.14
	Banana Farming Technician	4	13.79
	Vegetable Producer	6	20.69
	Herbal farm worker	4	13.79
	Sub-Total	29	100.00
Construction	Aluminum Fabricator	8	18.60
	Furniture Maker	6	13.95
	Construction Carpenter	5	11.63
	Plumber	4	9.30
	Electrician	6	13.95
	Mason	4	9.30
	Welder	4	9.30
	Plasterer	2	4.65
	Scaffolder	4	9.30
	Sub-Total	43	100.00
	Tourism	Cook	4
Tourist Guide		2	18.18
Waiter/Waitress		3	27.27
Housekeeper		2	18.18
Sub-Total		11	100.00
Grand Total		83	

The Table 2 depicts the occupational interests of RMWs in which they want to be trained. It was found that the positions of Village Animal Health Worker, Fishery Technicians and Vegetable Producers belonging to the agriculture sector were most liked, whereas 13.79% of the respondents recommended for Banana Farming and Herbal Farmworkers.

Similarly, in the construction sector, the positions of Aluminum Fabricator, Electrician, Furniture Maker, Construction Carpenters, Scaffolder, Mason and Welder were found to have been sought-after by a majority of the RMWs. The occupation of Plasterer was liked by the least number of respondents i.e., 4.56%. Meantime, in the tourism sector, the positions of Cook (Nepali Cuisine), Waiter/Waitress at 27.27% and, Tourist Guide/ House Keeper occupations were found to have been preferred by 36.36%, 27.27% and 18% of the respondents respectively,

Out of the total participants, 95% (83) RMWs wanted training to enhance their skills and secure jobs. Among them, around 50% had chosen the construction sector, 35% (29/83) opted for the agriculture sector and the rest 15% interested in joining the hospitality sector. The IOM (2020) and RERP (2020) had mentioned that agriculture is mostly demanded sub-sector by returnees. However, in the case of Madhesh Province, construction and agriculture are the first and second most in-demand sectors respectively among the returnee migrant workers in terms of profession. Only 15% RMWs were found interested in the tourism sector.

While interacting with the RMWs using FGD and KII methods, it was found that around 70% of the total workers did not have

any specific skills learned in their respective destination countries and the general skills acquired by them in such countries were not applicable in the context of Nepal. Out of the remaining 30%, whose skills were partially matched, a majority of them reported that they were not engaged in any profession due to the low remuneration offer or the inability to invest in self-employment or enterprise development.

Demand Analysis

This section analyzes the most in-demand occupations as responded by the employers in the form of key informants under each of the sectors.

Construction Sector

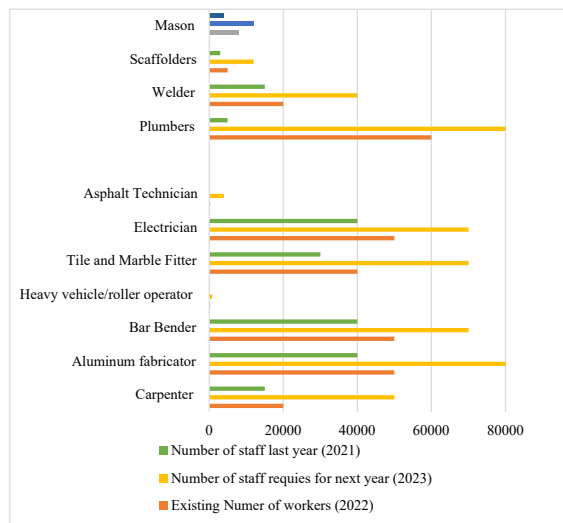
Since infrastructure development is the basic indicator of the holistic development of a country, both the central and local governments have accorded high priority to the construction sector. All the visited representatives of rural municipalities emphasized that the infrastructure development had been the foremost priority for the last one year and would continue to remain so for some more years to come. The following table depicts the information or data collected from the major respondents from key informants under the construction sector, including government representatives.

Figure 1 shows the trend of human resource requirements for three years. It depicts that the demands for most of the construction sector occupations are constantly on the upward trajectory. Such occupations pertain to plumbing, aluminum fabrication, electricity, bartending, asphalt technique,

heavy equipment operations, etc. It was found that a big majority (more than 90%) of the existing Asphalt Technicians are Indian workers and that they should be replaced by the Nepali ones.

Figure 1

Most Demanded Occupations (Construction)



Moreover, employers also further recommended that the trained youths should be competent enough by possessing various skills related to marketing, communication, etc. in addition to positive attitudes. The prime reasons behind the huge demands for the human resources of the construction sector as highlighted by the respondents were due to the infrastructure development plans of the provincial and local governments in the Madhesh Province as well as the frequent turnover of the staff. The following plan of GoN also contributes to the additional human resource demand in the construction sector:

- Fast Track (Kathmandu to Nijgadh) is undergoing;
- International Airport at Nijgadh is under process;

- The railway line is going to be expanded;
- Numerous road construction and irrigation canals have been planned.

The local government agencies like rural municipalities were found to have their own infrastructure development plans pertaining to local roads, irrigation canals, health posts, hospitals, municipality buildings, etc. Thus, a huge number of skilled workers in the construction sector is required. However, the demand of masonry is comparatively lower due to lack of earthquake resilient skills they lacked, and needed additional skills on existing workers.

The figure 1 also shows that a huge number of skilled workers in the construction sector is required for the year 2023. It shows the demand for construction workers is increasing constantly.

Regarding the bitter fact of Nepalese industries, it is noteworthy to mention the statement of a CCI official of Bara:

Around 75% of skilled workers hired by the industries in industrial corridor of Bara and Parsa districts are from out of the country- mostly from India. Owing to the behavioral or attitude related problems of the Nepalese workers coupled with the undue political influence of their trade unions, the employers are found reluctant to employ such workers in the industries. The factory owners believe that if they employ the Nepalese workers, it may result in strikes, padlocking of the industries, etc., thus hampering the entire manufacturing process. So, it was the demand of CCI that there should be only one professional trade union and the GoN should have a separate policy of

barring the workers from involving in any political parties or trade unions.

Likewise, NYEF official in Parsa mentioned:

Most of the youths in the informal sector are paid less than the minimum wages fixed by the GoN, so they get frustrated and, after getting some experience, move to another employer. This has led to the high turnover among the staff- a major problem being faced by the employers.

Both representatives from the CCI and NYEF mentioned that there is no any incentive mechanism for the entrepreneurs and industrialists rather private sector has to pay much tax without getting any subsidies from GoN. They recommended that if GoN wants to encourage returnees to retain in the country engaging them of self-employment or enterprise development, they should provide subsidized loans and tax exemption for processing machine, tools and equipment while importing from other countries. Though GoN has provisioned tax exemption policy and subsidized loan issue policy for agro- based enterprise, there is a huge gap in implementation of policy. Moreover, GoN and political parties of Nepal have to stop politicizing industrial workers so that their focus will be on their work rather than involving in political strikes. For this purpose, existing labor law needs to be revised to have only one professional trade union rather than having political party-based trade unions.

This statement alone indicates the need of policy level intervention as well as soft skills training for the workers to develop positive working attitude for the job and this is also equally important to enforce the minimum wages set by GoN even in informal sector.

Hospitality Sector

Figure 2 depicts the increasing occupational demand under hospitality sector as responded by the concerned key informants.

Figure 2
Most Demanded Occupations (Hospitality)



Based on the responses received from the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) as well as small entrepreneurs of the hospitality sector, as shown in the above chart, it was found that the occupational positions like Cook, Waiter/Waitress and Housekeeper were demanded much, while demand of tour guides, bar benders and front desk operators are also recommended in hospitality industries. Because of the priority of local government to develop tourist destinations, the demands for skilled human resources in all the above-mentioned occupations are on the rise. Among the various occupations in the service sector, the demand for Waiter/Waitress is projected to be the highest in the next year. Overall, based on the collective responses from key informants under hospitality sector, there will be a huge demand of workforce in the hospitality sector in the next year due to systematic development plans of the tourism sector proposed by both the private sector and local government. The local government, in particular, also has termed tourism as

one of the priority sectors in the planning documents.

Agriculture Sector

There are 6,561 agro-based small enterprises/ domestic industries in Madhesh Province (RERP, 2021) underdoing the scarcity of trained technical human resources. This is highlighted as a critical gap in the sector. Major agro-based products of the province, among others, are fruits, such as mango, pineapple, guava, papaya, etc, and crops like wheat, paddy, sugarcane, etc. Similarly, other such products include fish, oil products, and spices.

In the Madhesh Province, traditionally operated markets termed as *hatbazar* are the places for the smallholder farmers to sell their agricultural products. However, such markets are too unsystematic to provide equal opportunity for all farmers to sell their produce. Thus, modernization and commercialization of the existing traditional mode of agro production is very important linking them with the markets. As mentioned in the Provincial Profile of the Madhesh Province, 45% of the total fruit production in Nepal belongs to this province. Notably, the mangoes produced here account for some 70 percent of the total production of this kind of fruit in the country.

Banana is another fruit in the province that has a high potential. However, establishing fruit processing plants here for enterprise development is important as opined by the agriculture experts during the RMA.

The Madesh Province is a valuable commercial arena for both large and small market centers. This is so because of its

geographical structure, easy access to road networks, proximity to large market centers, including the highly populated cities of the neighboring India. However, to make agro-enterprises successful, the prime challenge is to face the harsh competition posed by the Indian agricultural products supplied largely by using modern technologies and in cheaper prices. Respondents from the local government and entrepreneurs emphasized that entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, and heavy use of technologies in agriculture production and processing should be the priority of all levels of GoN to integrate the returnee migrant workers. Those returnees with skills have an equal opportunity of replacing the Indian-dominated labor market.

Nepal has 24% of its total national land on an average appropriate for agriculture production while the Madhesh Province alone has 61% of its total land appropriate for agriculture production as stated in the Province Profile of Madhesh Province. Moreover, 63% of the wetlands in Nepal on an average are appropriate for agro- forestry while the said province alone has 94 percent of its total wetlands suitable for the same.

The province accounts for more than 33% of the total vegetable production in Nepal and its provincial productivity is also more than the average national productivity. The province's share in the total national production of milk stands at 17 percent. It has a 57% contribution to the total national fish production, a 41.67% contribution to the total cash crop production and a 20% contribution to the major crop production from Madhesh Province. (Provincial Policy and Plan, 2077)

During the interaction, one of the local Government heads, stated:

Agricultural land isn't the problem; the problem is the agricultural system. In this system, developing pocket area with mass production with market-based products ensuring market system is necessary. For example, we have developed all chains of fishery supplies from hatchery to fish farming and market for sales, and developed this municipality as a fish cluster. Dhanusha is enormously potential for fostering entrepreneurship in agriculture as well tourism. After assessing whether the returnee migrant workers are willing to start their own business or get job, preparation needs to be done accordingly, opportunity is enough for them.

Likewise, the Sub-Sector Analysis Report (FNCCI, 2021) recommended the following occupations as demanding occupations in agriculture sector at national level:

1. Fruits and vegetables processor
2. Dairy plant operator
3. Meat and fish processor
4. Tea and coffee processor
5. Agronomical grain processor
6. Herbal processor
7. Spices processor
8. Agricultural input supplier
9. Junior technical assistant (JTA)
10. Agricultural credit service provider

During the interaction with entrepreneurs in Dhanusha, Siraha and Saptari, it was found that fish farming was the most successful business for the farmers. Likewise, poultry farming was also a lucrative occupation in Bara, Parsa, Dhanusha, Siraha, and Mahottari. During the FGD and KII with local government representatives, it was found that poultry farming and fish farming

had changed the farmers' lives along with their living standards. In the same way, mango production in Siraha and Saptari is also a very attractive seasonal business in eastern Madhesh. One of the entrepreneurs during FGD in Dhanusha mentioned:

I have done fish farming in 3 bighas of land investing NRs 400,000 for the preparation of the pond and all the expense incurred for fishery including the cost paid to the hatchery. Entire expenditure incurred for fish farming was NRs.280, 000 for a year, including the cost of wages paid to regular staff for maintenance and farming as well as seasonal staff for catching fish. The net income I made from fish farming was NRs.120,000 in a year, excluding some fish that we consume at home for personal use. I have also created a regular job for 3 staffs and a seasonal job (fish catching) for ten people (since I have to pay 10% of the total cost of fish to the fish catchers- a group of ten).

The estimation of cost and profit was verified by another respondent of FGD, who invested NRs 1 million for acquiring nine *bighas* of land and preparing a pond for fish farming who spent around NRs 600,000 for all the expenditure incurred with net profit of NRs, 400,000 within one year and three months period.

Thus, the agriculture sector in the Madhes Province has profound potential for self-employment and job creation through enterprise development. Based on the interaction with the respondents, the following occupations under the agriculture sector are found demanded most by the market in Madhesh Province :

1. Poultry Farming Technician
2. Village Animal Health worker
3. Fishery Technician
4. Community Livestock Assistant
5. Organic Vegetable Producer
6. Banana farming Technician
7. Fruits Processor
8. Herbal Processing Technician.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

Based on the interaction with returnee migrants regarding their occupational interests responses received from different market players and local government representatives, the 24 occupations are found as the most demanding ones. Nine occupations are under the construction sector (plumber, building electrician, aluminum fabricator, house painter, asphalt technicians, construction carpenter, scaffolder, heavy equipment operator), seven under hospitality sector (cook, waiter, waitress, house keeper, tourist guide, bartender, front desk operator, barista maker), and eight under agriculture sector (poultry farming technician, village animal health workers, fishery technician, community livestock assistant, organic vegetable producer, banana farming technician, fruit processor, herbal processing technician).

In order to make reintegration program of returnee migrant workers more effective, the government and private sector have to join hands together providing technology supports based on business plan, credit linkage facilities for business, skills enhancement training and making the market system effective by developing pocket area for agricultural produces and other products.

Local Government exercising the power of monitoring and regulating vocational skills development training as mentioned in the constitution and Local Government Operational Act 2017, should develop strong mechanism to maintain quality of training and avoid duplication of resources. An institutional and policy level arrangement should be in place with the provision of business counselling, incubation training, market system development and support services. Effective implementation of National Education Policy, 2076 and National Vocational Qualification Framework for credit banking and credit transfer of skills acquired by skills holders are also felt. Strong coordination among Enterprise Development Facilitators (appointed by municipalities with the support of MEDPA/UNDP), Migration Resource Centers, focal persons of TVET program (Social Development Officer) and Employment Coordinator under PMEP within municipalities needs to be established.

Implications

Implications to Training Providers

Training providers were largely found going for less expensive common trades to impart training rather than providing training based on market demands which contributed in decreasing rate of employment of skilled graduates. Thus, training providers need to design training based on the demands of market, focusing more relevant market-based technology and skills in close coordination with local government, migration resource centers, and support service providers.

Implications to Local Government

Ensuring quality of vocational skills training and regulating the training is the

constitutional right of Local Government, so regular monitoring of the activities performed by different private sector training providers and other projects need to be done from planning phase so as to avoid duplication of resources and conduct training based on market demands in close coordination with market players. It can be done also by developing bench mark indicators for quality of training in major occupational sectors. It is also necessary to see whether the proposed training are against the human resource plan of the municipality as well as skills demanded by the local market. Moreover, having an effective database of skilled workers and potential unemployed youths, migrant and returnees, migrant workers as well as local employers would be helpful to effective labour market information system (LMIS) within municipalities.

Implications to Policy

The capacity of local government officials needs to be developed by implementing capacity development policy in the wake of restructuring of GoN under the federal system, particularly in exercising the rights ensured by the Constitution related to vocational skills training, managing databases, monitoring skills training and other economic activities, business counselling and business development supports defining the pocket area for agro-based products and agro-enterprise development, management of market Information systems (MIS), etc. GoN through MOLESS should initiate to amend labor policy, act, and bylaws to have only one personal trade union rather than party-affiliated trade unions to motivate industrialists to employ Nepali skilled workers. Another lack found in the effective

implementation of National Education Policy, 2076 was that National Qualification Framework for credit banking and credit transfer of skills acquired by individual skilled holders is to be done to encourage skills holders and facilitate them with job opportunities.

Implications to the Project

While designing a training plan for a project, consultation with various market players support service providers and local government is imperative. Training and employment service providers need to be selected in applying transparent procurement policy, and budget of training needs to be proposed considering quality of training.

Implication to Entrepreneurs and Skills Holders

Focus on entrepreneurs and skills holders is essential to enhance their skills and developing their expertise on particular occupations rather than testing different occupations in the name of training opportunities or business opportunities. It was reported during the FGD that one of the skilled graduates has different twelve certificates of level one training in various occupations, but he is still struggling for the job. It has the implication that the person should sharpen the skills and knowledge by upgrading the same skills rather than roaming around for other opportunities. However, having multi-skilling within the same sector would also be better for sustainable employment.

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