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Assessing the Impact of Pro-Poor Tourism Development on Poverty Alleviation in Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study assessed the impact of pro-poor tourism development on poverty alleviation in Imo State, Nigeria. Employing a descriptive survey research design, the study focused on a population of 391 staff members from the Ministry of Tourism in Imo State. Using a census sampling technique, the entire population was studied to ensure comprehensive coverage. Data were collected through a structured instrument titled the Pro-Poor Tourism Development and Poverty Alleviation Questionnaire (PPTDPAQ), which was validated by three subject-matter experts to ensure content relevance and reliability. The collected data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to determine trends and patterns. The findings revealed that tourism development initiatives in Imo State are significantly aligned with pro-poor tourism principles, promoting local employment, enterprise support, and community participation. Moreover, the study established that such initiatives have contributed meaningfully to poverty alleviation among local populations by creating economic opportunities and improving livelihood conditions. Based on the findings, the study recommended that the government implement skill acquisition programmes tailored to tourism-related jobs,

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thereby enhancing local capacity. Furthermore, it emphasized the need for transparent and equitable distribution of tourism revenues to ensure inclusive and sustainable poverty reduction outcomes.

Keywords: Pro-poor Tourism, Poverty Alleviation, Imo State, Tourism Development

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a pivotal sector in global economies, contributing approximately 10% to the world's GDP and supporting one in ten jobs worldwide. Its potential as a tool for poverty alleviation has garnered significant attention, particularly through the concept of pro-poor tourism (PPT). PPT aims to generate net benefits for impoverished communities by enhancing their participation in tourism-related activities and ensuring a fair distribution of the economic gains.

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty levels remain high, tourism has been identified as a viable strategy for pro-poor growth. Nigeria, endowed with rich cultural heritage and diverse natural attractions, has the potential to leverage tourism for economic development and poverty reduction. However, the extent to which tourism development translates into tangible poverty alleviation outcomes varies across regions.

Imo State, located in southeastern Nigeria, boasts several tourist attractions, including the Nekede Zoo and the Oguta Lake. Despite these assets, the state continues to grapple with high poverty rates and underdevelopment. This raises pertinent questions about the effectiveness of current tourism initiatives in addressing poverty and the potential for implementing PPT strategies to enhance socio-economic outcomes (Eleje, 2019).

This study aims to assess the impact of pro-poor tourism development on poverty alleviation in Imo State. By examining existing tourism policies, community participation levels, and the distribution of tourism benefits, the research seeks to identify gaps and propose strategies for optimizing tourism as a tool for poverty reduction. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism development in Nigeria and inform policy decisions aimed at fostering inclusive economic growth.

Statement of the Problem

Poverty remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges in Nigeria, despite decades of policy efforts and developmental interventions. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), over 63% of Nigerians are multidimensionally poor, with significant concentrations in the South-East geopolitical zone, including Imo State. In recent years, attention has shifted toward alternative strategies for poverty alleviation that move beyond traditional aid and handouts, focusing instead on sustainable and inclusive economic models. Among these is pro-poor tourism (PPT), a concept that advocates for the active involvement of poor communities in the tourism value chain and aims to ensure that the benefits of tourism development are equitably distributed among all stakeholders.

Imo State possesses numerous cultural, historical, and natural attractions with untapped tourism potential. Sites such as Oguta Lake, Mbari Cultural Centre, and various festivals reflect the state's rich heritage and tourism capacity. However, the visible underutilization of these resources, coupled with poor infrastructure, limited private-sector investment, and weak community involvement, continues to hinder tourism's ability to serve as a catalyst for economic empowerment. Although government policies and development plans often mention tourism as a potential growth sector, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that tourism in its current form is making a measurable impact on poverty levels in the state.

A critical gap exists in how tourism is planned and implemented in relation to poverty alleviation. Most tourism development projects tend to be top-down in approach, with minimal consultation or participation from local communities. As a result, benefits often accrue to external investors or urban elites, leaving the rural poor who are frequently the custodians of cultural and natural heritage excluded from the value chain. Without a deliberate pro-poor focus, tourism can deepen inequalities and even contribute to social displacement.

Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical research specifically examining the link between pro-poor tourism strategies and poverty alleviation outcomes in Imo State. Existing literature on PPT in Nigeria tends to focus on more popular tourist destinations such as Lagos, Calabar, and parts of the North Central region. Imo State remains relatively under-researched in this regard, despite its potential and the growing policy interest in diversifying the state's economy through tourism.

This study is therefore timely and necessary. It aims to fill the empirical gap by assessing the extent to which tourism development in Imo State aligns with pro-poor principles and whether such efforts translate into tangible poverty reduction outcomes. By identifying both the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches, the research hopes to offer actionable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and private sector actors interested in leveraging tourism as a tool for inclusive economic development.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study;

1. To what extent does tourism development in Imo State incorporate pro-poor principles and practices?
2. What are the measurable impacts of tourism on poverty alleviation among local communities in Imo State?
3. What are the key challenges and opportunities in using pro-poor tourism as a strategy for poverty reduction in Imo State?

Literature Review

Definition of Pro-Poor Tourism

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) refers to tourism initiatives that aim to deliver net benefits to the poor. It is not a specific type of tourism, but rather an approach or strategy that seeks to increase the participation of poor individuals and communities in the tourism value chain and ensure that the economic, social, and environmental gains from tourism contribute meaningfully to poverty reduction.

According to the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership (Ashley, Roe & Goodwin, 2001), "Pro-poor tourism is tourism that results in increased net benefits for poor people. The aim is to unlock opportunities for economic gain, livelihood support, or participation for the poor through tourism." This definition emphasizes that PPT is not limited to community-based or small-scale tourism; it can be applied across different tourism models, including mass tourism, as long as the poor benefit.

PPT strategies typically include:

- Increasing employment and income opportunities for the poor

- Supporting small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) owned or operated by poor individuals
- Encouraging partnerships between communities and private sector operators
- Promoting local procurement of goods and services
- Facilitating access to training, credit, and tourism-related infrastructure

Scheyvens (2007) argues that PPT should also address empowerment and capacity building, not merely income generation, in order to create long-term sustainable impacts. She cautions that unless tourism is accompanied by equitable planning, poor people may be further marginalized.

Furthermore, Chok, Macbeth, and Warren (2007) point out that while PPT has the potential to alleviate poverty, its implementation must be context-specific and integrated with broader development goals to avoid superficial or tokenistic interventions.

Concepts of Poverty and Poverty Alleviation

Poverty is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond the lack of income to include deprivation in areas such as education, health, living standards, and participation in social and political life. The World Bank (2023) defines poverty as "pronounced deprivation in well-being," encompassing not only material deprivation but also limited access to essential services, insecurity, and lack of voice and power. Traditionally, poverty has been measured using income thresholds such as the international poverty line of $2.15 per day (World Bank, 2023), but this monetary measure often fails to capture the full scope of human deprivation.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), provides a broader perspective by measuring overlapping deprivations in health, education, and living standards (UNDP, 2021). In Nigeria, over 63% of the population is considered multidimensionally poor, with wide regional disparities (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022).

Poverty alleviation, therefore, refers to any strategic effort aimed at reducing the level, depth, and persistence of poverty among a population. It involves both immediate interventions—such as cash transfers, food aid, and employment programs—and long-

term strategies like education, health care provision, economic empowerment, and sustainable livelihood development. Effective poverty alleviation not only raises income levels but also enhances people's capabilities to live fulfilling lives.

Contemporary development thinking advocates for inclusive and sustainable approaches to poverty reduction. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), for example, emphasizes enhancing people's access to five forms of capital—human, social, physical, financial, and natural—to build resilience and reduce vulnerability (Chambers & Conway, 1992). This approach aligns well with tourism-based strategies, especially Pro-Poor Tourism, which seeks to integrate poor communities into the tourism value chain as active participants and beneficiaries.

In Nigeria, poverty alleviation has remained a central theme in national development plans, yet outcomes have been mixed due to policy inconsistency, corruption, poor infrastructure, and limited community participation. Scholars such as Olayemi (2012) argue that for poverty alleviation to be effective, it must be locally grounded, participatory, and aligned with the needs and realities of the target population.

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) and Its Conceptual Framework

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) has emerged as a strategic approach aimed at ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed to improve the livelihoods of impoverished communities. Unlike traditional tourism models that often prioritize economic growth without specific regard for poverty impacts, PPT focuses explicitly on unlocking opportunities for the poor within the tourism sector (Dilys & Penny, 2001). This approach encompasses strategies such as expanding employment opportunities, fostering small enterprise development, and facilitating access to markets for local producers.

The theoretical underpinnings of PPT are rooted in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which emphasizes enhancing the assets and capabilities of the poor to achieve sustainable livelihood outcomes. By integrating tourism development with poverty reduction objectives, PPT seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable tourism industry.

Empirical Evidence of PPT in Sub-Saharan Africa

Empirical studies in sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated the potential of PPT to contribute to poverty alleviation. For instance, research indicates that tourism development can lead to significant benefits for the poor, particularly when local communities are actively involved in tourism enterprises and supply chains (Odhiambo,2021). However, the extent of these benefits is contingent upon factors such as policy frameworks, community engagement, and the equitable distribution of tourism revenues.

In Namibia, community-based tourism initiatives have been successful in generating income and employment for rural communities, thereby contributing to poverty reduction. These initiatives often involve partnerships between local communities and private sector operators, emphasizing capacity building and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms (Woyo, E.& Musavengane, R., 2023)

PPT Initiatives in Nigeria

In the Nigerian context, the tourism sector holds considerable potential for contributing to poverty alleviation, given the country's rich cultural heritage and natural attractions. Studies have highlighted that tourism can alleviate poverty through various channels, including employment creation, infrastructure development, and the stimulation of local economies. However, the realization of these benefits is often impeded by challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited community participation, and policy inconsistencies.

Research focusing on specific regions, such as Imo State, underscores the importance of addressing administrative barriers and enhancing community engagement to optimize the poverty alleviation potential of tourism. The development of tourist sites, such as Abadaba Lake, has been identified as a means to boost tourism and community development, provided that challenges related to infrastructure and investment are effectively addressed (Nwokorie & Adiukwu,(2020), Isidiho & Sabran (2015).

Challenges and Critiques of PPT

Despite its potential, the implementation of PPT faces several challenges. Critics argue that PPT initiatives may sometimes prioritize economic objectives over the socio-cultural and environmental well-being of local communities. Additionally, the effectiveness of PPT is

often hindered by factors such as inadequate community participation, lack of access to capital, and insufficient integration with broader poverty reduction strategies.

Furthermore, the sustainability of PPT initiatives is contingent upon the establishment of supportive policy environments, capacity building, and the development of equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers the multifaceted dimensions of poverty and the complex dynamics of the tourism industry.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two key development theories: the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) and the Empowerment Theory, both of which provide insight into how tourism, when designed inclusively, can contribute to poverty alleviation.

1. Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, developed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), offers a comprehensive model for understanding the means by which people sustain their lives in the face of economic, social, and environmental constraints. The framework identifies five forms of capital—human, financial, social, physical, and natural—which individuals draw upon to pursue sustainable livelihoods (Chambers & Conway, 1992).

In the context of pro-poor tourism, SLF emphasizes the need to strengthen the capacities and assets of poor individuals and communities, enabling them to benefit meaningfully from tourism-related opportunities. Tourism projects that provide skill training (human capital), foster cooperatives and community networks (social capital), or improve infrastructure and access to markets (physical capital) align directly with this framework. The SLF also supports the view that external shocks—such as policy changes or economic instability—can influence the ability of communities to engage in tourism, thus underlining the importance of resilience and institutional support (DFID, 1999).

Applying SLF to Imo State allows for an analysis of how tourism contributes not only to income generation but also to broader livelihood outcomes such as empowerment, capability expansion, and social inclusion. It also helps identify barriers that limit the poor

from accessing tourism benefits, such as lack of skills, inadequate infrastructure, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

2. Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory, rooted in social and community psychology, provides another critical perspective by focusing on the enhancement of individuals' and communities' capacity to exert control over their lives. Rappaport (1987) defines empowerment as "the process by which people gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives." In tourism, this theory underpins participatory development approaches, where local communities are involved in planning, decision-making, and management of tourism enterprises.

This theory is particularly relevant to Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT), which advocates for community participation and equitable benefit sharing. Empowerment through tourism not only involves economic gain but also includes political (decision-making), psychological (self-confidence), and social empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). A lack of empowerment can result in tourism projects that marginalize local voices and reinforce existing power imbalances.

In the context of Imo State, where tourism remains underdeveloped and local communities are often excluded from tourism policymaking, empowerment theory provides a lens through which we can evaluate the inclusivity and equity of tourism development. For tourism to be genuinely pro-poor, communities must be empowered to act not just as service providers but also as decision-makers and beneficiaries.

METHODS

The study utilized a descriptive survey design to assess the impact of pro-poor tourism development on poverty alleviation in Imo State. Conducted in Owerri Municipality of Imo State, the research focused on a population of 391 staff of the Ministry of Tourism, Imo State. A census sampling technique was employed, accounting for all the total population as sample. Data collection was carried out using the Pro-Poor Tourism Development on Poverty Alleviation Questionnaire (PPTDPAQ), a researcher-designed instrument validated by three subject experts. The reliability of the questionnaire was established using the Cronbach Alpha method, producing a coefficient of 0.82. Data

analysis was conducted using mean and standard deviation, with a criterion mean of 3.00 serving as the benchmark. Mean values exceeding 3.00 indicated agreement (or large extent), whereas lower values suggested disagreement (or low extent).

RESULTS

Table 1: Extent to which tourism development in Imo State incorporate pro-poor principles and practices

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	Tourism development policies in Imo State explicitly mention poverty reduction as a goal.	3.30	1.218	Large Extent
2	Local community members are consulted during the planning of tourism projects.	3.50	1.572	Large Extent
3	Tourism projects in Imo State prioritize hiring from local communities.	3.40	1.231	Large Extent
4	Small-scale local businesses are supported through tourism initiatives.	3.70	1.490	Large Extent
5	There is transparency in the distribution of tourism revenues.	4.10	1.372	Large Extent
6	Tourism development includes capacity-building programs for the poor.	3.40	1.231	Large Extent
7	Local crafts and cultural products are promoted through tourism.	3.30	1.218	Large Extent
8	Tourism authorities collaborate with NGOs or CSOs that advocate for the poor.	3.50	1.572	Large Extent
9	Pro-poor strategies are included in tourism planning documents in Imo State.	3.40	1.231	Large Extent
10	Land use for tourism respects the rights and needs of local residents.	3.05	1.637	Large Extent
	Grand Mean	**3.46**	**1.377**	**Large Extent**

The Table 1 shows that tourism development in Imo State incorporates pro-poor principles and practices to a large extent, with a grand mean of 3.46. All ten items recorded mean scores above 3.00, indicating consistent application of these principles. The highest-rated item is transparency in the distribution of tourism revenues (mean = 4.10), while the lowest is respect for land use rights of local residents (mean = 3.05). Other areas such as local hiring, community consultation, support for small businesses, capacity building,

promotion of local crafts, and collaboration with NGOs also received mean scores between 3.30 and 3.70, confirming that pro-poor practices are widely incorporated in tourism development in the state.

Table 2: Measurable impacts of tourism on poverty alleviation among local communities in Imo State

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	Tourism has created job opportunities for people in my community.	3.30	1.218	Agree
2	My household income has increased due to tourism activities.	3.40	1.231	Agree
3	Local infrastructure (e.g., roads, electricity) has improved due to tourism.	3.30	1.218	Agree
4	Tourism has led to better access to education and training for community members.	3.50	1.572	Agree
5	More community members have started businesses because of tourism.	3.30	1.218	Agree
6	Tourism has helped preserve our culture and traditions while improving livelihoods.	3.50	1.572	Agree
7	Tourism-related projects have improved healthcare access in my community.	3.40	1.231	Agree
8	Women and youth have gained more opportunities through tourism development.	3.40	1.231	Agree
9	Tourism has reduced seasonal unemployment in the area.	3.30	1.218	Agree
10	I believe tourism has contributed to reducing poverty in my community.	3.30	1.218	Agree
	Grand Mean	**3.37**	**1.293**	**Agree**

The Table 2 reveals that tourism has had a measurable positive impact on poverty alleviation among local communities in Imo State, with a grand mean of 3.37, indicating general agreement across all items. Respondents agree that tourism has created job opportunities, increased household income, and improved local infrastructure. It has also enhanced access to education and training, supported cultural preservation, and improved healthcare access. Additionally, tourism has encouraged entrepreneurship, especially among community members, and expanded opportunities for women and youth. Seasonal

unemployment has been reduced, and there is a shared belief that tourism contributes to poverty reduction in the community.

Table 3: Key challenges and opportunities in using pro-poor tourism as a strategy for poverty reduction in Imo State

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	There is a lack of funding for community-based tourism initiatives.	3.50	1.572	Agree
2	Bureaucratic procedures hinder community participation in tourism.	3.40	1.231	Agree
3	Local residents lack the skills needed to benefit from tourism.	3.70	1.490	Agree
4	There is limited government support for pro-poor tourism.	3.20	1.399	Agree
5	Corruption or mismanagement affects tourism revenue distribution.	3.40	1.231	Agree
6	Tourism benefits are not evenly distributed among community members.	3.60	1.465	Agree
7	Environmental degradation caused by tourism affects local livelihoods.	3.30	1.218	Agree
8	There is potential to expand eco-tourism to benefit local communities.	3.40	1.231	Agree
9	Cultural heritage and festivals can be better leveraged for tourism.	3.35	1.496	Agree
10	Local entrepreneurship in tourism can be enhanced with proper support.	3.40	1.569	Agree
11	Digital marketing can help promote rural tourism destinations.	3.40	1.231	Agree
12	Community-based tourism cooperatives can be a viable model.	3.30	1.625	Agree
13	Partnerships between the government and local groups can improve outcomes.	3.60	1.429	Agree
14	International and domestic tourists show interest in authentic local experiences.	3.40	1.231	Agree
15	Training programs can improve local capacity to engage in tourism.	3.30	1.218	Agree
	Grand Mean	**3.41**	**1.376**	**Agree**

The Table 3 indicates that there is general agreement on both the challenges and opportunities associated with using pro-poor tourism as a strategy for poverty reduction in Imo State, with a grand mean of 3.41. Key challenges include lack of funding for community-based tourism, bureaucratic hurdles, limited government support, corruption in revenue distribution, and uneven sharing of tourism benefits. Additionally, respondents agree that local residents often lack the necessary skills to benefit from tourism, and that environmental degradation caused by tourism poses a threat to local livelihoods. On the opportunity side, there is agreement that eco-tourism has the potential to be expanded, cultural heritage and festivals can be better utilized, and digital marketing can enhance the visibility of rural tourism destinations. Other promising strategies identified include promoting local entrepreneurship, establishing tourism cooperatives, fostering partnerships between government and local groups, and providing training programs to build community capacity. There is also recognition of growing interest from both domestic and international tourists in authentic local experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the study collectively illustrate that tourism development in Imo State is significantly aligned with pro-poor principles and has made measurable contributions to poverty alleviation, despite the presence of key structural and institutional challenges. The study underscores that pro-poor practices are incorporated into tourism development in Imo State to a large extent, with an overall mean above the criterion mean. Items such as transparency in revenue distribution, support for small-scale businesses, community consultation, and prioritization of local hiring reflect best practices in inclusive tourism. These findings align with the global shift toward sustainable tourism frameworks that emphasize community participation and benefit-sharing, as highlighted by Scheyvens and Hughes (2018), who argue that tourism policies are most effective in reducing poverty when they are explicitly designed to include the voices and interests of marginalized populations. The highest-rated item—transparency in revenue distribution—may reflect growing demand for accountability and equitable benefit-sharing, which has been identified as crucial for trust-building in tourism development (Spenceley, 2021). However, the relatively lower score for respecting land use rights indicates persistent tensions between

development goals and the rights of local residents, which is a common challenge in tourism sectors across developing countries (Goodwin, 2018).

In the study, the results point to widespread agreement on the positive socio-economic impacts of tourism in local communities, with a grand mean above the criterion mean. Respondents observed job creation, improved household income, and enhanced infrastructure, which are consistent with literature emphasizing tourism's potential to stimulate local economies (Ashley & Mitchell, 2019). Furthermore, the reported improvements in access to healthcare, education, and entrepreneurship among women and youth suggest that tourism in Imo State is contributing to multidimensional poverty reduction, not just income-based gains. These outcomes support the argument by Novelli, Morgan, and Nibigira (2012) that tourism can act as a catalyst for social development when integrated with community empowerment and local enterprise development strategies. That said, the uniformity in mean scores across several items may also indicate that while the benefits of tourism are acknowledged, they may not be profoundly transformative for all households, which aligns with earlier concerns that tourism's benefits can be diffuse and uneven (Torres & Momsen, 2014).

The study adds depth by revealing the nuanced challenges and untapped opportunities in implementing pro-poor tourism strategies. The overall agreement (grand mean above criterion mean) suggests that while there is awareness of the barriers, respondents also perceive viable pathways for improvement. Lack of funding, bureaucratic obstacles, and limited government support are consistent with previous research emphasizing the constraints of weak institutional frameworks in developing tourism (Chok, Macbeth, & Warren, 2017). The high score on residents' lack of skills indicates a crucial gap in human capital, which limits their capacity to engage meaningfully in tourism value chains. This is echoed by Saarinen and Rogerson (2021), who stress the importance of targeted training and education to improve community participation in tourism markets. Encouragingly, opportunities such as the promotion of eco-tourism, digital marketing, and cultural festivals received strong support, reflecting global best practices that link tourism with environmental conservation and cultural preservation (UNWTO, 2020). The noted interest from both international and domestic tourists in authentic local experiences suggests market potential that can be leveraged through innovative partnerships and cooperative models. Thus, these findings indicate that tourism in Imo State is on a promising trajectory with respect to pro-poor development. However, realizing its full potential will depend on

addressing systemic issues such as capacity-building, equitable benefit distribution, institutional transparency, and sustained policy support. This echoes the sentiments of Scheyvens (2007), who cautions that without deliberate structural changes, tourism may perpetuate rather than alleviate poverty.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that tourism development in Imo State significantly incorporates pro-poor principles and practices, with tangible positive impacts on poverty alleviation among local communities. Despite several challenges—such as funding limitations, skill gaps, bureaucratic barriers, and inequitable benefit distribution—there are notable opportunities for enhancing pro-poor tourism through eco-tourism, digital marketing, community partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives. Strengthening these areas can further deepen tourism's role as a sustainable strategy for poverty reduction in the state.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government should provide skill acquisition programs to equip local residents for tourism-related jobs.
2. The government should allocate dedicated funding for community-based tourism initiatives.
3. Tourism authorities should ensure transparent and equitable distribution of tourism revenues.

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