



Empowering  
young people



# **Embracing Diversity in the Youth Sector for a Fruitful Social Dialogue**

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## **About the YES Forum**

Founded in 2002, YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people facing challenging situations. By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of vulnerable young people. YES Forum aims to create an environment where young people and youth professionals have equally accessible learning and work-related opportunities in Europe and beyond.

# Content

- Introduction ..... 4**
  - Social Youth Dialogue.....4
  
- Embracing differences in groups and maximising the benefits ..... 6**
  - Diverse backgrounds .....6
  - Diverse culture and communication styles .....6
  - Differences in language proficiency .....7
  - Differing knowledge levels and interests.....8
  - Diverse age range.....9
  - Learning by-doing as a universal language .....9
  
- Building and fostering an open and inclusive culture within (youth) organisations ..... 11**
  - Signing the diversity charter of your country..... 11
  - Develop an organisational diversity strategy ..... 12
  - Appoint a diversity officer ..... 12
  
- Conclusion ..... 13**
  
- Bibliography ..... 14**



participating in the EUYD exceeded 131,000. At the beginning of 2024, the EU held a summit committing to strengthening social dialogue to tackle labour challenges. One of the key outcomes of this summit was that the EU reiterated its commitment to fully respect and promote the role of social partners and social dialogue. Social dialogue is enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and underlined by Principle 8 of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Pillar Action Plan. The EU also aims to conclude a new Pact for European social dialogue by early 2025.

When engaging youth in social dialogue, it is important to consider that different groups of young people have different needs in different situations. It is critical to remove age-based barriers and other inequities, to ensure young people from diverse backgrounds, with differing perspectives and employment and differing personal and family histories have access to spaces for meaningful participation.<sup>10</sup> It is also important for social partner organisations to learn about how they can be more supportive of diversity. Only by recognising and addressing differences between group members will it be possible to have a fruitful dialogue. By recognising and valuing differences, and building a social dialogue, we have an advantage in producing more inclusive, social and creative outputs.

The YES Forum Network and partners have experience in engaging with diverse groups of young people, and the best practices shared in this report provide recommendations on how to enhance dialogue and inclusivity in diverse groups. The YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people with fewer opportunities.<sup>11</sup> By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of disadvantaged young people. Throughout the network's 20-year history, YES Forum has held the unique position of providing an inclusive platform which brings young people and professionals who work directly in the field into dialogue with policy makers and EU institutions. From our years of experience, we have developed numerous recommendations and best practice contributions on working with diverse groups of young people, engaging them through social dialogue, and implementing a culture that fosters inclusive dialogue.

This report will first give recommendations for how differences in groups might be overcome, and on how they can be utilised in a way which enhances social dialogue. Then, the report will give recommendations on how to promote an inclusive environment in organisations. The recommendations and best practices outlined in this report will be especially useful for professionals and young people working within a diverse group. However, since classrooms, workplaces, sport associations (among others) are all rightfully becoming more diverse, the recommendations and best practices within this report have broad applicability, no matter the environment.

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<sup>10</sup> Chacaltana & Prieto (2019). Evolution and future of youth employment policies: global debates and the implications for Latin America. ILO. [\(PDF\) Evolution and future of youth employment policies: global debates and their implications for Latin America \(researchgate.net\)](#), 115

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the YES Forum's work visit the website [YES Forum - Empowering young people \(yes-forum.eu\)](https://yes-forum.eu).

## Embracing differences in groups and maximising the benefits

Since its establishment in 2002, YES Forum has gained rich experience in implementing transnational projects with its members and different partners. These projects have included diverse participants and heterogeneous groups of young people. An insight into some of our network's experiences will be elaborated upon in this section, providing recommendations and examples of best practices. Alongside this, additional commentary focused on the selected dimensions of diversity which we have encountered during our work in international settings will be included.

### Diverse backgrounds

When working with young people it is always important to create a safe space and to make sure that participants feel comfortable in voluntarily sharing their views. However, this is even more important for youth from vulnerable backgrounds. It is vital to [create an open dialogue where everyone feels heard and respected](#). So, ask open questions, give affirming statements, show empathy by repeating and rephrasing, and summarise points made by youth to show that one has listened carefully and understood correctly. Another important tool when working with young people is to be generous with positive affirmations, to motivate them, and to help build their self-esteem. It is also important to be aware of emotional triggers and to address them proactively. This helps to create a more supportive environment.

Young people who are not from a disadvantaged background may say or act in certain ways that could unintentionally make others feel uncomfortable. While this is often not done on purpose, it influences the dialogue and can make participants feel unsafe and afraid to share. One approach that can be used here is to start the meeting by [writing certain rules and desired behaviours down together with participants](#). Participants should also plan how they should be adhered to within the session. Because they have been directly involved in writing the rules, it will be easier for the group to adhere to them and to hold their peers accountable. One practical way this can be done is by first letting group members write down suggestions by themselves and then discussing them within a group setting.

### Diverse culture and communication styles

Within group dynamics there are always differences to be found in the communication styles of members. This is especially true in multicultural, international settings where culture might also play a crucial role. Even within European, there are differences in cultural attitudes towards directness of communication, hierarchy and authority, and around what 'on time' means.

To address these challenges, it is important that every group member feels comfortable and included. It is also important to foster open communication and to make sure that everyone feels heard. Attention should be paid to make sure that everyone is able to voice their opinion, and that everyone has the opportunity to speak. One way to do this is by specifically asking the participants who have not spoken up yet about their opinions on something. However, it is important to make the question more specific than only asking whether they want to add something, as the likelihood is that they will simply say 'no'.

Another way to address this is by using [online tools](#) such as Kahoot<sup>12</sup> or Mentimeter<sup>13</sup>. As participants first fill in their answers online and anonymously, they are more likely to share their opinions. Afterwards, the groups answers can be discussed in the room, and as participants have already shared their thoughts in a written format, it makes it easier for participants to elaborate on their answers.

To foster more open communication, [breaking large groups up into smaller subgroups for discussion has also proven to be effective](#). Within smaller groups, people feel more inclined to communicate their opinions and are less overwhelmed by the opinions of others. In our experience, it is also important to build trust between participants, which can be done by [starting the meeting with some icebreakers](#) instead of diving immediately into the topic. These icebreakers should be focused on encouraging everyone to be involved (everyone should speak and/or share their thoughts and experiences), getting to know each other on a personal level (as building relationships fosters trust), and make everyone feel comfortable.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge differences in cultures and communication styles and to express expectations at the start. By learning what participants expect, you can avoid potential conflict as much as possible. For example, in multicultural groups it is important to let participants know that you want to resume immediately after a scheduled break ends. Time and punctuality are viewed differently in different cultures; hence it is important to express expectations to not let participants wait for each other.

### **Differences in language proficiency**

Language barriers are often a challenge for vulnerable groups and sometimes even for youth work professionals. Language barriers can arise when engaging in transnational projects on a European or regional level. In these circumstances, the focus should be on [creating a safe space that can overcome language barriers](#). By being aware that participants of transnational projects might have varying levels of language proficiency (the majority are between B1-B2, with a few young people at levels A and C), it's essential to provide adequate support for language comprehension. One way of doing this is by tailoring support according to language proficiency levels, for example by offering more time for translation, and speaking slowly to ensure that all participants feel included and understood.

There are instances where language comprehension may pose a challenge for the smooth running of a project, for example where a national organisation located in a rural area is working with vulnerable youth who require additional language support. In these circumstances, implementing strategies such as providing translations and allowing participants to contribute online can enhance accessibility and participation levels. However, it's crucial to address the concerns raised by participants, such as differing English proficiency levels, as if strategies are not put in place it can result in lower levels of interaction within the group.

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about Kahoot see here [Kahoot! for schools: how it works | Feature overview](#)

<sup>13</sup> For more information about Mentimeter see here [Interactive presentation software - Mentimeter](#)

To address the challenge of differing English proficiency levels leading to varying levels of interaction within a group, one effective strategy is to [create mixed-level groups](#) where participants with varying levels of English proficiency work together. This allows for peer learning and support, with more proficient English speakers assisting those with lower proficiency. Additionally, providing alternative modes of participation can be an effective solution, for example by allowing participants to provide written contributions or by facilitating small group discussions with bilingual moderators. These strategies can ensure that all participants have an opportunity to engage meaningfully, regardless of their English language skills. Lastly, it is important to ask professionals who will speak at an event to communicate [in an accessible language](#), without too many technical words and phrases that are associated with their field (i.e., jargon).

By acknowledging and addressing language barriers and English language proficiency levels within a diverse group, it is possible to foster inclusive dialogue and ensure that all participants are able to contribute effectively to the discussion.

### **Differing knowledge levels and interests**

Another challenge that can occur within a diverse group is a knowledge gap between the participants. In several YES Forum projects we have seen firsthand that there is often a significant difference between young people and their knowledge about the European Union. While some participants might have an affinity with EU politics, and have voted during the last EU election, or have friends/family that are interested in politics, other participants may not know much about the EU or politics in general.

To address the challenge posed by a knowledge gap, it is important to offer all participants access to basic information related to the topic, and to also offer support where needed to understand the content. An additional obstacle is the use of jargon. For example, it is commonplace to use the abbreviation MEP when talking about 'Member of European Parliament', in fact it is so integrated into our language that it is easy to forget that it is jargon. It is therefore important to [involve participants during all phases of the project](#), and to not make assumptions about what 'basic' knowledge is. This is especially important since the European Union itself has acknowledged that working in the EU environment can make you 'jargon-blind'.<sup>14</sup>

Several preparational activities can be held to overcome these obstacles. These activities might start by making sure that group members get a preliminary understanding of the topic before then moving on to explore it in greater detail. Finally, group members might even get to a level where they are able to reflect upon their newly acquired knowledge and debate the topic. To sum up, it is important to acknowledge that there might be a knowledge gap between participants on certain topics, and wherever possible to anticipate this and prepare activities for participants that 'level the playing field'.

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<sup>14</sup> European Commission. [Jargon and clear writing alternatives - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).



## Diverse age range

When reflecting on learnings and best practices for enhancing dialogue in a diverse group, age range is an important factor that needs to be taken into consideration.

One key observation is the importance of [acknowledging the diversity](#) within age groups when bringing together high school and university students. Recognising that younger participants may have different perspectives and experiences is instrumental for fostering inclusive dialogue. Diverse perspectives brought by different ages can lead to positive outcomes, so creating an environment where everyone feels comfortable to contribute is essential. Diversity, and the sharing of diverse perspectives should be recognised as a powerful learning tool, rather than being ignored.<sup>15</sup> By embracing diversity in youth work, practitioners and young people can benefit from increased creativity, higher-quality problem solving, and shared innovation. Diverse groups enjoy a distinct advantage over non-diverse groups, but only when the diversity is addressed. The sharing of diverse perspectives is the crucial element here, as a classroom of diverse individuals where the perspective differences are never addressed is hardly different from a classroom full of homogenous individuals.<sup>16</sup>

To bridge the gap between younger participants and adults, it's helpful to establish common ground and mutual respect. Encouraging open-mindedness and active listening can help break down barriers and foster understanding across generations. Providing opportunities for [intergenerational collaboration](#), such as mentorship or creating tandem groups during project activities, can also promote meaningful exchanges and build rapport between different age groups.

Furthermore, considering the prevalence of social media in younger generations, it's important to address the topic of age and social media consumption within the dialogue. Recognising the differences between platforms like Instagram and TikTok and acknowledging the diverse ways in which different age-groups engage with social media can enrich discussions on digital literacy, online safety, and youth participation in the digital age.

Overall, by embracing diversity, promoting inclusivity, and facilitating respectful dialogue, we can create spaces where individuals of all ages feel empowered to share their perspectives and contribute to meaningful outcomes.

## Learning by-doing as a universal language

[Learning by doing offers numerous advantages](#), primarily by enhancing knowledge retention through hands-on engagement. When learners actively participate in tasks, they are more likely to remember and understand information. This active involvement not only sparks interest and motivation but also helps them develop practical skills that are immediately applicable to real world scenarios. Moreover,

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<sup>15</sup> Goethe & Colina (2018). Taking Advantage of Diversity within the Classroom. Journal of Chemical Education. 95. [acs.jchemed.7b00510](#), 191

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

learning by doing fosters critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, as learners must navigate real-life challenges.

Non-formal education provides the flexibility that traditional education often lacks. It can be tailored to fit individual schedules and specific needs, making it particularly relevant and engaging for learners. [Non-formal education is accessible to a broader audience, including those who might not have access to formal educational institutions, thus it promotes inclusivity.](#) It encourages lifelong learning and personal development beyond conventional schooling years, especially for adults who have severed their ties to the educational system at a young age. The focus on practical skills and competencies ensures that learners acquire knowledge that is immediately useful in personal or professional contexts. Learning in informal settings reduces the pressure and anxiety associated with traditional classrooms, creating a more relaxed and conducive atmosphere for education. Diverse teaching methods, such as workshops, community projects, and online courses, cater to different learning styles and preferences. Furthermore, non-formal education often involves community participation, fostering a sense of belonging and social responsibility among learners.

Promoting dialogue and fruitful conversations in groups can be challenging, especially when the group is made up of people from diverse backgrounds. Generally, in training and meetings that take place in the field of youth and youth social work, time is of the essence. Efficiency must be obtained in order to cover all matters of discussion and ensure that all voices are heard. Apart from time constraints, all the above must be achieved while the group faces other difficulties such as differences in age, socioeconomic and educational background, as well as language barriers. These issues cannot be overcome solely through the use of formal language or explicit instructions, as not even a skilled mediator or translator would be able to work that alone. From our experience, the answer comes through co-operation and finding common ground.

This is where learning by doing comes along. Oftentimes, experiential learning does not even require talking. Art methods, visual and haptic tools, music and body language are used to express what words cannot. People from different cultures and backgrounds easily communicate through humour and shared experiences, thus building a link and conversing further. Language plays no significant part in drawing or “playing” a game, [some forms of communication are universal.](#)

This theory was put to practice during the creation of an “EU Puzzle Game”, which was created and successfully implemented by IEKEP.<sup>17</sup> By using infographics created during the implementation of the Ready<sup>18</sup> project and combining them with the concept of a silent cooperative puzzle game, an experiential learning activity was created that was targeted at young people. The aim was to stimulate the interest of event attendees that came from all over Europe and varied in age and background. Such

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<sup>17</sup> If you want to learn more about IEKEP, you can visit this link <https://iekep.gr/en/>.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the READY project see here [YES Forum - Empowering young people - READY - Raising EU Awareness through accessible Documents for Youth \(yes-forum.eu\)](#)

an activity only required a few sets of puzzles, clear and simply put directions and, of course, a willingness to play!

The launch of the 'EU Puzzle Game' during the YES Forum's Policy Event 2023 in Brussels, highlighted the need for activities and joint effort to promote dialogue. The participants, coming from various different countries, all gave it a try and the results were great. People genuinely enjoyed themselves, and had fun laughing, communicating, and learning about the topic of the event. This activity was planned before the panel discussion and motivated participants to speak their minds. As a result, the conversation which ensued was engaging and broke down barriers between young people and professionals.

## **Building and fostering an open and inclusive culture within (youth) organisations**

A culture of social acceptance and inclusion is needed to reap the benefits of diversity within groups. Diversity by representation is not enough. It is important to create equality, and this requires a systematic approach to create an inclusive culture.<sup>19</sup>

While many organisations try to create an inclusive culture and acknowledge the importance of diversity, there are several challenges that they might face. In this section, we will share with you best practice from Internationaler Bund (IB)<sup>20</sup> – one of YES Forum's members – on implementing and promoting diversity and inclusion within organisations.

As one of the top 25 employers (Stern ranking in 2022) in the field of health and social affairs<sup>21</sup>, and with decades of experience, IB demonstrates how organisations can create an inclusive culture.

### **Signing the diversity charter of your country**

Countries in the European Union have their own diversity charters. **By signing a diversity charter, an organisation voluntarily commits to promote diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace.** The German diversity charter - Charta der Vielfalt - covers seven fields of discrimination and aims to promote the recognition, appreciation and integration of diversity into Germany's business culture. Organisations that sign it commit themselves to creating an appreciative work environment – irrespective of age, ethnic background and nationality, gender and gender identity, physical and mental abilities, religion and worldview, sexual orientation and social background.

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<sup>19</sup> Kiradoo, G., (2022) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace: Strategies for Achieving and Sustaining a Diverse Workforce . Advance Research in Social Science and Management. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4392136>, 145

<sup>20</sup> If you want to learn more about IB you can visit this link <https://www.internationaler-bund.de/>

<sup>21</sup> [Internationaler Bund: News Details \(internationaler-bund.de\)](https://www.internationaler-bund.de/)

## Develop an organisational diversity strategy

Beyond committing to the relevant diversity charter, organisations —based on their size, available human resources, and financial capabilities— should consider developing a tailored diversity strategy. This strategy can outline specific goals, initiatives, and actions that align with an organisation's unique context and needs. By customising their approach, organisations can more effectively address diversity challenges, leverage opportunities for inclusion, and create a more impactful and sustainable diversity programme. This organisational strategy ensures that diversity efforts are not only aligned with broader standards but are also practical and relevant to the organisation's own environment and size.

For instance, IB's comprehensive diversity strategy encompasses seven key dimensions, illustrating how a well-defined strategy can guide and enhance diversity efforts effectively – see Figure 1.

For example, for the diversity dimension of age, IB facilitates professional and personal exchanges between older and younger generations. One effective approach they use to bridge age-related differences is job shadowing. For instance, job shadowing between employees from IB's headquarter and regional centre has proven successful. This method creates a win-win situation: both the employee exploring a new environment and the one sharing their experience about their role gain valuable insights. By experiencing a colleague's different perspective, employees can better understand different work processes and adapt more effectively to various situations.

To sum up, developing a tailored organisational diversity strategy ensures that diversity initiatives are both effective and aligned with an organisation's unique context, leading to a more impactful and sustainable programme that promotes diversity and inclusion.

## Appoint a diversity officer

For organisations, having a dedicated person who is responsible for overseeing and monitoring diversity initiatives and strategy is crucial. This role ensures that diversity goals are actively pursued and

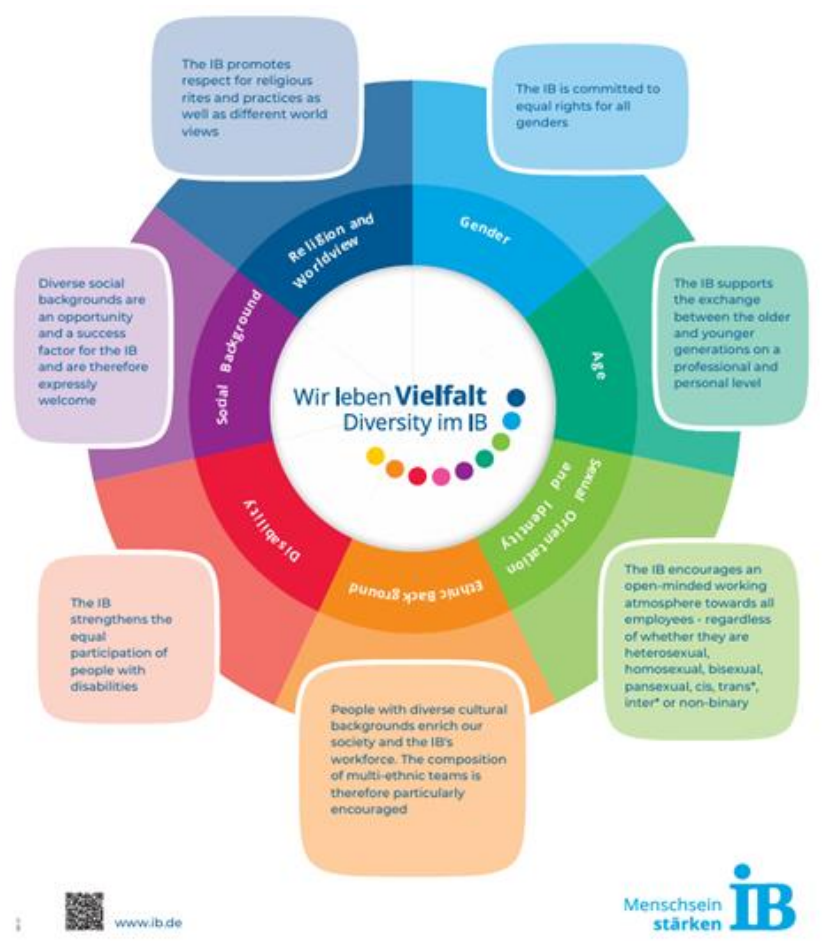


Figure 1: The seven core dimensions that are the basis of the IB's policy, based on the German charter of Diversity<sup>22</sup>.

measured through data like employee satisfaction. With these resources and accountability in place, diversity efforts are more likely to be genuinely effective and impactful. For example, IB appointed a Diversity Officer for the first time in 2014.<sup>22</sup> The tasks of the diversity officer include, but are not limited to, managing diversity activities and coordinating the diversity contact people across organisational units. The diversity officer is also responsible for planning and organising activities within IB's Central Management, such as participation in the annual Diversity Day and organisation of Pride Month. Organisations can foster a genuinely inclusive environment and drive successful diversity outcomes by implementing a similar approach.

## Conclusion

Conducting discussions and social dialogue in diverse groups offers many advantages. It increases creativity, cooperation, and the ability to find novel solutions. Besides the many advantages diversity offers, it is also true that it can sometimes be a struggle to have fruitful dialogues where participants have unmatched interests or different value systems. Throughout the years, YES Forum and its network has worked with groups of very diverse young people. From these experiences several recommendations and best practices have been collated and shared in this report.

Overall, the importance of acknowledging diversity is highlighted. Whatever the differences are, it is important to acknowledge and address them. A good strategy is to let participants work in smaller groups, or even mixed pairs, consisting of young people with a variety of ages/language proficiencies/genders interacting with each other. This way, participants can connect, learn from and support each other and will feel less overwhelmed than when participating in larger groups. Another good strategy is to use a variety of online tools such as Kahoot or Mentimeter to get the dialogue flowing more easily, or to use non-formal ways of learning. An example of this is the silent 'EU Puzzle Game' that was created by IEKEP, a member of the YES Forum, that was successfully implemented.

However, these strategies will only work when there is a culture of inclusion, where diversity is embraced and where all participants are empowered to share their perspectives. To achieve this, it is important to include participants through all stages of the process working up to the dialogue, and to avoid false assumptions about 'basic knowledge' being made. Before starting the dialogue, participants should be invited to share their expectations and be involved in icebreakers that make everyone feel included and comfortable.

We also recommend that organisations should cultivate a culture of inclusion within their team as well, not only when engaging with diverse groups. This report highlights selected best practices for achieving this. Our recommendations include signing the national diversity charter, developing an organisational strategy and appointing a dedicated staff member to oversee an organisational diversity strategy.

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<sup>22</sup> [Internationaler Bund: Interview Diversity-Beauftragter der IB-Gruppe \(internationaler-bund.de\)](https://www.internationaler-bund.de/en/internationaler-bund-interview-diversity-beauftragter-der-ib-gruppe)

Including diverse youth in social dialogue is important, especially in a world of increasing complexity which requires us all to work together. There are so many benefits that diversity has to offer, therefore we should not let our differences discourage us from reaching our common goals. The recommendations and best practices from the YES Forum and network written in this report will help others to navigate these differences, and reap the many benefits that diversity has to offer. Embracing diversity holds the promise that the fruits that will be harvested from these dialogues will be sweet and plenty!

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