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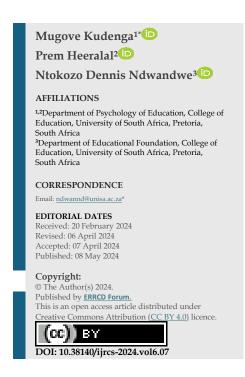# Navigating the Road Home: Challenges Hindering the Reintegration of Street Children with Their Families in Harare, Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** The reintegration of street children with their families in Harare, Zimbabwe, is a significant social issue that is characterised by numerous challenges. Therefore, this research paper aims to identify the challenges that hinder the successful reintegration of street children with their families in Harare, using the bioecological model as a theoretical lens. A qualitative research approach, underpinned by a phenomenological research design, was employed with a purposefully selected sample of ten social development officers who are directly involved in working with street children. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with the social development officers. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed various challenges, such as rejection and discrimination, economic hardship, disintegrated family structures, and lack of trust. Based on the findings, the study recommends the need to strengthen and expand support services that offer counselling, mediation, and practical assistance to families and children to ensure an effective reintegration process. Additionally, the study recommends the implementation of programmes that focus on poverty alleviation and economic empowerment for families. Moreover, social development officers should be capacitated with dispute resolution and cognitive restructuring skills to change the thinking patterns of members of the original families. Developing and prioritising sensitisation programmes to raise awareness about the issues faced by reintegrated street children and their families is also recommended.

**Keywords:** Street children, families, reintegration, social development officers, Zimbabwe.

## 1. Introduction

Globally, the phenomenon of children living on the streets has been a challenge for many decades. However, it is particularly alarming within Zimbabwe (Sitienei & Pillay, 2019; Hassen & Manus, 2018; Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022; Mukorera et al., 2023). Friberg and Martinson (2017) suggest that there are approximately ten million children globally who are living on the streets. Ahmed (2018) notes that this phenomenon is more prevalent in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Hence, Hassen and Manus (2018) assert that the problem of children living on the streets is especially pronounced in developing countries, where there may be inadequate social infrastructure and socio-economic programmes.

In the Zimbabwean context, research indicates a lack of actual statistics on the extent of street children in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. The constant movement of these children makes it difficult to determine the actual figures (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022). Ogan and Ogan (2021) suggest that there are more boys than girls on the streets, possibly because girls are more controlled by their families and are expected to multitask at home. Manungo (2018) emphasises that various socio-economic

challenges are the main cause of children living on the streets. Habtamu and Arindam (2016) and Nathan and Fratkin (2018) note that extreme poverty at home, abuse by step-parents, maltreatment, family breakdown, and the death of parents or guardians drive children into the street. The situation of these children is further worsened by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has led to many children being orphaned and left vulnerable (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022). Consequently, street children face numerous challenges, such as a lack of income to access necessities like food, clothing, and toiletries (Alem & Laha, 2016). Zewude et al. (2023) and Abate et al. (2022) argue that living outside of family care exposes children to challenges such as the risk of joining gangs, stigmatisation, involvement in risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse, health problems, discrimination, and trauma due to past experiences. In Zimbabwe, Gunhidzirai's (2023) research highlights visible daily street children begging on the streets, searching for food in bins, and sleeping on pavements, indicating extreme poverty. According to Ndlovu and Tigere (2022), some street children turn to drug abuse as a coping mechanism, leading to anti-social behaviour such as stealing from parked vehicles and snatching items from the public. Efforts have been made to address this problem through various strategies and interventions, but it continues to persist. The large number of children living on the streets puts pressure on the government, policymakers, and non-government organisations (NGOs). Therefore, proactive measures, such as family reunification or reintegration, need to be explored as alternative solutions to this problem.

The reintegration of children with their families is considered a preferable solution over institutional care or charity intervention (Chartier & Blavier, 2021). This approach recognises the importance of the child's right to family life, a sense of belonging, and their psychological and emotional development. By reintegrating with their families, these children have a better chance of becoming fully functional members of society and avoiding long-term and problematic pathways associated with out-of-home care (Tano et al., 2017; Zewude et al., 2023). Supporting this idea, Wedge (2013) emphasises the need for children to have secure attachments to regular and consistent caregivers, which in turn promotes their emotional, moral, and cognitive development. However, the city of Harare in Zimbabwe faces numerous challenges in facilitating the reintegration process, and it is crucial to understand and address these challenges from the perspective of those involved, such as social development officers.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of research studies that systematically capture the voices of social development officers engaged in the integration process. Additionally, De Bruin Cardoso et al. (2019) note that existing literature has primarily focused on the individual child rather than considering the child's broader environment, which may result in the child ending up on the streets. Frimpong-Manso et al. (2022) also highlight that while studies on family reunification have been conducted outside of Africa, they tend to focus on factors related to reintegration. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to fill these gaps by providing a comprehensive exploration of the challenges that hinder the reintegration of street children with their families.

## 1.1 Main research question

This study aimed to identify the challenges that hinder the integration of street children with their original families in Harare, Zimbabwe. This study sought to answer the following research question:

- Which challenges hinder the integration of street children with members of their original families in Harare, Zimbabwe?

## 2. Theoretical Grounding and Literature Review

The theoretical framework and review of the relevant literature are discussed in this section, and thereafter, the study's methodology, findings and conclusion are discussed.

## 2.1 Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory

The study was inspired by the bioecological theory advocated by Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005), which suggests that a child's development is influenced by multiple environmental systems, including the family and the broader world (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Sitienei and Pillay (2019) describe this theory as consisting of five nested structures: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. These structures demonstrate how certain children end up living on the streets. The microsystem represents the child's immediate surroundings, such as their home, parents, siblings, and other family members (Sitienei & Pillay, 2019). This is the innermost system. Haleemunnissa et al. (2021) point out that if there is conflict or abuse in the family, it often occurs at home, which can lead children to flee to the streets. According to Sitienei and Pillay (2019), the microsystem is where the child experiences distressing abuse and maltreatment, which serves as a motivation to leave. Understanding the challenges within this microsystem layer, such as family poverty, abuse, or neglect, can help us comprehend the factors pushing children to leave their homes and the obstacles preventing their successful reintegration.

The second system is the mesosystem, which, according to Sitienei and Pillay (2019), connects the various structures within the child's microsystem. In the case of children living on the streets of Harare, this could involve understanding their experiences on the streets and their original families' circumstances. This is crucial because if these structures are not supportive, the child may resort to living and working on the streets as a means of survival. Campos-Gil et al. (2020) believe that changes in one of the child's microsystems will impact the other systems. For instance, family relationship breakdown, economic hardship or poverty, and community influences can all contribute to children's decision to live on the streets, as well as hindering their reintegration with their original families.

The composition of the social structures and institutions in society that indirectly influence individuals, which is our third system, is known as the exosystem (Bronfernbrenner, 1994). For example, this could involve the legal system, community organisations, and social services. Neal and Neal (2013) maintain that although the child has little effect on the exosystem, it is crucial since it supports the microsystem and shapes how the original family members act. In the case of the study on the reintegration of street children in Harare, the exosystem involves examining the availability and accessibility of supportive services for these children and their families. This could include the role of government policies, the work of NGOs, and various community interventions in facilitating or hindering the effective reintegrating process. The chronosystem focuses on how a child's surroundings are impacted by time and historical context in shaping development. According to Eriksson, Ghazinour, and Hammarström (2018), the chronosystem considers changes that occur throughout time in the child's surroundings as well as changes that occur within the child. In the context of this study, which deals with the reintegration of street children with their families, this could involve any kind of changes that occur over time. For example, economic fluctuations, policy reforms, or changes in social attitudes that impact the experiences of street children and their families.

The bioecological theory was particularly relevant to this study since it provided a multi-dimensional social context and a multi-layered approach for conducting data analysis and important insights on the interconnections between the several systems, ranging from the microsystem to the macrosystem, leading to the difficulties the child in the original family faced. The social development officials, who are tasked with reunifying street children with their original families and gaining a holistic understanding of challenges faced by street children and their families, must develop comprehensive interventions to address the multi-level influence in their lives. This approach could also be beneficial in developing more effective policies and programmes that aim to enhance the effective reintegration of street children into their original communities.

## 2.2 Challenges hindering the integration of street children with their families

The challenges hindering the integration of street children with their families are well-documented. Children who have been living and working on the streets face challenges such as rejection and discrimination by members of their original families. Bejenaru and Tucker (2017) draw attention to the possibility that integration may be difficult in cases where the children's original families will not allow them back into their houses. The family members may refuse because the reasons that originally motivated the child to leave the home to work on the streets will still prevail. For example, a child who has lived and worked on the streets for some time typically bears some sort of stigma. As noted by Bejenaru and Tucker (2017), at times, the original family members fear what the community may say about the child who has been living and working on the streets; therefore, the original family may reject the child. According to Bhattacharjee and Veitch (2020), the child is typically stigmatised by family members and the larger community. These children are frequently regarded with contempt and purposefully excluded from social gatherings. The community will refuse the child access to certain shared utilities, making life unbearable for the returning child.

Economic hardship may also present a significant challenge to the successful integration of street children with their original families. This is because integrating the child who had been living and working on the streets into the original family's home would entail taking on additional financial, caregiving, and general parental responsibilities. As noted by Esposito et al. (2017), due to extreme poverty or socio-economic challenges, families may struggle to support additional members, especially if they have been away from home for a long time. Kuehr (2015) concurs that sometimes there are situations where the family simply does not have the resources to take responsibility for the child's care again. Similarly, a study by Mwende et al. (2022) contends that the issue of poverty and joblessness is the main challenge and contributory factor to the reunification of children with their families. Therefore, for reintegration to be successful, the family must be able to take care of the child. For that reason, Schrader-McMillan and Herrera (2016) suggest that a period of capacity development is necessary to lessen the difficulties that arise while integrating the child. Frimpong-Manso and Bugyei (2018) add that reunification support is necessary for the families who will be receiving the child because the original families, particularly in low-income countries, sometimes have big families. The family must be given the assurance that they will receive assistance to cover the costs of the child's basic needs, including food, healthcare, and education. To better the situation, Mutua (2017) suggests that families need to be empowered economically and capacitated through various business startups and entrepreneurship training opportunities to offer sustainable livelihoods.

Moreover, the intactness of the original family has an impact on reintegration. Occasionally, when a child returns home from working and living on the streets, the people they left behind may not be there. Various changes will have occurred within the family while the child was away, which will impact whether the child has a family to return to when being integrated. According to Wambede (2022), various factors such as broken families, imprisonment, death of parents, mistreatment, drug abuse, and mistreatment may result in the failure of the reintegration process. Ringson and Chereni (2019) add that modernity is affecting the family structure, such that families are very fluid as they seek employment in industry and commerce. It is likely that when the child returns to their original family, the members will have changed employers or moved to new places in search of employment or moved in response to natural disasters like floods, famine, or cyclones.

Another challenge that could hamper the process of integrating street children with their families is the lack of trust. Children who may have experienced some trauma or abuse within their families in the past may be reluctant to return home or to an environment where they felt unsafe or unloved. Again, parents' mistrust towards the child could pose a significant challenge when it comes to integrating street children, especially if the child has been involved in substance abuse, crime, or

other anti-social behaviour in the past. As a result, they doubt the child's willingness to adapt to their families and social norms. Balsells et al. (2015) support the view that for family reintegration to occur, the most critical condition is trust. It is only when the original families have trust that they will accept that the integration process can be successful. Goodman et al. (2020) also suggest that trust will make integration probable.

## 3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore the feelings and experiences of social development officers regarding the challenges that hinder the effective integration of street children with their original families. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research helps to understand the subjective meanings that participants attach to their experiences in specific situations. The study employed a phenomenological research design, which plays a crucial role in understanding how individuals perceive and interpret events or phenomena in their lives (Qutoshi, 2020). As noted by Smith (2014), phenomenology emphasises the lived experiences of individuals and their interpretations of different situations. The researchers heavily relied on the perspectives of the research participants and how they described their experiences with members of the original families while integrating street children into their households.

### 3.1 Population, sample and sampling procedure

The study population, which Kumar (2019) regards as a set of particular species, such as people, animals, or plants, which have and share identical, common, and specific characteristics, consisted of social development officers who work on integrating street children with their original families in the Harare Metropolitan Province. The research participants were purposively selected, which Babbie (2012) argues is used to choose a sample based on the researcher's belief that he or she will be able to obtain the most comprehensive understanding of the area being considered. The purposive sample consisted of ten social development officers from the Harare Metropolitan Province. In the view of Creswell and Creswell (2018), in a phenomenological study, three to ten research participants are sufficient to provide data. In this study, the data were already saturated when the ninth participant was reached.

### 3.2 Data collection

The study data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule, which, according to Smith (2014), endeavours to enter, as much as possible, the social and psychological world of the respondent. The researchers tried to gather as much information as possible on the respondents' thoughts about integrating street children with their original families. A semi-structured interview schedule was used because the researchers were not bound to rigidly follow the order and wording of the interview schedule. The researchers could ask more questions and engage in probing to ensure that the required data were obtained. Kakilla (2021) asserts that in a semi-structured interview, the researchers can critically scrutinise the conversations and verify initial superficial responses. Another advantage of using a semi-structured interview schedule is that it brings flexibility, which Deterding and Waters (2018) maintain allows the interviewers to synthesise different themes. Additionally, a semi-structured interview schedule enables the researchers to obtain data in its natural form and can draw upon the interviewee's inner voice and feelings, as suggested by Paz-Soldan et al. (2014). The audio-recorded semi-structured interviews lasted about 45 minutes each.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Data obtained from the study was thematically analysed. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasise that during the data analysis stage, the data should be continually coded, organised chronologically and categorically, and reviewed repeatedly. The researchers organised and prepared the data for

analysis and then examined the data to identify themes and the general tone of ideas before coding it. The data was then grouped into themes related to the research objective.

## 3.4 Ethical consideration

The study was conducted in strict adherence to the ethical standards required when conducting research. The researchers obtained ethical approval from the University of South Africa (Reference: 2021/08/11/7705166/14/AM). Permission was also obtained from the head of the ministry in Zimbabwe where the research participants are employees. In addition, the researchers obtained informed consent from each of the participants after briefing them on issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and beneficence.

# 4. Findings and Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to identify challenges hindering the integration of street children with their families in Harare, Zimbabwe. The findings from the study have been presented using pseudonyms such as social development officer as SDO 1, social development officer as SDO 2, and so forth. Thematic analysis was employed to present the findings from the research questions. From the data, four themes relating to the challenges experienced by the participants were identified, namely (a) rejection and discrimination, (b) economic hardship, (c) disintegrated family structure, and (d) lack of trust.

## 4.1 Rejection and discrimination

Evidence from the interviews suggests that rejection poses a significant obstacle to the successful reintegration of street children with their families. Participants reported that certain family members were reluctant to accept back children who had been living and working on the streets. This reluctance stemmed from the children's involvement in serious offences, some of which had caught the attention of law enforcement agencies. Additionally, participants noted that these children often disrupted family harmony and could even contribute to family members' arrests or the breakdown of marriages. The participants' perspectives on these findings are reflected in the following statement:

> *The problems that we encountered were that most of the original families did not want to take back the children in view of the situations that had made the child opt to leave home and migrate to the street. In some instances, the child had caused some family members to be arrested, in other instances they had caused marriages to break and caused a lot of disharmonies in the family. The family members will have got tired and did not want anything to do with the child.* -SDO6.

Another participant revealed that sometimes families reject their children who have been living on the streets due to their past terrible behaviour, which has presented a lot of problems for the family. Consequently, some choose not to have anything to do with the child for fear that they would end up becoming a bad influence on their own children. One participant commented that:

> *Some parents will have come to the decision that they have given up all hope for their child. Since the child has been tough to live with and has caused lot of issues in the family, they don't want anything to do with them. Getting them to take the child back home is a difficult task, some fear that they would influence the younger children's at home-* SDO 7.

The findings align with those of Bejenaru and Tucker (2017), who argue that reintegration may be impossible when the children's biological families cannot take them back due to the seriousness of the issues that led the child to the streets. There is consistency between what the participants mentioned and the views of Halton (2022), who affirms that sometimes family members may decline to take in children who have been living and working on the streets. In certain cases, the child may have caused family members to be arrested or contributed to the dissolution of a marriage.

Furthermore, the findings align with Bhattacharjee and Veitch (2020), who indicate that children living on the streets often face discrimination not only from the wider community but also from family members who fear that their other children will be negatively influenced.

## 4.2 Economic hardship

This current study also found that economic hardship is an issue that hinders the effective integration of street children with their original families. This is mainly because the majority of these children who work and live on the streets are orphans. In such cases, the children are often integrated with extended family members. For these families, this means taking care of and providing for an additional individual. However, many families already face financial difficulties, so accommodating a new member in the household becomes challenging. These families have limited resources and are constrained in terms of the number of people they can support. If a family has sufficient resources, they may be more willing to take the child in. This conclusion is further supported by a quote from a social development officer:

> *One problem is that the child's extended family does not want to assume responsibility for their care. The largest obstacle is that of resources. They might not be able to meet the child's basic needs in order to properly care for them.- SDO 1.*

Participants also pointed out that the issue of resources is a major challenge as some of the families faced resource challenges, as indicated below:

> *We occasionally have difficulties with material resources. The parents will ask, "How am I going to feed the child?" when you bring the child. Thus, the family may have broken down due to the resource problem, rejection, and other factors.- SDO 3.*

*They can also be sceptical that, if they take the child back, there will be further food shortages in the home during droughts. -SDO 5*

One participant pointed out that many of these families were already overburdened as it is, and they would not want an extra burden. The participants had the following to say:

> *Sometimes, a child, who is a double orphan, is given to a different family, but the other family declines, claiming they already have a large family and cannot take in another child. SDO 6.*

This is consistent with the findings of Frimpong-Manso and Bugyei (2018), who found that with reintegration, families may require support, especially in the case of large families and particularly in low-income countries. The findings also agree with Esposito et al. (2017), who contend that due to extreme poverty or socio-economic challenges, families may struggle to provide support to additional members, especially if they have been away from home for a long time. Furthermore, Ringson and Chereni (2019) agree that extreme poverty and socio-economic hardships, particularly in Zimbabwe, where there has been hyperinflation for the past three decades, have placed a strain on the extended family who is responsible for caring for integrated children, who are orphans of their relatives.

## 4.3 Disintegrated family structure

Disintegrated family structure is another issue that poses a challenge to the integration of street children with their families. During the interviews, the participants revealed several factors related to family disintegration, such as parental separation or divorce, the death of a parent or caregiver, and the migration of one or both parents for economic reasons. In such situations, the reintegration process will be difficult since the type of family set-up the child left could have completely changed. One participant expressed his frustration as follows:

> *Occasionally, when you track down the family, it's possible that they've moved and the individuals you speak with are unaware of their whereabouts. -SDO 8.*

At times, a lot of things happened while the child was away regarding the change in family structure and the child will come back to a completely new environment. In this regard, one participant argued as follows.

> *It's possible that the individuals you were hoping to locate won't be present. This may be the result of problems such as divorce or death following the child's departure, or you may have been tricked into believing that this is where you are from when, in reality, it is not.- SDO 3*

The findings are in line with Wambede (2022), who affirms that various factors such as broken families, imprisonment, death of parents, mistreatment, drug abuse, and mistreatment may result in the failure of the reintegration process. These findings confirm Ringson and Chereni's (2019) assertion that modernism was having an impact on family structures, making them more amorphous as members sought work opportunities in business and industry. These findings also concur with Gao et al. (2018), who affirm that the frequent relocations made it challenging to find the street children's parents. When the street children returned to their original homes, they would discover that no one knew them and that everyone they knew was no longer alive.

## 4.4 Lack of trust

The findings suggest that a lack of trust significantly hinders the integration process of street children with their families. This lack of trust may stem from the children's history of misbehaviour, causing family members to lose faith in them. The research also reveals that the original family members lacked trust in the street children and doubted their ability to adapt to family life. They were sceptical about whether the children had truly changed and feared that they would relapse into criminal behaviour. Consequently, establishing trust and creating a supportive family environment becomes a challenging task in such circumstances. The evidence provided by the participants indicates that only a few street children were successfully reunited with their relatives due to this lack of trust. One participant expressed their experience as follows:

> *When a child behaves in such a way, people don't trust them to enter the family in the hopes that the child will change and break other family bonds.- SDO 4.*

Other participants revealed that anti-social behaviour, such as stealing, has made it a challenge for members of the original family to accept these children back home. Most participants indicated that sometimes family members worry whether their children have transformed due to their wrongdoings. They worry that these children may repeat their wrongdoings while at home. These findings are noted in the following statement made by the participants.

> *Some continue committing crimes, and every time they commit a crime, they run away from home and come into the street. So, the parents give up and no longer want anything to do with the child.-SDO 7.*

A similar view was shared by another participant who indicated that, due to a failed previous attempt to integrate these children with their families and their problematic behaviour, there is evidence suggesting that some families have lost hope for them. The following participant argues as follows:

> *The challenges we face are that some of the family members do not want these children because, maybe, it may not be the first time we have tried to reunify them with the family. Usually, the children will have behavioural problems. So, the family gives up on them.-SDO 9.*

Balsells et al. (2015) emphasise that trust is the most crucial criterion for stable family integration. Without trust, it becomes challenging to achieve successful integration. The members of the original family should have confidence that the child has changed and believe fully in the success of the reintegration process. Goodman et al. (2020) stress the importance of conducting in-depth discussions with the members of the original family before starting the reintegration process. This allows the family members to digest the plan and consider different alternatives before participating in the integration process.

## 5. Conclusion

The study explored the challenges hindering the effective reintegration of street children with their original families. It was argued that family is a preferred or recommended solution over institutional care or charity intervention as it provides children with the right to family life and a sense of belonging and contributes to their psychological and emotional development. This, in turn, helps them become fully functional members of society and prevents them from falling into long-term and often problematic pathways of out-of-home care. The overall findings of the study indicated that the integration of street children is not satisfactory despite all the positive benefits related to integrating these children with families. Instead, evidence from the study reveals that various challenges such as rejection and discrimination, economic hardship, disintegrated family structures, lack of trust, and failure to resolve triggering issues continue to undermine efforts to effectively integrate street children with their families in Harare, Zimbabwe. Based on the researcher's knowledge, there is a dearth of research studies that systematically capture the voices of social development officers involved in the integration process and explore challenges hindering the reintegration of street children with their families in Harare, Zimbabwe. This paper serves to close that gap and make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge by providing an in-depth understanding of specific challenges that hinder the effective integration of street children with their families.

## 6. Recommendations

In view of the study's findings, the following recommendations are made to mitigate the challenges faced while integrating street children with their original families:

- The Ministry of Social Development should offer support services to strengthen and expand support services that offer counselling, mediation, and practical assistance to families and children to ensure the effective reintegration process takes place.
- To alleviate the economic challenges hindering the integration of street children with families, the study recommends the implementation of programmes that focus on poverty alleviation and economic empowerment for families. The original families need to be capacitated economically to not feel the burden of caring for the integrated child. This could involve providing vocational training and job placement or creating microfinance initiatives to assist parents in self-generating income.
- There is a need for social development officers to be capacitated with dispute resolution and cognitive restructuring skills to change the thinking patterns of members of the original families and accept integrating with the child who had been living and working on the streets.
- Within the community, sensitisation programmes need to be developed and prioritised to raise awareness about issues faced by reintegrated street children and their families. This could assist in alleviating stereotypes, reduce stigma, and foster empathy and understanding within the community.

## 7. Declarations

review and editing (M.K., P.H. & N.D.N.); supervision (N.D.N. & P.H.); project administration (M.K.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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**Data availability:** The data presented in this study is available on request from the corresponding author.

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