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Decentralization and Grassroots Development in Liberia

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Abstract:

Decentralization in contemporary era and across the globe is expected to extend good governance to the grassroots and as such infrastructural facilities such as good road network, health facilities, good drainage system among others are adequately provided. This ought to open up and facilitate rural and urban development. More so, the rural dwellers will also contribute to decision making and implementation of programs that affect them directly. Unfortunately, this is far from reality in sub-Saharan African and Liberia in particular. The centralized system operational has impeded the bottom –to- top developmental initiatives, subordinated participatory governance system, increased poverty and constrained local dwellers to focus on central government for everything. This study, therefore, examined decentralization and grassroots development in Liberia.

Survey design was adopted for the study. Population for the study was purposively selected from three of the four regions of the country. The counties selected are the regional headquarters of each of the respective regions. The three regions are the Southwest, Central and North with a population of 3.5 million people. A sample of 395 was derived and used for the study. Out of this number, 386 was retrieved for analysis. Questionnaire was the main data-gathering instrument for the study. Interview was also used to compliment the questionnaire. The secondary data were retrieved from documentary data such as books, journals and government documents relevant to the study. The data collected was analyzed in percentages and numbers, while the interview conducted and responses were content analyzed.

The study observed that Liberia has a centralized system of governance which has impeded development, punctured bottom to top initiative and eroded political participation. The system of governance in Liberia is onerous and has overburdened wherein local dwellers depend on government for everything. Realization of decentralization has been hampered by lack of a defined policy and legislation. Also, those factors that militate against decentralization were identified to be lack of political will, government commitment, and lack of professionals at the local level. The applicability of decentralization in Liberia is assured as it builds fiscal, administrative and political capacities of local sub-units.

The study recommended that the National Legislature should pass the requisite legislation to facilitate the decentralization process. There should be an investment in human resource development particularly to ensure continuity of service at the local level. Additionally, every county in Liberia should have at least an institution of higher learning to groom local talents thereby preventing brain- draining of locals from their counties to the capital in search of higher education. Adequate and efficient way of disseminating basic information by the Ministry of Information on Decentralization. This can be done by using jingles, dialect programs, drama and cultural performances to reach a broad spectrum of the Liberian Society.

Keywords: Decentralization, grassroots, development, centralization, Liberia

1. Introduction

Governance across the globe entails provision of social welfare and needs of the masses. To this end, it imperative for every government to look inward to understand the needs and aspiration of the people they govern. However, in a heterogeneous and very wide environment, it may be so difficult to centralize decision-making and expect an effective and efficient implementation of governmental policy that will add much value to the masses, this is one of the reasons it is important to adopt a bottom-up approach rather than top-down decision making. The assumption is that it is more natural and spontaneous to result- oriented than the traditional power structures that did not favour decentralization.

Decentralization as a concept is not completely new to Africa; but rather, it has adopted diverse strategies. Anglophone and francophone African nations have seen various pre-and post-war decentralizations. After independence, governments across Africa kept on utilizing governments at the local levels as administrative units, and significant elements of local governments, for example, basic healthcare, construction of roads, education and local revenue collection were shifted toward central government control (Gbartea, 2011).

In a similar dimension, Kiwanuka (2012) believes that African nations have additionally capitulated to the expanding wave of cities and metropolitans. Some dominant elite groups in Africa, for example, the Americo-Liberian in Liberia embraced decentralization as a means to bargain with local elites with secessionist tendencies, and as a remedy for political instability. Nations began truly considering decentralization as an option after the manifest disappointments resulting from centralized economic planning in the 1970's. Although there was no confirmation that decentralization would succeed, there were adequate information demonstrating that the centralized system of governance had failed (Awortwi, 2010).

The process of decentralization in Liberia began as far back as the later phase of the nineteenth century. In 1880, G.W. Gibson outlined a plan by which full citizenship would extend to aboriginal groups in return for an increased production of agricultural commodities. However, the coming of Arthur Barclay to the presidency of Liberia in 1904 is by and large considered a defining moment in Liberian politics; since it denoted the start of a deliberate, official strategy to build up a hinterland administration grounded on the British principle of indirect rule. Barclay formally established the principle of recognizing the pre-existing indigenous power structures (or rather, what "Americo-Liberians" took for indigenous power structures) and controlling through powerful families of local political groups. He imposed a uniform system of administration through a two-layered system of "Paramount Chiefs" and "Town Chiefs" on the hinterland (Gerdes, 2013).

However, despite the various efforts previously made to improve the well-being of the masses via decentralization, evidence of grassroots development seems to be absent in Liberia. The country has been branded as under-developed after several decades of existence. She remains inaccessible and impassable after more than a century and a half of existence. The old centralized governance issue in the unitary nation-state (Liberia) is an onerous problem to sustainable development. This centralized system has impeded the bottom -to- top developmental initiatives, subordinated participatory governance system, increased poverty and constrained local dwellers to focus on central government for everything.

As a result of the above scenario, on ascendancy to power in 2006, former President Johnson- Sirleaf's administration started sweeping changes geared toward the consolidation of peace and the establishment of a legal framework simultaneously that would set the basis for a decentralized system of government. Amongst her first acts was to reposition the Governance Reform Commission (GRC) which was a brainchild of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Accra, Ghana, which was geared toward promoting good governance and instituting public sector management reforms. Executive Order Number 2, issued March 6, 2006 changed the GRC into the Governance Commission (GC) authorized to finalize and actualize blue print giving alternatives to political, social and economic decentralization (USAID, 2012).

The thesis of this paper is to examine the roles of decentralization towards promoting grassroots development in Liberia. The specific objectives are to:

- Examine the implication of centralized system of administration to grassroots development in Liberia;
- Investigate the type of decentralization adopted and factors impeding its realization in Liberia; and
- Probe the applicability of decentralization to grassroots development in post- war Liberia.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a survey design. The approach was adopted because it created the opportunity for the researcher to narrate a given circumstance, within a defined period and place, given a significant amount of detailed information. Furthermore, the survey approach was considered because the study also centered around the attitudes and insights of the authorities and people on the concept of decentralization and grassroots development in Liberia. Consequently, the importance of primary data cannot be over emphasized in this research work when collecting and analyzing questionnaires.

According to the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo- Information Services, the population of Liberia during the last census in 2008 is 3.5 million people (LISGIS 2008). As such, the study considered this figure as the population of the study since indeed decentralization and issues of grassroots development affects the entire country. However, the decentralization process in Liberia requires the involvement of different actors and those actors played a very important role in providing the necessary data the researcher intends to gather from this study. Therefore, the target population for the study was purposively selected from three of the four regions of the country. One county from each of the three regions was selected. The counties selected are the regional headquarters of each of the respective regions. The three regions are the Southwest, Central and North. Table 1 provides the population of the study.

The researcher considered the size of population and through sampling from the three counties that were selected derived the sample size by using the sample size calculator formula. The sample size calculation is an excel application that allows the automatic calculation of the sample size based on the confidence level which is 0.95, the margin of error of 5% or 0.05. From the sample size calculator, a sample of 395 was derived and used for the study. Out of this number, 386 was retrieved for analysis. This indicates that the response is reliable since more than 90% of the feedback was received. Questionnaire was the main data-gathering instrument for the study. Interview was also used to compliment the questionnaire. The secondary data were retrieved from documentary data such as books, journals and government documents relevant to the study. The data collected was analyzed in percentages and numbers, while the interview conducted and responses were content analyzed.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1. *The Concept of Decentralization*

Decentralization is the transfer of power from the federal to regional level of government (Nnoli, 2011). The definition subscribed to the fact that if development must be visible and make much impact to the lives of the masses, power must move away from the central government to the sub-national levels. It implies that the rural dwellers must involve in the decision-making process so as their needs and aspirations can be met. Agu (2014), views decentralization as the evolution by central (national) government of specific functions, with all the administrative, political and economic attributes that these entails, to local (municipal) governments, which are independent of the centre and sovereign within a legally delimited geographic and functional domain. The idea of the definition as conceptualized by Agu is that local government within the law must have relative autonomy so as to function without interference from the higher-level government.

Conclusively, decentralization entails the transfer of both decision making and resources from the central government to the regional governments as it will add value to the lives of the grassroots people.

3.2. *Liberia and the Centralized Problems*

The centralized state has lost a lot of authenticity. As Bardhan (2002) declares, this is because of its widespread failures, and decentralization is expected to guarantee a scope of advantages. By decentralizing central authority and presenting more intergovernmental competition along with accompanying check and balances, there is a normal decrease in the amount of power the central government can wield generally. It is seen as an approach to make government more responsive and proficient.

The establishment of Liberia in the mid-1800s was built on standards of centralization. The different settlements along the coasts converged into a commonwealth. The colony evolved to the commonwealth within a decade to become the independent Republic of Liberia with Monrovia as the capital city hosting the seat of government. This provided the platform for Monrovia becoming the centre of political, economic and social activities (Nyei, 2011). Formulation of all governmental policies and programs as well as allocation finance and expenditure follow a top-down approach. That is, it is the government at the center that dictates the direction of the local government. Since independence, intermittent endeavors at redistributing power have missed the mark concerning transferring socio-economic, financial, political and administrative powers to the political sub-units of government. Since then, Liberia has progressed with the formation of local sub-units including towns, districts, counties and territories. The purpose for doing this was to ensure that central government designates some functions to these units. This has remained by and large elusive with more power still in the hand of the central government with the President at this hegemonic dominance (Nyei, 2011).

The previously self-administered traditional units including clans, towns, and chiefdoms that were administered through customs and traditions and with other common laws slowly converged into the Liberian state. Chiefs were assigned as agents of government and those co-opted ones even enforced central government policies such as recruiting laborers for multi-national companies like Firestone Rubber Plantation and collecting hut tax (Kromah, 2003). The integration of the chiefs further reinforced the strength of central government and encouraged the downfall of any type perceived counter authority in the interior of the country. At such, presidential despotism or the "supreme presidency" in Liberia was profoundly grounded (Gerdes, 2013).

Likewise, the 1847 and 1986 Liberian Constitutions have embedded such a framework by authorizing the President to appoint and expel from office appointed officials of the county including the superintendent. In such manner, the President designates county administrators and authorities of other sub-national units like districts and reserves the right to remove from office locally elected Paramount Chiefs (Art.54, Sec D). As the result of the aforementioned, the central government in Liberia has been over-burdened, inadequate, and has grossly failed throughout the years to provide adequate services to a huge number of the general population particularly those residing in the rural areas (Nyei, 2011).

3.3. *Necessity for Decentralization in Modern Governance*

There is global tendency toward increasing transfer of power, resources and responsibilities to the lower levels of government. Both federal and unitary countries, regardless of whether industrialized or in the process of doing so are moving toward more decentralization. On this note, a number of countries around the globe have adopted some type of decentralization. A significant number of these nations are decentralizing in light of the fact that they trust it can help enhance financial development or decrease poverty in rural areas particularly since most centralized governments, for quite a while, were unable to render efficient service and expedite economic development. A survey conducted in the early 2000's in over 75 developing and transitional countries with estimated population of not less than five million found that as low as only 12 had not taken on some form of decentralization (Awortwi, 2010). Decentralization mandates politicians to compete, prompting a more grounded local democracy, political accountability, and accordingly, citizens' control over resources (Dreher and Fischer, 2010).

As Schneider (2003) puts it, Decentralization essentially alters the governance structure by moving the local functions from central government to local constituents, and furthermore by changing the geographic locale of political contestation and by modifying the relative power of different actors and by changing the area of government interaction with society. Furthermore, Frey and Luechinger (2004) contend that to a vast degree, decentralized nations are more stable politically and administrative than more centralized states, have more proficient markets and give less significant typical focuses acts of terrorists.

Contentions for decentralization are centered on the presumption that greater cooperation in decision making can enhance effectiveness, parity, and development and also significantly increase accountability and resource management in the public sector. Essentially, decentralization is viewed as a reasonable process for transforming political governance with the end result of allowing everybody to participate equally in matters concerning them. Decentralization connotes a system of administration that encourages the transfer of power at the grassroots who are the beneficiary. Additionally, Tendler (2000) believes that decentralization can enhance service delivery on grounds that other institutions can supplement central government's inefficiencies with respect to the aforementioned. It is likewise assumed that if the whole course of action is based on trust and organized well, decentralization with its attending inclusive approach could enhance processes and appropriation equally (Hadenius, 2003)

Yajah (2014) affirms that civil society gets to be distinctly empowered with a viable decentralization program. Opportunities for grassroots development are upgraded with a strong local government capacity which is realistic when decentralization is enforced.

3.4. Grassroot Governance

Grassroots are characteristically involved with local governance within the community with team spirit of the people to achieve organized objectives. Therefore, grassroots governance facilitates favourable conditions that serve local needs, though the expectation is to enhance care and skill for effective development within the community (Oviasuyi, 2010). The idea of grassroots governance is to harness collective responsibility and resources towards fostering development within a given locality.

3.4.1. Theoretical Framework-Development Theory

The thesis of the theory is that local government is established to provide development at the grassroots level, especially, in the developing countries. They are critical agents for improving socio-economic conditions of the rural areas (Adeyemo, 2011). Ugwuanyi, Ndubisi and Onuoha (2014) argued that local governments provide a sustained basis for those represented at the grassroots to get a fair share in the national wealth of a state. In particular, the development function of the local government incorporates nation building, socio-economic and labour asset development. Therefore, citizen's participation in governance, especially those in the rural areas will influence the quality of decisions as well as implementation of governmental policies. According to I. J. Sharpe, one of the proponents of the theory averred that almost all services can have national implications when neglected. It will lead to national disease, ignorance and poor communication or isolation (Adeyemo, 2010).

However, the development theory does not consider some variables that drive development such as human capacity building. It is a known fact that human capacity building is a vital aspect of development and ought not to be overlooked as done by the theory. It is this variable that drives the attainment of development, as such, development does not exist in a vacuum; it has other attending variables which incorporate local capacity, human capacity building and vibrant civil society.

Application of the theory indicates that decentralization is an effective agent of development in the developing countries. It is when governmental activities are decentralized that the grassroots people can have positive effect of governance such as better life, improvement in the means of livelihood among others because government will be at their door steps and they participate not only in the formulation of programs but implementation as well.

4. Data Analysis

Region	No. of counties	Estimated Population of County Selected	County of Study	Number of Responders	Percentage
Southwest	3	83,758	Gbarpolu	39	10%
Central	4	328,919	Bong	147	37%
North	2	468,088	Nimba	209	53%
Total	9	880,765	3	395	100%

Table 1: Population and Sample Size Distribution

Source: Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2008

Table 1 shows the regions and the counties that were selected with the estimated population which is 880, 765. From the table, 39 respondents were drawn from Gbarpolu County with a population of 83,758 constituting 10%. For the Bong County, the population of 328, 919 and sample size of 147 was drawn constituting 37% of total respondents while Nimba County had 209 respondents with a population of 468, 088 constituting 53% of the total respondents. The implication of this is that adequate opinion was sampled from the entire population to execute the study.

		Frequency	Percent %	Valid Percent %	Cumulative Percent %
Valid	Male	265	68.7	68.7	68.7
	Female	121	31.3	31.3	31.3
	Total	386	100.0	100.0	100

Table 2: Gender of Respondents
Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2017)

From table 2, the number of male respondents is high as seen been the 69%. The female respondents constitute 31% of the total number of respondents. The implication of this is that more male respondents are will to participate in providing relevant information in the course of the study. Therefore, more male respondents are more vibrant and willing to involve in political participation.

		Frequency	Percent %	Valid Percent %	Cumulative Percent %
Valid	Gbarpolu	37	9.6	9.6	9.6
	Nimba	134	34.7	34.7	44.3
	Bong	215	55.7	55.7	100.0
	Total	386	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: Counties of Origin
Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2017)

Table 3 shows the counties that were selected with the total percentages of respondents from each county. Bong County in the Central of Liberia constitutes 55.7% of the total respondent because of the high population density of that region while Nimba County has 34.7% of the respondents. The remaining 9.6% of the respondents are from Gbarpolu County, the region with the lowest population density in Liberia. This implies that the central region has the highest population among the regions selected followed by the Northern Region. The South-western region has the lowest population density. This concurs with the 2008 census conducted in Liberia.

Age Range		Frequency	Percent %	Valid Percent %	Cumulative Percent %
Valid	Below 25	115	29.8	29.8	29.8
	26 – 35	93	24.1	24.1	53.9
	36 - 45	109	28.2	28.2	82.1
	46 – 55	68	17.6	17.6	99.7
	Above 55	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	386	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Ages of Respondents
Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2017)

Table 4 shows the age range of respondents. Cumulatively, the age range of below 25 and the ages 26-30 which are considered the youths constitute 59%, a fair representation of youth. This is primarily because the Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Service last census conducted in 2008 indicated that Liberia has a youthful population of over 60%. The remaining 41% are middle age respondents between the age ranges of 40 – 60.

Marital Status					
		Frequency	Percent %	Valid Percent %	Cumulative Percent %
Valid	Married	233	60.4	60.4	60.4
	Single	104	26.9	26.9	34.5
	Widowed	29	7.5	7.5	7.5
	Divorced	20	5.2	5.2	100.0
	Total	386	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Marital Status of Respondents
Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2017)

Table 5 shows the relational status of respondents. Respondents at all spectra of relationships were considered as expressed by 54% of those that are married, 24% represents those that single and the remaining 15% and 7% are respondents that are widowed and divorced respectively. This implies that in the rural communities' marriage is considered seriously as seen by the proportion of respondents.

		Frequency	Percent %	Valid Percent %	Cumulative Percent %
Valid	Secondary School	180	46.6	46.6	46.6
	Bachelor Degree	128	33.2	33.2	79.8
	Master and Above	73	18.9	18.9	98.7
	Others	5	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	386	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Education Qualifications of Respondents

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2017)

Table 6 shows the level of education of respondents that were selected by the study. The total of 46.6% of respondents said they had attained secondary education while 33.2% had a bachelor degree. A total of 18.9% of respondents are have attained a post-graduate degree. The remaining respondents constituting 1.3 had acquired some form of education that ranging from vocational was not specifically mentioned. This implies that majority of the respondents were high school graduate. This shows the quality of education needs to be upgraded to train professionals locally to occupy the bureaucracy that accompanies local government autonomy.

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1. The Implication of Centralized System of Administration to Grassroots Development in Liberia

Generally, from the responses it was gathered that the centralized system has negatively affected grassroots development in Liberia. The analysis from responses showed that Liberia has a centralized system of administration and that centralization has impeded development in Liberia. The Constitution of the Republic of Liberia in its Preamble labeled chapter one affirms that Liberia is a unitary state with one central government (Liberian Constitution, 1986). The respondents generally agreed the government has been overburdened because rural dwellers depend on central government for everything. Kiwanuka (2012) asserts that the disappointing results encountered by countries after a period of failed centralized planning compelled many developing countries to look for options beyond centralized planning.

Centralized development planning failed drastically in the 1970's and 1980's which seriously hindered development in Africa (Devas 2004). Respondents also agreed that political has been low at the local level. This is because as Awortwi (2010) posits, the centralized system of governance does not provide the environment for popular participation in the process of making decisions and development programs. Also, the respondents generally agreed that the government has been overburdened because rural dwellers depend on central government for everything.

5.2. Forms of Decentralization Practiced in Liberia and Factors Militating against Its Realization

Decentralization in Liberia is not an entirely new phenomenon; in fact, it started as far back as the later stage of the 19th century. In 1880, G. W. Gibson initiated a program by which local communities would attain full involvement in the political process in exchange for increased agricultural production. However, the ascendancy of Arthur Barclay to president of Liberia in 1904 is generally considered a turning point in Liberian politics, because it marked the beginning of a concerted, official policy to establish a hinterland administration (Gerdes, 2013). There has been significant reform instituted by the Ellen Johnson led government aimed at decentralizing the country. This reforms most of the responses in affirmative that County Development Agenda and the Local Service Centers are good steps toward full devolution of power.

Despite the improvements as far as the forms of decentralization practiced in Liberia is concerned, there are visible factors that war against the full implementation of decentralization. The study found out that there is lack of professionals at the grassroots level to fully implement decentralization and that some units of central government are unwilling to relinquish their powers to local authorities. Furthermore, there is level of uncertainty as asserted by the respondent that decentralization is one of the most important reforms of the past generation; however, its realization has been grossly affected during implementation. This is largely due to lack of professionals to occupy the bureaucracy at the local level. Additionally, from the UNDP (2007) report on the Liberian National Decentralization and Local Development (LDLD) program outlined the challenges of decentralization in post-war Liberia. The report established that the majority key functions for administering and managing the economy are entrusted to the center, and implemented through line ministries and agencies and commissions. This according to the report, show a very limited role and narrow relationship between the central government and local units as far as cooperation is concerned thereby frustrating popular participation and total involvement of locals in decision making.

5.3. Decentralization Applicability to Grassroots Development in Post-War Liberia

For over a decade and half Liberia remain impassable and underdeveloped with an onerous system of centralized government. Respondents agreed that decentralization has positive application to grassroots development in Liberia. Affirming the respondents' view, Awortwi (2010) posits that by decentralizing authority, there is stimulation of economic growth and significant decrease in the level of rural poverty especially since most centralized governments were unable to adequately provide services and deliver on key development programs.

6. Summary of Research Findings

After more than a century of existence, the oldest independent nation in Africa still suffers from developmental stagnation. Policy makers have introduced reforms to address this stagnation with decentralization at the apex. Decentralization is not an entirely new phenomenon in Liberia; however, the wanton failures of the centralized state has reinforced the need for reforms particularly those concern with taking development closer to the people. From the gamut of extant literature that was reviewed, decentralization seems to be an impressive reform to mitigate development shortfalls.

The study incorporated the survey design wherein questionnaire was the main instrument of the study. Out of the 395 questionnaire that were administered, 386 were returned which were analyzed using charts, tables and percentages. The findings from the data that were analyzed are summarized below:

- Liberia has a centralized system of governance which has impeded development, punctured bottom to top initiative and eroded political participation. The system of governance in Liberia is onerous and has overburdened wherein local dwellers depend on government for everything.
- Decentralization is not a new phenomenon in Liberia, but its realization has been hampered by lack of a defined policy and legislation. Also, those factors that militate against decentralization were identified to be lack of political will, government commitment, and lack of professionals at the local level.
- The applicability of decentralization in Liberia is assured as it builds fiscal, administrative and political capacities of local sub-units

7. Conclusion

One cannot overstate the fact that a high level of centralization has weakened democratic governance, diminished popular participation and stalled socio-economic development in Liberia. Liberian Decentralization and Local Governance policy is an institutional framework that will safeguard local participatory governance. When the citizens have a sense of inclusion, particularly the decision-making process of the country, they consciously take possession of developmental initiatives. This is the fundamental goal of decentralization. There is a serious need for political actors and policy makers to be sincere in articulating and instigating wide-range of issues that will not only enhanced development but also bolster citizen participation as far as state affairs are concerned. There is a widespread demand for governance reform after the turbulent period Liberia has gone through almost as a failed state. Amongst those reforms, decentralization seems to take center-stage and preeminence. When authority is decentralized, the governance system is strengthened which undoubtedly ensures government legitimacy and authenticity.

8. Recommendations

- There should be concerted effort from the Legislative and Executive branches of the Liberian Government in the form of political will to ensure the full actualization of the decentralization policy in Liberia. This particularly involves the National Legislature that must pass the requisite legislation to facilitate the decentralization process.
- This research is advancing that the government create structures at the local level along with providing handsome salaries and incentivizing those professionals that will be situated at the local level. Additionally, there should be an investment in human resource development particularly to ensure continuity of service at the local level. Additionally, every county in Liberia should have at least an institution of higher learning to groom local talents thereby preventing brain- draining of locals from their counties to the capital in search of higher education.
- There needs to be more adequate and efficient way of disseminating basic information by the Ministry of Information on Decentralization. This can be done by using jingles, dialect programs, drama and cultural performances to reach a broad spectrum of the Liberian Society. This is because it was observed by the researcher from the findings that respondents were undecided on some of the major issues that were brought out in the questionnaire.

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