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Sustainable development in rural communities: a review of approaches, progress, and challenges

Desarrollo sostenible en comunidades rurales: una revisión de los enfoques, avances y desafíos

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Abstract

Progress in sustainable development in rural areas has become a key aspect of public policy agendas, with a view to achieving greater social and territorial equity and collaboration between countries at the international level. This article aims to analyze the most significant strategies, obstacles, and achievements, considering methods and progress related to sustainable rural development from a comprehensive approach. Through a systematic review of the scientific literature, using the PRISMA methodology, academic sources indexed in databases such as Scopus, SciELO, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were studied, considering 15 research studies. The results reveal that elements such as education in rural contexts, health, community management for access to basic services through social participation, economic growth and diversification, and recognition of local culture are the essential foundations of sustainable development and progress in rural communities. The discussion highlights how these elements interact to form environments that are resilient, sustainable, and inclusive, particularly in situations of historical inequality and structural marginalization. It concludes that sustainable rural development requires comprehensive policies, valuing local knowledge, and territorial approaches as the foundations for significant structural change.

Keywords: Sustainable development, rural communities, PRISMA methodology.

Resumen

El progreso del desarrollo sostenible en las áreas rurales, se ha vuelto un aspecto clave para las agendas de políticas públicas, para tener una mayor equidad social, territorial y la colaboración entre los países a nivel internacional. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar estrategias, obstáculos y logros más significativos, considerando métodos y progresos relacionados con el desarrollo rural sostenible desde un enfoque integral. A través de una revisión sistemática de la literatura científica, empleando la metodología PRISMA, se estudiaron fuentes académicas indexadas en base de datos tales como: Scopus, SciELO, Web of SCience y Google académico donde se consideró 15 investigaciones. Los resultados revelan que elementos como la educación en contexto rural, salud, gestión comunitaria para el acceso a los servicios básicos mediante la participación social, el crecimiento económico y su diversificación, además del reconocimiento de la cultura local, son los cimientos esenciales del desarrollo sostenibles y el progreso de las comunidades rurales. La discusión resalta la forma en que estos elementos interactúan para formar entornos que sean resilientes, sostenibles e inclusivos, particularmente en situaciones de desigualdad histórica y marginación estructural. Se concluye que el desarrollo rural sostenible necesita de políticas integrales, valoración del conocimiento local y enfoques territoriales como fundamentos de cambios estructurales significativos.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo sostenible, comunidades rurales, equidad social.

Introduction

Sustainable development and progress in rural communities have emerged as crucial and essential factors on global, regional, and local agendas, driven by the imperative to address challenges related to poverty, social exclusion, inequality, and environmental degradation. At the international level, entities such as the United Nations

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have underscored that sustainable development must be inclusive and equitable, with particular attention to rural areas as especially vulnerable and underserved. From this perspective, rural communities should be regarded not merely as productive engines but also, too often, as passive recipients of government action plans that frequently remain unfulfilled, leaving them aside and undervaluing their role as key actors in processes of change.

Sustainability may be understood as the capacity to meet present needs without compromising the opportunities of future generations, as defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2025). In rural settings, this principle requires rethinking development strategies in light of the specific territorial, ecological, cultural, and institutional realities of each community. In these areas, sustainability cannot be addressed through a uniform approach or restricted solely to economic growth; rather, a multidimensional strategy is required, one that encompasses community participation, social equity, cultural valuation, environmental resilience, and the strengthening of inclusive governance systems (Santos, 2025).

In recent decades, academic and policy dialogue on rural development has evolved from productivity-centered approaches toward more integrated perspectives, such as territorial development, agroecology, sustainable economies, and common-good-based frameworks, as noted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2019). These analytical frameworks promote a clear vision that prioritizes people, their social relationships, respect for ecosystems, and collective rights, while also underscoring the interconnections between the local, national, and global levels. This recognition reflects the understanding that rural challenges cannot be separated from the broader macroeconomic context or from global phenomena such as climate change, public policy orientations, and rapid urbanization (Falconi, 2020).

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2024), rural communities in Latin America face numerous historical challenges. Structural inequality persists as one of the principal obstacles to rural advancement, along with deficits in basic services, inefficient health systems, territorial disparities, low-quality education, climate vulnerability, and forced migration, all of which demand a cross-cutting approach. Nonetheless, these same spaces also harbor innovation, collective organization, ancestral knowledge, and the creation of alternatives to dominant sustainable development models. In the case of Ecuador, specifically in Guayas province, efforts to implement sustainable strategies have been constrained by fragmented public policies, insufficient investment, institutional limitations, and weak linkages with rural communities. Although territorial development projects aim to reduce historical gaps, difficulties persist in their implementation at the local level (Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado Provincial del Guayas, 2024).

The concept of sustainability, introduced in the Brundtland Report in 1987, has evolved toward a more comprehensive perspective in which territorial dynamics, citizen participation, and local knowledge have gained greater recognition and value (Cardona, 2025). In rural areas, ongoing dialogues between government and rural communities address issues such as agricultural diversity with quality standards, food sovereignty, community empowerment, and equitable access to essential basic services such as water, electricity, health, and education, though in most cases, these conversations rarely translate into concrete action (Andrade, 2021).

Progress in sustainable rural development has been examined from various theoretical perspectives. The territorial approach suggests viewing the territory as a continually evolving social construct, shaped by diverse actors, identity, and power structures that influence development pathways. This perspective fosters the strengthening of local capacities, the connection of community networks, and the autonomous management of resources (Eutopía, 2020).

The capabilities approach, as introduced by Nussbaum (2012), proposes that development should focus on expanding the freedoms that individuals actually enjoy in order to pursue lives they consider valuable. In the rural context, this means creating the necessary conditions for people to access essential services, participate in decision-making processes, and live with dignity, beyond purely financial considerations (Mondragón, 2023).

Neo-endogenous development theory has gained traction in sustainability studies in rural areas, emphasizing the crucial role of local actors in shaping the future of their communities, while also recognizing the importance of external support and connections (Aguirre & Herrera, 2025).

Social microenterprise ecosystems in rural areas connect organizations with social purposes within participatory, collaborative networks that promote economic viability, social well-being, and environmental

stewardship, thereby strengthening local economies and advancing community development goals (Maldonado J., 2025).

The United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (2025) considers that, from the perspective of sustainability and rural livelihoods, these systems can be understood as arrangements in which families integrate various resources (financial, human, natural, social, and material) to develop flexible and durable strategies in response to challenges and transformations across all structures.

Agroecology, meanwhile, presents itself as a theoretical and practical alternative that combines environmental sustainability with social equity and justice, valuing the knowledge of community members and promoting food systems that are both resistant and resilient (Namicela, 2022).

According to Nolasco and Gomis (2021), the provision of electricity in rural areas not only improves household quality of life but also stimulates local economies and promotes gender equality. They note that distributed renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and biomass have become sustainable options for remote communities, though their adoption requires appropriate regulations, adequate financing, and community involvement.

Rivera et al. (2025) contend that sustainable progress in rural areas requires considering several dimensions cohesively:

Rural development rests on multidimensional integration that begins with an economic sphere focused on incentivizing sustainable productive activities, strengthening solidarity-based economies, ensuring equitable access, and generating decent employment within the community. This structure is complemented by a social dimension aimed at raising educational quality, improving access to health and housing. In addition, the institutional dimension emphasizes local and decentralized governance through citizen participation, while the environmental dimension prioritizes sustainable resource management, ecosystem conservation, and food sovereignty. Finally, the cultural dimension assigns fundamental value to worldviews and knowledge for territorial progress.

All these dimensions must be analyzed jointly, as they are interconnected and mutually influential; interventions must therefore account for territorial complexity. This review article aims to organize and critically evaluate the approaches, advances, and challenges of sustainable development in rural communities, with a focus on the global context, Latin America, and Ecuador. Although improved regulations and successful community experiences can be observed, significant challenges remain concerning institutional articulation, long-term sustainability, and resource financing. The review draws on recent scientific literature and is structured according to the PRISMA methodology to ensure rigor, clarity, and comprehensiveness.

Methodology

A systematic literature review on rural community development was conducted using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology, which allowed the review to be organized with clarity, precision, and reproducibility of procedures (Page et al., 2021).

1. **Search strategy**

The research was based on searches in academic platforms including Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, and Google Scholar. Keywords employed included "sustainable rural development," "rural territory," "agroecology," "rural social and solidarity economy," "rural governance," "territorial equity," "rural resilience," and "participation in rural areas." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search, and results were restricted to articles published from 2022 onward to ensure access to up-to-date academic information with full-text availability.

2. **Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

Inclusion criteria:

Consideration was given to scientific research, analyses, or case reports addressing sustainability in rural areas. Articles published from 2022 onward were included. Accepted languages were Spanish, English, and Portuguese, with peer review and full-text availability required.

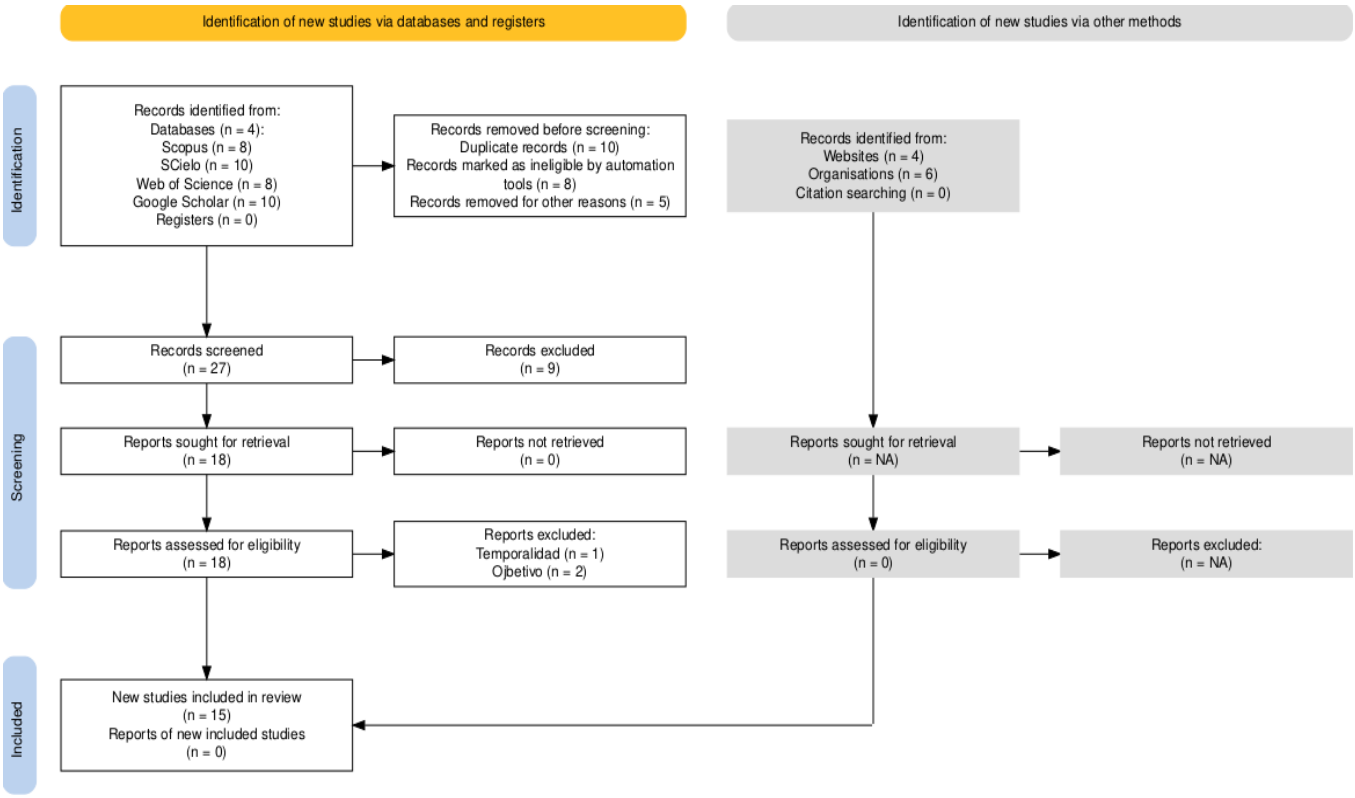
Exclusion criteria:

Studies focusing exclusively on transportation, energy, or infrastructure without a sustainability perspective were excluded, as were duplicate articles, editorials, non-peer-reviewed organizational documents, and studies conducted prior to 2022 or lacking geographical and scientific relevance.

3. Selection process

In the initial stage, 50 research documents were identified. After removing duplicates and applying exclusion criteria, 35 abstracts and titles were examined. Ultimately, 15 studies were selected for full analysis and PRISMA filtration.

To facilitate the selection process for the systematic review of works addressing sustainable development in rural communities, the intuitive tool developed by Haddaway et al. (2022) was employed. This tool enables the generation of flow diagrams compatible with the PRISMA 2020 methodology, thereby improving compliance with review standards and the quality of scientific information on the topic.



4. Analysis and evaluation

The selected studies were examined using an analysis table that recorded country, research area, methods employed, thematic dimensions, theoretical framework, participants, and key findings. Thematic classification was supported by the qualitative software tool ATLAS. ti 23.

Results and discussion

From the 50 studies initially identified, 15 were selected, facilitating the detection of various trends, patterns, and methodologies related to sustainable development in rural areas at the global, Latin American, and Ecuadorian levels. The findings were categorized into five key dimensions: economic, social, environmental, institutional, and cultural.

Author (Year)	Country	Topic	Study Objective	Approach/Strategy	Target Population	Study Participants	Study Design	Data Collection Method	Key Findings
Abreu et al. (2021)	Portugal	Design and validation of an index to measure development in rural areas through stakeholder participation	To design a multidimensional participation index for measuring sustainability in rural communities	Rural and participatory development	NUTS III rural territories	Experts and local stakeholders	Delphi, statistical	Surveys and expert panels	The index constitutes a highly useful tool for local sustainability assessment.
Cuenca et al. (2024)	Global (cases in Africa, Asia, and Latin America)	Sustainability of rural electrification projects in developing countries: A systematic literature review	To examine, study, and assess the viability of rural electrification initiatives	Evaluation and analysis of rural projects	Beneficiary users of rural electrification	Global studies published 2020–2023	Systematic review	Documentary analysis of electrification projects	The analysis, focused on energy, highlights social and economic elements of sustainable initiatives.
Balanzó et al., (2020)	Latin America	Typical governance challenges for sustainable regional development in globalized Latin America: A multidimensional literature review	To analyze and evaluate governance challenges for sustainable regional development	Sustainable rural development and governance	Rural regions of Latin America	Experts in analysis, evaluation, and specialized literature	Document review	Theoretical and descriptive analysis	Identifies institutional failures and the need for regional management in rural areas.
Durán et al., (2023)	Latin America and Caribbean	Socio-technical transitions and sustainable agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean: A systematic literature review 2010–2021	To analyze socio-technical changes in sustainable agriculture in rural areas	Systematic review of the agricultural sector	Academic studies (2010–2021)	Scientific literature on the agricultural sector	Systematic review	Bibliographic review	Presents emerging trends such as agroecology and adaptation to sustainable technologies in rural areas.

Hernández et al., (2024)	Latin America	Sustainable Development Goals and Education: A Bibliometric Review—The Case of Latin America	To analyze education and SDGs in rural areas through bibliometrics	Bibliometric educational review	Scientific production	Indexed studies	Document review	Bibliometric analysis	Education is a key factor in sustainable rural development.
Suárez et al., (2023)	Colombia (comparative Latin America)	Sustainable development in rural territories over the last decade: A state-of-the-art review	To identify the most important variables in sustainable rural development	Systematic review	Various rural territories	Indexed academic studies	Systematic review	Systematized selection and analysis of variables	Provides a robust classification of parameters for measuring sustainability in rural areas.
Figueredo et al., (2023)	Brazil	Challenges and opportunities for providing small farmers equal access to wealth through rural credit in Brazil	To examine challenges to equitable access to rural credit	Participatory and rural economy	Small-scale farmers in the sector	Farmers	Observational and participatory	Observation and community workshops	Identifies challenges to equitable credit access in rural areas.
Valbuena et al., (2025)	Colombia (Global)	Exploring the local nexus between human development and environmental sustainability: A case study from Colombia	To investigate the connection between human development in rural communities and environmental stewardship	Integrated territorial-human approach	Rural communities in Colombia	Study author(s)	Global comparative case study	Spatial and socio-environmental analysis	Participatory planning improves well-being and conservation outcomes.
Casas Matiz et al., (2023)	Colombia	New rurality and public policy in Latin America	To analyze new rurality in Colombia and public policy implementation	Territorial policy review	Previous studies and policymakers	13 official policy documents evaluated	Document review	Document analysis	In current rurality, autonomous, decentralized, and diversified governance is promoted.

Mezza et al., (2021)	Colombia	"Rural communities toward Sustainable Development" as an analytical and procedural approach for Architecture students	To stimulate SDG actions among architecture students implemented in rural areas	Applied education in architecture	Populated rural areas	Rural communities and university students	Education-based study	Mixed analysis and observation	Professional training related to sustainable progress in rural areas.
Ramos et al., (2024)	Ecuador	Sustainability and rural empowerment: Developing women's entrepreneurial skills through innovation	To improve the entrepreneurial skills of rural women	Rural entrepreneurship with a gender focus	Rural women	Empowered women and local leaders	Quasi-experimental	Workshops and surveys	Skills development and sustainable businesses with gender equality.
Ayala et al., (2023)	Ecuador (Andes)	Motivations for adopting agroecology in rural communities in the Northern Andes of Ecuador	To understand the reasons leading rural communities to choose agroecology	Participatory agroecology	Indigenous and mestizo farmers from communities	Farmers from rural sectors	Mixed-methods study	Surveys and interviews	Reasons grounded in social, ecological, and cultural principles foster adoption.
Franco & Tibán (2024)	Ecuador (Central Highlands)	Contribution of community enterprises to food sovereignty and security in the central highlands of Ecuador	To analyze the role of community enterprises and their contribution to food autonomy	Community solidarity economy	Rural communities producing food in the highlands	Members of community enterprises	Mixed-methods study	Surveys and interviews	Community organizations play an important role in food security, social justice, and cultural preservation.
Maldonado et al., (2022)	Ecuador	Strengthening community tourism enterprises as a means of sustainable development in rural areas: A case study of community tourism development in Chimborazo	To provide an overview of the current situation of communities and progress achieved	Community tourism development	Rural communities in Chimborazo province	Sector cooperative members	Case study	Interviews, questionnaires	Community tourism is strengthened to improve rural economies and social cohesion.

Yonfa et al., (2024)	Ecuador (Guayas)	Contribution of university-community collaboration to rural sustainability: Participatory action research in the rice-growing community of Paipayales, Ecuador	To evaluate the impact of participatory action research (PAR) university-community collaboration on rural sustainability	Participatory/action	Rice farmers of Paipayales	Farmers + university students	Action research	Workshops, interviews, observation	University-community linkages improve water management, production, and commercialization.

The findings indicate progress in sustainable development strategies for rural communities, as their advancement constitutes a complex and multifaceted challenge encompassing economic, social, cultural, environmental, and institutional dimensions. The comprehensive analysis of the selected studies demonstrates that multiple factors influence sustainability and the improvement of well-being in rural communities.

This section presents a comparative analysis derived from 15 scientific studies focused on the sustainability of rural populations, examining differences, convergences, and significant contrasts among research works published and indexed in scientific journals or repositories.

Regarding the similarities identified across studies, the researchers concur that a commitment to rural community development exists, as they address various economic, social, and ecological factors. To this end, they propose diverse approaches such as education, agroecology, tourism, women's empowerment, and regulatory frameworks. They also highlight the importance of local actors in ensuring sustainability, emphasizing education as a fundamental driver and its role in fostering awareness, alongside the generation of varied approaches such as sustainable tourism, agroecology, empowerment, and improved public policies.

Concerning the commitments of sustainable development in rural communities, Abreu et al. (2021) and Yonfa et al. (2024) underscore the importance of actively involving rural community stakeholders to ensure sustainability, applying methods such as community workshops, Delphi, and action research, which they considered customary. Likewise, Mezza et al. (2021) and Hernández et al. (2024) emphasize teaching and learning as drivers of progress, highlighting the crucial role of education in raising sustainability awareness. In turn, Ayala et al. (2023), Casas et al. (2023), and Ramos et al. (2024) agree on the variety of rural sustainability topics, including tourism, women's entrepreneurship, and public policies.

Differences and contrasting approaches are also observable among the studies analyzed. Some employ technological tools such as Delphi techniques, interviews, questionnaires, workshops, bibliometric analyses, and surveys, with the choice of tool depending on the research objective. Regarding geographic scales, some studies are global in scope while others are more localized, which influences findings, for instance, Cuenca et al. (2024) focus internationally, whereas Valbuena et al. (2025) adopt a more regional perspective. While certain studies, such as those by Durán et al. (2023) and Suárez et al. (2023), employ systematic reviews as their methodology, others, including Maldonado et al. (2022) and Valbuena et al. (2025), opt for case studies, combined methodologies, or mixed approaches. In terms of thematic focus, some research concentrates on technical elements, such as financing for rural communities and rural electrification, while others direct attention to human and social aspects, government regulations, improved public policies, and participative strengthening of rural women.

In contrast to the results, it is notable that several analyses reference how education can significantly and positively influence the adoption of sustainable practices (Mezza et al., 2021), while others, such as Suárez et al. (2023), approach the topic from a documentary perspective with systematic analysis to examine patterns without direct intervention. Regarding tourism versus agroecology, some researchers, such as Maldonado et al. (2022), suggest that tourism serves as a source of economic growth, whereas others, including Ayala et al. (2023), defend

and propose agroecology as a model better adapted to change with a sustainable focus grounded in cultural principles. Consequently, in terms of management, governance, and public policies, researchers such as Balanzó et al. (2020) and Casas et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of effective and decentralized institutional systems, in contrast to Valbuena et al. (2025), who highlight human territorial planning.

These studies reveal interdisciplinary lessons and trends, as sustainable progress in rural areas requires approaches that combine different sectors, including the economy, education, gender equality, and the environment. Furthermore, in terms of local contextualization, sustainable development must take into account the inhabitants of each area according to its socio-cultural and geographic environment. Since no single solution exists to development challenges, working collaboratively with communities to implement solutions, as those most knowledgeable about local needs, is essential, identifying common characteristics as a fundamental factor for sustainable improvements, as demonstrated by multiple studies in the transition toward sustainable development, shifting from extraction models to methods that are resilient and adaptive.

Conclusions

Progress toward sustainability in rural areas remains a key objective for achieving resource equity across territories, as it presents multiple facets. The studies reviewed concur that sustainability cannot be restricted to a single aspect; rather, all dimensions, especially the economic, cultural, social, environmental, territorial, and institutional governance dimensions, must be interconnected, as their joint work is crucial to achieving lasting and sustainable outcomes.

A stronger connection between government programs and local communities is necessary. Even with decentralization of public policies, these do not by themselves ensure effective administration or responsiveness to population demands. Strengthening local institutions and optimizing infrastructure is fundamental, as favorable outcomes depend on proper collaboration among institutions, the development of local capacities, and attention to cultural and geographical specificities to ensure equitable access to essential basic services.

As success factors in sustainable development, the research shows that involving rural communities and enabling them to participate in projects is a key factor for successfully improving their communities. The various studies, at the global, regional, and local levels, demonstrate that sustainable initiatives that actively include community members from planning, initiation, and execution through to evaluation achieve greater acceptance and sustainability over time, in contrast to other initiatives that fail to involve communities, which often result in collapse, stagnation, and repeated interventions without achieving results.

The authors of the reviewed studies emphasize the persistence of territorial and structural challenges that constitute significant obstacles in rural communities, including rising poverty, lack of basic services, weak institutional capacity due to poor governance, and limited connectivity at the global, Latin American, and local levels. They concur that these communities require improved resources and infrastructure, as well as targeted policies aimed at reducing historical inequalities.

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