

GAGE Digest

Do adolescent girls benefit from social enterprises?

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1. Introduction

Social enterprises are evolving and, in some countries, growing rapidly. There are diverse models in operation across the world, with varying objectives and approaches. However, there is no one accepted definition or description of what a social enterprise is. A common understanding is that the principles of a social enterprise combine running a profitable business and delivering social benefits.

Social enterprises are associated with bringing innovative and efficient service delivery to the communities they serve. Many operate in productive sectors, as well as delivering services such as education, health, water, housing and justice. Several social enterprises have women's and girls' well-being and empowerment as key objectives, along with wider goals of social change. However, there are also questions over whether social enterprise models can effectively reach the poorest, whether they are sustainable, and whether they are an appropriate approach to fill the gap where governments are failing.

This briefing paper looks at the opportunities and challenges in the current social enterprise landscape, focusing on how social enterprises can benefit adolescent girls. The paper is an output of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research initiative, which aims to strengthen the evidence base on adolescent girls to maximise their capabilities and shape their own futures. The paper draws on secondary data to identify ways in which social enterprises can improve outcomes for adolescent girls in low-income countries. As this is an emerging sector, there are limitations to the evidence base and availability of relevant literature. Furthermore, the diverse interpretations and definitions of social enterprises – and a lack of common terminology across the social enterprise literature – pose further challenges when trying to analyse their impact. This is particularly the case when it comes to measuring direct and indirect impacts on women and girls.

While there are recent scoping studies on national social enterprise landscapes, these tend to focus on descriptive mappings of social enterprises. Although these studies often include descriptions from a gender perspective, there is little focus on adolescent girls. Moreover, there is much less evidence on the *impacts* of social enterprise activities in general, and while there are

a few recent studies on the effects of social enterprises on women's empowerment, these tend to be small in scale. Much of the analysis here, therefore, is indicative and based on a deductive analysis from the available literature, looking predominantly at research conducted using the term 'social enterprises'. Most of the literature comes from South Asia.

1.1 Social enterprise models

Social enterprises are seen by some as a growing, global movement that is revolutionising the scope of business to tackle some of the world's most pressing social issues such as social injustice, poverty and environmental degradation. The number of social enterprises and the scope of their activities is reportedly increasing in low-income countries, especially in South Asia – creating jobs and livelihood opportunities, increasing household incomes, and with potential to increase growth in new products and services (British Council, 2016a). Many social enterprises are delivering services such as education, health, water, housing and justice, often filling a gap where governments are failing to meet the needs of poor or vulnerable groups.

Education is one area where social enterprises are filling gaps in state provision, especially for hard-to-reach groups in rural or neglected areas (Shahnaz and Ming, 2009). These social enterprises tend to adopt a model that either charges fees for the services delivered or, where another part of the enterprise is profitable, these end-user goods or services may be subsidised or delivered free of charge. Other social enterprises are productive businesses selling marketable goods, which may be based on a cooperative model, or one that reinvests profits back into the business for the purposes of further social and community good, rather than being run simply to maximise shareholder profits (Mair et al. 2006; Rykaszewski et al. 2013). Another model, which is often unexplored due to it being a grey area, is the relationship between social entrepreneurship and social enterprise. Many women and girls are developing initiatives for social purposes under the role of social entrepreneurs, which could develop further and become social enterprises. This model falls outside of the commonly understood definitions of social enterprises in the study of entrepreneurship, despite the activities not being too dissimilar.

Most social enterprises tend to be small-to-medium-sized start-ups, but, increasingly, NGOs are making the transition from traditional charitable models to a social enterprise (or hybrid) model, to become more financially sustainable while keeping the social principles needed to support their mission objectives (BRAC, 2015; Grotenhuis, 2015). Given the importance of NGO programming in supporting adolescent girls in low-income countries, this change in business model has important implications for the social impact of NGO programming.

Cordaid is one of the NGOs that has been making this transition, and has stated that 'the transition that is happening in the development sector will require development agencies to adopt a more innovative culture and respond more creatively to the changing context they are working in' (Grotenhuis, 2015: 15). Improved efficiency, adoption of cutting-edge technologies, and innovative programming seem to be another rationale for moving towards a more business-oriented model and away from traditional government-donor funding. In reference to Cordaid, Grotenhuis (2015) states: 'The social enterprise model puts organisations in a different, more socially dynamic mental framework', implying that this enables the organisation to step out of the 'system' and can be seen as part of the (sustainable) solution to social problems (ibid.). Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) is another NGO in the process of moving to a social enterprise model to strengthen organisational sustainability, including financial viability, and reduce dependence on external financing (BRAC, 2015). BRAC states that it will adopt social enterprise models across almost all of its programmes, except for those specifically targeting people living in hard-to-reach areas and those living in ultra-poverty (ibid.).¹

1 It seems that the emphasis on social enterprise models across BRAC is new, although it has been running parts of its organisation as enterprises for a long time (Hossain and Sengupta, 2009). BRAC (2015) states: 'Our social development programmes will increasingly adopt social enterprise models. Five programmes will be the initial focus; health, education, skills and employment, migration and human rights and legal services. More sophisticated targeting mechanisms will be introduced, with diversified financing options (free, subsidised, fee based, etc.) available for different economic groups'.

1.2 The potential role of social enterprises in supporting better outcomes for adolescent girls

Adolescent girls face specific challenges in the transition to adulthood, and despite remarkable progress in several outcome areas – particularly education and health – there remain substantial challenges in promoting equality, voice and agency, and access to services among adolescent girls (GAGE Programme, 2016). The potential role that social enterprises can play in supporting these outcomes depends on the types of services and goods provided, and how they are provided. The recent and increasing expansion of social enterprises suggests that such models will have growing importance in the development sphere in the future. Understanding the types of challenges that adolescent girls face, and what is needed to overcome them, is a starting point for thinking through the role that social enterprises can play in delivering better outcomes for girls.

GAGE's framework focuses on the '3 Cs' for adolescent girls' well-being: capabilities, change strategies and contexts² (GAGE Programme, 2016). This framework recognises that adolescent girls at different stages in the life-course face different needs and constraints, which are highly dependent on the context at family/household, community and state levels. It also acknowledges that context will both modify the ways in which girls develop their capabilities but also determine the change strategies that can be employed to improve their outcomes (see Box 1).

Drawing on this analytical framework, how could social enterprises support better outcomes for adolescent girls?

1. Supporting women and girls' economic empowerment, voice and as entrepreneurs. Women (and young women) may benefit as social entrepreneurs or being employees of social enterprises. Working outside of the home, increasing the income earned by women or older adolescent girls can have positive effects on empowerment, voice and agency.
2. Supporting education, health and well-being outcomes as girls benefit from the services or goods delivered by social enterprises. Girls may benefit from the delivery of goods or services (free or subsidised) by social enterprises; they may benefit directly (e.g.

2 Adolescence refers to ages 10-19.

Box 1: Improving outcomes for adolescent girls – the 3 Cs: capabilities, change strategies and contexts

Adolescent girls face many challenges in realising their full capabilities. These challenges are found in:

- education and health;
- bodily autonomy and integrity (child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV));
- their psychosocial well-being (social isolation, depression and anxiety, and, in contexts of conflict, heightened risk of SGBV and psychosocial trauma);
- exercising voice and agency; and
- realising economic empowerment.

Change strategies in various contexts include – at the individual level – providing girls with access to a range of programming centred around safe places where they can develop voice and agency, becoming more confident, empowered actors. Strategies also include providing boys with gender-transformative programming that supports them to exercise the positive masculinities that are critical to opening up space for girls' growing capabilities.

At the household level, strategies include supporting families with programming that ranges from positive parenting classes to norm change interventions aimed at helping caregivers support their daughters to achieve new futures.

At the community level, strategies focus on ways to accelerate social norm change and expand girls' access to higher-quality, girl-friendly services and systems such as schools and health care centres.

Source: GAGE Conceptual Framework (2017)

girls themselves are the direct beneficiaries) or indirectly (their families may be beneficiaries).

3. Supporting change pathways and capabilities through social enterprises that support social change at the community level. Girls may benefit from broader social change goals, which may be direct or indirect results of social enterprises delivering goods, services or operating in the community.

The rest of this briefing paper examines the evidence on how social enterprises can benefit adolescent girls across these three areas.

2. What is the evidence on how social enterprises can improve outcomes for adolescent girls?

Many social enterprises are formed with the primary purpose of empowering women. As research in this area is new and emerging, few rigorous evaluations have been conducted to examine the tangible impacts and benefits of programmes on adolescent girls. Some findings on women's empowerment exist but there is very little focus on girls as opposed to women. Here, we draw on available findings from case studies discussed in the literature.

2.1 Does employment in social enterprises support economic empowerment, voice and agency?

Recent evidence from Bangladesh, Ghana, India and Pakistan suggests that women play an important role in social enterprises (British Council, 2016a). They are more likely to lead social enterprises than mainstream businesses, female-led social enterprises are more likely to employ other women, and, overall, social enterprises are likely to have proportionately more female staff than mainstream businesses (ibid:4). In Pakistan, for example, women are four times more likely to lead a social enterprise than a mainstream business; in Bangladesh, women make up two-fifths of the social enterprise workforce – far more than the national female workplace participation rate (British Council, 2016a).

It is unclear whether social enterprises may be more accessible to women or whether, by being more socially focused, they are better able to help women to overcome work-related barriers and biases they face in mainstream business (ibid.). One key constraint, particularly for women, is access to finance or economic support to start up and run a business. It is also important to note that, despite the relative importance of social enterprise

employment for women and girls, the relatively small number of such enterprises limits the number of women and girls who can take advantage of the opportunities they provide. Moreover, female-run social enterprises tend to be smaller in terms of staff numbers and financial turnover than those run by men (ibid.).³

Some studies highlight the employment opportunities that social enterprises offer adolescent girls. For example, a social enterprise in India delivering eye-care services for poor people, Aravind Eye Care, recruits high school girls each year and trains them as clinicians and administrators, targeting girls from rural areas and often those with limited education (Rametse and Shah, 2012). Another example from India – Datahalli, a social enterprise initiated by the JSW Foundation in Karnataka – encourages girls to complete their education up to twelfth grade and then provides them with basic computer skills, training in data entry and processing, and creates job opportunities at their BPO (business process outsourcing).

A critical question, however, is whether working in a social enterprise promotes women's and girls' empowerment, and if so, how?⁴ While there is a large body of evidence that demonstrates the positive effects of increasing poor women's income, this evidence also shows that working does not automatically lead to empowerment (Domingo et al., 2015). Factors such as the regularity of wages, formalisation of contracts, social visibility and independence from the 'familial sphere of control' are critical in determining the empowerment effects of employment (Kabeer, 2005a, cited in Esplen, 2007; Kabeer, 2013). Whether women's work also leads to improved well-being and lifestyle changes for women and girls requires further investigation, particularly in situations where women are encouraged not to work and, by doing so, create tensions within the household or

among their communities (Dey and Steyaert, 2010).

Indeed, while there is limited in-depth discussion on the factors contributing to women's empowerment as a result of their engagement in social enterprises (and often an assumption of positive effects), the British Council (2016a) study in Bangladesh, Ghana, India and Pakistan finds that jobs in social enterprises are not always steady, permanent positions, suggesting that the critical factors to support empowerment may not be present.

However, it is also important to note the different economic status of women employed in social enterprises. While this is not widely commented on in the literature, certain social enterprise employment often seeks higher-educated women and girls, with high-priced and high-quality skill sets (on a part-time basis) to bridge the talent gap (Intellect India, 2012, cited in British Council, 2016a); this means they are drawing from families with a higher level of education and from a higher income bracket.

Moreover, we know that prevailing discriminatory gender and cultural norms cannot be easily overcome. Haugh and Talwar (2016) question the extent to which women can reap the benefits of social enterprise programmes and their outcomes due to existing cultural and gender norms. They argue that the opportunities offered to girls and women often overlook deeply engrained prejudices and beliefs, which contribute to further tensions between and within households. This highlights the need for context specificity when discussing the empowerment outcomes of social enterprises for women and girls.

Reports from some social enterprises focused on lower-income women and girls do indicate some positive effects on empowerment and economic opportunities. Anecdotal evidence from the JSW Foundation BPO, which trains girls from rural areas who have dropped out of school, suggests that the enterprise has improved girls' socioeconomic status as well as changing their perspective on traditional cultural and gender norms, citing ambitions to aspire for more and delay marriage (Das, 2011). Another example is from a small-scale study on the effects of low-income women working in the cooperative Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad (widely known as Lijjat), which makes papadums. The study examined the importance of the business model for realising empowerment effects (see also Mair and Schoen, 2007; Santos, 2012) and found that

3 The survey also found that female-run social enterprises also tend to have been established more recently, and trends on age and size indicate that this may account for their smaller size and scale of impact (beneficiary numbers), although these may also be indicative of choosing to focus on depth of impact rather than on growth or reach (British Council, 2016a).

4 For example, not only looking at the factors of employment and the model of social enterprises, but also differences in agency and empowerment for social entrepreneurs versus employees of social enterprises. See, for example, studies from the UK and US (Dempsey and Sanders, 2010; Estrin et al., 2015).

the collective entrepreneurship model successfully resulted in economic and social empowerment of its members (Datta and Gailey, 2012). In particular, the authors point out that principles of collective ownership (and particularly flat, non-hierarchical structures), cooperation (democratic organisational processes), self-reliance (developing the confidence of women from poorer backgrounds) and profit-sharing (which also encourages further entrepreneurial behaviour) are factors contributing to empowerment outcomes (ibid.). Indeed, the opportunity for women to collectively mobilise, to work as leaders and as owners of their own production is also reflected in a larger body of evidence supporting women's empowerment, voice and agency (Domingo et al., 2015). However, it is not yet clear how these types of opportunities relate to lower-income women's opportunities in the growing number of social enterprises.

2.2 Do adolescent girls benefit from goods and services delivered by social enterprises?

Social enterprises often fill a gap in service provision by government. A recent survey on social enterprises in Bangladesh, Ghana, India and Pakistan found that education was the dominant sector for social enterprise activity, with widespread activities on agriculture and business development services and entrepreneurship support too (British Council, 2016a). A study in Morocco found that the most common purpose for social enterprises was to improve or support a community, supporting women and providing education and training (Chung, 2014). Other studies indicate that health is another important sector for social enterprise activity.

The literature suggests that social enterprises can deliver services in an efficient and innovative way through market-based solutions to improve performance (e.g. performance-based financing) and extend the types of services offered. With this focus on health and education, social enterprises can directly benefit adolescent girls. Examples of work in this area include social enterprises in Bangladesh and Rwanda supporting adolescent girls in school through the provision of sanitary goods, and a mobile health application (app) for adolescent girls in Bangladesh to give them health information services and educate them on the physical and psychological changes they will go through during adolescence (Sarwar,

2015; Haas, 2016). However, despite some claims that social enterprises can achieve impacts where others have failed, there is an absence of impact evaluations on the end-use of goods or services delivered. This is in part due to lack of clarity over the desired social impact and how to measure it (e.g. to deliver goods efficiently? To reduce poverty? To achieve better school results?), as well as lack of rigorous evaluations or monitoring applied to social enterprise activity (Rykaszewski et al., 2013). For example, whether initiatives have impacts on adolescent girls' well-being, and to what extent, has not been explored; evaluations tend to focus on the number and delivery of outputs instead, with qualitative benefits assumed rather than measured.

There are also concerns about the limitations of social enterprises in delivering services that can effectively reach poor people, even though the 'whole idea of social enterprises is to include the excluded in the social services through innovative entrepreneurship and reach the most marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable and socially excluded' (Sarwar, 2013: 8-9).⁵ Social enterprises tend to operate either by charging user fees, or cross-subsidising from profitable parts of the business to subsidise or eliminate charges. For some, including Cordaid and BRAC, user fees make a lot of business sense and ensure that the social enterprise model is sustainable and self-sufficient (Pierre-Emmanuel, 2006). The rationale for charging user fees is that in many low-income contexts, payments are made out-of-pocket anyway, and social enterprise service delivery can offer better value and more efficient services for a charge (Grotenuis, 2015). However, charging user fees – even small fees – on basic services is proven to have a negative effect on poor people's uptake of those services (Humphries, 2011).

5 Moreover, can social enterprises reach the poor at scale? The British Council surveyed 149 social enterprises and found that although 200,000 people in Bangladesh benefited from their activities in 2015, some social enterprises did not actually reach that many people. 64% of all social enterprises surveyed reported benefiting 50 people or less, and half reported benefiting less than 30 people. Ten firms did not count any beneficiaries. Though this could be indicative of quality rather than quantity, with the numbers so low it becomes unclear how much of an impact these social enterprises are actually having (British Council, 2016a).

For example, studies in many African countries have shown that health user fees present a huge financial barrier for the very poorest people (Ridde, 2003). Kremer and Miguel (2007), in a study of a de-worming programme in Kenya, found that when a small fee was introduced for drugs there was an 80% reduction in treatment rates. Furthermore, while user fees are typically introduced as a sustainability measure, their basic principle excludes certain social groups, particularly girls and women living in poverty as well as other disadvantaged groups (Sarwar, 2015). Not only does the evidence suggest that cost-recovery programmes and the introduction of user fees reduce uptake of services, they also tend to further marginalise extremely vulnerable groups, which gives cause for concern.

Even if services are cross-subsidised by other parts of the social enterprise, and therefore delivered free of charge, cross-subsidisation is also limited in scope and dependent on the amount of revenue earned elsewhere, raising questions about sustainability (Sarwar, 2013). There is also concern that this model is disconnected from the needs of the people the projects are designed for in the first place (Sarwar, 2013). Where user fees become a barrier to service uptake, there is a question as to whether the service is one really desired by the beneficiary, and how effectively the benefits of the service are being communicated.

Indeed, this raises another question about the accountability of services provided, especially where social enterprises are stepping in to deliver services traditionally provided by the government and public institutions. This provision is one of the building blocks of the state–citizen contract, and citizens have a right to hold governments accountable for their delivery of services. While not trying to replace the importance of the state–citizen contract, some social enterprises are seeking ways to incorporate accountability into their service delivery. For example, Cordaid's performance-based financing model creates incentives through its 'pay-for-performance' approach, substituting input financing partly by output financing. Each social service institute is paid based on its performance: the better the performance, the higher the reimbursement for the school or the clinic. This model also creates a role for communities to assess performance as a basis for reimbursement, giving them power in the process and changing their role from mere clients to participants

in the decision-making process. Cordaid reports that the model has yielded good results in health care and education, citing an example from the Shabunda district of Southern Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the percentage of girls attending school rose to 50%, while teacher absenteeism dropped from 21% to 4% and the pupil dropout rate fell from 15% to 3% (Grotenhuis, 2015).

2.3 Do social enterprises promote social change that benefits adolescent girls?

As well as delivering goods and services to individuals and communities, many social enterprises also aim to create broader social and environmental benefits. In the scoping study in Morocco, for example, many stakeholders saw social enterprises as a tool to achieve change, with participants mentioning the importance of communities both as beneficiaries but also in terms of how social enterprises operate within and with the community (Chung, 2014). This raises questions about how local practices of social entrepreneurship might be related to broader social change (Haugh and Talwar, 2016); but our interest is in how girls may benefit from social enterprises operating in their communities. The literature is again limited on this, but one issue that comes up across various studies is the effects of women's empowerment (via involvement in social enterprises) on the well-being of their family and in terms of providing a role model for younger girls.

Bornstein (2004: 2) reported that female social entrepreneurs were making positive changes to their society by helping to 'shift behaviour patterns and perceptions'. Though many employment opportunities for women within social enterprises are in roles traditionally seen as 'women's jobs' (i.e. handicrafts, textiles and agriculture), and therefore underpaid, other jobs are challenging gendered social norms and employing women in positions traditionally carried out by men, such as taxi drivers. In some areas, though, even employing women is seen as challenging cultural norms.

The British Council (2016b) finds that social enterprises led by women are more likely to employ other women while Haugh and Talwar (2016) show that female entrepreneurs can provide inspiration to their daughters. One social enterprise in Gujarat, Mahaul, was designed to address existing social and cultural norms that limit

women's agency, by creating an organisation which was both financially sustainable and able to empower women. One participant in the enterprise spoke of it being beneficial to her as it allowed her family to see that girls can be involved in economic activities and should not be constrained solely to the household (Haugh and Talwar, 2016).

The same study also found that the combination of resources and agency for members of Mahaul led to increases in household income and improvements in the quality of education of children and access to education for girls. Informants talked about how they wanted a better future for their daughters, and their commitment to ensuring their daughters completed primary school. Women's earnings from Mahaul had increased their power within the family and their capacity to create a better future for their daughters (Haugh and Talwar, 2016). Another study (Glinski et al, 2015) found that women who become more financially stable and empowered through social enterprises showed a greater desire for good-quality health care and nutrition for their families, particularly their children. These women were also more likely to care about sanitation and cleanliness, and to educate their families about the importance of hygiene.

3. Conclusions and policy implications

This briefing paper has examined the ways in which social enterprises can support improved outcomes for adolescent girls. Despite a limited evidence base, the available literature indicates that there are ways in which various social enterprises can support adolescent girls' well-being and empowerment in low-income contexts. This is mainly through opportunities in training and employment, and delivering targeted, and often innovative and efficient health and education services. As projects addressing women and girls' economic needs are currently underfunded, with only around 2% of global aid going to such programmes (OECD-DAC, 2016), social enterprises may offer an effective alternative. Adolescent girls can also benefit indirectly from social enterprises, especially those that promote women's economic empowerment and broader social change, offering role models and new opportunities for younger girls.

However, the evidence behind these outcomes is very limited and tenuous, suggesting only indicative findings

at a small and localised scale. Indeed, social enterprises by their design tend to be focused on the local, but the rise in their number and scale is changing not only in terms of the number of new start-up businesses but also changes in the models of NGOs to social enterprise models or 'hybrids'. These have important implications for future development progress in low-income countries, particularly for poor and marginalised girls and their families. In conclusion, we reflect on three policy implications for the role of social enterprises in supporting better outcomes for adolescent girls.

First, while social enterprises can provide innovative and efficient market-based solutions to problems, there is mixed evidence on whether this type of model can reach the poorest and most marginalised girls and their families. For example, they can fill a gap where the government is failing to deliver, including responding to local need and targeting specific life-cycle issues for adolescent girls with regards to health and education. But many social enterprises charge user fees, and even though these charges may be low, they may limit the uptake of services by poor households, potentially having detrimental effects on adolescent girls as end users. In other cases, social enterprises have reached the most marginalised groups and had an empowering effect on female workers. A key challenge for the social enterprise sector, therefore, is how to ensure financial sustainability while meeting social objectives around benefiting the poorest groups – not only as end users, but also as social entrepreneurs or employees of social enterprises.

Second, this briefing paper concurs with other studies that there is an urgent need for more evidence on the impacts of social enterprises beyond the quantitative outputs currently being monitored. Indeed, as there are many different models of social enterprise, it will be important to bring a nuanced understanding of what works where and why. This is important not only for understanding the impacts on the end user, but also how the functioning or the model of social enterprise affects workers, and affects the enterprise outcomes. However, these types of impacts are still difficult to ascertain; ensuring that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) indicators are disaggregated by sex and age, as well as ensuring that a gender analysis is applied from the outset, will be vital to move beyond current assumptions in the descriptive literature about women's empowerment, and to fill an important gap on the impacts of social enterprises on the poorest adolescent girls.

Finally, there is a need for an overarching framework to articulate a more coherent approach to social enterprises while at the same time granting entrepreneurs the autonomy to respond to local opportunities and needs. A key strength of social enterprises is that they can stimulate entrepreneurial activity among marginalised people at the same time as addressing local concerns. Therefore, facilitating an approach that acknowledges the significance of both areas is important not only to improve coordination, but also to maximise impact.

Without an overarching framework or policy, lack of coordination will continue to result in inefficient activities and fragmented target groups. Given the small scale and localised nature of existing social enterprises, but also the increasing role of bigger development actors such as BRAC, there is an urgent need for improved coordination across the sectors in which social enterprises are present without controlling what types of businesses they should be – something best left to local entrepreneurs.

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About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit www.gage.odi.org.uk for more information.

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