Global Citizenship Education in Times of Disasters

Communities as Spaces of ›Transformative Literacy‹

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Introduction

Global Citizenship Education was introduced in 2012 by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's Global Education First Initiative (Wulf 2023) and enshrined in Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals in order to promote educational equality worldwide. UNESCO describes global citizenship as the connection of the individual to a global community in which a learner understands »how the world works, values differences in people, and works with others to find solutions to challenges too big for any one nation« (UNESCO 2025: n.p.). Global Citizenship Education goes beyond this and aims to empower people to live together peacefully as global citizens.

From an educational science perspective, Lang-Wojtasik (2019a: 7) summarises Global Citizenship Education through the question, »How can we live so that everyone can survive and how can educational science and reflective educational processes help create a world worth living in?« (ibid., translated from the German). This is linked to the critique that a ›business as usual‹ approach is insufficient and challenges the notion that civilisation must inherently be expansion- and growth-oriented (Lang-Wojtasik 2019a: 8).

Various concepts, including global learning, education for sustainable development, and also the transformation from an imperialist to a solidarity-based mode to life can be bundled within Global Citizenship Education (Lang-Wojtasik 2019a: 9–10; Brand/Wissen 2021). In considering how to think about such a transformation, the present article draws on community-based, bottom-up approaches to the production of welfare and the concept of »transformative literacy« (Schneidewind 2018; Singer-Brodowski/Schneidewind 2014)

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as one of several levels of socio-ecological transformation; at the same time, it does not ignore the need for interfaces with political, top-down approaches to transformation, which are necessary for the creation of the societal conditions and regulations.

Transformative literacy refers to the ability to understand, critically reflect on and actively shape social change processes (Lang-Wojtasik 2019a). It is an approach that is becoming increasingly important in the context of the polycrisis – the interplay between the climate crisis, the loss of biodiversity, poverty and resource scarcity, war and other problems – in order to counteract resignation and strengthen the potential for action (agency). Transformative literacy builds on the educational understanding of individuals' and communities' fundamental capacity and creative abilities, focusing particularly on alliances and collective action.

At the academic level, this focus means research needs to take civil society actors into account even more than before, involving them in research, working with them to develop transformative forms of knowledge with regard to the major problems of the 21st century and using such knowledge not only to understand and explain the potential for change, but also to tap into it (Singer-Brodowski/Schneidewind 2014: 132). Transformative literacy, therefore, implies active involvement in transformative processes (ibid.: 136). For Lang-Wojtasik (2019b: 44), it is »global teachers« and »change agents« who, together with others, promote Global Citizenship Education in people's everyday lives, who are groundbreaking in this context.

Based on these considerations, the present text seeks to establish who the »global teachers« and »agents of change« might be in our fragile world. It investigates communities' capacity to act at local and translocal level to deliver sustainable planetary relations. In this context, community refers to a group of actors who are connected by common interests, experiences or living environment and who are committed, locally or translocally, to social, ecological and educational issues. The focus here is not on institutional affiliation, but on the collective capacity for action and a shared assumption of responsibility for furthering the common good (Mariotti/Spreafico 2021).

The thesis is that Global Citizenship Education research and practice need to take (even greater) account of communities' skills and knowledge forms, as well as their potential for education and transformation, linking these with existing social and political institutions.

At the same time, active grassroots Global Citizenship Education can draw attention to gaps in institutional handling of the major problems of our time.

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However, such work must not be placed solely in the hands of communities on a »community capitalism« basis (van Dyk 2019); rather, the development of novel, systemic forms of collaborative learning involving both communities and organisational support structures is required to address contemporary challenges. A community-centered approach is one of several and expands the stories that are told in times of polycrisis and the associated search for a sustainable way of living with the planet (see Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story, https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg, on the relevance of telling multiple stories).

Building on this starting point, the present article expands the notion of Global Citizenship Education programmes to include community activities, which are seen as spaces where Global Citizenship Education is practiced. Socio-ecological communities represent an educational opportunity for society as a whole. They encourage people to enter into relationship with their living environments and their impact – on a small and a large scale, locally and globally (Wintersteiner et al. 2023: 12). The basic idea – placing communities at the centre of socio-ecological transformation – ties in with the Humboldtian educational ideal of self-directed education (ibid.), in which people educate themselves about the world and at the same time leave their mark on it. The telling of community stories thus fulfills an important function in the polycrisis: it does not negate it, but neither does it lapse into a dystopian lethargy (see Haraway 2017). Instead, these stories are a way of »staying with the troubles« as Donna Haraway puts it, and are also always educational accounts of a ›beyond‹ that deal with concrete action, new ideas and real stakeholders in specific spaces.

Global citizenship education and disaster relief

One such space, the setting for a community story, is the Ahr Valley in Germany, located in Rhineland-Palatinate and stretching along the River Ahr, which flows into the Moselle. The valley borders North Rhine-Westphalia to the north. The region is renowned for its wine production, extensive hiking and cycling routes, and cultural landmarks including castles and historic town centres.

In the night of July 14 to 15, 2021, extremely heavy rainfall led to devastating floods in parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia – and in Saxony, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. The Ahr Valley was particularly badly affected: the floodwater inundated houses, destroyed bridges and infras-

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tructure, and contaminated soil and buildings with mud and pollutants. Several hundred people lost their lives. The effects of the flooding are still being felt today.

Follow-up studies by the Disaster Research Unit at Freie Universität Berlin highlighted a variety of »lessons to learn« (Reinert et al. 2023) and a clear need to be prepared for future floods and develop new, more effective warning systems (ibid.: 428). The disaster also revealed a need for a diversity-sensitive approach to disasters. For example, twelve people with disabilities from a specialist facility lost their lives because they could not be evacuated in time.

The psychosocial consequences of the disaster continue. Many children are still attending schools in temporary portable cabins. Familiar surroundings have been partially destroyed and have to be rebuilt. The fear of future disasters is still prevalent. This makes transitions, such as from adolescence to young adulthood, more difficult – e.g. if young people's first homes or newly built houses have been destroyed. Added to this are existential and financial burdens (Schmelz/Schmitt 2023): years later, the region is still rebuilding.

The flood disaster of 2021 was a wake-up call for Germany with regard to prioritising disaster prevention. That year, the federal government adopted the German Resilience Strategy (BMI 2022), which aimed to improve Germany's resilience in the context of crises and disasters. In addition to extreme weather events, this covers pandemics and economic shocks. The Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance, based in Bonn, is responsible for this at federal level. The resilience strategy is based largely on the United Nations' Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030), which was adopted in 2015 at the third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan and was signed by Germany. The key objectives of the Sendai Framework are to: (1) better understand disaster risks, (2) strengthen disaster risk reduction and resilience, (3) promote investment in disaster risk reduction and (4) improve infrastructure and expand international cooperation.

The term »disaster« is primarily a social label. An event is considered a disaster if it impacts the foundations of a society or community to such an extent that other descriptions are no longer sufficient. The relevant UN office defines it as a massive disruption of social structures with far-reaching human, material, ecological or economic consequences, meaning that affected societies are no longer able to respond with their own resources. One paradoxical dynamic is that resilience initiatives are often only introduced once an event has been officially classified as a disaster. The climate crisis is leading to a global increase in such events – including in Germany. At the same time, social dynamics, such

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as climate crisis denial, are making such developments more difficult to deal with.

It should also be noted that the extent of climate-related disasters is significantly higher in many regions of the Global South. The WorldRiskReports by Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and the Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict at Ruhr University Bochum indicate, for example, that disaster risk is particularly high in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, India, and Colombia – those ranked highest in the 2024 report.

With a risk score of 4.1, Germany ranks 98th globally – and is therefore in the middle of the pack (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft/IFHV 2024). In addition to national differences, the 2023 report considered intersectional inequalities in the wake of disasters, focusing in particular on diversity (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft/IFHV 2023). This highlights the interface between Global Citizenship Education, disaster risk reduction, educational science and diversity education. After all, not everyone is impacted equally in the event of a disaster. A central aspect of scientific analysis of disasters is therefore the consideration of different vulnerabilities (Hansson et al. 2020). It makes a difference whether people are privileged or subject to social, economic or political marginalisation. Studies show that racialised and poverty-stricken people, women*, BIPoC and people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by disasters. One example is the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan in 2011: people with disabilities accounted for 24.6 percent of all deaths – twice the percentage for the total population (ibid.: 20). Another example is the spring 2023 earthquake in Syria and Turkey: the compound effects of the long-standing war in Syria are creating »overlapping disasters« (Chagas et al. 2024).

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to how security and sustainability can be delivered for everyone, so that no one is excluded. The central thesis of the present article is that the knowledge and skills of socio-ecological communities are a special resource and an expression of lived, bottom-up, Global Citizenship Education, from which we need to learn as we navigate the polycrisis.

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A story of global citizenship education in the polycrisis: the Syrian Volunteers in Germany community

This chapter does not take a top-down approach to Global Citizenship Education, but rather a bottom-up approach that involves a reversal of perspective. It examines the concepts and approaches communities are already developing to deal with disasters, which can be considered from the perspective of Global Citizenship Education. A case vignette is used to show how a community is introducing a practical form of Global Citizenship Education in the wake of the 2021 floods – even without explicitly using the term.

The Syrian Volunteers in Germany disaster relief community case study comes from a qualitative study conducted in the Ahr Valley between September 2022 and August 2023 by the author, in collaboration with Andrea Schmelz and with funding from the global budget of the University of Klagenfurt. The aim of the study was to investigate social support structures in the Ahr Valley through interviews and ethnographic research with educationalists, social workers, support initiatives and those affected. Since September 2024, this exploratory approach has been extended as part of the Volkswagen Foundation-funded joint project »Transformation Knowledge for Disaster Relief« at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences and Coburg University of Applied Sciences. This project pools empirical knowledge from social services, educational institutions, residents, helpers, initiatives, artists and the relevant disaster authorities. Knowledge is gathered through interviews and participatory transformation workshops, and then translated into educational materials. The aim is to develop learning and educational processes for inclusive disaster relief throughout society.

The study of the Ahr Valley disaster showed that a variety of grassroots support systems have emerged alongside qualified pedagogical professionals and social workers, and that some of these have led to institutionalised structures. These forms of support develop in particular when existing support mechanisms are overwhelmed, no alternatives are available and needs-based options are required – as can be the case with disasters. One of the initiatives that emerged in this context is the Syrian Volunteers in Germany community, which operates at the interface between disaster relief and inclusive migration work. The initiative came together in response to the events in the Ahr valley and developed its own disaster relief infrastructure. The primary movers in this initiative are young refugees from Syria, who are helping to rebuild the Ahr Valley; it can thus be considered an expression of Global Citizenship

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Education and is creating new, post-migrant connections between the residents of the Ahr Valley and their newly arrived fellow citizens. The following discussions are based on two qualitative interviews conducted by the author in September 2022 with Anas Alakkad and Faris Allahham[1], two key players in the initiative. Their interviews are condensed below into a case history (the case vignette was first published in Schmitt 2024).

From initial reception center to the emergency services

Anas Alakkad was 29 years old at the time of the interview in September 2022. He was born in Syria and studied medicine in Lebanon and Egypt between 2010 and 2015. After the war in Syria and having encountered difficult circumstances in Egypt, he fled to Germany. He initially lived in a reception center in Saarland, where he experienced the »prescribed doing nothing« as »demotivating« (A, 216). A turning point came when he met Faris Allahham, a fellow resident who had also fled from Syria, who worked as a translator in the accommodation center and helped Anas become a translator as well. From then on, the two of them translated together, from English into Arabic and vice versa, wherever there was a need (A, 82). Having attended an intensive German course in Egypt, Anas had basic language skills; he was employed as a full-time translator at the facility after three months. This work led to a new focus for him, which was further strengthened by contact with a German family who took him and Faris Allahham into their home. Finally, a new friend recommended that Anas train to become a paramedic in order to move towards his goal of continuing his medical studies in Germany. Anas successfully completed the three-and-a-half-month course and then worked for two years as a full-time paramedic for a regional branch of the German Red Cross. He identified a gap in support for Arabic-speaking trainees at the paramedic school and began to support this target group with both organisational and language issues. He was eventually hired as an honorary lecturer for this target group (A, 103–104).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Anas shifted his teaching to digital formats and came up with the idea of founding an e-learning start-up: »During Covid […] I taught my learners in the emergency services school on Zoom […] and they asked if I could put videos […] on YouTube […] so that gave me the idea

1 The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to Anas Alakkad and Faris Allaham for their collaboration on this research.

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for an e-learning start-up« (A, 115–118). In collaboration with Faris Allahham, who was trained as a media designer, Anas created bilingual training content in Arabic and German, which he made available via digital platforms. It turned out that the medical degree that Anas had completed in Egypt and Lebanon was not recognised in Germany, so he decided to study international business administration, which fitted with his new project. When the Ahr Valley was hit by flooding in July 2021, he used his network of trainee paramedics, from Syria, Afghanistan and Egypt, to support the aid effort in the Ahr Valley.

Community support after the flood disaster in the Ahr valley

Inspired by a Facebook post from a friend calling for »Syrians to help« (A, 152), Anas Alakkad and Faris Allahham founded the Syrian Volunteers in Germany group on Facebook. They designed a logo that showed two intertwined hands to symbolise Syria and Germany and began creating Arabic-language videos and posts to inform the community about the events in the Ahr valley. The group wanted to provide concrete help (F, 68). After making contact with an aid co-ordinator in the Ahr valley and assessing the initial need, on July 19, 2021 Anas and Faris Allahham set off for the town of Sinzig in the Ahr valley, »where it all started«, together with other members of the Facebook group (A, 172).

In the meantime, the Facebook group »exploded« (A, 182), growing to more than 1,500 members. Helpers arrived from German cities such as Saarbrücken, Cologne, Bonn, Hamburg and Berlin. The group found an empty house, where they could sleep, store relief supplies and get organised. A local association provided financial support for the initiative and with the help of a foundation provided a bus to transport donations and relief supplies and set up its own aid infrastructure. As the community emphasised, it was focused on »Deeds, not just words« (A, 181).

The group coordinated their missions on a daily basis and set up a system of car pools and local groups. Anas and Faris also put together a digital form that people from the Ahr valley could use to register for the help they needed. Teams were then sent to the people concerned: »At our peak, we had around 60 helpers per day. The average was 25« (A, 190–191). People in need of help could use QR codes carried by the helpers to register with via their cell phones and provide the required information, such as assistance requirements and preferred dates. There was a particular focus on supporting vulnerable groups such as people affected by poverty, the elderly and those without insurance

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cover: »We prioritise […] flood victims who are [not] insured. […] old people who have no money, […] poor people« (F, 146–147).

Post-migrant connections, lived Global Citizenship Education and transformative literacy

The initaitive's activities reach more than 200 people and its organisational structure is becoming increasingly complex. A central motivation for Anas and his fellow campaigners is the newfound opportunity to be able to help at all: »Many of us had experienced war […] seen disasters, bombs, people killed […], but could […] do nothing […]. People didn't have the freedom to shake someone's hand […]. […] [They wanted] to help in Syria […] [but] they couldn't. Now they can help […] this kind of freedom […] that was new for all of us« (A, 310–327).

The opportunity to bring about real change in the Ahr valley gives people hope (F, 471). While towns and villages in Syria are destroyed and aid workers risk their lives there, reconstruction can begin in the Ahr valley, says Faris Allahham. Those leading the initiative had intense empathy for people losing their belongings in the floods: »It was really very sad. […] Things that people had bought or collected all their lives. […] Memories and pictures. […] But the good thing is, it's still much better than in Syria. We are used to seeing destruction. You see here, the houses are still good. […] I always hoped that […] if we were there, we could do something there too« (F, 465–471). The initiative is particularly keen to »give something back« in return for the help they have had from Germany. Although many physical bridges in the Ahr valley have been destroyed, the initiative wants to build new »bridge[s] between our culture and the new culture« (F, 31–32).

However, it is not only the helpers who take on a new role; those who receive support also reinterpret themselves and the world as a result of these new relationships: »People cried, not just once, repeatedly« (A, 352). »Warm feelings« (A, 345) develop between the recipients of help and their helpers. It was very important for the helpers to be able to get involved and to find a framework for this – regardless of language skills, country of origin, qualifications or educational achievements. However, the perspective of those receiving help, and that of other helpers who had not had to flee their country also changed, leading to gratitude and shame: »Many people said, ›We're sorry, we had a completely different image of you.‹ So you can't forget the people crying […]. And the gratitude. Many […] then asked what food they could offer us, water, and they were

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also concerned that the food should be halal […] the whole situation there was overwhelming« (A, 360–365).

These experiences illustrate a new form of connection between people who were initially unknown to each other, against the backdrop of the disaster, overcoming national borders and redefining the boundaries of communities (see also Beck 2008). Through unexpected encounters in the midst of the disaster, dichotomies such as ›refugee‹ and ›German‹ are being overcome through joint action and empathy: »Every helper there was very much appreciated by those affected, regardless of whether they were refugees or Germans« (A, 342–343). Residents of the Ahr valley and other helpers view the Syrian refugees as supporters, while the volunteers themselves enjoy the warmth of the experience and are glad to be the ones being thanked. These are post-migrant experiences, moments in which the divisive social categories of ›us‹ and ›them‹ are broken down, and new connections and a »new topography of potentially more convivial social interactions« (Rotter/Yilidz 2023: n.p.) emerge.

Anas reports that, »People cried, not just once, but several times.« In this emotional space, there is a reversal of the usual construction that portrays refugees exclusively as aid recipients who are expected to show gratitude for the help they receive. Now it is the people from Syria who are rebuilding the Ahr valley after the disaster: »That was very interesting for a lot of the media, […] look, the ›poor refugees‹ who came to Germany are now helping with the reconstruction« (A, 426–428). This experience strengthens the self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging of those involved – especially individuals who were previously considered as ›not yet arrived‹ due to structural barriers in Germany, such as unrecognized educational qualifications or a lack of opportunity to learn the German language.

Experiences of racism and the vision of inclusive support

Despite post-migrant shifts in perspective, the community's history continues to be marked by experiences of racism. The initiative did not receive unanimous support from all helpers; it was met with rejection by certain helpers, flood victims and police officers, as the example of a police check shows: »Once we were stopped by the police […] What are you doing? Show us your IDs […] They kept us there for an hour and a half […] just blocking the road […] that was really very shocking. And some of us […] are traumatised and afraid of any police or security […] that was really very bad« (F, 663–669). The checks reactivate fears and re-traumatises people about violent experiences in Syria; the volun-

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teers are perceived as ›strangers‹ who need to be monitored. There is a contradiction here: post-migrant developments in relationships come up against experiences of racism within a racially structured society.

»Shocked« (F, 649) by this, the initiative once again reinforces its philosophy of wanting to promote »variety and diversity in society« (F, 659–660) and standing up for each other in the event of a disaster and its aftermath. The initiative sees disasters as extreme events »that affect everyone« (F, 673): »Germans, foreigners, aliens, everyone« (F, 673). It focuses on cooperation and recognising the joy of living in a diverse society: »I think diversity is very cool. I love people with different backgrounds« (F, 701–702). The initiative's logo, with its symbol of joined hands, is emblematic of shared responsibility in the world – and an expression of transformative literacy that transcends national, origin-based and other boundaries: »We have to help each other, we are one society« (F, 565–566). The initiative combines what it does with the hope of bringing about a transformation in society as a whole and changing the image of refugees (A, 433).

The experiences in the Ahr Valley have enabled the group to develop an impact chain (F, 300), which now extends to activities in Ukraine and along the Polish-Belarusian border. The transnationalisation of the group goes hand in hand with the expansion and consolidation of its activities: the initiative now comprises over 10,000 committed individuals and is in the process of registering as an association in order to give its diverse activities an institutional framework. In addition to their civic engagement, Anas Alakkad and Faris Allahham have acquired a grant to establish the multilingual start-up Pontem Pro in the emergency services field, which aims to provide a »bridge« (A, 136) into emergency services training for marginalised groups and at the same time help overcome the shortage of skilled workers in this sector.

Conclusion and outlook

This article has taken as its starting point the need to place communities at the centre of lived Global Citizenship Education. It has shown how, in times of polycrisis, a community is organising local support after a flood disaster. Aid workers who fled war in Syria and came to the Ahr valley have provided help with reconstruction and become ambassadors for Global Citizenship Education.

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Their intervention is an example of transformative literacy, a specific intervention that foregrounds diversity, community, togetherness and the shared assumption of responsibility that transcends exclusionary categories of belonging/not belonging. This form of lived global citizenship shows how refugees, who are frequently subject to racist attributions of ›otherness‹ and regarded as a ›threat‹, can become »global teachers« and central players in bottom-up »transformative literacy« (Schneidewind 2018; Singer-Brodowski/Schneidewind 2014).

In the context of this reversal of perspective, the initiative is teaching emergency services, education, disaster relief, social services and society as a whole how to build diversity-conscious community support structures in times of disaster and how meaningful and joyful global coexistence can reflect the spirit of global citizenship. The community is an example of the transformative power and practical delivery of Global Citizenship Education based not on curricula or policy, but on the realities of everyday life.

However, it should be emphasised that responsibility for overcoming the polycrises of our time must not rest solely on the shoulders of communities, as in many cases there are gaps in existing support systems. Critical reflection is required on the responsibilities taken on by civil society stakeholders, but at the same time state and institutional structures must be strengthened.

On the one hand, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the key contribution made by communities such as the one presented here to the strengthening of Global Citizenship Education and the development of transformational educational processes at a time of massive eco-social disasters and social divisions. Such communities show how a sense of responsibility and care for one another transcend national and cultural borders – and break down divisive boundaries (Peterlini 2024), replacing them with an awareness of the interconnectedness of and with the planet. This creates new bonds and visions, which – according to Schramkowski, Pfaff and Lutz (2021: 19) – give us the strength to deal with disasters and socio-ecological collapse and to develop ways to overcome them. Communities thus become places of learning and partners in forward-thinking disaster relief – for social services as well as for established aid organisations.

On the other hand, it is important that civic engagement does not lead to government agencies withdrawing and fostering a »community capitalism« (van Dyk 2019) that shifts the management of disasters solely onto the shoulders of civil society – without critically addressing the underlying social issues.

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The fact that people with a history of flight and migration are doing reconstruction work in Germany is also reminiscent of economic reconstruction after the Second World War. At that time, people from other countries were labelled ›guest workers‹ and made use of for economic purposes, but at the same time marked as ›not belonging‹ (Kourabas 2021). Functional rather than inclusive perspectives dominated: this was a relationship of exploitation within racist societal structures (ibid.: 136). Such ambivalence necessitates power-sensitive reflection on the practices of civil society from the bottom up and the embedding of Global Citizenship Education and transformative learning across institutions in challenging times; it also requires social and other initiatives to promote the good of all people and the planet, independent of utilitarian thinking.

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