

Trends of International Volunteering in Latin America and the Caribbean

International Forum for Volunteering in Development



Alex V. Norr
Practik Consulting, Champaign Illinois

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PRACTIK

OVERVIEW

International volunteer opportunities vary greatly from region to region. Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) offer a wide variety of focus areas for international volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs). Throughout the LAC region, diverse socio-economic circumstances and the growing effects of globalisation magnify social disparities and isolate poverty-stricken communities. The international volunteer community continues to work within the LAC region to improve people's lives and their communities.

The following report details the state of international volunteering in the LAC region. A summary of findings is presented on the characteristics of international volunteering within the region, including volunteer placement duration, program type, and local-partner cooperation strategies. Methodologies for volunteering throughout the region are discussed and examples of unique and innovative models specific to LAC are provided. A comprehensive list of volunteer opportunities, as well as specific issues and groups addressed by IVCOs and their programs are also considered. Major challenges for operating successful programs are identified. Finally, a concise analysis of current volunteer efforts throughout the region is presented and discussed.

The data provided in this report were gathered by an online survey commissioned by the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum). The survey was distributed by three international volunteer coordinating networks: Forum, Comhlámh, and the Building Bridges Coalition. Twenty representatives of 19 IVCOs responded (a complete list of participating organisations can be found at the end of this report).

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING IN LAC

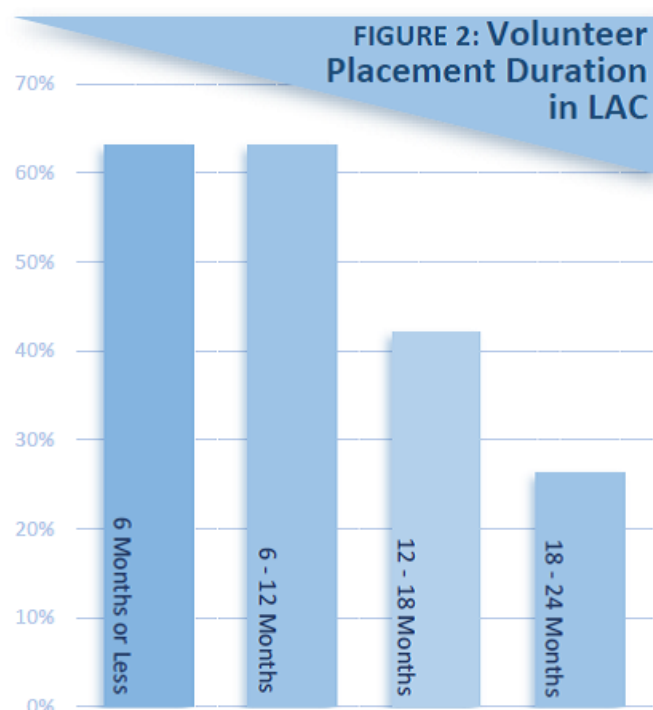
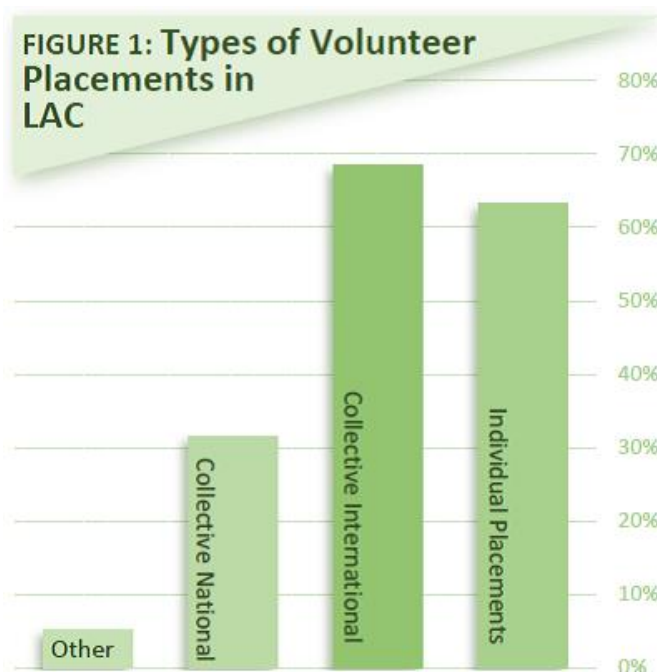
Volunteer Placement Model and Duration

IVCOs operating in LAC offer group- and individual-based programs with flexible time commitments. The most popular volunteering approach is sending groups of international volunteers together—or collective international placements (68%). The second most popular approach is the strategic placement of individual volunteers (63%). Only 32% of IVCOs reported pairing international volunteers with national volunteers (see Figure 1). Although pairing with national volunteers was not the most popular practice, program managers reported this model as being particularly successful. Of the responding organisations, most offer volunteer placements for a duration of a year or less. In total, 63% offer opportunities for volunteers seeking an assignment for less than six months or

six to twelve months. Long-term placements are offered by 68% of organisations—ranging between one and two years (see Figure 2).

Directionality of Volunteer Programs

As with most other world-regions, North-South volunteering is the most common model practiced in LAC. In order to better understand the regional influence, IVCOs were asked specifically about their South-South programs. Specific to programs operating within the region, 47% reported South-South volunteering among LAC nationals. This method reduces travel costs, eliminates the need for language training, and encourages intra-regional cooperation. Of these, 26% of organisations include South-South volunteering programs from regions outside LAC. Other programs draw expertise from diaspora volunteering as a hybrid form of North-South and South-South volunteering, and also offer online volunteering (e-volunteering) that spans the full range of service directionality.



Local Organisation Involvement

The majority of IVCOs (95%) reported working with local partner organisations in coordinating volunteer efforts. Local organisations and/or volunteer-host groups play different roles in coordinating volunteering efforts, ranging from program initiation and development to volunteer recruitment. All IVCOs reported that each local partner group participated in the development of roles for incoming volunteers. Partnering organisations were also responsible for the following activities: initiate programs (contact IVCOs) (84%), provide orientation and

training for volunteers (74%), recruit and/or select volunteers (63%), and evaluate and follow up with volunteers and program organisers (11%). Following involvement with IVCOs, local partner organisations have also reportedly continued coordinating volunteer opportunities for national volunteers—promoting greater involvement in future programs.

APPROACH TO VOLUNTEERING IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Through decades of volunteer experience in LAC, IVCOs have developed effective methodologies for furthering their programs. A fundamental principle that supports volunteer programs in the region is a longstanding tradition of community and the celebration of culture valued by LAC peoples. A sense of community fosters the practice of helping one another and caring for one's neighbour. According to survey respondents, this volunteering spirit is a critical component of Latino culture and allows IVCOs to develop long-term local partnerships that can sustain a lasting presence in the community. When IVCOs, as external agents, work to further enhance and develop the local traditions and culture, it stimulates further community growth.

To be successful, organisations require volunteers with specific skill sets. Perhaps more importantly, however, they need individuals who can speak the native language. Survey respondents asserted that without adequate foreign language skills, volunteers have a difficult time becoming personally motivated and involved in community efforts. This is a key factor because all responding organisations believe that a strong regional focus on social movements and poverty reduction are among the areas with the highest demand, and with the potential to generate the most international support.

Specialised and Innovative Volunteer Models in LAC

Many international volunteer organisations operate using traditional methods for program targeting, volunteer recruitment, and volunteer placement. The models described below may not be unique to LAC volunteering, however, respondents reported them as particularly effective and prominent throughout the region. Of the organisations facilitating volunteer efforts in the region, 60% reported developing targeted models for regional use. For instance, multiple organisations reported difficulty in bridging the language gap. To overcome the language challenge, IVCOs have begun to pair national volunteers (native Spanish- and Portuguese- language speakers) together with international volunteers in the same group. In addition to helping to recruit traditional

international volunteers, this method has increased the success of recruiting corporate volunteers. It has also helped to secure volunteers with specialised skill sets, who may otherwise be reluctant to serve because they lack the necessary language skills. Other unique approaches are detailed below:

Summer Camp and Construction: Through a work-camp model, volunteers spend half of their time doing light construction projects for the community and the other half engaging children or other vulnerable populations (focusing on education and social issues) in an environment similar to a traditional summer camp. In comparison with programs that primarily focus on labour alone, pairing labour with opportunities for social interaction allows volunteers to establish lasting bonds with members of their host community.

Online Volunteering (e-volunteering): While online volunteering is not unique to the region, respondents indicated that their online programs operating in the LAC region are expanding rapidly. Online volunteering allows individuals from across the globe to contribute without the cost of travel. It also creates opportunities for corporate volunteers and others with regular Internet access to become familiar with local issues, creating a path-of-interest for potential future visits to the region.

Private Sector—Social Movement Partnerships: By establishing connections and sponsorship between local and/or global companies, volunteer organisations create a lasting and influential presence in the target community. Private companies and international corporations that have a particular interest in a specific social movement provide monetary assistance and/or additional volunteers to support local efforts. For example, respondents reported partnerships with interests in women's rights, empowering women, good governance, youth entrepreneurship, and combating poverty, as well as a variety of environmental issues including climate change. The prominent corporate culture of nearby North America provides greater opportunity to develop this style of program.

Diverse Education Strategy: Perhaps also owing to the region's proximity to the US, the placement of students engaged in international service learning, alternative spring break programs, and other forms of service in higher education is common in the region. IVCOs operating in LAC work

with volunteers from a spectrum of accredited programs providing a key component to the student's education. Students engage in the local partnering organisations teaching on a variety of topics, including disease prevention, agriculture, commerce, social issues, and others.

Long-term Partnerships: Partnering and creating alliances with other national or international partners with a similar regional focus and longstanding presence in the community generates lasting relationships with local officials and community leaders. Such partnerships reinforce the close-knit LAC culture and create opportunities for local community members to become involved in current and future volunteer efforts. Some programs reported more successful community outreach programs as a result of pairing short-term volunteers with long-term volunteers of other organisations.

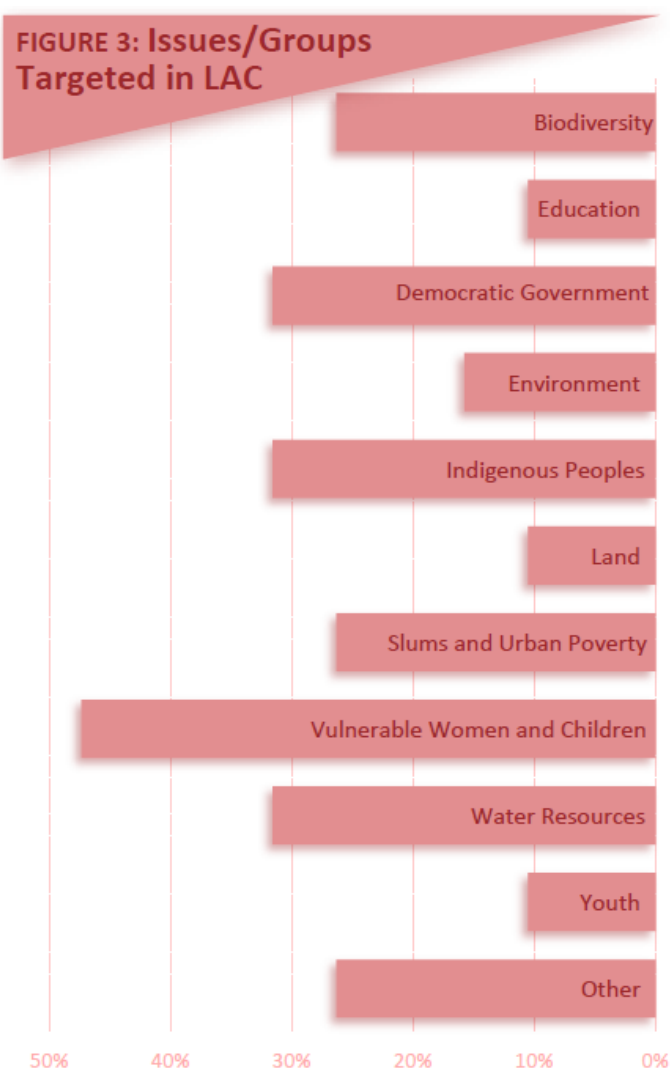
Other general approaches in Latin America—though not unique to the region—have been found helpful in retaining volunteers and local support. Such models include host community home stays, international/national pairing of volunteers, and placing volunteers from low-income countries to other low-income countries within the region. Models incorporating volunteer groups that are multi-lingual, culturally diverse, and which include an inter-cultural learning curriculum have been reported to be particularly successful in the region.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR VOLUNTEER ORGANISATIONS

IVCOs primarily focus their activities on under-represented minorities and underprivileged populations including women, youth and children (47%), indigenous people (32%), immigrants, and others largely affected by growing rates of poverty and inequality (26%). Other top areas of focus for IVCOs in the region include environmental preservation (16%), clean drinking water (32%), and local democratic governance (32%) (see Figure 3). With increasing violence and political instability, localised efforts on peace-building were also reported by IVCOs operating in El Salvador, Venezuela, and Jamaica.

Social inequality for under-represented minorities and underprivileged populations have provided opportunities for effective partnerships between IVCOs and other local/national organisations. In cooperation with local groups and national organisations, volunteers work to strengthen communities through education, access to justice, and entrepreneurship programs, as well as partnering to address more specific issues targeted by the host organisations.

Respondents asserted that partner organisations working within LAC have an urgent need for volunteers with specialised skills. Whether or not formal programs have been established to target the issues mentioned above, IVCOs routinely place volunteers with host organisations dedicated to capacity building (89%), environmental conservation (84%), education (68%), and health care (63%) (see Figure 4).



Latin America and the Caribbean have opportunities for volunteers from all backgrounds. For volunteers seeking specific opportunities, 38% of organisations have created target programs specialising in a variety of issues. Multiple programs are geared towards individuals interested in teaching and/or developing personal and professional skills. Most programs offer a variety of placement lengths and, with a focus on service-learning, many offer educational opportunities provided by local partners. The LAC region has many opportunities for international volunteers: some of the most commonly-reported activities include light construction projects, natural resource preservation, climate change, and youth and child development. An example of a particularly unique opportunity from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the *Nikkei* Communities Volunteer Program.



Nikkei Communities Volunteer Program: Nikkei-specific programs include youth and senior volunteers dedicated to the development of local *Nikkei* (Japanese descendant) communities in countries that accepted Japanese immigrants throughout history. The program began in 1985 and continues to have success today.

CHALLENGES TO VOLUNTEERING IN LAC

Political instability in LAC and limited inter-governmental and inter-regional cooperation continue to complicate international volunteer efforts in the region. Likewise, limited resources and complex policy requirements continue to frustrate the volunteer community. Of responding organisations, 47% reported safety as the most challenging issue for working within the region today. Unstable countries and regimes

have made it difficult to guarantee safe travel and stay for many international volunteers. In addition to legitimate safety concerns, some organisations reported difficulty recruiting volunteers due to their perceived lack of safety while volunteering abroad.

The second most commonly reported challenge (16%) was the cost and time associated with international travel. Even when funding is secured, difficulty in obtaining visas for specific countries has limited the number of volunteers that IVCOs have been able to place in the region. Such factors have also made it difficult for some host organisations to find international partners willing to work within the region or a specific country.

Language barriers also continue to challenge volunteers and volunteer programs in the region. Not only is language important to communicate with national volunteers and host communities but it is also necessary when navigating many program-level challenges,



including those mentioned above. As mentioned earlier, IVCOs have found some success pairing national and international volunteers when language capacity is limited. Whatever method is used to address this barrier, it is ultimately essential to find international volunteers who can communicate effectively to ensure the goals of all stakeholders are met.

VOLUNTEERING TRENDS IN LAC

The 19 responding IVCOs reported a total of 9,823 volunteers serving in 31 countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean between 2010 and 2013. Figures 6 and 7 below illustrate two primary findings: 1) the percentage of IVCOs working within a specific country, and 2) the total number of volunteers serving in a specific country. On average, each IVCO sent 600 international volunteers to an average of seven countries. Multiple organisations reported that they were planning to open new programs in additional countries in 2014, while others reported some country programs would be shut down due to funding constraints. However, no countries not previously accepting volunteers were expected to receive new volunteers in 2015. Over half (56%) of organisations did not have plans to enter additional LAC countries, and 44% were working on developing new programs in LAC countries not yet represented by their organisation.

From 2010 to 2013, the largest majority of IVCOs were operating programs in Peru (79%) with 40-50% of organisations also operating in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua (see Figure 6). Of the Caribbean countries, IVCOs most predominantly operated in the Dominican Republic (32%) with limited programs functioning in other Caribbean countries. The largest numbers of volunteers were placed in Costa Rica (2,308) followed by the Dominican Republic (1,169), Peru (935), Ecuador (919), and Bolivia (692) (see Figure 7). Collectively, IVCOs plan to increase their volunteer efforts in the future in Nicaragua, Columbia, Paraguay, Haiti, Cuba, Panama, Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In addition to the priority areas detailed in the survey findings, what other specialised practice areas are most relevant for international volunteers serving in LAC?
2. Given the finding that political instability and complex policy regulations frustrate the attempts of many IVCOs to place volunteers in the region, what strategies have effectively been used to overcome these challenges?
3. What factors account for the proportionally lower number of international volunteers serving in the Caribbean versus Latin America?
4. Three common themes that emerged in the survey were South-South volunteering within LAC, public-private partnerships, and national-international volunteering pairing models. What characteristics of LAC, if any, make these desirable to IVCOs operating in the region?

**FIGURE 6: PERCENTAGE OF IVCOs
SENDING VOLUNTEERS TO LAC**

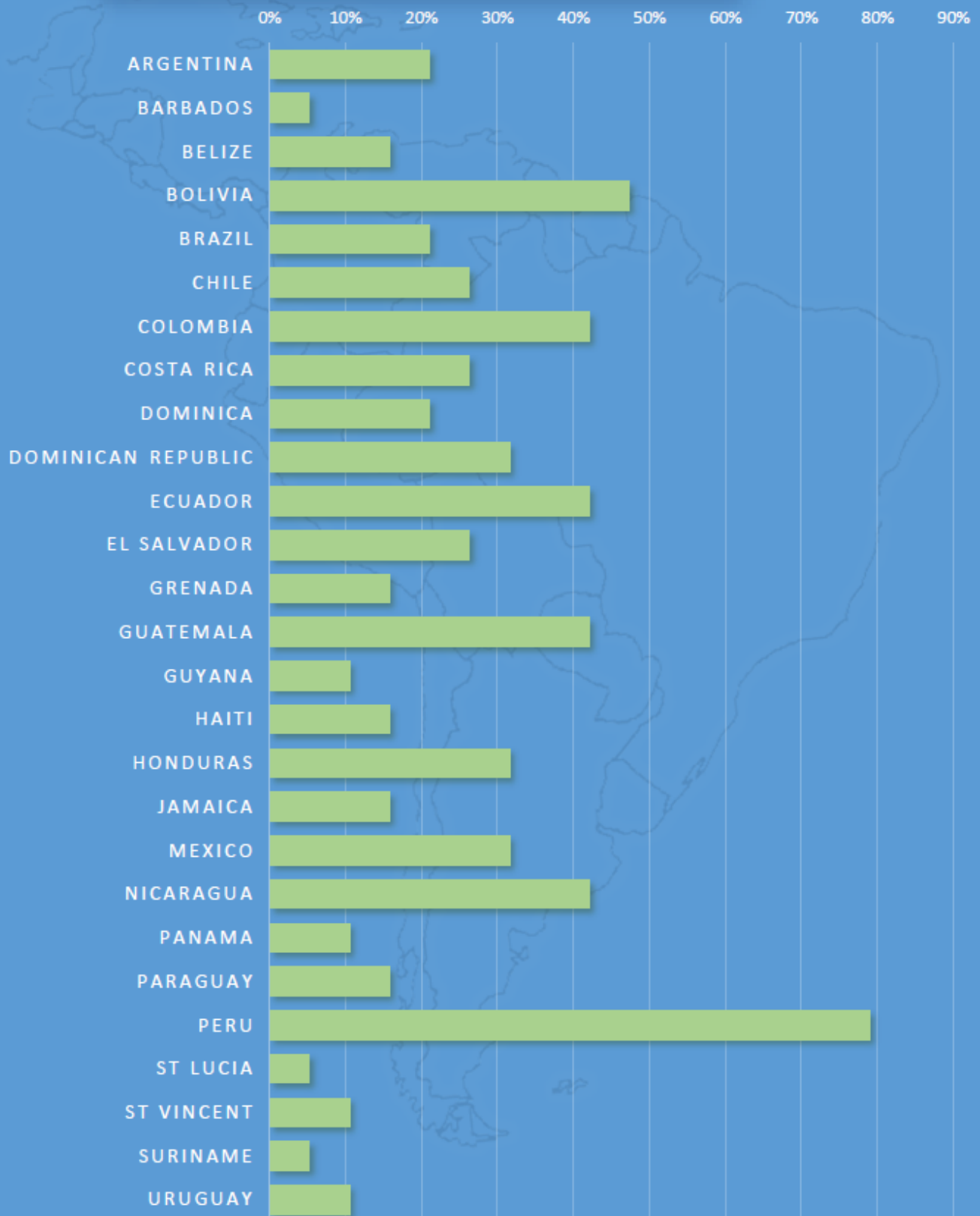


FIGURE 7: NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS PLACED PER LAC COUNTRY



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