

PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Evaluating and Improving Two Partnerships

March 2005



**CANADIAN INSTITUTE FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND POLICY**

**L'INSTITUT CANADIEN DU
DROIT ET DE LA POLITIQUE
DE L'ENVIRONNEMENT**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper, and the ones that accompany it, has been produced with the support and guidance of many of CIELAP's friends, staff and supporters. The team that has given extraordinary support to the production of these documents includes the author, Ravenna Barker; CIELAP staff, Anne Mitchell, Susan Holtz, Iana Nikolova and Jolanta Rasteniene; CIELAP Board Members, Pamela Robinson and Lisa King; and also Christopher Gore.

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.

CIELAP extends grateful thanks to the International Development Research Centre for its support and flexibility.

ISBN: 1-896588-53-0

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INTRODUCTION

Partnerships are arrangements “between two or more parties who have agreed to work cooperatively toward shared and/or compatible objectives and in which there is: shared authority and responsibility, joint investment of resources, shared liability or risk-taking; and ideally, mutual benefits”.¹ These relationships are vital to achieving the aims of sustainability, which require the coordination of economic, social and environmental benefits.

Partnerships for sustainability are not always successful. CIELAP’s research has identified ten qualities that could be used as indicators of the likelihood of the success or failure of a partnership.

This paper applies the ten qualities to two partnerships – the Equator Initiative and the International Marketing Communications Initiative for Sustainable Development* (IMCISD) – in an attempt to illustrate how they can be used to evaluate partnerships. The paper also illustrates why each quality is important and how the qualities impact one another. The paper, along with others in the *Partnerships for Sustainability* series, can provide a useful resource for others researching partnerships and their effectiveness.

The Equator Initiative and the International Marketing Communications Initiative for Sustainable Development are among the partnerships that were showcased at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD). Partnerships for the implementation of sustainable development were considered to be one of the most important and most concrete outcomes of the summit.

* This partnership is also known as “Engaging the Advertising Industry to Help Communicate Sustainability Around the World”

METHODOLOGY

The checklist that this paper uses lays out each of the ten qualities of successful partnerships and then breaks each one down into its elements. By looking in detail at each element, partnership members can see where there are gaps in the partnership that will cause it to function sub-optimally. The qualities, which appear as section headings, are:

- 1) The partnership has a solid base of joint commitment and understanding;
- 2) There is a clear and appropriately detailed plan for achieving the goals of the partnership;
- 3) Each partner clearly benefits from the partnership;
- 4) Sufficient and appropriate resources are committed from all partners for achieving the goals of the partnerships;
- 5) The partnership has an appropriate level of formality;
- 6) The partnership has good leadership;
- 7) The partnership has clear and effective lines of accountability;

- 8) Partners communicate in productive and supportive way;
- 9) There is trust in the function of the partnership; and
- 10) Accurate and appropriate indicators are used to evaluate and improve the success and progress of the partnership.

In this paper the elements of each quality are listed and ranked. The rankings used are:

- ♣ the partnership does show this element; and
- ? it is unclear if the partnership has this element.

EQUATOR INITIATIVE

The Equator Initiative, set up in 2002, focuses on identifying, recognizing, and improving the capacity of “successful communities that work to reduce poverty and conserve the biological diversity in the Equatorial Belt”.² Activities of the partnership include an awards program, community capacity development activities, policy analysis, research and advocacy and a multi-media communication campaign on issues related to poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation, and the critical role communities play in achieving both goals.³ Among the partnership’s achievements are providing 27 communities with public recognition and resources to further their work in poverty reduction and biodiversity preservation, holding a highly successful comprehensive learning exchange at the WSSD, and reaching tens of thousands of people with its outreach and media campaigns.⁴

The partners involved in the partnership are BrasilConnects, Environment Canada, CIDA, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, International Development Research Centre, IUCN – The World Conservation Union; The Nature Conservancy, Television Trust for the Environment, UNDP, Conservation International, and the UN Foundation.⁵

Quality 1:

A solid base of joint commitment and common understanding

- ♣ partners either have common backgrounds or mandates or go through a process involving extensive face-to-face contact to define problems or opportunities being addressed, and to understand each other’s concerns
- ♣ partners clearly define vision
- ♣ partners clearly define goal
- ♣ partners clearly define general methodology/strategies

- ♣ partners clearly define relationship to one another

Interviews⁶ with the partners of the Equator Initiative show that there is a common understanding of the purpose of the partnership, of the issues that each partner faces, and a common language to discuss the partnership. This common culture within the partnership was not developed during a process of extensive face-to-face contact, but rather is a result of the similarity of the mandates of all of the partners. All of the partners are either NGOs, governmental, or intergovernmental bodies that are concerned with biodiversity and/or poverty issues.⁷ Because of this similarity all of the groups understand one another’s concerns, and already had similar vocabularies and narratives.

In the partnership’s internal and public literature, the vision, goal, methodology, and roles of individual partners are clearly articulated. The vision that the partnership pursues is inspiring and ambitious, while the goal is succinct and achievable. Similarly, the partnership has laid out methods for achieving its goal.

These aspects of the partnership are not only laid out on paper, but have been internalized by all of the partnership members. While all of the current members were not involved in setting out the partnership’s vision, goal, methodology, and relationships, in interviews they all demonstrated a clear understanding of these aspects of the partnership, and used the same language to describe them.

Quality 2:

A clear and appropriately detailed plan for achieving the goals of the partnership

- ♣ a plan exists
- ♣ the activities planned will lead to realization of goal

- ♣ the plan defines who will undertake each action
- ♣ the plan defines what resources they will use
- ♣ the plan defines timeline for completing action
- ♣ the plan defines how action will be evaluated
- ? the plan includes reflection on the processes of the partnership
- ♣ the plan addresses further continuation or ending of partnership

The Equator Initiative has created an action plan for its current function and is in the process of carrying it out. The plan details all of the actions to be taken by the partnership, who is to undertake the actions, what resources they will use, when they are to complete the action, and how the action will be evaluated. It also includes the assumptions behind the action and how the members of the partnership believe that the set of actions that they have planned will lead to the fulfillment of their goals.⁸ The plan includes timelines, with deadlines. It also lays out the methods through which the next phase of the partnership will be planned and provides time for the planning.

The action planning of the partnership and its oversight is easier than it would likely be in most partnerships because the oversight body of the partnership carries out most of the major partnership activities. The role of the partners is to sit on the board and to provide further guidance and legitimacy to the activities of the UNEP office.

One weak area of the action plan is a lack of formally structured time or forum for reflecting on the processes of the partnership. All of the partnership members interviewed agreed that process issues are discussed during the board meetings. They also agreed that this was an appropriate forum for discussing any problems of the partnership and that issues brought up in this setting have always been adequately addressed. While this is not currently a problem in the partnership, the partners should consider adding a formalized time period at their board meetings for specifically discussing issues of the processes that run the partnership.

Quality 3:

Each partner clearly benefits from the partnership

- ♣ the activities of the partnership help each participant to achieve part of their mandate

Because all of the partners of the Equator Initiative, as mentioned previously, are either NGOs, governmental, or intergovernmental bodies that are have biodiversity and/or poverty issues as part of their mandates, the partnership clearly benefits all of the partners.

Quality 4:

Sufficient and appropriate resources are committed from all partners for achieving the goals of the partnerships

- ♣ each partner contributes to the partnership
- ♣ all partners acknowledge that resources necessary to the partnership include more than financial resources
- ? there are enough resources available to achieve the aims of the partnership in the short term and long term
- ♣ there is a clear agreement about who will provide which resources when
- ? the provision of resources is planned in a timely manner
- ♣ if resources are acquired for the partnership, there is a plan for what to do with them after the partnership

The way that the partners of the Equator Initiative set up their collaboration made sure that the partnership would have enough resources to get off the ground, and that each partner would have a vested interest in the success of the partnership. The partnership requires each partner that joins to contribute at least \$100,000 upon joining.⁹ Some partners have contributed more than that to the partnership, but each partner's input is considered equally, since they have all made a significant contribution to the partnership. Similarly, they all share equal responsibilities as board members to participate in

decision-making.¹⁰ The partners all acknowledge that more than financial resources are necessary to make the partnership successful, and so they have created the Equator Initiative Secretariat. The secretariat provides the infrastructure, time, and labour that the partnership requires. It carries out most of the partnership's activities.

The Secretariat is located within the UNDP, and it can be assumed that all resources allocated to it will be used by other bodies within the UNDP if the partnership dissolves.

One weakness of the planning process is that the partnership has not secured enough resources to fuel its future work. The parties made a clear agreement about who was going to provide what resources and when. The provision of the resources was planned in a way that guaranteed that there would be enough available to establish the partnership, and carry out its first several years, but the plan did not structure in a way to get resources for the future of the partnership.¹¹ To deal with the lack of future funding, the partners are now developing a fundraising plan, but all of the partners interviewed acknowledge that it is going to be difficult and time consuming to get enough financial resources to continue the accomplishments of the partnership. This may hamper the partnership in the future. The action that the partnership is taking, however is the only action that could lead to the resolution of this problem, and should be continued.

Quality 5:

The partnership has an appropriate level of formality

- ♣ the partnership has begun action, the partners have thought about formality and consciously decided how formal it should be

The members of the Equator Initiative have carefully laid out the organizational structure and formality of the partnership. They have set it up in such a way that responsibilities are clear and accountabilities are guaranteed. The partnership quickly became formal after its initiation. As activities have become more complex and as more partners have signed on, it has become progressively more formal. The structure of

the partnership is clearly laid out in internal organizational documents that all partners help to compile. The partnership's success in carrying out all activities as planned, the low level of conflict, and the continuing commitment of all members indicates that the partnership has an appropriate level of formality.

Quality 6:

The partnership has good leadership

- ♣ the partnership's leadership is defined
- ♣ there is openness in communication with the leadership
- ? the leadership has strong abilities in the areas of negotiation, team building, planning, evaluation, time management, financial management, conflict resolution, and stress management
- ♣ the leadership clearly supports and understands the vision and goals of the partnership
- ♣ the partners trust the leadership and are supportive of it
- ? the leadership is open to change and improvement

The leadership of the Equator Initiative is well defined. Because the structure of the partnership is clearly laid out, the roles of all members of the partnership are very clear. The board is the partner's leadership, and is made of individuals from all partner organizations. It makes decisions about future directions of the partnership, and provides support to its projects.¹² There is also leadership in the Equator Initiative Secretariat. There is an individual who runs the day-to-day operations of the partnership, and makes sure that all initiatives are coordinated and that the board is always informed of what is going on. All members of the partnership that were interviewed agreed that there was good communication among all levels of the partnership.¹³

The partnership's board is constituted of all of the partners, thus the leadership supports and understands the partnership's vision and goals and all partners trust the leadership. Similarly, the person who runs the secretariat was central to the formation of the partnership, and based on interviews, clearly

has the trust and support of everyone involved in the partnership, as well as a clear understanding of all aspects of the partnership.

Based both on interviews with the partners and on internal documents of the partnership it seems that the Equator Initiative has had only few conflicts or problems. Without closer knowledge of the leadership, however, it is difficult to determine if it displays all the skills listed in the checklist. Similarly, without such close knowledge it is also not possible to know whether the leadership is open to change and improvement. Regardless of whether or not these qualities are present in the leadership, the partnership has been well directed so far, and the leadership should not be changed unless problems arise.

Quality 7:

The partnership has clear and effective lines of accountability

- ♣ each partner knows what they are responsible for
- ♣ each partner reports thoroughly on their actions both to other partners, leadership and to their organizations
- ? there are mechanisms for addressing non-fulfillment of responsibilities
- ♣ there are mechanisms for monitoring each partner's progress

The Equator Initiative, as has been previously mentioned, has clearly laid out and articulated its plans and its structure. The partnership is structured in such a way that there are strong lines of accountability, though there don't seem to be strong mechanisms for addressing the non-fulfillment of responsibilities. The action plan for the partnership specifies exactly who needs to do what and when. All those who are responsible for implementing a part of the partnership report to the board and to the secretariat about what they have accomplished. Each partner organization chooses how they communicate internally about progress in the partnership. All partner organizations were clear about how they were to communicate internally. There is no formal system for monitoring progress because partners

report on their activities and because most of the partnership's activities are public in some way.

The only mechanisms that exist to address non-compliance are social pressures exerted by the other partners. Though this has not been a problem for the partnership, creating mechanisms, for example a probation for groups who do not fulfill their obligations, would be wise. Such mechanisms would help to prevent future non-compliance, as well as any conflict around what to do if a partner does not do what they have agreed to.

Quality 8:

Partners communicate in productive and supportive ways

- ♣ there is a plan for communicating within the partnership
- ♣ there is a plan for communicating with the public
- ♣ each partner has a plan for communicating internally about the partnership
- ♣ all plans outline the frequency of communication
- ♣ all plans outline the general content of the communication
- ♣ all plans describe how information will be transmitted
- ? there are general ground rules and/or principals that guide the partnership's communication
- ? potential conflict is addressed in the communication plan

At the initiation of the Equator Initiative, the partners created a set of *modus operandi*, some of which focused on communications. Included in this are general principles of communication, as well as where and when the partners will meet.¹⁴

There are, however, no rules about communication, though some were drafted. They have not been enacted, because there has never been a need to use them.¹⁵ All representatives involved in the partnership have managed to work together without

such rules. They have also had very little conflict. Nevertheless, because communication and interaction often involves conflict, developing and adopting ways to deal with conflict and with inappropriate communication could prevent any future problems that may arise. Since principles of communication were drafted, it would be an easy step for the partnership to adopt them.

The board of directors meets at least once a year, though generally they meet every six months, usually at an international event that all of the partners are attending. These meetings have pre-determined agendas concerning what the partners will discuss. When the partners are not meeting, they have occasional conference calls, and are welcomed to call the secretariat with any concerns that they may have. They are kept up to date on the partnership's progress through frequent emails sent by the head of the secretariat.¹⁶

The partnership's external communications plan outlines the general content of what is to be communicated outside of the partnership, through what channels, when, and what the purpose of the communication is. The external communications plan has been very successful, and has gained the partnership a great deal of recognition and media coverage.¹⁷

All of the partners interviewed said that they had some sort of protocol through which they reported on their activities to their own organizations.¹⁸

Quality 9:

There is trust in the function of the partnership

- ♣ partners are willing to share resources, success, and risk with one another to the extent that the partnership's actions demands it
- ♣ partners are able to fulfill the commitments that they make
- ♣ partners are open with one another

As was previously stated, all of the members of the Equator Initiative made a significant financial contribution to the partnership upon joining it. This

contribution indicates that each partner trusted, to some extent, that the partnership would enjoy some success. The other indicators of trust - that partners are able to fulfill commitments and that they are open with one another - are evident in the partnership. All of the actions that the partnership has set out have been completed¹⁹ and all of the partners interviewed stated that they are open and honest in their communications with their partners.²⁰ The manager of the Equator Initiative attributed the development of this trust to the iterative engagement of the partners and that all partners listen to one another's concerns.²¹

Quality 10:

Accurate and appropriate indicators are used to monitor and improve the success and progress of the partnership

- ♣ there are indicators of what the partnership will look like if it is successful
- ♣ there are indicators of what successful completion of each action of the partnership will look like
- ♣ the indicators are reflective of actual success
- ♣ the indicators are measurable in some way
- ♣ partners agree on the measurement methods
- ♣ there is a system in place to continuously improve the partnership based on the indicators

The vision that the activities of the Equator Initiative are designed to support is one in which the Millennium Development Goals are met. If the partnership were completely successful environmental sustainability would be achieved, extreme poverty would be eradicated, primary education would be universal, gender equality and women's empowerment would be promoted, child mortality would be reduced, maternal health would be improved, and diseases would be combated.²² Clearly, these goals are too broad for one partnership

to address all of them substantially, and so the Equator Initiative focuses on biodiversity preservation and poverty eradication.

The actions of the partnership are designed to assist in both of these areas. For each action that the partnership takes, there are measurable indicators of how well the action was completed and further, how the action assisted in achieving the goals of the partnership.²³ None of the partners interviewed disagreed with the measurement methods.²⁴

The partnership has not implemented a formal system to continuously improve the partnership based on the indicators. Four factors, however, lead to such continuous improvement: the frequent involvement of the board in planning future actions of the partnership, accurate documentation of the partnership's progress, reflection on that progress and the self-interest of each partner in achieving success in the partnership. The success of the use of indicators in the Equator Initiative can be seen in its continuing success and improvement.²⁵

INTERNATIONAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS INITIATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (IMCISD)

Work to design the IMCISD began in May 2002. The primary objective was to engage the communications/marketing/advertising industry to communicate the essence of sustainable development.

In 1998 at the Commission on Sustainable Development, Canada (Ambassador Fraser) identified the inconsistency of messaging to the public on sustainable development. Improving this would serve to encourage sustainable decision-making across all sectors and to facilitate an on-going dialogue that sustains long-term public engagement with sustainability issues. This in turn would positively influence business and industry worldwide to integrate sustainability into decision making by creating a public demand for it. Of particular interest was the prospect of increasing the engagement of the communications/marketing/advertising industry to understand and internalize the messages of sustainable development.²⁶

The activities that the partnership were to undertake included public opinion leader research and public education/advertising campaigns aimed at improving the general understanding of public perceptions and motivation.²⁷ The partners J. Walter Thompson Company Limited, UNESCO, York University, Industry Canada and Environment Canada met and created a vision and objectives, as well as an action plan.²⁸ However, the management and administration of funds proved to be a hurdle which in turn limited access to the necessary funds and the partnership was eventually terminated.²⁹

Quality 1:

A solid base of joint commitment and common understanding

- ? partners either have common backgrounds or mandates or go through a process involving extensive face-to-face contact to define problems or opportunities being addressed, and to understand each other's concerns

- ? partners clearly define vision
- ? partners clearly define goal
- ? partners clearly define general methodology/strategies
- ? partners clearly define relationship to one another

The partners of the IMCISD are very different. They derive from all different sectors, and generally deal with very diverse issues. At the initiation of the partnership, they held several meetings and conference calls.³⁰ This time was devoted to developing the goals, vision, and methodology of the partnership, and also to developing a common culture and understanding of one another. However, the partners did not take sufficient time to work out many issues, particularly around the management and administration of funds. As well, it became clear that business and government are accustomed to taking differing amounts of time to complete projects.³¹

Despite their attempts, the partnership was not able to articulate a shared vision, nor does it have a single simple goal that is clearly stated. Rather, it has a list of objectives, which includes within it methodologies and strategies. Additionally, though J. Walter Thompson Company Limited is recognized as the lead partner, UNESCO appeared to take on many of the leadership roles.

Quality 2:

A clear and appropriately detailed plan for achieving the goals of the partnership

- ♣ a plan exists
- ? the activities planned are doable and will lead to the realization of a goal
- ♣ the plan defines who will undertake each action
- ♣ the plan defines what resources they will use

- ♣ the plan defines timeline for completing action
- ? the plan defines how action will be evaluated
- ? the plan includes reflection on the processes of the partnership
- ? the plan addresses further continuation or ending of partnership

The partnership created a very detailed action plan that would have taken the partnership through 18 months if it had been implemented. These plans included deadlines, indicated who was responsible for implementing each action, and included resources to complete each action. The plan did include an intent to develop a system of evaluation. Since the plan is not available for assessment, it is not possible to comment on whether the activities planned would have led to the realization of the goal.

Quality 3:

Each partner clearly benefits from the partnership

the activities of the partnership help each participant to achieve part of their mandate

Part of the reason that the action plan was never implemented may be that some of the partners had little motivation to take the action required of them in the plan. The lead partner, J. Walter Thompson Company Limited, would benefit from the partnership, in some way, through an increase in company profits from an improved public image, or from being hired to do advertising that would come out of the partnership. These benefits were not structured into the partnership, and the partnership could be carried out without either of these benefits being realized for JWT.

For the other partners, promoting sustainability is part of their mandates, but it is not the central mandate of any of them. Nevertheless, widely marketing the idea of sustainability would have been a clear benefit to all of the partners of the IMCISD.

Quality 4:

Sufficient and appropriate resources are committed from all partners for achieving the goals of the partnerships

- ♣ each partner contributes to the partnership
- ♣ all partners acknowledge that resources necessary to the partnership include more than financial resources
- ? there are enough resources available to achieve the aims of the partnership in the short term and long term
- ♣ there is a clear agreement about who will provide which resources when
- ♣ the provision of resources is planned in a timely manner
- ? if resources are acquired for the partnership, there is a plan for what to do with them after the partnership

The partners of the IMCISD all committed resources to the partnership, and contributed the resources necessary to initiate the partnership.³² The use of these resources was carefully planned. These resources were not only financial. A lack of resources, or a plan of how to use them does not seem to have been a problem for the partnership. Funds management appears to have been the main issue.

Quality 5:

The partnership has an appropriate level of formality

- ? If the partnership has begun action, the partners have thought about formality and consciously decided how formal it should be

Another reason that the IMCISD has not enjoyed success is that the partnership did not formalize roles and modes of operation. According to the partner groups³³, they were interested in keeping the process open and democratic. However, lack of clarification of roles and responsibilities, particularly related to the management of funds, impeded the work of the partnership.

Quality 6:

The partnership has good leadership

- ? the partnership's leadership is defined
- ? there is openness in communication with the leadership
- ? the leadership has strong abilities in the areas of negotiation, team building, planning, evaluation, time management, financial management, conflict resolution, and stress management
- ? the leadership clearly supports and understands the vision and goals of the partnership
- ? the partners trust the leadership and are supportive of it
- ? the leadership is open to change and improvement

According to members of the IMCISD, one of the issues that stood in the way of its success was a lack of clear leadership.³⁴

Quality 7:

The partnership has clear and effective lines of accountability

- ♣ each partner knows what they are responsible for
- ? each partner reports thoroughly on their actions both to other partners, leadership and to their organizations
- ? there are mechanisms for addressing non-fulfillment of responsibilities
- ? there are mechanisms for monitoring each partner's progress

Accountability was not built into the IMCISD. The experience of the IMCISD shows that it is not enough to assign action, but that there needs to be a motivation for completing that action, or a review process to mitigate for any incomplete actions.

Quality 8:

Partners communicate in productive and supportive ways

- ♣ there is a plan for communicating within the partnership
- ♣ there is a plan for communicating with the public
- ? each partner has a plan for communicating internally about the partnership
- ? all plans outline the frequency of communication
- ? all plans outline the general content of the communication
- ? all plans describe how information will be transmitted
- ? there are general ground rules and/or principals that guide the partnership's communication
- ? potential conflict is addressed in the communication plan

All aspects of the IMCISD were planned to some extent.³⁵ This includes a plan for both internal and external communications. However, these plans were not carried out since one of the partners triggered the ending of the partnership. To the best of our knowledge two of the partners are in the process of revising the partnership³⁶, and two of the partners consider that the partnership has ended.³⁷ There are no documents about this partnership for the public, or media coverage outside of announcements at the WSSD. All of the information about the partnership that is publicly available states that the partnership is expected to complete its activities by the end of 2004.³⁸

Quality 9:

There is trust in the function of the partnership

- ? partners are willing to share resources, success, and risk with one another to the extent that the partnership's actions demands it

- ? partners are able to fulfill the commitments that they make
- ? partners are open with one another

It is very difficult to determine the level of trust that developed between the partners of the IMCISD. The fact that two partners are revising the partnership and two partners consider the partnership is ended, may imply a lack of communication among partners.

Quality 10:

Accurate and appropriate indicators are used to monitor and improve the success and progress of the partnership

- ♣ there are indicators of what the partnership will look like if it is successful
- ♣ there are indicators of what successful completion of each action of the partnership will look like
- ? the indicators are reflective of actual success
- ? the indicators are measurable in some way
- ? partners agree on the measurement methods
- ? there is a system in place to continuously improve the partnership based on the indicators

The above indicators were part of the plan.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of the Equator Initiative and the IMCISD does two things. First, it shows how to use the checklist to rank the strengths and weaknesses of a partnership. The second thing that this analysis shows is that strength in the structure of a partnership contributes to success, while weakness may lead to lack of achievement. While this checklist addresses structural qualities, we acknowledge that every partnership has intangible qualities that contribute to its performance. Those seeking further information and research on partnerships should also read CIELAP's *How to Make Partnerships Work* and *Getting the Most Out of Partnerships*.

ENDNOTES

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