



# A Fulcrum for the Future

**Girls' Education and  
Voluntary Family Planning:  
The Best Investments for  
Development and  
Security in the Sahel**

**Increasing access to family planning and quality education are strategic, mutually reinforcing interventions that enhance self-determination for women and girls.** Better educated, more empowered women choose smaller families. These rights-based approaches slow population growth and help generate a "demographic dividend" that can put the Sahel<sup>i</sup> on the path toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

Gains in education and family planning will result in gains in other sectors, making Sahel communities healthier, more resilient, better resourced, more prosperous, and ultimately more stable and secure.

This represents an important opportunity for donor countries and international organizations to have far-reaching effects on the Sahel crisis and to leverage positive outcomes in the region and beyond. Targeted investments in family planning and girls' education in the coming decade can mitigate future humanitarian need and help reverse worsening migration, terrorism and unrest.

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<sup>i</sup> For the purposes of this brief, we focus on the G-5 Sahel countries: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Most of the analysis we use excludes the Eastern Sahel countries of Sudan and Eritrea, as well as Senegal and Nigeria. Nigeria's territory includes only a small strip of land within the Sahel and its population is so large that it skews the analysis.

# The Urgency of Addressing Population Growth

Prioritizing funding for family planning and girls' education in the Sahel is critically important and urgent, even now, in the midst of a global pandemic.

The African Development Bank's Covid-19 response facility is aiming to channel US\$10 billion to fight the pandemic across the continent. That funding is urgently needed. In West Africa, while Covid-19 incidence and fatalities are relatively low,<sup>1</sup> the pandemic is having serious knock-on effects in the Sahel, increasing the number of people living in extreme poverty in the region by an estimated 1.3 million in 2020. The number of people suffering from extreme food insecurity has risen from 3.9 to 7.4 million, with a million more at risk if the pandemic doesn't improve.<sup>2</sup> Its economic fallout now threatens to wipe out five years of development gains<sup>3</sup> and fuel more migration from the Sahel.

At the same time, there is another underlying factor greatly compounding current challenges in the Sahel – not only poverty and food insecurity, but also unrest, terrorism, displacement, and climate disruptions. That factor is rapid population growth.

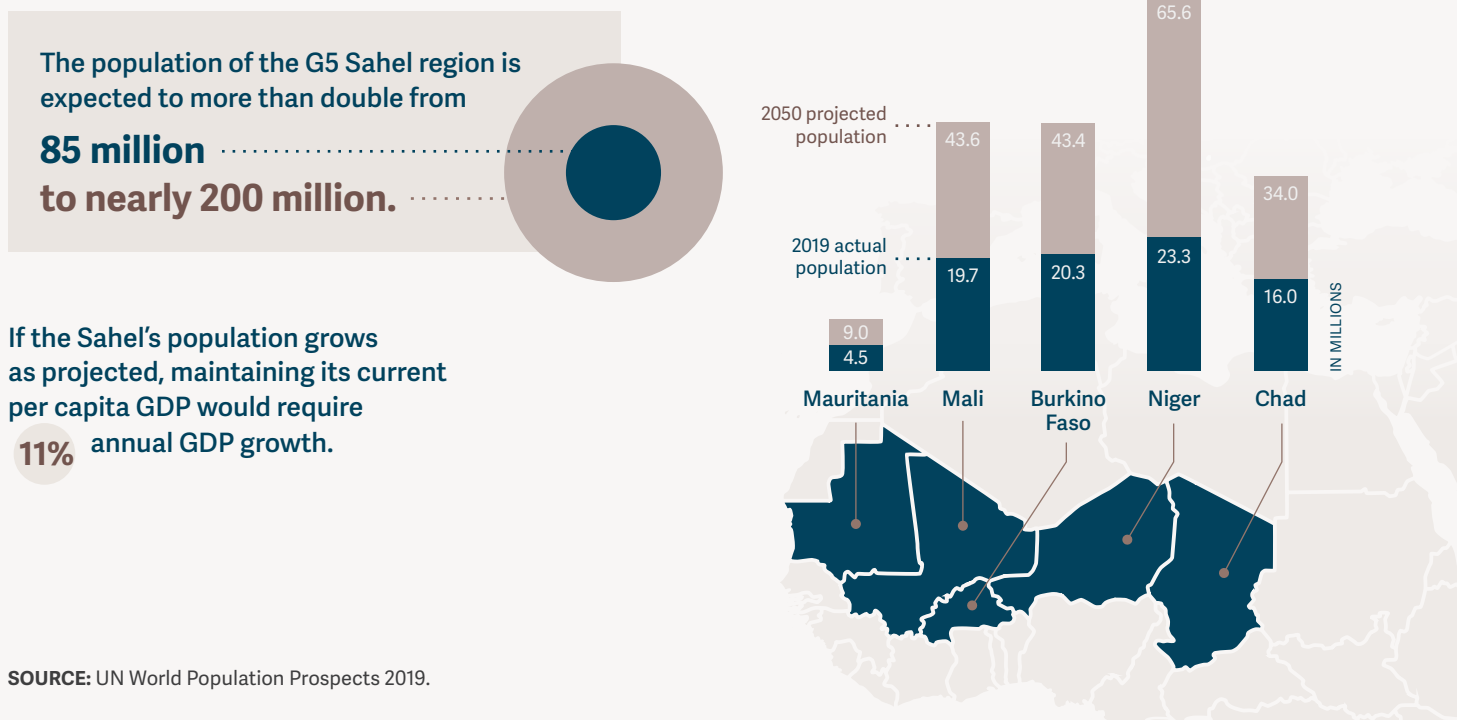
Population growth in the Sahel region is among the highest in the world. It threatens to exacerbate the Sahel's other challenges to the point of insolvency. The G-5 Sahel countries' population is expected to more than double – from 85 million to nearly 200 million people –

by 2050 (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> This is a conservative estimate which assumes a steeper decline in fertility than these countries experienced in recent decades. Nigeria is estimated to exceed 400 million by midcentury and become the third most populous country after China and India.

If the Sahel's population grows as projected, just maintaining (let alone improving) its current per capita GDP, school enrollment rates and health care access would require 11% annual GDP growth. "We know that 11% annual GDP growth is not possible," said Toby Lanzer, former Assistant Secretary-General, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel. "Unless the Sahel countries tackle this demographic challenge which faces them, the countries will get poorer, communities will suffer more, enrollment rates will go down. Fewer women will have access to health care, and the Sustainable Development Goals will not be met." Failing to slow the region's population growth could result in what Lanzer called "a tempest of incalculable proportions."<sup>5</sup>

Avoiding that fate hinges on the women of the Sahel, who are currently among the least empowered in the world. Many don't have a say in their own basic life choices, such as whether to attend school, when and whom to marry, whether to work outside the home or seek healthcare.

**FIGURE 1: 2050 SAHEL POPULATION PROJECTION**



## For 1.3 billion dollars we could close the family planning and education gap in all G5 countries.

**\*That is half a billion dollars less than what was pledged for humanitarian response in just 3 countries at the 2020 UN Central Sahel Summit.**

Women in the Sahel face particularly extreme deficits with respect to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). In Niger, Chad, and Mali, the median age of marriage is around 16, and about 40% of women give birth before age 18. Birth rates in the Sahel are among the world's highest: an average of 5.7 children over a woman's lifetime (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> One in four women surveyed in the Sahel would like to have fewer children or space out births but lack modern contraceptives.

Educational attainment tracks with delaying marriage and childbirth, lower fertility rates, and other key SRHR

outcomes. Yet only three to six girls out of every ten complete primary school in Mali, Chad, and Niger. Secondary school completion is very low regionwide: three of the five countries have completion rates below 30% (see Table 1). As of October 2020, 4,000 schools in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger were closed due to terrorism.

Demographic conditions in the Sahel – especially rapid population growth and women's lack of self-determination – stand to make the Sahel's development and security challenges worse. But to contradict Auguste Comte, demography is not destiny.<sup>7</sup> Historical demographic trends in the Sahel need not determine its future. Research shows they are susceptible to improvements with far-reaching effects on future outcomes.<sup>8</sup> The situation of women and girls in the Sahel can also be leveraged as a powerful factor in ameliorating the crisis and building a much brighter future in the region and beyond.

Left unchecked, the Sahel crisis could have cascading geopolitical consequences that may cost the international community many billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance and military response.<sup>9</sup> Urgent action is required to address some of the root causes of this crisis.

**TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC, HEALTH AND EDUCATION INDICATORS**

	Mauritania	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger	Chad	Sub-Saharan Africa
 Women of reproductive age (in thousands)	1,138	4,541	4,891	5,097	3,739	262,960
 Women using modern contraception	5%	10%	16%	14%	6%	25%
 Total fertility rate	4.5	6.1	6.0	7.6	6.4	4.7
 Women with an unmet need for contraception	32%	25%	26%	21%	24%	26%
 Girls' primary school completion rate	80%	47%	68%	57%	34%	67%
 Girls' lower secondary school completion rate	45%	27%	44%	16%	10%	42%

SOURCE: DHS, FP2020, World Bank Indicators, and UN World Population Prospects 2019

# Meeting the Unmet Need

At the end of 2020, donors pledged \$1.7 billion to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Central Sahel. For \$1.3 billion annually, the donor community can meet the remaining unmet need for family planning and girls' education across the Sahel. This will help slow population growth and ease the humanitarian caseload in decades to come.

Of that additional \$1.3 billion needed, just 8% (US \$107 million), would be sufficient to meet the unmet need for family planning in the region.<sup>i</sup> While international recognition of the importance of family planning is growing, funding for it still lags far behind what's needed in the Sahel.

On average, only 0.5% of the total aid to the region from Sahel Alliance members targeted family planning.<sup>10</sup> Increasing that allocation to 2.7% would meet the remaining need. Total annual contributions to family planning from Sahel Alliance members are around US \$37 million (see Table 2). Allocating more of their aid to family planning would be a cost-effective investment.

Overseas development aid (ODA) for education funding in the Sahel is considerable, around \$246 million annually, yet it's only about a quarter of what is needed (see Table 3 and Figure 2). Analysis of education aid to the Sahel reveals that only about half had gender equality as a significant objective for the related projects.<sup>11</sup> Increased education funding should promote gender equity and be oriented towards sustainability – breaking the pattern of increased education leading to increased consumption.<sup>12</sup> In 2019 French

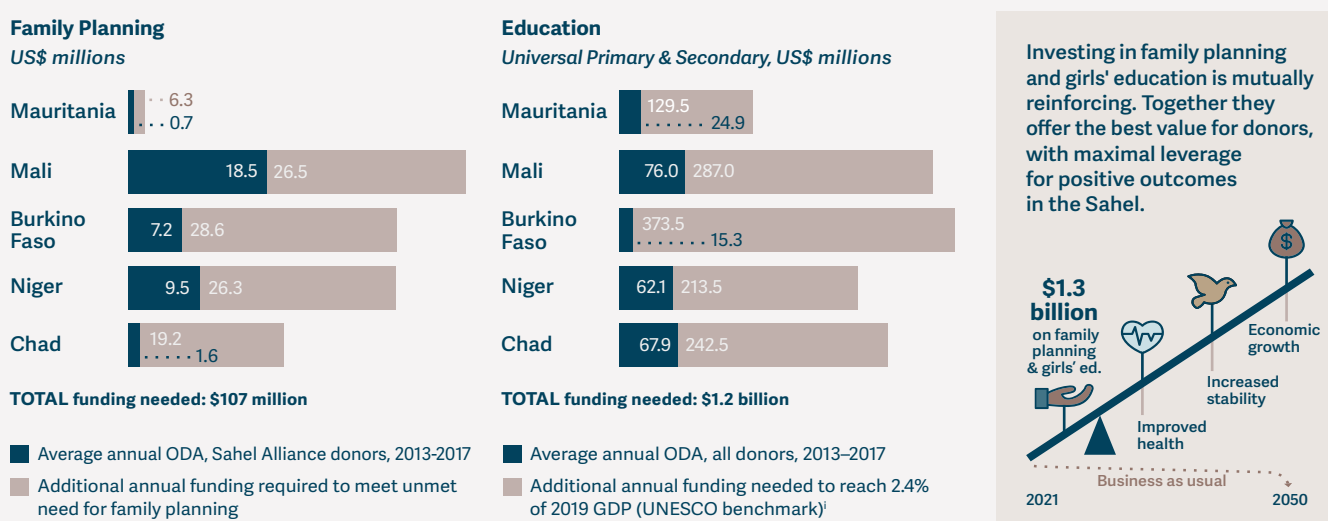
President Emmanuel Macron called for other G-7 countries to double their funding for girls' education in the Sahel.<sup>13</sup>

Given current funding levels, our analysis found it would take an additional \$1.2 billion to meet the educational needs in the Sahel (see Figure 2). That's an order of magnitude greater than the additional funding needed to meet family planning needs, because the per capita cost of education is much greater than that of family planning. In addition, to truly close the gap for all girls to attend and complete primary and secondary education, the systems for universal education need to be built and funded – not just funded for girls. This education funding is equally critical and cost-effective for changing outcomes in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Increased funding from donors must also be matched by increased engagement and leadership from recipient countries. To be sustainable and impactful, development efforts should be locally led. In order to make effective use of funding, national policy makers and local leaders in the Sahel countries need a better understanding of the significant role family planning and girls' education play in regional development and stability. Governments and donors should ensure that the great majority of education and SRHR funding goes to services that directly benefit girls and women.

<sup>i</sup> This US\$107 million is in addition to any existing funding levels currently flowing to the region for family planning. Women with unmet need are those who are fecund and sexually active but are not using any method of contraception, and report not wanting any more children or wanting to delay the next child.

**FIGURE 2: ADDITIONAL ANNUAL FUNDING NEEDED NOW TO CHANGE COURSE IN THE SAHEL**



<sup>i</sup> Estimate of needed donor funding comes from a recommendation of the 2015 UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report. The report estimates developing countries will need to increase total education spending to 6.3% of GDP to reach universal education levels. Of that 6.3% spending, the report calls on domestic governments to increase their own spending to 3.9% of GDP, so international donors are called on to make available the additional 2.4%. The estimate of needed funding for family planning is based on the Sully et al (2019) report.

**SOURCE:** See Methodological note, <https://oasissahel.org/resources/methodological-note-a-fulcrum-for-the-future>

## Annual Funding Overview

**TABLE 2: FAMILY PLANNING**

Average annual family planning ODA and imputed UNFPA core contributions benefiting the Sahel (2013–2017), US\$ thousands, selected donors only

Donor	Mauritania	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger	Chad	UNFPA Core Contributions	Total
African Development Bank	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Canada	–	1,727	150	–	204	157	2,239
Denmark	–	–	–	–	–	482	482
EU Institutions	–	–	–	26	–	–	26
France	430	1,896	2,193	3,180	810	9	8,518
Germany	–	2	–	3,706	–	306	4,014
Italy	–	–	4	–	–	22	26
Luxembourg	–	144	73	415	–	44	676
Netherlands	–	1,228	–	–	–	513	1,741
Norway	–	–	–	–	–	732	732
Spain	31	–	–	–	–	3	34
Sweden	–	–	–	–	–	847	847
United Kingdom	–	–	–	–	–	356	356
United States	–	12,976	1,118	6	–	235	14,335
World Bank (IDA)	–	32	2,826	791	–	–	3,649
<b>Total</b>	<b>461</b>	<b>18,005</b>	<b>6,364</b>	<b>8,124</b>	<b>1,014</b>	<b>3,708</b>	<b>37,676</b>

**SOURCE:** Custom analysis of OECD CRS flows and imputed UNFPA core contributions reaching the Sahel. See methodological note for full methodology details, <https://oasisahel.org/resources/methodological-note-a-fulcrum-for-the-future>. US\$2018 constant dollars.

**TABLE 3: UNIVERSAL PRIMARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE SAHEL**

Average annual education ODA benefiting the Sahel (2013–2017), US\$ thousands

Donor	Mauritania	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger	Chad	Total
African Development Bank	190	12	611	3,705	–	4,519
Canada	39	10,550	8,884	96	32	19,601
Denmark	–	3	1,117	–	–	1,120
EU Institutions	234	2,384	385	10,887	493	14,383
France	9,253	18,414	12,459	9,013	6,468	55,607
Germany	1,382	3,824	3,080	1,736	295	10,317
Italy	7	241	1,454	246	185	2,132
Luxembourg	–	3,486	6,916	10,282	–	20,685
Netherlands	–	729	2,097	–	–	2,827
Norway	–	2,592	736	4,228	–	7,556
Spain	188	310	232	31	226	988
Sweden	–	45	22	–	–	67
United Kingdom	18	–	–	–	6	24
United States	95	16,193	5,397	633	–	22,318
World Bank (IDA)	4,650	5,328	8,114	5,387	2,210	25,690
Other Donors	8,817	11,878	16,334	15,832	5,379	58,240
<b>Total</b>	<b>24,874</b>	<b>75,989</b>	<b>67,839</b>	<b>62,077</b>	<b>15,295</b>	<b>246,074</b>

**SOURCE:** OECD CRS, gross disbursements

# Not Just Aid, But High-Yield Investments

Funding family planning and girls' education in the Sahel is more than just a cost, it's a high-yield investment in the region's future.

The Copenhagen Consensus project analyzed cost-benefit relationships for investments in all SDG areas. It found that investing in universal access to contraceptives had the second highest return on investment, yielding \$120 of annual social, economic, and environmental benefits for every \$1 spent (see Figure 3).<sup>15</sup> That means investing the recommended \$107 million in family planning could leverage over \$12 billion in returns.

Only reducing trade restrictions has a greater return on investment.<sup>16</sup> As such, family planning is the single most impactful investment donors can make. Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, former Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), called it "the most important intervention for human development in the world."

"As we work towards ending poverty across the developing world, we know that educating adolescent girls and getting health services to women will lead to greater prosperity not just for individual families but also for entire economies," said World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim.

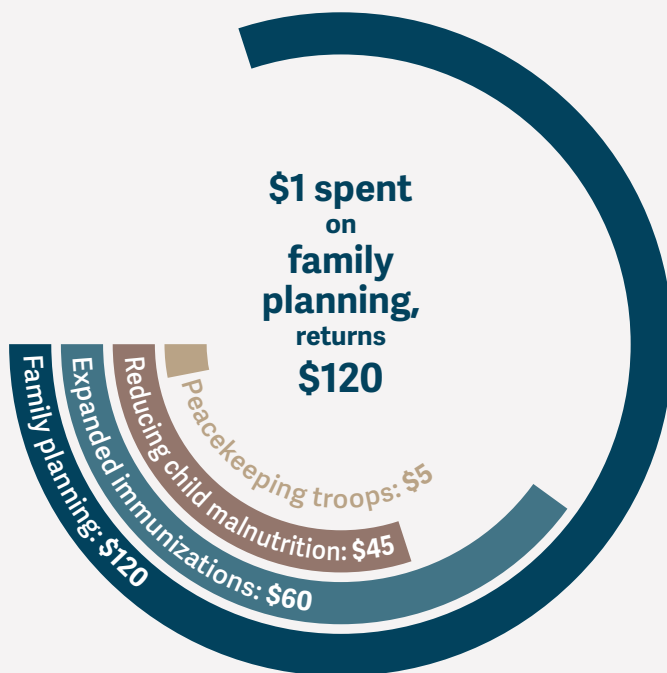
But the inverse is also true: continuing education and family planning deficits for women and girls will lead to

crippling poverty, higher mortality, and overburdened communities. They will also exacerbate conflict and terrorism, and drive higher levels of migration, including to Europe. Population growth, young age structures and food shortages correlate directly with conflict and civil unrest.<sup>17</sup>

That's why investing in family planning and girls' education is so critical for the Sahel's future. The two are mutually-reinforcing; together they offer the best value for donors, with maximal leverage for positive outcomes in the region.<sup>18</sup> They are in line with national policy commitments made by the G-5 Sahel countries.<sup>19</sup> It's time to reposition them as priority investments for development. Recognizing the links between population, development, and security should help to engage new partners in health and education efforts, including finance and defense ministries. Yet the most important rationale for investing in girls' education and family planning remains: they are fundamental human rights which we have a responsibility to uphold.

The cost of doing so is within reach: \$1.3 billion, including \$1.2 billion for girls' education and \$107 million for family planning (that's in addition to the \$1.7 billion already pledged to combat the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel). We call on donors to close the gap, and open the way to a better future in the region and beyond.

**FIGURE 3: BENEFITS PER DOLLAR SPENT FOR VARIOUS DEVELOPMENT TARGETS.**



SOURCE: Copenhagen Consensus Centre

**"The education of the girl child is critical and an urgent matter. It is actually about human rights and human dignity. It is about peace and the development of the country."**

— Ellen Sirleaf Johnson  
former President of Liberia

**"(Family planning is) the most important intervention for human development in the world."**

— Dr Babatunde Osotimehin  
former Executive Director  
of UNFPA

## Return on Investment for Family Planning

Accessing contraceptives lets women avoid unwanted pregnancies, which in the aggregate slows population growth, and makes it easier for countries to reach 15 out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>20</sup> Co-benefits of family planning include:



### IMPROVED HEALTH

18% of maternal deaths and 14% of newborn deaths in the Sahel would be averted, and the health of women and children generally would improve, if all contraceptive needs were met.<sup>21</sup>



### HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Adolescent pregnancy and childbearing often leads girls to drop out of school, limiting their educational attainment and economic potential.<sup>22</sup> Family planning reverses that equation. Research shows children of women who use family planning also achieve higher levels of education.<sup>23</sup>



### SOCIAL PROGRAMS SAVINGS

A dollar spent on meeting contraceptive care needs leads to a \$3 savings in pregnancy-related care.<sup>24</sup> Longer term, family planning also saves on education,

health, and immunization programs, which could add \$2–\$6 in savings for every dollar spent on family planning.<sup>25</sup>



### ECONOMIC GROWTH

Accessing family planning tracks with higher female labor force participation and earnings,<sup>26</sup> and faster overall economic growth.<sup>27</sup> Every \$1 spent on funding family planning yields \$60–100 annually in long-term economic growth. Slowing population growth also sets up a “demographic dividend,” shifting the region’s age structure so that workers outnumber dependents, further boosting economies.



### CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Slowing population growth lowers overall resource use, promotes food security, and improves prospects for adapting to climate change.<sup>28</sup>

## Return on Investment for Universal Primary & Secondary Education

Like family planning, investing directly in women and girls’ education confers powerful benefits for the women themselves, their families, and their communities, and sets up multiplier effects in economic, health, and social spheres, including:



### HIGHER LIFETIME EARNINGS

In Sub-Saharan Africa, women’s earnings increase by 14.5% for each year of schooling they complete.<sup>29</sup> Children (including girls) in low-income countries who complete secondary education can expect lifetime earnings almost five times higher than their parents.<sup>30</sup> Children whose mothers get more education also earn more compared to children of mothers with less education.<sup>31</sup>

Women who complete secondary school have on average 2.4 fewer children than those with no schooling and 1.7 fewer children than those who complete only primary school.<sup>34</sup> Children whose mothers have more education are likely to attend school longer and more regularly.<sup>35</sup>



### ENHANCED RESILIENCE

Women with more education and skills are better positioned to find work and identify resources in the wake of a crisis or disaster.<sup>32</sup>



### INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY AND GROWTH

A 1% increase in girls’ secondary school completion leads to a 0.3% increase in national Gross National Income (GNI).<sup>36</sup> Raising girls’ completion rates of secondary school to 100% by 2030 would yield, on average, an additional 10% growth in GDP, and even bigger cumulative economic returns after that.<sup>37</sup>



### HEALTHIER FAMILIES

Increasing women’s education decreases the likelihood of child marriage and early pregnancy, and reduces infant and maternal mortality rates by up to 49%.<sup>33</sup>



### GREATER PEACE AND STABILITY

Girls’ education, together with family planning, can help change the age structure of the region. An older median age is associated with increased peace and stability.<sup>38</sup>

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