

**Helpdesk Research Report: Youth Issues in Yemen**  
**03.10.07**

**Query:** What are the key issues facing the youth of Yemen? How have other countries experiencing the same issues been impacted by them, and how have national governments and donors responded to them, in policy and practical terms? Examples from countries in the MENA region would be particularly valuable.

**Enquirer:** DFID, Middle East and North Africa Department

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**1. Overview**

Over 20% of Yemen's population is aged between 15 and 24 and, according to UN estimates, by 2025 will have increased by 69% - the second fastest growth rate in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Yemen also has high rates of illiteracy and together with Egypt and Iraq, makes up three-quarters of the 10 million illiterate youth in the region – two-thirds of which are girls. According to 2006 ILO figures, the MENA region also has the highest unemployment among youth – at 26% this is 8% more than sub-Saharan Africa.

Lack of employment is considered to be one of the single most important and debilitating effects of population growth in the region, especially as it has coincided with a decline in the oil industry in many countries as well as poor economic growth for many years. Many commentators argue that the phenomenon of large numbers of unemployed graduates demonstrates that education systems do not equip youth with the skills appropriate to making the transition into the labour market. As a result, many donor interventions have focused on providing skills development and vocational training programmes. National governments are also being urged to provide conditions for private sector growth.

A key issue for Yemen is illiteracy among women. Illiterate girls tend to marry early and bear children at a young age and often get caught in a cycle of low education, high fertility and poverty. Due to traditional and cultural norms, many women are kept out of the labour force altogether. Other issues which are beyond the scope of this query include the influence of tribalism, the widespread use of *qat*, and migration.

In general, governments with large youth populations are faced with the challenge of expanding basic services such as housing, education, healthcare, sanitation and jobs. In Yemen, this task is compounded by political volatility and shortages of water and other natural resources. Youth bulges can exacerbate pre-existing political and socioeconomic problems and it is argued that there is a strong link between youth economic prospects and social unrest, which can be fuelled by feelings of disenfranchisement and discontent. In the Islamic world, these trends in violence can find expression as political Islam.

### 3. Key documents

#### **Key Issues in Yemen**

- Government of Yemen, 2006, 'The National Children and Youth Strategy of the Republic of Yemen', Government of Yemen, Sana'a  
The executive summary of this document is available at: [http://www.bankofideas.com.au/Newsletter/Downloads/Executive\\_Summary\\_National\\_Agenda\\_Yemen.pdf](http://www.bankofideas.com.au/Newsletter/Downloads/Executive_Summary_National_Agenda_Yemen.pdf)

Section 6 'Major Development Challenges in Yemen' highlights that Yemen is one of only two MENA countries not on course to meet 80% of the Millennium Development Goals. It outlines the key challenges for the country which include high population growth and large youth cohorts; high rates of poverty especially among children; high rates of adult illiteracy especially among women; pervasive gender discrimination; scarce water resources and lack of access to safe drinking water; poor electricity and telecommunications coverage; one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the MENA region and prevalence of Qat use. Page 27 of section 6 'Yemeni Children and Young People – Current Situation' lists the following as hindering the achievement by Yemeni youth of their full potential:

- Illiteracy – the literacy rate for males is 83.7% and for females 48.2% (and only 15.8% in rural areas).
  - Lack of access and retention in secondary, tertiary and vocational education. gross tertiary enrolment for young men is 17% for young men and 5% for young women.
  - A high unemployment rate of 18.9% and growing, and high inactivity rates among women. Teenage girls (15 – 19 years) have an inactivity rate of 51.9%, while young adult females (20 – 24 years) have an inactivity rate of 65.5%.
  - Risky behaviours including early marriage; early pregnancy; HIV/AIDS; violence and crime; and substance abuse
  - Limited leisure options
  - Lack of participation in developmental policies and processes.
- Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2006, 'The Socio-Economic Plan for Poverty Reduction (2006-2010)' Government of the Republic of Yemen  
<http://www.yemencg.org/library/en/DPPR.pdf>

Chapter 7 'Human Resource Development' identifies high population growth rates, scarcity of natural resources such as water, and slow economic growth as the key issues affecting the country. The report also identifies illiteracy, particularly among women as an important issue affecting the youth population and addresses the status of the education and vocational training sector. The report also notes that there is a weak link between the education that is offered and the needs of the labour market which has translated into an increase in unemployment amongst university graduates.

- Al-Rabee, A., 2003, 'Adolescent and Reproductive Health in Yemen: Status, Policies, Programs and Issues', POLICY Project, Washington D.C.  
[http://www.policyproject.com/pubs/countryreports/ARH\\_Yemen.pdf](http://www.policyproject.com/pubs/countryreports/ARH_Yemen.pdf)

The report offers a useful background on the social context and gender socialisation issues that set girls and boys apart in terms of life expectations, educational attainment, job

prospects, labour force participation, reproduction, and duties in the household. It describes how many young girls are out of school and spend most of their time within the confines of the family home, often with heavy domestic responsibilities. Girls are usually taught to aim for 'marriageability' and as a result have limited decision-making power. In rural areas, school enrolment for girls of 15 years or older is uncommon and there are large gender gaps in enrolment and literacy rates. The median age at which women between 20-49 years were married is 16.5 years.

## **Impact and Donor Government Responses**

### *General*

- La Cava, G., Clert, C., and Lytle, P., 2004, 'Investing in Youth Empowerment and Inclusion: A Social Development Approach', World Bank, Washington D.C.  
[http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdext.nsf/60ByDocName/InvestinginYouthEmpowermentASocialDevelopmentApproach/\\$FILE/sdp60.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdext.nsf/60ByDocName/InvestinginYouthEmpowermentASocialDevelopmentApproach/$FILE/sdp60.pdf)

The paper argues that putting the empowerment and inclusion of young people on the "radar screen" of the research and operational agenda of social development actors will be extremely valuable for effective preventive strategies to encourage a more equitable, sustainable and secure future in developing countries. Some of the key points include:

- Youth can be potential agents of positive economic and social change.
- Few of these youth have access to secure economic, social and political opportunities and assets, which could help them to fulfill their potential.
- The proportion of youth not in employment or education is high.
- Youth employment is characterised by higher levels of exclusion than the general population.
- Youth disadvantage also includes other dimensions, which are harder to quantify. These include psycho-social needs which are particularly relevant during the transition from childhood to adulthood and which can be difficult to meet in times of economic crisis and family breakdown.
- Across regions, youth feel that their voices are not sufficiently heard in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, at family, community or national levels.

The paper also includes case studies from the Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and Caribbean regions.

### *The MENA Region*

- Yousef, T., 'Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demography, Employment and Conflict' in De Benitez et al., 2003, 'Youth Explosion in Developing World Cities: Approaches to Reducing Poverty and Conflict in an Urban Age', Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C.  
<http://wwics.si.edu/topics/pubs/ACF1AEF.pdf>

In this chapter the author acknowledges that assessments of the "youth bulge" in the region have often been politically charged and have taken place against the backdrop of concern over domestic conflict and global economic and political security. The paper assesses the education and labour market outcomes of these demographic changes and argues that what makes them significant in MENA is their timing, their interaction with other socioeconomic trends, and their implications for employment outcomes. Yousef argues that the emergence of the youth bulge in the region coincided with the collapse of oil prices in the mid-1980s which along with the weak growth performances that followed led to high rates of unemployment. In order to address existing unemployment, a substantial acceleration in economic growth is needed. Government employment policies, as well as the slow pace of economic restructuring and policy reform programmes have also played a central role in limiting the scope of job creation and higher productivity and hampering the emergence of dynamic private sectors. Another issue is the reduced scope for regional and international migration which until the 1990s acted as a safety valve for youth discontent. The inequality resulting from poverty and unemployment contributes to political instability by heightening discontent and fueling unrest. This in turn, by increasing the probability of coups, revolutions,

mass violence -or, more generally, by increasing policy uncertainty - has a negative effect on investment, wages, and income growth.

- Assaad, R., and Barsoum, G., 2007, 'Youth Exclusion in Egypt: In Search of "Second Chances"', Middle East Youth Initiative, Dubai/ Washington DC  
<http://www.shababinclusion.org/content/document/detail/540/1>

This important paper looks closely at the issues facing youth in Egypt through a social exclusion lens and focusses on four important dimensions: education and learning; work opportunities; potentials for forming families and channels for exercising citizenship. The authors argue that exclusion is a cumulative process, with each of these life transitions having an overlapping impact on the others. Poor learning leads to poor job prospects. Forming families and achieving personal independence is closely linked to employment and adequate earnings. Also, civic participation, or civic inclusion, is an essential for making successful transitions to meaningful adult roles.

Since 2004, labour market conditions in Egypt have notably improved. However, youth continue to be one of the most disadvantaged groups in terms of higher rates of unemployment, lower earnings, and limited job security and stability, with the majority of new entrants finding jobs within the informal economy. The youth are also experiencing a devaluation of their education credentials compared to earlier cohorts. This paper shows that youth exclusion is also highly gendered. While female school enrollment rates have significantly increased in the past few decades; a significant minority of girls remain out of school, particularly in rural Upper Egypt. Similarly, while labour market conditions have improved for most groups, recent analysis shows many out-of-school young women aged between 15 and 29 are economically inactive; and many of these as unpaid family workers. Young women are also four times as likely to be unemployed as young men.

#### *Education and Training*

- Benard, C., 2006, 'Fixing What's Wrong – and Building on What's Right – with Middle East Education', SAIS Review of International Affairs, vol. 27, no. 2, Summer-Fall  
[http://rand.org/pubs/reprints/2007/RAND\\_RP1292.pdf](http://rand.org/pubs/reprints/2007/RAND_RP1292.pdf)

This article argues that while over the past few decades great emphasis has been placed on the role of education in improving social, economic, and political conditions in the Middle East, the impact of this work has been largely uneven. The key issue remains the lack of synergy between education and economic opportunity. The author argues that the links between schooling and employment, and between education and social stability are absent in many locations and much more emphasis is needed on the socialisation and life-competency aspects of education. Instead of prioritising abstract measures such as literacy and testing scores, reforms should be aimed at enabling graduates to find work and develop an identity as productive citizens. In reviewing what has worked best, the author argues that educational investment has been particularly helpful for young Arab women, who have shown significant and in some cases dramatic improvement in educational levels and economic participation. This has been accompanied by changing attitudes and increased support for women's education by parents, educators, and communities, which shows that positive outcomes can help change attitudes.

- Hakim, G., and Carrero-Perez, E., 2005, 'Reforming Technical Vocational Education and Training in the Middle East and North Africa: Experiences and Challenges', European Training Foundation/World Bank, Luxembourg  
[http://www.edis.sk/ekes/TA7005520ENC\\_002.pdf](http://www.edis.sk/ekes/TA7005520ENC_002.pdf)

This report argues that the issue in education in the MENA region is today less a problem of initial access, but one of quality and relevance. Many citizens in the region do not complete basic education or do not have access to quality learning opportunities. As result, they are ill-prepared for the challenges of knowledge-based societies which in turn limit the growth potential of their countries, with serious implications for their participation in global markets,

job growth, poverty alleviation and social stability. This report explores the role of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the provision of quality and relevant learning opportunities in the region, and discusses it in the relation to improving governance; financing; quality and relevance; the role of the private sector; and the acquisition of skills in the informal sector. TVET in the region covers various institutional arrangements, from vocational streams in basic and secondary schools to post-secondary institutions. This report summarises the key findings from detailed country reviews of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia.

- Brady, M., et al, 2007, 'Bringing New Opportunities to Adolescent Girls in Socially Conservative Settings: The *Ishraq* Program in Rural Egypt', Promoting Healthy, Safe and Productive Transitions to Adulthood, Brief no.12, Population Council, New York <http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/IshraqFullReport.pdf>

Ishraq was a programme for 13 to 15 year-old out-of-school girls, one of the hardest to reach groups in Egypt, which aimed to promote literacy, create awareness of rights, enhance life skills, and build solidarity and social support. At the individual level, the programme increased literacy levels and awareness of critical reproductive health issues, and transformed gender norms and attitudes. Parallel changes also occurred among governorate and national-level ministry officials, who have become enthusiastic supporters of the programme. Ishraq also trained young female secondary school graduates as promoters and leaders in their own villages, providing them with training for skills such as outreach, advocacy, communication, and networking. By the end of the pilot program, some Ishraq promoters had formed women's associations in their communities, joined political groups, taken up local leadership positions, and lobbied successfully to increase the access of girls and women to local youth centers.

- Rusten, E., Ogasawara, T. and Brady, K., 2005, 'Programa Para o Futuro: Enabling Disadvantaged Youth to Build New Futures', Academy for Educational Development, Washington D.C. [http://www.aed.org/ToolsandPublications/upload/programa\\_para\\_o\\_futuro.pdf](http://www.aed.org/ToolsandPublications/upload/programa_para_o_futuro.pdf)

The paper describes the process and achievements of an employment skills programme in Brazil. The pilot programme tested and refined a strategy to enable disadvantaged youth to transform themselves and build new futures. PPF was developed into an employability training curriculum that integrated the four broad areas of learning and skills development: basic education skills; ICT technical skills; social and life skills; and employability skills. This was supported by key features including: emphasising communication skills in both Portuguese and English; emphasising building employment capacity rather than simply focusing on finding jobs for youth; integrating first-offender youth into PPF; hiring a part-time gender specialist to explicitly integrate gender awareness activities into the curriculum; hiring professional teachers as learning facilitators rather than depending on volunteers; partnering with the private sector; and scheduling bimonthly meetings with parents and youth to reinforce family support for youth participation. At the end of the project, more than 88% of the youth on the programme earned jobs and/or were attending college or university. Upon completing the training programme, IBRATEC, the best technical college in Northeast Brazil, offered all PPF youth scholarships.

#### *Unemployment*

- Kabbani, N. and Kothari, E., 2005, 'Youth Employment in the MENA Region: A Situational Assessment', World Bank, Washington D.C. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/SP-Discussion-papers/Labor-Market-DP/0534web.pdf>

This paper investigates the youth labor market in the MENA region in order to identify factors which contribute to the persistently high rates of unemployment and joblessness among MENA youth. The paper suggests several regional contributing factors: strong labour supply pressures, rising female labour force participation rates, and labour market issues that may be interacting with the first two factors. The paper argues that public sector wage premiums

and bureaucratic obstacles to the development of private sector enterprises may be especially important contributing factors. Despite many common regional trends, MENA countries also face unique circumstances suggesting unique policy responses.

- Alissa, S., 2007, 'The School-to-Work Transition of Young People in Syria', International Labour Office, Geneva  
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/yett/download/swtssyria.pdf>

This paper analyses the main factors that determine school-to-work transition among youth and explores the characteristics of youth in the different stages of transition and the factors behind easy and difficult transitions into the labour market. The first and most important characteristic is a high level of inactivity among young persons. The second is that the unemployment problem is quite severe among youth, is highly concentrated among young persons with primary and secondary education, and the duration of unemployment is lengthy. The third is that educational achievement among young men and women is quite minimal. The fourth is that the majority of employed young persons engage either in unpaid work or paid jobs where they work long hours for low pay. In addition, the gender gap is highly significant in relation to these issues.

- Gardner, E. 2003, 'Creating Employment in the Middle East and North Africa', International Monetary Fund, Washington DC  
<http://imf.org/external/pubs/ft/med/2003/eng/gardner/>

This article argues that high unemployment is one of the MENA region's most urgent and destabilising problems which is fuelling social tensions and encouraging migration. It charts the recent history of employment trends in what it terms the 'MENA7' – Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Tunisia, to assess whether current GDP growth can create sufficient employment or if further growth will be required; whether the current pattern of job creation mainly within the public sector will need to change; and other questions. The authors find that, according to labour market surveys, rising unemployment has hit mostly first-time job seekers, particularly those with a secondary education. This suggests that unemployment is mainly the result of the countries' inability to create jobs fast enough to accommodate new entrants into the labour force rather than of economic restructuring. It may also indicate that educated youths are waiting for jobs in the formal and public sectors to open up and are registering themselves as unemployed in the interim, and that educational systems are failing to provide students with the kinds of skills needed for private sector jobs.

- Brewer, L., 2004, 'Youth at Risk: The Role of Skills Development in Facilitating the Transition to Work', International Labour Office, Geneva  
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/youth/download/wp19.pdf>

This paper addresses the issue of skills development for at risk youth, including the economically vulnerable and the socially excluded. Some of the key points of the report are:

- Youth unemployment exceeds adult unemployment universally;
- There are notable disparities between countries and even starker differences between men and women;
- The informal economy absorbs the majority of un- and under-employed young people; and
- Youth unemployment results in a narrow consumer base for industry, a weak taxation base for government as well as a potential source of instability, and increased drug use and crime.

Section 3 of the paper examines the reasons that youth are at greater risk of being unemployed and section 4 looks at ways in which mainstream education and training can be used to boost employability. Finally, section 5 explores alternative methods of training by presenting 50 examples of innovative training programmes aimed at various vulnerable youth groups including school dropouts, war veterans, youth with disabilities, those in rural areas, those working in the informal economy, indigenous and ethnic youth, and those from remote areas.

- Eid, F., 2005, 'Entrepreneurial Finance for Job Creation in the Arab World: Elements of a Strategy', Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Paris  
<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/26/35312595.pdf>

This paper aims to outline the steps necessary to support the potential role that entrepreneurial finance can play in job creation, demonstrate evidence of success along these lines, and suggest policy steps that can be taken in this direction. The author argues that there exists a broad consensus that the way out of MENA's unemployment trap is through higher private sector investment and growth and that the policy challenge is to maximise the potential of the region's fresh graduates, equip them with skills needed in their markets, and link them with capital when their ideas have promise. In most of MENA, however, there are considerable financial, regulatory and educational barriers to firm creation and expansion. Governments in the region must create the institutional infrastructure necessary for the development of entrepreneurship, especially financial legislation; and they must promote the creation of parallel educational programs to develop entrepreneurial skills at all levels of the economy, including the non-governmental sector.

#### *Women*

- Roudi-Fahimi, F. and Moghadam, V., 2003, 'Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa', Population Reference Bureau, Washington DC  
<http://www.prb.org/pdf/EmpoweringWomeninMENA.pdf>

This policy brief argues that while there has been some progress in providing basic education to girls, many are still excluded and those that are enrolled are not being prepared for entry into the job market. It quotes the 2002 Arab Human Development Report: "(t)he most worrying aspect of the crisis in education is education's inability to provide the requirements for the development of Arab societies." The report also highlights that MENA countries generally have lower levels of women's education and labour force participation than other regions with similar income levels. This is largely a result of the interaction between the region's economic structure and its conservative culture, in which traditional gender roles are strongly enforced. The report also looks at the effect of education on reproductive choices and employment and highlights ongoing concerns which include high illiteracy rates; gender gaps in literacy and enrolment rates (in Yemen the illiteracy rate among young women of 54% is triple that of young men at 17%); and poor quality of education. With regard to the latter the article cites the 2002 Arab Human Development Report which states that education in the region often fails to teach students to analyse information or think innovatively. In addition, the curricula and teaching materials – as well as the media, which has a powerful role in shaping people's knowledge and opinions in the region often reinforce traditional roles that may deny women opportunities for full and equal participation in society.

- Miles, R., 2002, 'Employment and Unemployment in Jordan: The Importance of the Gender System', *World Development*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 413-427  
<http://psclasses.ucdavis.edu/POL124/spr/PDF/JordanWomen.pdf>

Using data from focus group interviews, this study investigates how the gender system influences employment and unemployment patterns in Jordan. It finds that cultural and family-level factors affect not only whether women are in the labour market but also their success in finding a job. Cultural restrictions on female mobility are a significant constraint in women's job searches. State and employer-level factors are also important in explaining high unemployment rates among women. The shrinking of the public sector disproportionately affects women, the location of jobs matters more for women than for men, and discrimination in the private sector remains an issue.

#### *Resource Scarcity*

- Urdal, H., 2006, 'Population, Resources and Political Violence: A Sub-National Study of India 1956-2002', The International Peace Research Institute, Oslo

[http://www.wilsoncenter.org/events/docs/Urdal\\_2.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/events/docs/Urdal_2.pdf)

This article tests the hypothesis that exceptionally large youth cohorts, so-called “youth bulges”, make countries more susceptible to political violence, by potentially increasing both opportunities and motives for political violence. This author uses a cross-national statistical model for internal armed conflict for the period 1950-2000, and event data for terrorism and rioting for the years 1984-1995 and finds robust support for the idea that youth bulges increase the risk of political violence.. The results are consistent both with an expectation that youth bulges provide greater opportunities for violence through the abundant supply of youths with low opportunity costs, and with an expectation that stronger motives for violence may arise as youth bulges are more likely to experience unemployment for example. The study also finds that some contextual factors also potentially enhance the effect of youth bulges. Youth bulges are particularly associated with an increasing risk of internal armed conflict in starkly autocratic regimes. The interaction of youth bulges with economic decline and expansion in higher education appear to increase the risk of terrorism but not of rioting. Recent studies in economic demography find that when fertility is sharply decreasing, causing lower dependency ratios, large youth cohorts entering the labor market may lead to economic boosts.

#### *Violence and Instability*

- Fuller, G. E., 2003, ‘The Youth Factor: The New Demographics of the Middle East and the Implications for US Policy’, Brookings Institution, Washington DC

<http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/fp/saban/fuller20030601.pdf>

This paper argues that the existence of a relatively large youth cohort within the population of Middle Eastern societies serves to exacerbate nearly all dimensions of its political, social and economic problems. “It is youth that often translates broader social problems into an explosive and radicalizing mixture.” The author identifies Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iraq as constituting particularly threatening demographic scenarios. Rapid population growth places immense strains on the entire infrastructure of the state, especially on educational services that are already poor and declining in quality, and creates greater dissatisfaction among the most volatile elements of society. States are unable to employ the growing number of university graduates or to expand social services in order to meet the needs of the growing population. The latter gap is often filled by Islamist organisations which gain increased support from the population. In addition, youth unemployment also acts as a volatile force for instability. Concerned primarily with the attitudes of these youth cohorts towards the US, the author makes various recommendations to address the demographic challenge. These include promoting ‘liberalization’ or good governance; encouraging democratisation; providing better and secular education, to men and women; and promoting family planning and better healthcare.

- Urdal, H., 2004, ‘The Devil in the Demographics: The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict 1950-2000’, World Bank, Washington DC

[http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/07/28/000012009\\_20040728162225/Rendered/PDF/29740.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/07/28/000012009_20040728162225/Rendered/PDF/29740.pdf)

The paper explores possible links between youth bulges and violent conflict and aims to understand under what conditions and in what contexts youth bulges can cause armed conflict. The study finds significant support for the hypothesis that youth bulges increase the risk of domestic armed conflict, and especially so under conditions of economic stagnation. The author also argues that the lack of support for the youth bulge hypothesis in recent World Bank studies is found to arise from a serious weakness in the youth bulge measure employed by World Bank researchers. The study provides evidence that the combination of youth bulges and poor economic performance, i.e. in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world, can be explosive. In addition to economic performance, a key factor that affects the conflict potential of youth bulges is the opportunity for migration which often works as a safety valve for youth discontent.



### 3. Additional information

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**Websites visited**

Brookings Institution, Eldis, Ford Foundation, Google, Google Scholar, Ingenta Connect, Oxfam GB, Population Council, Population Reference Bureau, RAND Corporation, Save the Children, UNDP Yemen, Woodrow Wilson Center, World Bank.

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