

Chapter 8

Preparing to build researchers' capacity in development and community mobilisation: Towards sustainable North–South collaborations

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IN THIS CHAPTER, we report on a pre-collaboration study that we conducted to establish potential participants' expectations of a Southern African–Nordic Centre (SANORD) project aimed at enhancing research capacity at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. The SANORD project, entitled 'The politics of development and community mobilisation', is aimed at deepening researchers' capacity in relation to these issues, as well as strengthening relations between two higher education institutions in southern Africa (the University of Limpopo in South Africa and the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe) and one from a Nordic country (the University of Bergen in Norway).

The pre-collaboration study was conducted at the University of Limpopo's Turfloop Campus. One of South Africa's historically black institutions, Turfloop is located in the country's northern-most and largely rural province of Limpopo. Our inquiry sought to ensure that participants at the university were prepared for the collaborative project in a timely manner ahead of its implementation.

As co-ordinators of the project at the University of Limpopo, we adopted the motto, *nihil de nobis, sine nobis* (nothing about us without us). Our intention was to engage potential participants in the project on our campus by giving them a chance to communicate their ideas to us first. Our hope was that this would help them to be clearer and more articulate when communicating with partners on other campuses and so contribute to the design and implementation of the project.

Aware that the collaboration would involve actively working with local communities in Limpopo province, we interviewed heads of university departments or units that would be participating in the project, namely, the

Turfloop Graduate School of Leadership, the School of Social Sciences, the School of Economic and Management Sciences, and the Rural Innovation and Development Hub. The following questions were used to guide the inquiry:

- How can a collaboration between Southern and Northern higher education institutions contribute to community mobilisation in the South?
- What are the relevant political issues pertaining to community mobilisation in our area?
- What are the perceived roles of stakeholders in the development of capacity related to community mobilisation?
- Are any particular skills needed to ensure that the collaboration works effectively?

While foregrounding these four questions, we also kept the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in mind, particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). We contextualised these as follows:

- To what extent could the SANORD project ensure high-quality research training that is both inclusive and equitable while promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all stakeholders in the project?
- How could our study help to strengthen the means of implementation and so help to revitalise future global partnerships for sustainable development?

International collaboration linked to research-capacity development has become an important feature of South Africa's research landscape. As Sooryamoorthy (2013) pointed out, this has become an accepted and productive norm, partly because science is no longer a centralised activity located in a single place but is dispersed far and wide. Hence, a report on the European Union's access to South Africa's research innovation programmes (SACCESS 2013) suggests that South African researchers' collaboration with their European counterparts positively facilitates the flow of knowledge and other resources to South African innovation systems. Moreover, South Africa's post-graduate sector has also endorsed international collaboration and research partnerships as a key strategy for achieving the SDGs. Examples include the strategic establishment of institutes such as the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, the African Doctoral Academy, and the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study, where according to Vale (2010) 'academics from all over the world are invited to fulfil their true calling – to read, to think, to write and to talk'.

Nevertheless, experts on North–South research partnerships attest that the agenda-setting process remains a formidable obstacle in many

international collaborations. Bradley (2008: 674), for instance, pointed out that the ‘literature on North–South research co-operation often laments the continued domination of collaborative agendas by the interests of Northern donors and scholars, and almost invariably calls for more equitable Southern engagement in agenda-setting processes’.

In this chapter, we report on the ways in which we sought to foreground the voices, expectations and needs of southern African participants in an international research partnership. The collaboration was deemed crucial for capacity building among researchers and for contributing to the achievement of SDG 4. The collaboration was also deemed important in the three institutions’ efforts to ‘strengthen the means of project implementation and revitalise North–South partnerships, and by implication ensure a sustainable development agenda’, as advocated by SDG 17.

We hoped to achieve these ends through the promotion of North–South and South–South partnerships, built on the shared principles, values, vision and goals that seek to ‘place people at the centre of development’ (Dahl 2014). It was our view that eliciting the views of Southern stakeholders from the very beginning would be crucial for enhancing their buy-in, and help to sustain the North–South collaboration that spurred the study. For this reason, two key ideas formed the basis for our research; the first is that it is crucial for Southern partners to voice their concerns and be heard during the preparatory stages of North–South collaborations; the second is a concern to ensure the sustainability of North–South collaborations. The next section reviews these concepts in the light of the local and international literature.

Reviewing the literature

Many scholars have commented on the complexities of establishing mutually beneficial collaborations between North and South. Ashman (2001) and Kruckenberg (2015) point out that the most serious challenges relate to issues of power sharing and power relations. Simon et al. (2003) allude to the political and environmental complexities in and around the locations where collaborative work takes place. Similar to the arguments we advance here, Bradley (2008) refers to the complexity of the agenda-setting process, but stops short of referring to the crucial issue of involving all stakeholders in agenda setting during the preparatory stages of a collaborative process. Meanwhile, Termeer et al. (2010) indicate that professionals facilitating such partnerships can expect to be challenged in terms of their ideology and values as these relate to politically loaded relationships and fragile social trust, financial dependence or independence, and cultural and physical distance. Surprisingly, they do not suggest addressing these issues in the preparatory

stages of a collaboration. In addition, Onokerhoraye et al. (2012: 128) lament two weaknesses in research collaborations. The first is that 'the impact of North–South partnerships on research capacity building has often related more to individual rather than institutional capacity building'. The second is that such partnerships tend to focus 'too much on the one-directional transfer of capacity from North to South, which is usually at the expense of effective partnership work, mutual learning and responsiveness to the peculiar needs of institutions in both the North and the South' (2012: 128).

Without question, North–South collaborations can be challenging and disconcerting. Yet, despite reviewing a considerable body of scholarly literature, we found no studies that described or discussed consultations between stakeholders during the preparatory stages of a collaboration to ascertain their views and needs prior to project implementation. The only mentions of participatory decision-making in the collaborations we reviewed seemed to take place during and not before the implementation phase. For example, Simon et al. (2003) comment on the politics of participatory decision-making in a capacity-development project; Schelling et al. (2008) argue for an integrated approach to the planning of a capacity-development project; Atkins et al. (2016) advocate e-learning because they see it as inherently more participatory than other approaches.

Combining their own observations with feedback from the co-ordinators of a medical post-graduate capacity-development project, Amare, et al. (2017) list the strengths of effective collaboration programmes as: good planning, close supervision during implementation, appropriate budget utilisation, regular communication and periodic evaluations. In our own project, we sought to achieve 'good planning' and ensure that participants from the South would share ownership of the project from the very beginning through a pre-implementation needs-determination process.

When it comes to studies of research-capacity building at higher education institutions in South Africa, we found four that usefully highlight the importance of context and sustainability.

In the first study, Singh (2015) explored the challenges and successes of research-capacity building at the University of Limpopo. The many programmes at the university that were engaged in research-capacity building both for staff and post-graduate students were examined. It was found that a multipronged approach was being used to advance the institution's research culture. Various strategies were applied, including supervisor training, support for doctoral programmes, women in research and post-graduate students, as well as incentives for staff engaged in research, participation in funded projects and in community-linked research activities. Singh's study revealed

that higher education institutions in South Africa lag behind in terms of research capacity because of challenges pertaining to staff qualifications and staff retention, a lack of infrastructure and an underdeveloped research culture. In addition, Singh explained that:

Research capacity building in a rural environment is also challenging, for example: experienced researchers are often ‘poached’ by other HEIs; funding for research capacity building initiatives is limited; the culture of research is adversely affected by poor supervisory skills; and the language of research (English) is a second language for the majority of students and academics. (2015: 184)

Two recommendations emerged. The first was that capacity-building initiatives must be designed to ensure sustainability (see also Frantz et al. 2014; Puukka 2008). The second was that capacity builders should give careful consideration to contextual factors (see also Segrott et al. 2006).

In the second study, Frantz et al. (2014) examined a research-capacity development project in an unnamed South African higher education institution that was initiated as part of a North–South research collaboration. The researchers adopted a framework informed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in which capacity development is conceptualised as a process through which researchers’ abilities to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives are fostered in a sustainable way. The UNDP framework has five steps, the first of which parallels the main idea of this chapter, namely: ‘engaging the partners and building consensus’ before embarking on a collaborative journey. The UNDP framework was also used to analyse the project’s outcomes. According to the study, the international collaboration improved the potential for capacity building and networking as the institutional partnership between the collaborating universities focused on building capacity at the individual and institutional levels. The institution’s operational plans and existing North–South partnerships were identified as core assets, and the strategy was to develop participating researchers and the institution through improving staff qualifications, supervision capacity and research output. Clear targets were set and the project was implemented between 2000 and 2012. Monitoring and evaluation were conducted using existing quality assurance infrastructure. Learnings that emerged included that collaboration is time consuming and challenging; multiple strategies are needed to build capacity; co-supervision with Northern partners was necessary to enable staff to achieve master’s and doctoral qualifications. Frantz et al. (2014: 1216) concluded that through this collaboration, participants ‘were able to develop intra- and inter-disciplinary

partnerships' that maximised 'capacity-building efforts'. Although there are similarities in the approach taken in that study and ours, Frantz et al. (2014) simply assessed the capacity of the partnering groups at the start of the partnership, whereas our project deliberately built in a mechanism to give the Southern stakeholders the space to determine the direction that the initiative should take.

The third study was conducted by Balfour and Lenta (2009). They examined research-capacity development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal between 2003 and 2007 in the context of the merger of two higher education institutions with widely differing research cultures and levels of expertise. Their strategy was to increase the research output of the newly merged institution through a process of transformation that involved mentoring, holding seminars and the co-authoring of articles. They recorded successes by using this approach, and were able to attract funding for further research.

The final example linked a university and a government department. In the study, Nesamvuni (2014) described a model for collaboration related to agricultural research and development in Limpopo province. Arguing that effective research and development requires new forms of collaboration based on opportunities offered by willing stakeholders, the author set out to assess the research capacity of the Department of Agriculture in Limpopo and to make suggestions for establishing an effective programme of collaborations. A PESTEL analysis was used to measure the (political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal) impact of the collaboration project on crop and livestock production. Nesamvuni identified some weaknesses which were ascribed to, among other things, a lack of involvement from relevant stakeholders, demotivated and uncooperative participants, and limited attention paid to suggested policies or strategies. Hence, the recommendations that emerged from this study included the need to involve stakeholders in more meaningful ways, and to combine research capacity, environments, and technologies with appropriate institutional arrangements (Nesamvuni 2014).

Our comparison of these four studies revealed that strategies and models for building research capacity probably need to differ depending on context. This reinforced our view that any new research-capacity building programmes needed to be carefully and thoroughly planned – communities differ, as do their needs. Swilling (2014) usefully emphasises the need to re-think the science-policy interface in South Africa. He suggests experimenting with knowledge production, using, for example, a reflexive approach that deconstructs the discourses of participatory policy making as well as transdisciplinary approaches that legitimise researchers as active change agents (Swilling 2014).

Research methodology

For this study, we took a qualitative approach, using an instrumental case-study design (Stake 2005). As noted, our aim was to gain an understanding of the needs and priorities of the southern African partners in the SANORD collaboration, which would then inform the planning and delivery of the capacity building project for community mobilisation. Thus, we conducted an in-depth inquiry into stakeholders' perceived requirements, views and expectations regarding the upcoming project. Data were collected via interviews with the prospective participants in the project and analysed thematically.

As noted, the participants came from different departments within the university. Of common concern was their involvement in community development and mobilisation through their undergraduate and post-graduate programmes. The sample consisted of twelve participants who were representative of those who would be involved in the forthcoming collaborative project. Included were post-graduate candidates at master's and doctoral levels, as well as staff, school directors, programme managers and heads of the identified departments, since they would be at the forefront of research development activities to follow.

Participants had varying levels of experience in collaborative efforts that included working with a number of researchers from the Netherlands, and Belgium, as well some of the Nordic countries, including Finland and Norway. The interviews were held in the participants' offices and were guided by, but not limited to, the following six key questions that served to create space for wide-ranging discussions:

- How can higher education institutions contribute to community mobilisation in the South?
- What are the relevant political issues pertaining to community mobilisation?
- What is your opinion of the envisaged SANORD collaboration in the light of the politics of community mobilisation?
- What roles can other university stakeholders play in the development of capacity in relation to community mobilisation?
- What role do you think the Northern partner should play in this collaboration?
- What skills do you think are needed for the effective development of a community mobilisation project?

Prior to conducting the inquiry, we informed the participants about the aims and objectives of the envisaged community mobilisation study, and obtained

their consent to use their responses in our research. In addition, we assured the participants that their identity would be kept confidential at all times, and ascertained that their participation was voluntary. Accordingly, respondents are quoted below but are not named.

During the interviews, we made notes of the participants' responses. These notes were then consolidated at a debriefing session immediately after each interview. The data were then analysed thematically following the prescripts of thematic analysis advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), and in accordance with the following steps: i) familiarisation with the written data; ii) generation of initial codes; iii) collation of codes into potential themes; iv) generation of a thematic map; and v) definition and naming of identified themes. After completing our analysis, we asked respondents to confirm the themes and data interpretations before we prepared a final report that was then shared between the two collaborating institutions in the South.

Findings and discussion

The key themes that emerged from the interviews were considered crucial in determining elements of the larger project that all participating departments needed to discuss. The themes identified were stakeholder co-operation, knowledge co-generation, power relations, skills development, and policy development. Certain facets of participants' contributions transcended these thematic classifications; in our view this indicated that the prospective collaborators held a common understanding of what would be essential for the successful implementation of the larger project.

Stakeholder co-operation

Stakeholder co-operation will play a key role in the achievement of the SDGs since the ability to enhance knowledge, learn together, facilitate capacity development, collaborate and jointly create solutions to development challenges is often well served by good stakeholder co-operation (OECD and Camoes Institute 2016). Hence, it is not surprising that this theme cut across all participants' responses in our study. When asked about their perceptions and expectations of the envisaged collaboration, they were explicit that the project should: 'add value for all parties'; 'enhance co-operation between different faculties within the university'; and ensure 'representative community participation'.

Our view was that the SANORD project would meet these requirements, as the project grant vividly pronounced on the need to foster an equal partnership that would mutually benefit all participants. Hence, we were pleased when a respondent in our preparatory study elaborated on this,

adding that ‘through the envisaged collaboration, the university will sharpen activities such as experiential learning, volunteerism and engaged research’. This view also reflected the notion of enhancing workplace readiness in students who would be involved in the project. Other comments highlighted participants’ hopes that the project would benefit from resource sharing and that they themselves would gain knowledge and skills that would enable them to enhance stakeholder co-operation. As one respondent put it: ‘There are multiple avenues to be explored here, and each faculty or department will have different angles that they can contribute, so collaboration within this diverse society is important.’

The fact that countries differ both culturally and politically has major implications for the ways in which higher education is organised, and how quality within the different higher education institutions is perceived (NOQA 2011). For several years, the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education has included stakeholder co-operation as an element in measuring the quality of higher education (NOQA 2011). This is especially important in relation to international co-operation and partnerships that aim to help countries build on the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to make more rapid progress towards the realisation of the SDG targets (Osborn et al. 2015). Participants in our inquiry agreed with the NOQA (2011) that the central goal of stakeholder co-operation is to ensure that close contacts are maintained with stakeholders in the higher education and community sectors, and to ensure the delivery of quality projects.

Consideration of these issues is key to the successful implementation of such projects because, as Osborn et al. (2015) suggest, the SDGs pose a transformational challenge. High-income countries, particularly, are facing a paradigm shift – from conditions in which knowledge generation and transfer were unidirectional from North to South, to conditions in which *mutual* benefit is expected to be derived from an *interchange of knowledge*. Participants in our inquiry were clear: in the larger collaboration, the benefits must not be one-sided.

Knowledge co-generation

The role of international co-operation among universities has become more marked in recent years. This coincides neatly with the United Nations’ development agenda, sharpened and spelled out through the SDGs, which strive towards a world in which learning and knowledge-generation are widely advocated. The traditional functions of educating and conducting research, as well as the importance of a wider interface between university and society, need hardly be emphasised here (Aranguren et al. 2012).

All participants in our study stressed the importance of the envisaged project as an opportunity for stakeholders to contribute to knowledge co-generation. They all emphasised that the most important issue would be to define what community mobilisation is. The reasons given for this were: i) there is a gap between theory and practice when it comes to community mobilisation, and this collaboration has the potential to help bridge this gap, thereby adding real meaning to the concept; ii) the project needs to clarify what sorts of partnerships can drive and sustain community mobilisation; iii) defining the concept will enhance knowledge co-generation and help to create a space in which to rethink, transform and produce knowledge collectively; iv) the definition will help researchers and community members to better understand the relevance of community mobilisation in initiating peaceful change.

According to Odebode (2012), the role of knowledge co-generation cannot be overemphasised given the effect it has on rural communities, and particularly on community projects geared towards rural development. In their understanding of and explicit association with the value of knowledge co-generation, participants in our study concurred with Odebode's (2012) observations that the success of such projects is largely due to the positive relationships that researchers can build with communities.

Power relations

In their review of the SDGs, Deacon and St Clair (2015) show that a plethora of studies attribute persistent poverty to global, national and local power relations that enable dispossession, inequity and disrespect for people's rights and dignity. Like Nyasimi and Peake (2015), they conclude that unless dealt with effectively, such power relations will create serious obstacles for the realisation of the SDGs. Turning to research collaborations between universities, Atkins et al. (2016) remark, 'the traditionally inequitable balance of power and resources between northern and southern institutions has often led to what has been described as scientific colonialism.' Our participants' opinions differed on political issues pertaining to community mobilisation. One thought the project would 'help clarify issues of power relations in community mobilisation.' Another asked, 'Whose reality counts, because there are different power relations?' A third noted that: 'It is difficult to implement community mobilisation effectively within highly prescriptive environments.'

Commenting on these issues, Steenkamp and Uhr (2000) point to the critical role that power relations play in community mobilisation. They cite the case of the Makuleke Land Claim, in which power relations around a community-based resource-management project and a land claim initiated by the community had the unintended consequence of weakening the community's

bargaining power relative to the state. They conclude that skewed power relations negatively affected the Maluleke community's ability to develop and pursue an independent bargaining strategy with respect to the land claim.

A very different view came from one participant in our study who wondered whether there was a place for politics in the research-capacity development project, and asked: 'I'm not sure why SANORD would want to be involved with politics.' Schneider (2002: 145) raised similar concerns, asking: 'In the context where the state has had the power to implement major policy initiatives...why has conflict persisted as high politics.' What this signifies is the importance of our pre-collaboration inquiry in affording participants the opportunity to clarify their concerns and thus contribute more effectively to the planning phases of the project.

Skills development

A report compiled by researchers from the Earth Institute of Columbia University strongly suggests that information and communications technologies (ICTs) will play a special role in the future of low-income countries (Ericsson 2015) – a point strongly and cogently echoed by the United Nations Broadband Commission. The Earth Institute's researchers suggest that 'in essence, ICTs are "leapfrog" and transformational technologies, enabling all countries to close many technology gaps at record speed' (quoted in Ericsson 2015: 2). This supports the view of Seegolam et al. (2015), who contend that ICTs are an important development factor around the world. In this, they support the United Nations' view that ICTs have the potential to help enable the achievement of SDGs, and place strong emphasis on the provision of ICT infrastructure and skills. Referring to the role of collaboration in skills development, Herbert-Cheshire (2000) revealed that many contemporary strategies for rural development are based upon notions of self-help and bottom-up, community-based initiatives which are said to 'up-skill' individuals. Nelson and Stroink (2012) added that, since the role of the university in society is to be a place of exploration, reflection, experimentation and innovation, such collaboration projects create breeding grounds for skills development.

In our inquiry, consensus emerged that skills development was a major potential benefit of the envisaged collaboration. Respondents noted that 'multiple soft and hard skills' (including ICT-related skills) would likely be acquired by prospective participants. The dominance of these views about ICT were interesting because they support our own experience of research development at the university, where the majority of past and present capacity-development projects supported by Northern partners have focused on ICT-

related skills. These have included the use of computer-based research and data-analysis programmes such as Nvivo, AtlasTI and STATA.

Policy development

In September 2015, when nations across the world adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its associated SDGs, it was hoped that this would prove highly catalytic in influencing policy related to development. In theory, the SDGs should create an environment fertile for communities (including children, young women and men) to participate in policy development as ‘critical *agents of change*’ (Olaiya 2016: 34). Our inquiry yielded mixed views on this. Our interview notes reveal participants’ concerns about the role of the future collaborative project in empowering prospective participants as agents of policy development. Some comments reflected participants hopes related to ‘gaining new insights’. One participant said: ‘For all, it will unpack new and emerging policy issues that seek to enable the exploration of intellectual highways which may or may not cut across each other in trying to understand the flows and fluxes in development and community mobilisation.’ This echoes the views of Barrett et al. (2011: 40) who suggested that such ‘partnerships have an increased potential to build interdisciplinary research capacity in order to positively affect policy and good practice within diverse contexts or settings’. An opposing view on this theme was expressed by some participants who were concerned about the ‘envisaged project’s focus’ on politics rather than on ‘more important policy issues’. One participant asked, ‘Why not pick up on some policy issue like the DST’s grand challenges¹ [or something like that]?’

Referring to collaboration and policy development, Nelson and Stroink (2012: 3) explain that proper consultation in collaboration projects contributes to ‘the democratisation of knowledge creation, as it is then no longer seen as the exclusive domain of academia’. For this reason, we hope that, by taking a more flexible and fluid approach to community involvement and mobilisation, the university might serve as a knowledge-creation hub in ways that are accessible to anyone seeking new knowledge and advanced thought.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that, based on previous experiences, most participants in the forthcoming project saw North–South relationships as involving unidirectional transfers of knowledge that tend to mostly benefit the Northern partners from whom project funds and certain kinds of expertise are sourced. Nevertheless, most respondents also indicated their belief that collaboration remains paramount for higher education institutions in

the South, and specifically for success in projects like the planned one on development and community mobilisation. These findings led us to conclude that, for our project to succeed, stakeholders from South and North needed to co-operatively determine the project's purpose and objectives.

In a nutshell, the lessons we learned were that consultation ahead of project implementation can help to create an inclusive environment that is conducive to wider buy-in from participants, as well as strengthen the means of project implementation and, by implication, extend opportunities for lifelong learning. If well conceptualised, projects that engage all partners from the start have the potential to help revitalise global partnerships in ways that enhance their sustainability and effectiveness, as well as involving lower-income-country partners as the architects of their own destiny. Hence, we argue that preparing and organising such collaborative processes should be a team effort that fully includes all participants, from teaching staff to those who plan and implement the policies that encourage such initiatives.

Our findings highlighted important areas to plan for within the envisaged SANORD collaboration. In particular, it became clear that to enhance knowledge co-generation the collaboration would need to foster stronger stakeholder co-operation. Participants in our study were positive about the project because, in their view, it had the potential to deepen the understandings of all stakeholders of the power relations inherent in community mobilisation. Furthermore, their hopes that the collaboration would help ensure skills development, as well as empower participants to contribute to policy development, were articulated and acknowledged.

The sentiments expressed in the interviews made it clear that the participants were confident that benefits would flow from the project. By way of warning, however, it is useful to note the caution expressed by Hogue (1993), that when communities do not develop a pattern of collaboration, the potential for community development diminishes. A lack of collaboration, he argues, results in a lack of direction, win/lose behaviours, a lack of commitment, and poor planning.

In the light of this, participants concluded that the planned collaboration needed to be tailor-made to ensure that fertile ground was created to address the six key questions highlighted in the pre-project inquiry. This approach should also align the implementation of the project with SDGs 4 and 17, as well as with targets related to capacity building that are embedded in several of the other SDGs. Finally, careful tailoring should help to direct the project towards the kind of international co-operation between North and South that brings change and new knowledge to all partners involved, and not only to those in the lower-income countries.

Note

- 1 South Africa's Department of Science and Technology (DST) has identified five 'grand challenges': namely, a) strengthening the bio-economy, b) contributing to space science and technology, c) meeting energy security needs, d) responding to global change (with an emphasis on climate change), and e) contributing to a global understanding of shifting human and social dynamics' (see <https://nationalgovernment.co.za/suppliers/view/152/departement-of-science-and-technology>; accessed September 2017).

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