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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK:

AN AFRICANIST PERSPECTIVE

Edited by

Ali A. Abdullahi, Ph.D.

Emmanuel M. Ajala, Ph.D.

DEPT. OF SOCIOLOGY
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DEDICATION

Department of Social Work, University of Ilorin, Nigeria
Department of Social Work, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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SOCIAL WORKERS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Musediq O. Lawal & Sundry Akor

Different scholars have defined Social Work on the basis of the perspectives from which the concept is appreciated. To some, Social Work is viewed as a profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being. It is also seen as an endeavour that aims at assisting people to develop their skills and abilities so as to use their own resources and those of the communities within which they reside to resolve day-to-day problems. Dhavaleshwar (2016) defined Social Work as an organised profession for extending helping hands to an individual, group or community for their betterment and to sustain them to help themselves by adopting varied professional strategies. According to him, the disadvantaged sections of the society like the weaker sections, the downtrodden, orphans, etc. are considered to be in need of the profession. Social workers do provide psychological counseling, guidance and assistance in the form of helping the people's sustainable livelihoods. A professional who works with people so that they can manage their daily lives with respect and dignity is called a 'social worker'.

Social Work is concerned with not only individual and personal problems but also with broader social issues such as poverty, unemployment, domestic violence among other social problems (Webb, 2017; Grinnell and Unrau, 2008; Webb, 2006; Turner, 2005; Davies, 2002). The uniqueness of its practice is in the blend of some particular values, knowledge and skills, including the use of relationship as the basis of all interventions and respect for the client's choice and involvement (Bodenheimer, 2015). Social Work applies the social sciences such as Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, Public Health, Community Development, Law and Economics, to engage with clients, conduct assessments and develop interventions for the actualisation of its mission. Stressing further on this, Ogundipe & Edewor (2012) noted that Social Work is interested in providing the means and opportunities by which persons can work. In its operations, Social Work has severally induced social as well as individual change, prevents social problems as well as alleviate common problems that usually

emanate from social problems. As part of its mission, Social Work strives to serve the people through:

- 1) The planning, development and implementation of social services, programmes and policies required for meeting basic needs and supporting the development of capacities and abilities of individuals, groups, communities, and organisations.
- 2) The promotion, restoration, maintenance or enhancement of the functioning individuals, families, households, social groups, organisations and communities by helping them prevent distress and utilise resources effectively;
- 3) The pursuit of policies, services and programmes through legislative advocacy, lobbying and other forms of social action; and
- 4) The development and testing of professional knowledge and skills related to this purpose.

Just like every human environment, social workers are a much-needed commodity in rural communities. The unique approach of Social Work to problem-solving and interventions is evidenced in direct clinical practice, policy planning and administration, community-level and state-level service, private and public sectors and in teaching, research and scholarship (Blodgett, 2015; Walmann, 2011). This chapter complements other chapters in Rural Social Work and Rural Sociology in this book to drive home or epitomise the importance of Social Work to rural development. The chapter is useful to rural development planners and other professions interested in rural empowerment and emancipation.

History of Social Work

The practice and profession of Social Work has a relatively modern and scientific origin (Turbett, 2010) and is generally considered to have developed out of three strands. The first was individual casework. This is a strategy pioneered by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in the mid-19th century that was founded by Helen Bosanquet and Octavia Hill in London, England (Crisp & Beddoe, 2012). Most historians identify the COS as the pioneering organisation which propounded the Social Theory that led to the emergence of Social Work as a professional occupation (Lymbery, 2005). The second was social administration, which included various forms of poverty relief ('relief of paupers'). Statewide poverty relief could be said to have its roots in the English Poor Laws of the 17th century but was first systematised through the efforts of the Charity Organisation Society. The third is concerned with social action rather than

engaging in the resolution of immediate individual requirements. The emphasis here was placed on political action, working through the community and the group to improve their social conditions and thereby alleviate poverty. This was accompanied by a less easily defined movement: the development of institutions to deal with the entire range of social problems. All had their most rapid growth during the 19th century and laid the foundation for modern Social Work both in theory and in practice (Jones, 2014; Pople & Leighninger, 2011).

Similarly, professional Social Work had its roots in the social and economic upheaval brought about by the Industrial Revolution, in particular the societal struggle to deal with the resultant mass urban-based poverty and its related problems. Poverty as the main focus of early Social Work informed its being intricately linked with the idea of charity work (Zastrow, 2014). It started in the overcrowded and unsanitary slums of the rapidly expanding cities of Europe and North America. At this point, the first social workers sought to ameliorate the problems of poverty and deprivation, either through direct casework intervention or the neighbourhood-focused activities of the Settlement Houses. Since those early days, Social Work has been largely associated with urban needs and problems, and the majority of social workers today are employed in urban areas (Barnford, 2015; Jones, 2014).

Ogundipe (2002) clearly articulated the history of Social Work in Nigeria by tracing it to the earliest tradition of assisting the individual within the community. According to him, people came together and lived in a harmonious clan or lineage in groups where a sense of belonging, solidarity and affinity defined individuals and subsumed them under the general will. However, the existing social, political and economic organisations were broken down by colonialism and subsequently led to the collapse of the Nigerian social structure thereby fostering modern social problems. The Christian missionaries, before independence in Nigeria, introduced informal social work into their activities. Their services were therapeutic rather than preventive. Much of the concentration was on health. They provided drugs and opened clinics and taught midwifery and simple nursing. Sanitation and hygiene were introduced and child welfare and women's programmes were designed. These social educational services were primarily to lure more converts into Christianity. In return, the trained converts were hired to expand missionary activities (Ogundipe & Edewor, 2012).

Subsequently, the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria came up with a national policy on social development tagged 'Social Development Policy for Nigeria' in October 1989. A revised version of the policy, which was published in 2004, has a sub-section on social work education and training under the section on social welfare services. Since then, a number of social development institutes, in which the training of social workers was done, were established in the country. In addition, a number of Nigerian universities have both Sociology and Social Work programmes. However, there are far more universities with only the Sociology programme than those with both (Ogundipe & Edewor, 2012). The universities that run Social Work in Nigeria today included the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Benin, University of Ibadan, University of Ilorin and few others. Social Work is also available as an academic programme in Redeemer's University, Ede.

Rural Social Work on its own can be traced to the Country Life Commission of 1908 appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt of the United States of America and the National Conference of Charities and Correction of the same year. Interest in rural social work waned during World War II and the 1950s. A resurgence of interest began to develop in the late 1960s as a result of the War on Poverty philosophy and the important Social Work leadership provided by Leon Ginsberg and others (Barnford, 2015). Its emergence and the circumstances under which it operates defines its peculiarities. The first relates to the possibilities of Social Work that follow from the nature of rural communities and the interdependence between community members and those who provide them with human services. Although the small size of rural areas could be uncomfortable to social workers because everyone knows everyone's business, it is also an asset that could be built upon within the context of a Community Social Work Model (Turbett, 2018). Neighbourliness being one of the uniqueness of rural areas equally becomes an asset that assists in the management of the vulnerable (Bodenheimer, 2015). Just like the case of mainstream social work that Olaleye (2016) noted, relatively unknown to many people in Nigeria, rural social work is trying to find its footing. In recent times, most of the tertiary institutions offering it as a course of study are assiduously working towards its effective utilisation. Parts of these efforts include the domestication of scholarly publications on this discipline for better understanding and effective utilisation. This paper is an example of such domestication project, since it points to the high prospects of its acceptance as an effort to enhance sustainable development and livelihood.

Development Indices of Rural Areas and necessity of social workers involvement

Though the rate of extreme poverty was noted by the World Bank (2018) as decreasing globally, still an estimated 79% of those experiencing poverty are overwhelmingly residing in rural areas. Africa remains the region that has the highest rate of rural population in the world, with 60% of the population living in rural areas, as of 2014 (UNDESA, 2015). The latest figures indicate that in 2015, there were around 736 million people living in extreme poverty globally, compared to nearly 2 billion in 1990. Presently the population of poor rural people in the world is in the realm of 580 million. Multiple-dimensional aspects of deprivation, which include lack of access to education and essential services further makes the rurality of poverty more glaring (Castaneda, Doan, Newhouse, Nguyen, Uematsu, and Azevedo, 2018). In Asia, the question is more of addressing pockets of poverty where some of the rural people especially those operating on remote and marginal farmlands that are not connected to urban markets, have been left behind in the economic transformation of previous decades.

Nigeria equally formulated several policies that were meant to enhance rural development before and after independence. Olayiwola & Adeleye (2005) revealed that efforts made to upgrade the status of rural areas in terms of developmental policies and programmes have not yielded the expected positive results. Babasanya, Balogun, Zungun & Olowohunwa (2008) also noted that the pathetic pictures of rural communities in Nigeria are reflections of unequal distribution of wealth whose source is the rural areas of Nigeria. Nigeria's underdeveloped condition according to Abah (2010), is more evident in the deplorable conditions of the rural sector. The situation was affirmed as worrisome by Ezeah (2005) who revealed that policies and programmes initiated and implemented by government over the years have not resulted in the meaningful enhancement of development in the rural areas of Nigeria. It is, therefore, not surprising that rural areas in Nigeria, according to Olayiwola & Adeleye (2005), are enmeshed in economic predicaments. Okunola (2013) attributed these predicaments to bad governance and its consequences, especially as it relates to the nature and practice of politics and governance in a manner that may result in the malfunctioning or utter collapse of the nation's economy.

Earlier reflection by Chukwuemeka (2008) showed that policy makers in Nigeria formulate policies and programmes with some inbuilt flexibilities to allow

loopholes to pave way for inordinate gains. The consequences to him, is that most of the poverty-reduction programmes do not get to the people at the grassroots where most of the poor people reside. What we now have is a rural sector that is largely characterised by absence of basic human needs and underdevelopment in agricultural and non-agricultural activities (Enyi, 2014). According to Obetta & Okide (2011) this, like various efforts at rural development, was occasioned by the limitation of local community participation in problem identification, project prioritisation, design, preparation and implementation. Apart from this, most of the development approaches are elitist and urban-biased, such that the rural areas are often given lip attention in virtually all ramifications of modernisation. On this note, social workers appropriately fit in when it comes to addressing the rural challenges and improving sustainable livelihoods based on their professional orientation and practices.

Rural Social Work Practice

Social Work has a distinctive approach of assisting clients to function optimally within their environments. Professional social workers by their training assist their clients in maximising the available opportunity for change in themselves and/or their situations. The uniqueness of a social worker manifests further in its professional values and ethics, appreciation of human diversity, emphasis on social and economic justice as well as an understanding of social welfare services. The foregoing thus becomes a springboard for positive accomplishment for social workers whose areas of operation are rural based.

Social workers in rural areas make use of the generalist approach in professional training rather than specialised approaches. This approach gives them the advantage of having a working knowledge of other branches of social work where professionals in those specialisations are not available. This is what Briggs (2006) referred to as taking on many different roles at many different levels to advocate and enable the client to succeed. In this circumstance, skills in community social work equally become immensely advantageous to rural social workers since they are enabled to relate on a personal level to the community members. In the words of Locke & Winship (2005), this will further assist them in their efforts to get rural community members directly involved in social functioning and overall well-being of their people.

The practice of social work becomes easier and assuring where rural social workers live and work in the same town, because it will promote the building of

trust and support for their professional role (Riebschleger, 2007). In this situation, such rural social workers will never be off-duty within their communities; clients and social workers may encounter each other in the markets, places of worship or any other area as circumstance may permit. Clients may regard these times as opportunities to seek for further assistance (Reamer, 2006, 2003).

Community Social Work and Practice

Community Social Work is that branch of Social Work that adopts as its model the practice of encouraging community members to be actively involved in the process of enhancing social functioning and overall well-being. This model is based on the assumption that the people being affected by whatever issue the social worker is trying to solve should be more interested and passionate through their direct involvement. The responsibilities of community social workers fall under the banner of community organisation or outreach. Much of what a community social worker does depends on the type of organization he or she works for. Community social workers, therefore, take into cognisance the different backgrounds and life experiences, opinions and ideas of community members for effective service outcome. Citing examples, Turbett (2010) noted that a social worker employed by an advocacy group in a specific instance may spend time applying for grants. He stressed further that someone employed to oppose the development of a waste-treatment plant might spend more time researching alternatives and talking to local politicians and citizens. If a community social worker works internationally, he or she might create programmes to help the local community and offer insight into infrastructure that could shape the future of the area (Turbett, 2018; Mackie, 2012).

Community social workers do not bother about the differences in ages, races, religions, socio-economic classes and genders of community members. What concerns a community social worker is to use community organisation, planning and administration to establish a common bond between community members. To achieve this, community social workers lead the charge when problems that involve community members occur. They work with existing organisations or groups of concerned citizens to improve living conditions, solve a problem and bring the people they are working with to the forefront of the political action (Dhavaleswar, 2016). The work of a community social worker may vary, but the goals are always the same. In societies where social work practices are well entrenched, community social workers may work with educational agencies,

community centres, governmental agencies and advocacy groups or help fight a toxic landfill placement (Davenport and Davenport, 2008).

Rural Social Workers and Community Social Work practice

Rural areas all over the world have a history of being neglected in terms of social and structural development. The existence of social work practice and its adaptation to address the plight of those in rural areas has assisted some societies tremendously (Banford, 2015). For effective operations in the rural areas, social workers make use of a broad range of methodologies and skills. Rural areas with their peculiar nature of having strong community ties have ample opportunities for chance encounters and boundary crossings with clients (Healy, 2003). What rural social workers need for outstanding achievement in their mission is the understanding of both the positive and negative implications of working in small rural communities. The positive implications include (a) availability of open communication systems, (b) inter-agency cooperation and (c) a sense of community. The negative elements include (a) geographic isolation, (b) personnel isolation, and (c) service isolation.

Rural social workers, being generalists and skilled in working with individuals, families, small groups, organisations and communities, have what it takes to mobilise both human and material resources for the development of rural areas. To achieve this, external relations with significant people, such as local politicians and other influential actors are easily harnessed (Riebschleger, 2007). Also potent for positive development outcomes is the sensitivity of rural social workers, by virtue of their training, to the particularities of local rural cultures as well as to the needs of minority groups (Waltman, 2011). Another desirable characteristic which assist them in the course of their work include a visible commitment to the local community and the capacity to work without much professional support. Finally, the application of casework practice will go a long way to achieving viable and sustainable rural community development (Lohman & Lohman, 2005).

The long held notion of 'generalist practice' is very much alive. This rests on the worker becoming skilled at choosing a methodology and strategy that addresses an issue, using the resources available. The lack of specialist resources to which service users might be referred in a rural neighbourhood, requires the worker to be inventive and creative. Generalist practice will thrive in a team, however small, that celebrates this culture and finds it rewarding; it will not work in a managerial environment where work is judged on computer generated

measurable outputs. Although it will, as an essentially upstream method, reduce downstream statutory referral levels (Smaile, Tuson & Statham, 2000). It will also depend largely on the exercise of discretion by the worker – knowing how and when to apply practice-gained wisdom rather than employer-driven prescriptive procedure and process (Lipsky, 2010; Schwartz, 2010).

Rural Social Work and Rural Peculiarities

Application of this profession in rural settings brings about the practice known as 'rural social work'. Rural social work practice, therefore, contributes to the social work mission of advocating for social justice and extending access to services for under-served populations. Rural social work, according to Davenport & Davenport (2008), may be defined as the practice of social work in any setting identified by those present in the area as rural. This may include farming, mining, fishing, logging or ranching communities and small towns and villages of many types. The necessity of Social Work in the rural area becomes apt in view of the fact that rural communities around the world face common challenges and rare opportunities. Such challenges (that include lack of access to education and services, histories of colonisation and exploitation, high levels of disease, poverty, isolation, hopelessness, and civic inertia) require a unique focus of social work inquiry and competencies.

Rural areas are generally thought to be serene environments with safe neighbours, a slower pace of living, self-provisioning families who grow their own food and close-knit communities (Nelson, 2006; Templeman & Mitchell, 2002). In spite of this, rural poverty and the effects it has on children and families remain the darker side to rural living which has been attracting scholarly discourse over time. With this development, rural communities present social workers with a range of unique challenges that are not present in cities. As communities expand, there begins to emerge 'particular cultures, people who share a hobby, parents at a school or even children at a park'. At this point, a need arise for social workers to unite all of these groups within the communities to work towards a common goal. Such community work, from the perspective of Baldock (1974), was concerned with affecting the course of social change through analysing social situations and forming relationships with different groups to bring about some desirable changes. From the foregoing, three basic objectives could be derived. The *first* was that of involving people in decision-making. The *second* was that of giving people the fulfilment of belonging to a community. The *third* is one of providing social services to people rather than solving abstract problems.

Uniqueness of Social Workers in Rural Development

The need for the application of Social Work in the development of rural areas is apt when considering the significance of rural areas in the developmental processes. For example, in Nigeria, the rural area constitutes the habitat of the majority of the population; it serves as the main source of food, raw materials and labour for the urban areas (Ele, 2006; Nwuke, 2004). In spite of this, the existence and needs of some rural dwellers tend to be similar to what Pugh and Cheers (2010) described as unrecognised, understated and typically underserved by welfare services.

Rural settings offer social workers the opportunity to build strong working relationships with colleagues in other sectors such as education, police and health (Martinez-Brawley, 2012). Generally, the situational assessment of rural areas all over the world reveals that the availability or presence of services such as affordable housing, effective transport systems and so on is not encouraging; employment opportunities are restricted; poverty and poorer life chances are more common in most rural areas while rural services generally cost much more to deliver (Turbett, 2018; Waltman, 2011; Schwartz, 2010). Hilton & DeJong (2010) in their study of homelessness identified different types of homelessness within the same region. These range from the brief and the episodic to the long term and the chronic. These scholars revealed that many of the participants who have families were struggling to find a way out of their precarious state. In Texas Panhandle, the rural poor are noted to be the most socially and geographically isolated. Hilton & DeJong (2010) stressed further that oppression through rigid class stratification, racial segregation and marginalisation was observed to be a barrier to residents of rural areas.

Isolina, Fotabong, Proctor, Lopes & Kebe (2012) similarly noted that rural areas in most developing countries (of which Nigeria is included) suffer higher levels of poverty than urban areas. According to them, rural areas frequently suffer from inadequate enterprise creation, poor infrastructure, inadequate financial services and insufficient provision of social protection. In Nigeria, the population's daily living is largely characterised by extreme poverty and hunger due to poor agricultural yield, diseases, high rate of child mortality and maternal death (Bamidele, 2015). This further reinforced the position of Isolina *et al.* (2012) on the myriad of challenges being faced in the rural areas, which are not limited to climate change and energy insecurity, population growth, unemployment and migration, water scarcity and competition between food and fuel production.

In developing societies, efforts towards addressing these challenges heavily rest on support from governments and international donor agencies. Most often, these problems are always subsumed under community development, welfare and social services provision. In Nigeria, for instance, the responsibility of providing essential social services and bringing about development to rural dwellers has been delegated to the local government councils (Nwoba, 2015). In industrialised societies, on the other hand, the necessity of social workers as effective means of addressing these challenges has been identified for decades. This is anchored on the fact that social workers are best suited, in terms of their training, to providing services that will enhance the well-being of the populace.

Assuredly, the developmental status of rural areas is likely to change for the better because social workers have what it takes to (a) mobilise the people in rural settings for effective utilisation of their own problem-solving and coping capacities, (b) establish initial linkage between people and resource systems, (c) facilitate interaction, modify and build new relationship between people and societal resource systems, (d) contribute to the development and modification of social policy, (e) dispense material resources; and (f) serve as agent of social control for positive outcome of developmental efforts. As these professional peculiarities help in making a difference in the course of positively developing rural areas, they will further bolster the capacity of rural communities in sharing their strengths and overcoming seemingly impossible obstacles while critically analysing solutions for developing more interactive services.

The expertise of social workers whose interest lies in rural environments, thus becomes a potent tool for the provision of information pertaining to children's needs, family planning, planning and coordinating educational programmes to promote literacy and better skills and handling of personal and family problems such as alcoholism and domestic violence (Mackie, 2012, Hilton & DeJong, 2010). Attaining this is possible through the unique approach of social work that entails providing direct services or therapy to clients, guiding people to critical resources and counselling them on life-changing decisions. Social work practitioners, by virtue of their activities (irrespective of their areas of specialisation), are educators, managers, planners, coordinators, mobilisers, policy-makers, trainers, administrators, innovators, fund-raisers, negotiators, supervisors, researchers, change facilitators, organisers, skilled writers, counsellors, advocates, brokers and team-players.

Social Work Model for Rural Community Development in Nigeria

The position of Harry (2009) on developmental challenges in developing countries is inequity. The thesis of his argument is that people's access to and interactions with key institutions are shaped by power balances in the political, economic and social spheres. Absence of this, according to him, often leads to adverse incorporation, social exclusion and a negative effect on growth, poverty reduction, social cohesion and voice. This scenario can be replicated in developing countries especially Nigeria, where Okunola (2013) as well as Obetta & Okide (2011) noted the grievous effects of inequity in the efforts towards positive development of rural Nigeria. From the position of Harry (2009), developmental processes in any given clime become effective when the problem of inequity is treated. Harry (2009), therefore, identifies core priority areas that, when addressed, will equally solve the problems of rural challenges. As a country in which Social Work is still developing, the following are the specific strategies by which rural social workers can assist in bringing about development in rural settings.

- 1) Study and report about the Community. The focus here should include the history of the community, its administrative structure, operational area, target group, existing development programmes and the challenges facing the community's developmental efforts.
- 2) Study the magnitude of unemployment in the community and prepare a report on its migration pattern
- 3) Analyse the situation and problems of rural industries (if any) and suggest the plan for man power utilisation.
- 4) Work for the promotion of sustainable livelihood in families or groups using livelihood strategies.
- 5) Get involved in the micro planning of any project with the target group and report the process.
- 6) Study the present status of any of the development programme implemented by the government in rural development.
- 7) Work on meeting the community needs by using the process of community development.
- 8) Get involved in the micro-planning of any project with the target group and report the process.
- 9) Engage in public relations and social advocacy activities in the organisation/community.
- 10) Formulate pressure groups and take necessary action on particular issues in the communities.
- 11) Select any programme/service/agency and evaluate it.

- 12) Plan and organise a one/two-day programme to create awareness among the target population on any specific social issue.
- 13) Assist the agency in fund raising and publicity campaigns.
- 14) Study and report the steps in community based planning, management and monitoring of water shed management
- 15) Study and report on different types, functioning activities, role and problems of cooperative societies in the community.
- 16) Prepare the case study of any successful/failure case/group.
- 17) Get involved in networking, lobbying and advocacy of the concerned project.
- 18) Use audio-visuals and theatre communication methods in the field.
- 19) Get involved in participatory evaluation by using the criteria.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is apparent that there is no organisation without a need for social workers. The uniqueness of social work as a modern professional service whose principles and objectives arise from and are closely identified with the key beliefs and aspirations of progressive entities remains undisputable. From the foregoing, it is apparent that the adoption of social work practice for rural development will make positive impact especially in view of its significance in mitigating social problems. At the same time, social workers, through their methods of reducing social problems in the society, will achieve the expected objectives by targeting not only how individuals behave and cope with personal troubles but also how other systems and people impact each other. Apart from this, social work has an inbuilt mechanism for helping in actualising its mission. These include the ability to understand the environment in which it is operating and learn, identify and implement opportunities for growth, development, health and welfare. Durowade (2000) captures these further when he observed that (a) social work tries to scrutinise and understand the problem or the situation and (b) make use of specific plans of action developed by the workers and where goals are carefully selected and specified. The actual may be in the form of referrals or counseling depending on what the situation is. Social work thus operates in an organised manner through social casework and social group work. Going by the assessment of Durowade (2000) on the activities of this professional service, many other organisations and institutions have benefited immensely from it beyond the framework of its original social welfare services. In line with this, the end-result of the involvement of social workers in developmental process will adequately be of huge value to individuals, groups or communities. Social workers will add value through their services to various

segments of the rural societies in spite of relative inaccessibility and their dispersed settlement patterns. To cap it all with the assertion of Oialeye (2016), social work is a profession that helps take people out of their problems.

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