

# How to Avoid Preaching Exclusively to the Choir: Extending the Scope of Civil Society Involvement in Cultural Relations

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## Introduction

Reaching a broader range of citizens and collaborating with neighbouring sectors becomes more important in many initiatives in the realm of intercultural exchange and collaboration. For many actors who are active in the field of intercultural relations, it is of great importance (and, in some cases, even a genuine objective) to enable encounters with large sections of the population across cultural borders. They have access to a wide range of instruments to bridge differences, to bring heterogeneous groups of actors together, and to create common platforms. When it comes to reaching out to new target groups and fostering innovative approaches by involving a broader and more diverse range of society actors, it can be valuable and inspiring to look at concepts that originated in other sectors that aim for the same objective, such as ‘reaching the hard-to-reach’ (which originated in the health programmes of international aid organisations and in emergency management) and ‘co-creation’ (which has its origins in the private sector). These two approaches will be briefly presented in this essay, followed by concrete examples illustrating the implementation of these concepts in the field of intercultural relations, to reflect which lessons can be derived from this and then transferred and applied.

This article relates to activities and initiatives that are in general attributed to ‘cultural relations’ and involve partnership, collaboration, and dialogue in the field of culture and (informal) education – practices that are united “by the focus on interactions of people at the interface of cultures” (Young/Chi 2013: 134). They are hereinafter referred to as ‘intercultural relations’.<sup>1</sup> This definition intentionally does not distinguish between activities in the field of foreign cultural relations, which are driven by

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<sup>1</sup> My article refers to the practices of intercultural relations, which should not be mistaken for a field of social science studies that is sometimes referred to as either ‘intercultural studies’ or ‘intercultural relations’.

state actors and public institutions on the national or international level or those that are led by third sector organisations such as private or political foundations, NGOs, or cultural organisations, or by individual artists and creative entrepreneurs.

The aim of reaching out to new target groups applies to activities embraced by the above definition, regardless of the main actors involved. Cultural activities are also increasingly characterised by the fact that they arise, work, and spread independently of location and therefore have an impact inside and outside the local and the national context. Today, intercultural relations are no longer just about intergovernmental connections at the macro level, such as those between national civilisations and major cultures that interact with one another. More than ever, networks are set up on the meso and micro level, i.e. it is civil society associations or even individuals that are primarily involved in shaping 'the cultures' in a multi-collective manner within a common framework.

This essay takes a reflective position and draws on discussions from the strategic working group on civil society of the Division for Culture and Communication of the German Federal Foreign Office as well as the debate on the results of this working group in the Workshop of the Academic Council on Culture and Foreign Policy (WIKa) at ifa in 2019. It aims at reflecting the transferability of selected approaches of other sectors such as 'reaching the hard-to-reach' and 'co-creation'. It concentrates on a thematic overlap of the lessons learned during and through the collaboration with civil society actors within the coordination of the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) (cf. Zaremba 2020), as well as on selected best practices and thus brings a specific perspective of practice into play.

While there is still a need for research exploring which target groups are included in projects in the field of intercultural relations and which are not, as well as for concrete recommendations and guidelines for communication and outreach practices about how to reach underserved audiences, there are already living practices in many programmes pertaining to the latter. Systematic research on this issue with a specific focus on projects in the field of (inter)cultural relations is a desideratum.

## Putting Citizens at the Centre of Intercultural Relations

Intercultural relations can help enable access to culture and education beyond geographical, political, and social borders. They can contribute to the essential democratic objective of ensuring that the entire population is heard and involved, and can also contribute to citizens' participation in the public sphere, including in decision-making processes. Reaching beyond those who are already engaged and collaborating with neighbouring sectors becomes more important as a reaction to a diverse reality with regard to new challenges. Social cohesion needs to cope with the consequences of climate change and overcome social inequalities; the latter include increased migratory movements, societal divides, increasing populism, and the feeling of a loss of security in the face of future challenges. Strengthening intercultural relations can

“[...] decisively influence mutual understanding and common interests, which will counter radicalization processes in the long run. This dialogue, if embedded in a regional, sustainable and comprehensive form of cultural support, will also help countering increasing polarization within societies” (El Difraoui 2017: 2).

This presupposes a strong civil society and the acknowledgement of its key role in preparing political decision-making processes as crucial parts of the public sphere (cf. Strachwitz 2014; Lang 2012), in order to provide an alternative to the rise of populism. Participatory approaches that reach beyond certain parts of society can contribute to a more inclusive and diverse public discourse.

Civil society actors can achieve outstanding results thanks to their dynamism, agility, and innovative strength. Small local civil society actors can reflect the direct fears, worries, and expectations of the local population and can help define problems and solutions that are relevant to society. Considering advice from civil society organisations but also from individual citizens can help identify the burning local questions and can therefore contribute to the relevance and effectiveness of the programmes. Artists and creatives can act as “agents of change” even in authoritarian contexts (Crückeberg et al. 2018: 292); they can contribute to the development of a counter-public and critical awareness. Strengthening the cooperation between civil society across borders on a long-term basis also allows for civil society actors to stay in contact despite difficult environments, and enables the discussion of topics

absent from the political agenda. Networked individuals and groups, such as social movements within civil society, cultural and political activities by migrants and diaspora communities use cross-border cooperation as an empowering mode of work (cf. Sassen 2002: 217 ff.).

While globally active NGOs have their own strengths in terms of their networks, their professionalism, and access to the international political level, the increasing power of smaller local civil society organisations is to be found in their involvement on the grassroots level.

## **What Can Intercultural Relations Learn from the Concepts of Reaching the Hard-to-Reach and Co-Creation?**

The need for new strategies to reach out to previously neglected sectors of society has become more obvious. Conventional modes of communication do not come close to reaching the full spectrum of society. In considering concrete practical initiatives, this section asks how intercultural relations can learn from the concepts of ‘reaching the hard-to-reach’ and ‘co-creation’.

### **Reaching the Hard-to-Reach**

The so-called concept of ‘reaching the hard-to-reach’ was primarily used in health programmes of international aid organisations or in emergency management, fields in which access to all citizens can be a question of life and death. The term is debatable, as Vicki S. Friemuth and Wendy Mettger (1990) state, since it has a certain connotation that labels and misleadingly blames those who are not reached by traditional communication efforts. By acknowledging this objection and being aware of it, and thereby avoiding this risk of labelling, the term will nevertheless be used in this article to describe the fact that different strategies are needed to reach out to different parts of the population. Christian Humm and Philipp Schrögel (2020) suggest a typology of factors that exclude certain parts of society from science communication events, which might serve as an orientation for intercultural relation activities as well, though the transferability has yet to be proven. They differentiate between individual

factors such as age, educational background, income, and literacy; social factors such as gender, origin, and disabilities; and structural conditions that refer mainly to infra-structural location, distance, availability of supporting services, etc.

Apart from the increasing significance of protection programmes and shelter initiatives (for artists, human right activists, or researchers at risk) or of heritage emergencies, intercultural relations are rarely confronted with tackling emergencies. Nevertheless, they can learn lessons from this concept, since the challenges and solutions of reaching broad sections of the population are similar and comparable, and so as not to fall into the trap of functionalising arts and culture – as is well known, truth is not constitutive for culture, and the conveyance of information is not the declared aim of intercultural relations. However, in the process of intercultural encounters, participants can develop the ability to convey knowledge and insight, and can develop an understanding of and reflections on their own tolerance for ambiguity and the awareness that their own perception of the world is relative. Intercultural activities in the field of culture and education can help to encounter stereotypes, enable critical thinking; they can provide evidence-based knowledge to the public sphere and to the shaping of public opinion. It becomes obvious that reaching a broad range of citizens – even if it's not a question of immediate emergency – is still of high importance for any society as a whole on a longer term that respects these tangible experiences of democratic values. Freedom of the arts, research, and freedom of speech or the significance of a culture of open debates should be accessible to a broad range of citizens and, together with the evidence basis of information, are values that cannot be taken for granted.

John Froomjian and James L. Garnett (2013) draw lessons for governments – and public administrations in general – seeking to reach increasing numbers of citizens of diverse populations. They suggest that more effective strategies should include knowledge about the target group and the building of partnerships with agencies and individuals that interact with the target population. More diverse sections of the population can also be reached by including specifically selected media and by using simplified communication and feedback techniques.

Humm and Schrögel formulate recommendations for reaching and engaging underserved audiences of science communication activities. They not only suggest listening to and reducing the distance to underserved audiences, but also better illustrating the relevance of science for their daily lives. Moreover, they recommend going where

the target people are and cooperating with stakeholders and multipliers. Additionally, the authors point out the problem of too much openness and too many one-time activities. This might also include changes in the communication strategy, including promoting values in a more striking way, and adapting the language and sending clearer messages.

The initiative COLA TAXI OKAY<sup>2</sup> can serve as an example for the implementation of this approach within the field of intercultural relations: It was created in 2015 in Karlsruhe by a group of students, artists, and refugees, first and foremost as a café and an open 'cultural space' in which people meet at eye level and facilitate joint cultural events. The target groups are newly arrived refugees and long-established citizens of the city. The initiators do not pick out potential differences or conflicts as central themes for a discussion, but instead offer space to develop a dialogue and to reflect on conflicts together. Barriers are set as low as possible – people come together to drink a coffee, cook together. While the activities offer the medium of encounter, this happens subtly in individual everyday situations: while cooking, jamming, at a joint theatre performance, in writing, in an argument. The events are attended by refugees and locals alike. A communication strategy that builds on the networks of the involved migrants and refugees made this possible: The refugees shared the events in their Facebook groups (sometimes on request, but sometimes, which is of course even better, unsolicited). The refugees are of course much better multipliers than German volunteers, for example, and not only because of potential language barriers. In a conversation, Larissa Mantel, the founder of the initiative, mentioned trust among people who have gone through similar experiences as a further important success factor. She also noted the need for more practical knowledge about how to reach the target group: What messenger service do members of that group use? Do they read emails? Which social media platform(s) do they use for communication? It is obvious that a solid foundation of trust and credibility and the feeling of co-ownership are needed to make this happen: Half of the team consists of refugees, who are active participants; all partners are involved on the conceptual level from the very beginning, and that involvement is ongoing; and the autonomy of the partners as independent organisers of events lends the project credibility, which is indispensable for those partners' willingness to spread the word among their peers, and which has helped make this project a true success story.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on this cultural meeting space, see <https://colataxiokay.com> [01.02.2021].

Another project that aims to reach migrants and refugees, and thereby focuses on making their own team more diverse, is “Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums”<sup>3</sup> While Syrian and Iraqi refugees are not only the target audiences of the involved museums, they are being trained to become museum guides so that these museum tours can in turn be offered to Arabic-speaking refugees in their mother tongue. *Multaka* (Arabic for ‘meeting point’) aims to form a bridge between the newcomers’ cultural heritage and their host societies. Stefan Weber, Director of the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin, sums it up as follows:

“The programme’s approach of involving refugees as key players in the core of the project has proven successful. It not only allows us to reach out to newcomers for cultural participation by bridging language barriers, but also enables them to present cultural outputs from their home countries in a confident way to the public: They select their objects and stories and add new narratives.”<sup>4</sup>

The Goethe-Institut Johannesburg in partnership with Triggerfish Academy is carrying out a project that puts marginalised South African youth in touch with professionals from the animation industry and opens up paths for possible careers in creative industries. This project reaches out to the target group by combining objectives such as career guidance, capacity building, and employability with creative expression, and conveys means to bringing underrepresented voices into the global media eye. The project brings local youth together with a local actor in the creative industry – the Triggerfish Academy – to train skills that can be applied in many fields outside the traditional film industry, while fostering enduring relationships that will outlast the initiative.<sup>5</sup>

The “Alta Voz” project seeks to empower the Bolivian cultural sector to promote equality, gender equity, and sexual diversity and to strengthen its link to civil society organisations. It reaches out to rural areas where most of the activities take place. It has a multi-stakeholder approach, identifies and brings together local cross-sectoral actors, while also laying the groundwork for creating a sustainable network that

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on this collaboration between the Museum für Islamische Kunst, the Vorderasiatisches Museum, the Skulpturensammlung and Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, and the Deutsches Historisches Museum, see <https://multaka.de/en/project-2> [01.02.2021].

<sup>4</sup> Personal conversation with Stefan Weber in 2020.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on this project, see <https://www.goethe.de/ins/za/en/kul/sup/tfa.html> [01.02.2021].

can exist independently after the initiative. The initiators explicitly see themselves as supporters who help create spaces and networks for the local actors initiating the activities. The project also demonstrates the importance of finding the right media to reach the local community: In this case, traditional media (television and radio) were chosen for the audiovisual show, *Amazonía Alza la Voz*.<sup>6</sup>

The potential of an expanded outreach to formerly neglected participants shall be illustrated by transferring the idea to the potential extension of an existing project in the field of intercultural relations: The European Commission's pilot project Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange establishes encounters and intercultural exchange online (cf. Helm/Van der Velden 2020). The Anna Lindh Foundation, as a consortium partner in the programme, is in particular responsible for running intercultural online debate exchange activities. The trainings and exchanges, which use a 'virtual debates' methodology, aim at enabling participants to engage with people from diverse backgrounds in a secure dialogue space and at facilitating critical thinking in an intercultural context. Intercultural and leadership communication skills as well as collaborative problem solving are the target learning goals. The programme not only seeks to reach out to universities, but also targets youth organisations across the Mediterranean. Working with local organisations on the ground that can help by providing technical means and reducing psychological barriers proved to be a successful means of reaching people who had never been in touch with exchange programmes before. This is already a great achievement in and of itself, since it includes young women and men from some of Europe's neighbouring countries in the exchange who otherwise would be excluded from many exchange programmes due to visa restrictions or mobility costs.

Transferring the presented concept would mean extending the target group and making the programme accessible to parts of the populations that have not been reached yet, e.g. due to language barriers, a lack of information, or a lack of access to the necessary technical means. It seems to be valuable to focus on inhabitants in marginalised, rural areas on both shores of the Mediterranean. Besides the already tested

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on this first EUNIC Bolivia project, see <https://proyectoaltavozbolivia.com> [01.02.2021].



collaboration with local youth organisations, it is worth aiming at a cross-sectorial collaboration with, e.g. international aid organisations, private foundations, or companies that provide the needed technical infrastructure in marginalised areas.<sup>7</sup>

### **Co-Creation**

An active form based on a participative approach which could be useful in extending the scope of involved citizens is that of co-creation. While strategies behind the catchphrase ‘reaching the hard-to-reach’ relate to communication, co-creation comes up with tried and tested methods for user-oriented project development. Derived from the private sector, co-creation describes the active involvement of end-users in different phases of the production process (cf. Prahalad/Ramaswamy 2000; Vargo/Lusch 2004). The concept has been transferred in various forms to the public sector (cf. Voorberg et al. 2014).

When it comes to collaboration in the field of intercultural relations, this approach means involving citizens in the design or implementation of projects from the very beginning. Some traditional approaches encourage those people who meet the expectations of a certain professionalism to write proposals for calls for projects, but these approaches simultaneously risk ignoring some of the most potentially impactful innovative ideas on the grassroots level by inadvertently limiting possible participants. If involved from the very beginning, citizens can help reach new actors on the ground who would otherwise be excluded from writing proposals for project calls due to their lack of capacity or their lack of the specific skills needed for sometimes very demanding project application processes; this therefore avoids the unintended effect of supporting only those people who are already the best suited to write such complex and demanding proposals (cf. Worschech 2019). Rather than having the agenda set by the person who owns the fund (see Hampel 2014) and who therefore decides on the outcomes in lines of funding, the involvement of local citizens in the first and fundamental part of designing the project can counteract the risk of failing to meet the local population’s needs.

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<sup>7</sup> A proposal for the extension of the programme to marginalised areas was submitted by Marjus Cevoli and Swenja Zaremba in the context of the “Summit of the two Shores” 2019: “Virtual Exchange Goes Rural: Empowering Youth Mediterranean Generation with Fewer Mobility Opportunities through Enabling VE in Marginalized Areas” (unpublished).

A cultural-political movement of people in different countries has made precisely this approach its guiding principle, and this movement understands that the needs of the citizens are a mandate. The “New Patrons” (in German: “Neue Auftraggeber”)<sup>8</sup> is an international network that carries out artistic projects that arise on the initiative and behalf of citizens. Their first and most important principle is to listen to the needs of the local population. In different, mostly structurally disadvantaged regions, their team of more than 20 people, made up of mediators, coordinators, and employees, works together with citizens and well-known artists to address societally relevant issues using artistic methods.

The “Alhan Libiyya”<sup>9</sup> project of the Candid Foundation (a member of the German ALF network) is based upon the principle of co-creation throughout the entire process. Since it is a format by Libyans for Libyans, the team in Berlin sees itself merely as a facilitator in this project. The social media activities, the design of the digital collaboration process, and the accompanying media outputs, such as a video and podcast series, were developed in close cooperation with Libyan talents, and it is through them that they become creative reality – the best way to create target-group-oriented attention and awareness. All musicians, producers, social media experts, and creative people involved in the project are part of “Alhan Libiyya”.

The international Nagoonbaatar Eco Art Festival,<sup>10</sup> a cooperation between Mongolian, German, French, and Czech artists, and the inhabitants of the Yurts district in Ulaanbaatar has been set up with the aim of raising awareness through the arts. Its goal is to work with citizens on more environmentally friendly ways of living and to raise awareness about the dangers of air pollution and the means of preventing it. The festival’s main activities centre around community participation and co-creation: Mongolian and European artists (attendees of a residency programme) will explore the local context with the support of the local community. The programme follows a cross-sectoral approach bringing artists, air pollution experts, environmental

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on “The New Patrons”, see <https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/about-the-new-patrons-1> [01.02.2021].

<sup>9</sup> For more information on this project, whose title can be translated as “Libyan Tunes”, see <https://alhanlibiyya.com> [01.02.2021].

<sup>10</sup> For more information on this festival, organised and financed by EUNIC, with the cooperation of the Delegation of the European Union in Mongolia, the Embassy of the Czech Republic, the Alliance Française of Ulaanbaatar, the Goethe-Institut Mongolei, and local partners, see <https://eunicglobal.eu/projects/mongolia-nagoonbaatar-international-eco-art-festival> [01.02.2021].

educators, and representatives of the local community together to conceptualise art projects and education methodologies. The project is organised and financed by EUNIC, and its partners include local organisations such as Art Gallery 976, the Arts Council of Mongolia, and the University of Arts and Culture.

Another participative approach that exhibits elements of co-creation was chosen by the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation to design the format “The Mediterranean on the Spot”<sup>11</sup>: The nationwide series of events composed of different formats such as debates, trainings, and artistic performances brought together diverse perspectives from local communities on a shared subject. The topic was determined by the member organisations – as a thematic umbrella under which a majority of people could gather their local concepts. In 2015, the peak year of flight and migration movements, the focus topic was “New Neighbourhoods”. In this situation, many member organisations took over tasks of building bridges between newcomers and host communities, dealing with intercultural challenges for accommodating newcomers (whether refugees or migrants in general). Since the challenges differed greatly depending on the local conditions, concerning, e.g. the social and political need to provide help for people’s existential needs, the involvement of local actors from the very beginning allowed for each of the challenges to be tackled locally in a way that organisers on the ground considered appropriate. Within a core period of three months, more than 13 events were organised throughout Germany in cooperation with the member organisations. The series of events was able to contribute to both – sharing knowledge as well as tackling current societal challenges while taking local needs into consideration.

## Conclusion

Both approaches – reaching the hard-to-reach and co-creation – not only offer exemplary solutions for initiating dialogue with new target groups which can be implemented in a concrete project, but also bear the potential of a sustainable, community-focused, needs-lead, and partnership-driven cooperation based on trust and innovative strength. Moreover, these approaches can reduce the risk of focusing

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on this project, see <https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/resources/good-practices/mediterranean-spot-new-neighbourhoods> [01.02.2021].

solely on the fulfilment of short-term project-driven cooperation, which would probably fail to meet the actual needs of any given situation. It builds on the need for good knowledge of the local scene and the continuous expansion of the network to include (smaller) civil society actors. Close contact to a lively civil society enables actors in the field of intercultural relations to react to societal needs, since those actors are able to perceive social developments, trends, dissatisfaction, and demands in a timely manner. However, one should be aware that these approaches are very time-intensive with regards to their preparation.

The abovementioned examples show that methods of co-creation and strategies for how to reach the hard-to-reach are already being put into practice in different activities in intercultural relations. While systematic research that analyses the success factors of these approaches in intercultural relations is still needed, several recommendations can currently be drawn out of these promising and practice-proven approaches:

- *Target-group-oriented attention and awareness, clearly defined local needs*  
Listen to your new target group to clearly define their needs. Involve your target group from the very beginning. Small, local civil society actors on the grassroots level can directly reflect the fears, worries, and expectations of the local population.
- *Peers as mediators, diverse teams*  
Peers of the target group as members of the team can serve as intermediaries and bridge builders, particularly when it comes to communication, the choice of media, and choice of which language to address your target group in.
- *Go to where your audience is*  
Lower the barriers by planning activities in places that are familiar to the participants you want to reach, since space and mobility play an important role. This might mean organising exhibitions in public places or debates in cafés, developing theatre plays with prisoners, or planning entire programmes in rural areas.
- *Active audience participation: target group as protagonists*  
It is important for the initiators of participatory programmes to reflect on their roles, especially concerning the degree of the content's openness and accessibility, the approaches adopted, and the hierarchy of any decision-making processes. If the project's initiators see their role merely as facilitators, their task can be to provide space and bring people together, to offer capacity

buildings and trainings for the participants, and to moderate the participatory process. This definition of roles enables the target group to operate as active participants and protagonists of the project.

- *Identify and link cross-sectoral partners in order to create sustainable structures*  
A multi-stakeholder approach fosters innovation and learning from one another, and also provides new perspectives and visibility by finding surprising and unexpected ways of addressing issues. Bringing actors from different sectors, backgrounds, and regions together can enhance innovation within the local context. These partnerships can also help create independent and sustainable structures that can continue to benefit the local sector long after the initiatives have ended. When it comes to trainings and capacity building, it is worth considering whether these are always sufficient objectives in and of themselves. On a longer-term level, the activities should contribute to creating structures in which these competences can be used, e.g. by helping to create sustainable relationships and networks that will endure after the initiatives have been completed.

However, it is crucial in any such policy and strategy to maintain the division and autonomy of all partners involved. Especially if public institutions are involved, the financier behind the initiatives needs to be transparent to avoid the risk that CSOs become perceived by those communities and localities as agents of the central authority. Public engagement with civil society always needs to respect the autonomy and self-action ability of all partners involved. It needs to be permanently aware of all possible risks in order to preclude illegitimate manipulation. Dialogue at eye level and transparency are therefore indispensable basic principles. Civil society needs to be dealt with as an arena of its own, which – despite cross-sectoral collaboration – has to be clearly distinguished from other spheres. Civil society networks therefore present a promising measure of interconnected and organised entities rather than an unconnected group of independent CSOs. Hence, collectivities of civil society organisations have a crucial role to play as moderators and as mechanisms to reach and represent a much larger segment of society and civil society organisations.

A participatory approach on the operative level corresponds internally to the implementation of the values that are represented externally and thus makes the implementation more credible. Bearing in mind those principles, initiatives of intercultural relations with an inclusive approach that are open towards new partnerships can expand their networks through lively exchanges with local actors on the ground and can therefore

provide relevant contributions to the public discourse. Involving a broader spectrum of the population (both within and outside the country) in intercultural relations can contribute to the essential democratic objective of a more diverse and open exchange at eye level, and this is reflected in intercultural encounters, which are becoming increasingly necessary to counteract cultural divides within and across societies.

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