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Sustainable development in the Mediterranean region

INFORMATION REPORT

Section for External Relations

Sustainable development in the Mediterranean region

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1. **Introduction**

- 1.1 The EESC Euromed Follow-Up Committee has decided to focus in 2020 on the issue of sustainable development in the Mediterranean region. A preliminary analysis was presented at the hybrid Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions of 26 November 2020 with a view to deepening dialogue and regional exchange. The final document will include comments and recommendations from the Summit debate.
- 1.2 The purpose of this document is to:
- analyse the situation in achieving sustainable development in the Mediterranean and highlight the specific challenges, including environmental and socio-economic, as well as good governance;
 - stimulate joint analysis and debate, explore necessary actions and possibilities for cooperation among Mediterranean countries, also bearing in mind recent impacts from COVID-19.
- 1.3 This report complements previous information reports on Education and vocational training in the Euro-Mediterranean region and Digitalisation and SMEs in the Mediterranean region.

2. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 2.1 The Fifth Assessment Report from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPPC, 2013) highlights the Mediterranean as one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to the impacts of global warming. Southern Mediterranean countries suffer from high unemployment rates, especially among young people and women. Significant differences in development levels and standard of living between countries, together with conflicts in the region, which already have a negative impact on lives and development, emphasise challenges to the sustainable future of the Mediterranean area. New challenges are arising from COVID-19, mainly concerning the economic and social situation. Sustainable development and the implementation of green economy policies are therefore important for the region to drive sustained and equitable socio-economic development.
- 2.2 The green economy and sustainable development are recognised as priorities in many Mediterranean countries. However, knowledge, capacities, resources and will from most decision makers are insufficient to enable their practical implementation and much more needs to be done to enhance integrated rather than sectoral policies. There is also an urgent need to create the right conditions for a sustainable blue economy and effective sea governance.
- 2.3 The Mediterranean region is very diverse. Investing in human capital is essential for the sustainable development of countries. Such investment also contributes to stability, security and peace – major preconditions for sustainable development as stipulated by SDG target 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). Youth education and training are a major challenge and represent a strong instrument to resist divisions and prevent radicalisation. Equal rights and opportunities for women should be guaranteed as a contribution to inclusive development and equal access to the world of work. COVID-19 induced poverty is an additional burden with a still unclear level of impact on development.

- 2.4 The transition to a low-carbon energy and resource-efficient economy could have a profound effect not only on the climate but will also have benefits for health, education, gender and deforestation. This creates the need for a "just transition" that takes into account the social impact on workers and communities of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. The EESC points to the importance of nurturing entrepreneurial attitudes and digital skills. The effort should be collective and include companies, national governments and a range of stakeholders. The economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important it is to have local production that society can rely on.
- 2.5 Precautions and physical distancing have intensively affected the way education is delivered, pointing to the inevitability of using modern technologies. Many students do not have the means to pay for an internet subscription or purchase laptops, so necessary resources to students in need in order to guarantee a successful online learning experience should be provided by ministries of education or through other channels.
- 2.6 Public infrastructure and public services should be preserved, as they have proven to be the most vital in this crisis. Also, the role of CSOs and many volunteers in helping people, vulnerable groups and communities in need should be recognised by decision-makers. The post-pandemic economic recovery must be environmentally and socially acceptable to respond to a much deeper, climate crisis.
- 2.7 Strengthening governance and development of relevant policies both play an important role in the achievement of many of the SDGs. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires an integrated approach rather than goal-by-goal or target-by-target efforts.
- 2.8 The 2030 Agenda is a universal, collective responsibility that covers all levels. To address policy challenges in a complex and interconnected world, policy coherence will be an important element to reconcile and deliver economic, social and environmental transformations needed to achieve SDGs. Integrated and coherent policies, supported by strong institutional mechanisms, can contribute to the transformation towards sustainable societies.
- 2.9 "Leave no one behind" is a core principle of the SDGs – equity, human rights and gender equality are central to all the goals. Governments must ensure an enabling environment in which civil society engagement is possible and in which it can operate freely.
- 2.10 Culture constitutes another important aspect of sustainable development as mentioned in SDG target 4.7 (culture's contribution to sustainable development) or target 11.4 (need to safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage).
- 2.11 In the process of transformation, there are risks, but also exceptional opportunities. It is important to link business opportunities with the development of sustainable solutions. Some priority areas are: climate change prevention, climate change adaptation, the circular economy, pollution prevention, sustainable use of water and marine resources, and healthy ecosystems.

- 2.12 Solidarity, the fight against inequality, a just society and protection of human rights should be high on the agenda of governments, as this is the only way that democratic and prosperous societies can be built in which young people will remain. The role of civil society as an implementer makes civic space essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda through a bottom-up approach.
- 2.13 Regional cooperation, information exchange and policy coherence are fundamental and critical for achieving SDGs. This regional cooperation within the Mediterranean region should include the development of clean fuels like hydrogen. Greater efforts are needed to leverage private finance to implement the SDGs, mainly by creating a proactive business environment, under the rule of law and political stability. Assistance for eastern and southern countries should be provided through EU development aid and programmes, both bilateral and regional, in order to address climate and environmental challenges, pressure on resources (with a focus on the pressure on water resources), inequalities and to strengthen governance, fight against corruption and ensure freedom of the media.

3. General comments

- 3.1 The Mediterranean region already is, and will continue to be, severely affected by climate change. Increased average temperatures¹ and changing patterns of rainfall and sea level rises will have a devastating effect on water resources, biodiversity, human health, agriculture and tourism. These threats represent extraordinary challenges for governance and call for major efforts to lessen their negative effects and build resilience.
- 3.2 Southern Mediterranean countries suffer from high unemployment rates, especially among young people and women. Sustainable development and the implementation of green economy policies are important for the region to drive sustained and equitable economic growth, as well as inclusive job creation. New challenges are arising from COVID-19, mainly concerning the economic and social situation; while it can bring short-term benefits to the environment, in the long-term that might not be the case as crises and a degraded economy might put additional pressures on the environment.
- 3.3 Having in mind the importance of sustainable development and achieving the global Sustainable Development Goals within the region, UNEP/MAP² has developed a Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development 2016-2025, through a participatory process. The document clearly states that sustainable development is crucial for the Mediterranean, since the area is subject to great pressure and, as a closed sea, particularly vulnerable to pollution. Its coasts account for around 30% of the world's tourist arrivals, leading to significant growth of cities and tourist infrastructure, with significant pressures as regards population growth and accumulation of economic activities in a fragile environment, etc. On the other hand, Mediterranean agriculture depends entirely on the sustainability of rural landscapes, resources and decent working conditions.

¹ Global climate indicators show that the last five-year average is 1.1°C higher than in the pre-industrial period, while in the whole of Europe it is almost 2.0°C higher than in the second half of the 19th century.

² United Nations Environment Programme / Mediterranean Action Plan.

- 3.4 Significant differences in development levels and standard of living between countries, together with conflicts in the region, which already have a negative impact on investment and development, emphasise challenges to the sustainable future of the Mediterranean area. The fragility of the region is further exacerbated by its sensitivity to climate change; in its Fifth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has identified Mediterranean ecosystems among the most impacted by global climate change drivers.
- 3.5 The green economy and sustainable development are recognised as priorities in many Mediterranean countries. However, knowledge and capacity are insufficient to enable their practical implementation and much more needs to be done to enhance integrated rather than sectoral policies.
- 3.6 The Southern Mediterranean countries as a whole are lagging behind in achieving the 17 SDGs. At the same time, there are positive trends on several SDGs across the region that can be built on to support accelerated implementation. Despite significant differences between these countries, they share a number of sustainable development challenges, including those relating to: conflict, violence and poor governance; water resources and fisheries; waste management; environmental safety; sustainable agriculture; malnutrition; decarbonisation and the transition to renewables; women's role in society and gender equality; reimagining urban areas, supporting civil society organisations and research, innovation and employment. There is a growing understanding in the region on the linkages between stability and sustainable development, but also on integrating the SDGs into development planning and sectoral reform processes.
- 3.7 There is a need in most of the countries for data collection, data management, using real-time big data and having transparent systems in place to support data-sharing and decision-making for sustainable development. By focusing on SDGs and gathering data on various indicators, countries can more easily move on to the roadmaps for addressing their development challenges. The whole region still needs to accelerate efforts in all areas of sustainable development.

4. **Environmental sustainability**

- 4.1 The unprecedented pressures on natural resources resulting from climate change are affecting the Mediterranean, and present new social, economic and environmental risks (e.g. in 2015 parts of the Moroccan desert were flooded).
- 4.2 Climate change is multi-layered and far-reaching, and some of the little-known consequences include the lack of oxygen in the sea, which can have major effects on marine life. An increase in temperature will cause a reduction in the amount of water available, in addition to decreasing its quality and increasing demand for water. Climate change threatens the extinction of numerous species in Mediterranean humid habitats, most notably in Spain, Israel and Dalmatia in Croatia.
- 4.3 The Eastern parts of the Mediterranean have been facing the highest incidence of droughts in the last 900 years. Even now the ecological footprint of development is almost twice as high as elsewhere in the world. Of the ten countries with the largest water-related ecological footprint, five are in the Mediterranean (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and Cyprus). Some 82% of Southern

Mediterranean water consumption goes to agriculture. Innovative approaches to enforce policies and measures to achieve sustainable financing for climate change mitigation and adaptation are needed, involving different funding sources. The EESC therefore welcomes the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Water Agenda and the Financial Strategy for Water.

- 4.4 Macroeconomic estimates of the impact of climate change on the economies of individual countries predict high impact on tourism and agriculture. There is also an urgent need to create the right conditions for a sustainable blue economy and effective sea governance, as many activities that are considered part of the blue economy (such as fisheries, aquaculture, shipbuilding and tourism as well as emerging industries including ocean energy and biotechnology) still have significant direct or indirect impacts on the health of sea ecosystems.
- 4.5 Many of the Mediterranean countries are carrying out harmful actions on the shoreline, foregoing the immense benefits provided by natural coasts, which are still needed to repair the damage caused by coastal erosion. Climate change is coming at all these ecosystem loads, so it should be an opportunity to change our relationship with nature and the environment.
- 4.6 Governments could pave the way for a fully decarbonised energy system by mid-century and revive COVID-19 affected economies by adapting packages of incentives to boost clean energy technologies, according to a report by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). Governments have a wide range of options to do so, from tax incentives for solar panel buyers for their homes to public investment to improve the interconnection of national energy grids or to redesign grids to cope with a greater share of renewables. Such investment would quadruple the number of jobs in renewable energy, more than the jobs lost in the fossil fuel industry.
- 4.7 Climate change increases the risks of new disasters, which requires countries to plan disaster prevention and mitigation legislation, adoption of new scientific knowledge, ensuring coherence and coordination between disaster risk reduction systems and climate change adaptation policies. but also joint action of countries.
- 4.8 Significant challenges remain in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean to achieving SDG indicators such as SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation (degree of implementation of integrated water resources management); SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy (renewable electricity output; percentage of total electricity output); SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure and SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production (carbon dioxide emissions). The situation is not improving in most of the countries regarding SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities.
- 4.9 There is a positive trend visible in most of the countries for SDG 13 – Climate Action; but also in North African countries for SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation for all, SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy and SDG 15 – Life on Land. Amongst solutions for achieving SDG 6, the following are recognised: joint initiatives between several countries on food security, desalination and water treatment technology and by capacity-building and financing of water supply and sanitation; wastewater treatment and reuse and awareness raising.

- 4.10 Integrated management of several challenges (such as the Water-Energy-Food nexus; WEF nexus) has proven to be more efficient, such as using renewable energy not only for energy production but also for desalination plants; and using water more efficiently in agriculture systems, together with using solar energy for pumping water; or recycling water to be used in agriculture. Thus, water is recognised as a very important resource, as it connects with food production, and its efficient use indirectly influences many SDGs.
- 4.11 Focusing on a country-to-country approach: of the North African and Middle Eastern countries, Algeria leads, as it displays positive trends in achieving most of the SDGs. Egypt struggles mostly with air pollution and SDG 14 – Life Below Water, which is the problem for nearly all North African countries. Jordan has achieved SDG 13 – Climate Action and SDG 15 – Life on Land; and so also on the way to achieving SDG 6 and SDG 7. Lebanon has achieved SDG 1 – No Poverty and has met SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation; but struggles mostly with SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities, due to high pollution and practically non-existent public transport. Morocco and Tunisia are losing momentum with SDG 11 due to air pollution, and SDG 15 – Biodiversity. Countries in conflict such as Libya, Syria and Palestine lack financing for new infrastructure that would ease their environmental problems.
- 4.12 Most EU Member States support the initiative to put the European Green Plan at the centre of a post-pandemic economic recovery. Most Mediterranean countries are also committed to the green economy, e.g. the Moroccan "Green Generation 2020-2030" plan is a new strategy based on capitalising on the achievements of the Green Morocco Plan, through the adoption of a new vision of the agricultural sector. One of the lessons learnt during the pandemic is the need to rely on national resources and focus on local production, which might have a strong impact on energy and agriculture policies.
- 4.13 There are some good practices that other regions and countries can learn from, and these should be promoted: e.g. Morocco is home to the world's largest concentrated solar farm, built on an area of more than 3 000 hectares, which produces enough electricity to power a city twice the size of Marrakesh. Significant improvement and visibility of environmental problems is coming from various bottom-up initiatives by CSOs, getting young people, the private sector and governments on board. Two such cases are: VeryNile (Egypt) – initiated by Egyptian social enterprises Greenish and Bassita – is the first initiative/campaign to develop large scale means to clean the Nile while raising awareness of the importance of protecting the environment. The initiative has mobilised over 3 600 volunteers in cleaning actions; that cleaned over 50 000 kg of trash from the Nile river and Live Love Recycle (Lebanon) – a campaign/initiative focusing on raising awareness of environmental problems and mobilising communities to volunteer for environmental actions.

5. **Social sustainability**

- 5.1 The Mediterranean region is very diverse. On the one hand is Egypt, with a population approaching 100 million, and on the other Montenegro with some 600 000 inhabitants and Malta with less than 500 000. The median age in Northern Africa is 25.5 years. In contrast, there are EU countries with ageing population, and are desired destinations for many south Mediterranean migrants. Investing in human capital is essential for the sustainable development of countries, but also in order to ensure Euromed stability and security.

- 5.2 Youth education and training are a major challenge and represent a strong instrument to resist divisions and prevent radicalisation. Equal rights and opportunities for women should be guaranteed as a contribution to inclusive development and equal access to the world of work. A higher level of solidarity is also advocated, as well as a change in consumption and production patterns. Mutual trust between government and citizens can be key for successful, mutually-reinforcing response and recovery from COVID-19.
- 5.3 The transition to a low-carbon energy and resource-efficient economy could have a profound effect not only on the climate but will also have benefits for health, local employment, education, gender or deforestation. By creating new economic opportunities and reducing pressure on natural resources and creating local jobs, socio-economic stability and improving living conditions, it is easier to reduce fossil fuel subsidies (e.g. in Algeria), which are often used as an instrument for social peace in Southern Mediterranean countries. This creates a need for a "just transition" (taking into account the social impact on workers and communities of transitioning to a low-carbon economy). The effort should be collective and include, besides companies, national governments and a range of stakeholders.
- 5.4 Just transition overlaps with several SDGs, in particular SDG 13 – Climate Action and SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth. Switching to a low-carbon economy is expected to eventually have a positive impact on jobs which rely directly on healthy ecosystem services, including those located in Africa³. The vast majority of these jobs relate to agriculture. On the other hand, a lot of people working in industries contributing to environmental degradation will be potentially at risk by a green transition. Embarking on a fair transition ensures that these workers are considered. The transition can also be seen as an opportunity for new jobs as green infrastructure has to be built.
- 5.5 Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decline in social and economic activities. The most affected are vulnerable social groups, many of which have lost jobs. Those who have suffered the most are freelancers and the self-employed, migrant workers and all those who are in some kind of precarious work. Leaders in public, private and social sectors have to make difficult decisions that balance economic and social sustainability, given that social cohesion is already under heavy pressure from populism and other challenges that existed before COVID-19. The economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important it is to have local production that society can rely on.
- 5.6 In the medium term, weak social security nets, the poor state of some countries' treasuries, shrinking oil revenues in others and a devastated tourism sector, among other issues, will most probably lead to dramatic situations and amplify current problems such as socio-economic inequalities.

The consequences of the pandemic will, on the other hand, provide an opportunity to learn from a multitude of social innovations and experiments, and an understanding of which innovations, if adopted on a permanent basis, could bring significant progress to the economic and social well-

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), 2014.

being of society. Digital entrepreneurship is a promising avenue for the creation of employment opportunities for young women and men in unemployment-ridden Euro-Mediterranean countries, but its potential remains largely untapped. The EESC points to the importance of nurturing entrepreneurial attitudes and digital skills.

- 5.7 Precautions and physical distancing have intensively affected the way education is delivered, pointing to the inevitability of using modern technologies. A hybrid model (blended learning) will be increasingly introduced, combining classes on campus or school and content that can be attended online, although deeper understanding is created in discussion with other students and the teacher, and this happens very effectively in the classroom. The difficulties encountered when teaching online are internet and equipment related. Many students do not have the means to pay for an internet subscription or purchase laptops. The lack of resources can hinder the potential of online classes. The necessary resources to students in need in order to guarantee a successful online learning experience should be provided by ministries of education or through other channels.
- 5.8 The current crisis has demonstrated the importance of public infrastructure and the public sector that ensures that fundamental human rights and needs are met. We need to preserve public infrastructure and public services that have proven to be the most vital in this crisis. Also, the role of CSOs and many volunteers in helping people, vulnerable groups and communities in need should be recognised by decision-makers, and CSOs should be involved in planning new policies, strategies and large projects. The EESC stresses that support for their work should not be cut due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 5.9 The post-pandemic economic recovery must be environmentally and socially acceptable to respond to a much deeper, climate crisis. A higher level of solidarity is also advocated, as well as a change in consumption and production patterns. Mutual trust between government and citizens can be key for successful, mutually-reinforcing response and recovery. Transparent and accurate disclosure by the government empowers citizens to take responsible, mitigating action to curb contagion. Governments should act with integrity, open themselves to public scrutiny and roll back emergency powers after the pandemic. Unfortunately, there are certain risks that, due to the need for a quick recovery, the good results so far in achieving the SDGs will be abandoned and that the goals will be left out of future development plans.

6. **Good governance**

- 6.1 Strengthening governance and development of relevant policies both play an important role in the achievement of many of the SDGs. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires an integrated approach rather than goal-by-goal or target-by-target efforts. As current administrative structures are largely based on divided sectoral policies, such an approach challenges conventional processes and should push different sectors to seek synergies between their separate sectoral plans. Policymakers usually lack tools to identify which interactions are the most important to tackle, and evidence to show how particular interventions and policies help or hinder progress towards the global goals. An important step would be to create an understanding of how to promote an integrated approach and policy coherence to inform better planning, through cross-sectoral collaboration and recognition of the trade-offs that sometimes have to be made.

- 6.2 Improvements in governance may not yield immediately impressive results, but pay off substantially in the long run. Pursuing an integrated development strategy can generate returns that are greater than the sum of the individual effects and result in striking advancement across all aspects of development. The successful implementation of a comprehensive approach sets up the countries to achieve more of the SDGs chosen as important for the individual countries.
- 6.3 The 2030 Agenda is a universal, collective responsibility that covers all levels: global, national and local. To address policy challenges in a complex and interconnected world, policy coherence will be an important element to reconcile and deliver economic, social and environmental transformations needed to achieve SDGs.
- 6.4 Governments are facing challenges as they move to implement SDGs. Integrated and coherent policies, supported by strong institutional mechanisms, can contribute to the transformation towards sustainable societies. Measuring sustainable development target 17.14 (Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development) should be more concrete, as there is a need to measure the political commitment to coherence, the mechanisms of institutional coherence and the participation of different sectors in implementing sustainable development.
- 6.5 "Leave no one behind" is a core principle of the SDGs. Equity, human rights and gender equality are central to all the goals, while SDG 16 calls for "responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels" and also explicitly demands public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms. Governments must ensure an enabling environment in which civil society engagement is possible and in which it can operate freely. Civil society stakeholders can spur government action through advocacy and act as watchdogs, support implementation through service delivery, data collection efforts or can facilitate consultations on government implementation plans, inform and train citizens, etc.

7. **The way forward**

- 7.1 We must find a way to preserve nature and its wildernesses and find a pattern to meet our needs without further destroying nature and the planet. By reducing the threat we pose to the natural balance and by applying principles of sustainable development, we can reduce the risk of a future pandemic crisis and build resilience of economies, societies and environment, with a special focus on solutions which have positive impacts on all these elements.
- 7.2 In the process of transformation, there are risks, but also exceptional opportunities. It is important to link business opportunities with the development of sustainable solutions. Some priority areas are: climate change prevention, climate change adaptation, circular economy, pollution prevention, sustainable use of water and marine resources, and healthy ecosystems.
- 7.3 Public administration plays a key role here. Regulation should guide the market towards sustainability and encourage companies to transition to low-carbon and sustainable development. Wise regulation will enable smart innovations for sustainable development to enter the market. In order to create new opportunities for sustainability, it is important to fund research and development, encouraging innovation incubators dealing with green and eco-innovation.

- 7.4 A fair transition mechanism should be introduced to help industries, manufacturing plants and even entire regions in the transition to more sustainable jobs and the economy, including sustainable mobility. The opportunities in this mechanism are broad – from conventional to organic agriculture, emphasis on local food and energy production, short supply chains and guiding the tourism sector towards the development of sustainable practices resistant to environmental, energy and health crises.
- 7.5 Sustainable development topics should be integrated into the education system to create the knowledge and skills needed to understand risks and act towards a solutions.
- 7.6 Solidarity, the fight against inequality, a just society and protection of human rights should be high on the agenda of governments, as this is the only way that democratic and prosperous societies can be built, in which young people will remain. Civil society's role as an implementer makes civic space essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda through a bottom-up approach.
- 7.7 Support for civil society in the region should be a key element in the future EU assistance and development programmes, in order to strengthen and promote the role of civil society actors in reforms and democratic changes taking place in the South and Eastern Mediterranean countries and strengthen their capacity to engage with public authorities (e.g. NGOs Project– "Strengthening Environmental Governance by Building the Capacity of Non-Governmental Organisations", a project funded by the EU, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme-UNDP).
- 7.8 Strengthening environmental governance and development of coherent environmental policies both play an important role in the achievement of many of the SDGs. Regional cooperation, information exchange and policy coherence are fundamental and critical for achieving SDGs. Greater efforts are needed to leverage private finance to implement the SDGs, mainly by creating a good business environment, under the rule of law and political stability.
- 7.9 Assistance for eastern and southern countries should be provided through EU development aid and programmes, both bilateral and regional. Regional Environment and Climate Action should be a test ground for innovative approaches and new financing schemes, tested through pilot programmes that are then integrated and scaled up in bilateral programming (e.g. SwitchMED – Switching to Sustainable Consumption and Production practices, which contributes to the achievement of several SDGs: SDG 8 – Inclusive and sustainable economic growth, decent work for all, SDG 9 – Resilient infrastructure, sustainable industrialisation, innovation, SDG 12 – Sustainable consumption and production, SDG 17 – Global partnerships for sustainable development. SwitchMed is also aligned with the EU Circular Economy Action Plan).

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