



Development or Displacement? Labuan Bajo's Struggle Between Economic Growth and the Well-Being of Its People Through the Lens of Liberation Theology

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Abstract

Labuan Bajo's rapid development has transformed it into a major tourism hub, bringing economic opportunities and infrastructure improvements. However, this growth has often marginalized local communities, who face rising living costs, land displacement, and limited inclusion in decision-making processes. This article examines the dual impacts of this development through the prospective of liberation theology. On one hand, tourism has driven job creation, infrastructure improvements, and local economic growth. On the other, it has led to rising costs of living, environmental strain, and cultural displacement, which threaten the traditional livelihoods of local communities. Key issues include gentrification, land displacement, and limited local involvement in development decisions. Environmental concerns also emerge, with the impact of increased tourism on natural ecosystems. The article calls for a balanced development approach, with policies to protect local rights, promote community-led tourism, and ensure sustainable practices that support both economic growth and the well-being of marginalized residents.

Keywords: Labuan Bajo, economic growth, environmental sustainability, marginalized residents, liberation theology.

1. Introduction

Labuan Bajo, located on the western tip of Flores Island in the Nusa Tenggara region, is a remarkable destination within the Komodo district, comprising one of its nineteen areas. Originally established as the administrative center for the West Manggarai district, Labuan Bajo is now steadily transforming into a vibrant city. Renowned for its stunning natural beauty, this area boasts pristine beaches and captivating underwater scenery, offering a feast for the senses. Adding to its allure, Labuan Bajo is home to the rare and iconic Komodo dragon—a unique species found only in Indonesia and recognized as the last living link to prehistoric times. The nearby Komodo National Park, once celebrated among the world's seven natural wonders, further elevates Labuan Bajo's reputation as an essential destination for travellers seeking both adventure and wonder. Labuan Bajo, now a well-known name among adventure seekers and nature enthusiasts, has a fascinating history that reflects its evolution from a quiet fishing village to a premier tourist hotspot. The name "Labuan Bajo" carries a straightforward yet profound meaning: "Labuan" signifies a harbour or docking place, while "Bajo" is a reference to the (Suku Bajo) Bajo people, an ethnic group famous for their exceptional seafaring and fishing abilities. Therefore, Labuan Bajo translates as "harbour of the

people." In its early days, Labuan Bajo was a humble village where the community's livelihood was deeply tied to the sea, with residents engaged in fishing, sailing, and processing marine products (Remmer, 2017: 5).

The Bajo people, originally reliant on fishing, once lived in floating houses near the shore, which is how the area came to be known as Labuan Bajo. Over time, they gradually moved onto land, establishing small villages along the coast. Despite these changes, the Bajo people remain deeply connected to their rituals and traditions. Even in modern times, they uphold and honour their cultural heritage, with a strong sense of respect for their ancestral practices.

Once a quiet fishing village on the western tip of Flores, Indonesia, Labuan Bajo is now at the heart of a sweeping transformation, spurred by tourism and economic growth. This scenic town, serving as the gateway to the famous Komodo National Park, draws visitors from all over the world, promising substantial economic benefits for local communities and stakeholders. Recognizing its potential, the Indonesian government has prioritized Labuan Bajo's development, aiming to elevate it into a premier tourism destination. As a result, significant investments have been made to modernize the city and enhance its infrastructure, reshaping Labuan Bajo into a vibrant urban hub that balances natural beauty with urban progress. The government began investing in infrastructure, such as roads, ports, and airports, to support the growing tourism industry. However, this rapid development raises critical questions regarding the well-being of its residents. The dual narratives of economic growth and social displacement present a complex challenge for the community, as they grapple with the implications of modernization on their traditional way of life (Cohen, 2022: 10).

At the heart of this development lies a critical dilemma: Will this growth uplift local communities, or will it instead displace and marginalize them in the name of economic progress? For many residents, the new wave of tourism and investment has introduced social and economic challenges that threaten their way of life. Rapidly rising property prices, environmental degradation, and the commercialization of local culture are some of the consequences faced by locals. Often, it is the wealthiest investors and developers who benefit the most, while the local population must navigate the social costs of a system that seems to prioritize profits over people.

This article explores Labuan Bajo's development struggles through the perspective of liberation theology, an approach rooted in social justice and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Liberation theology arose in 20th-century Latin America, emphasizing social justice and interpreting the Bible through the struggles of the poor. Originating in Latin America, liberation theology advocates for the "Preferential Option for the poor" and calls for active resistance against economic structures that exploit or oppress vulnerable populations. Influenced by the Second Vatican Council, especially "Gaudium et Spes," the Church shifted from natural law to social analysis, adopting the "See, Judge, Act" approach. Pope John XXIII envisioned a "Church of the poor," inspiring engagement with contemporary challenges as "signs of the times," addressed in light of God's Word. This movement deeply rooted faith in action against systemic inequality and oppression (Madung, 2024: 3).

This perspective asks essential questions: Who is truly benefiting from the development in Labuan Bajo? How do current economic policies impact the dignity, rights, and well-being of local residents? Can a balance be struck between fostering economic growth and honouring the community's social and cultural integrity? The article employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on books, articles, and reports to analyse and synthesize perspectives. This approach is commonly referred to as literature-based analysis.

By applying liberation theology, this study challenges purely economic narratives and advocates for a model of development that centers the needs and voices of Labuan Bajo's residents. It argues that genuine development should not merely be measured by profit margins or tourist numbers but by its ability to empower and uplift the communities it touches. Through liberation theology's ethical framework, the article

examines the role of government, private investors, and local advocates, seeking to understand how each contributes to or detracts from a just and inclusive vision of progress.

2. Developmental context, capitalism and its socio-economic impact on Labuan Bajo

In recent years, Labuan Bajo a fishing village, located in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, has quickly transformed into a major tourism hotspot, with its economic promise centered around its unique natural attractions, particularly Komodo National Park and its famous Komodo dragons because of its largely booming tourist destination and strategic position as the gateway to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Komodo National Park. Because of its exceptional beauty, Labuan Bajo ranks first among the top 10 tourist destinations, as cited in CNNIndonesia.com. The surge in tourism has sparked a dual narrative: on one hand, it promises substantial economic growth and prosperity; on the other, it raises critical questions about the well-being of local communities.

The growth in tourism has spurred improvements in local infrastructure, including roads, airports, and accommodations, creating jobs for locals and attracting regional and national revenue. Local residents are now finding employment opportunities in hotels, restaurants, and as tour operators. The surge in visitors has not only boosted the local economy but also brought international attention, positioning Labuan Bajo as a prime destination for diving, trekking, and nature tourism.

However, while these opportunities exist, many higher-paying jobs and businesses are owned by foreign entities or larger companies from outside the region, leading to a “leakage” of income from the local economy (Patra, 2022: 53). As a result, local business owners often struggle to compete with these larger investors, which limits their financial gains from the tourism industry. Even many local boat operators find themselves subcontracted by larger, international tourism companies, receiving minimal earnings compared to the higher prices paid by tourists.

Likewise, the rapid rise of tourism has also brought significant developmental pressures. With the influx of investors and rising demand for land, property values in Labuan Bajo have skyrocketed, contributing to rapid urbanization. Development has driven up the cost of living, especially with rising property prices and rent, which impacts local residents who now find it challenging to afford housing or maintain their land. Many locals who previously relied on fishing have been forced to shift focus or relocate due to changes in land ownership and rising living costs (Supriyanto & Putra, 2021: 78-79). However, these economic benefits come with substantial social costs. This economic displacement not only affects their living standards but also erode community ties and disrupt traditional ways of life.

The shift toward a tourism-driven economy has led to notable cultural changes. As Labuan Bajo becomes more geared toward accommodating foreign visitors, traditional marketplaces and fishing docks are increasingly replaced by modern tourist facilities. The ecological impact of rapid tourism growth and infrastructure development in Labuan Bajo cannot be overlooked. This shift affects the cultural fabric of Labuan Bajo as the local way of life changes to suit external demands (Cohen & Cohen, 2022: 134). Residents now encounter pressure to adapt their customs and interactions to align with tourism-focused lifestyles, which may erode their cultural identity over time. Increased tourism has had environmental impacts, notably around Komodo National Park, where boat traffic, waste, and overcrowding threaten marine biodiversity. Unregulated tourism places stress on coral reefs and fish populations, essential to local ecosystems and the economy, particularly for fishing communities (Lestari, 2020: 65). Protecting these natural resources is vital for the sustainable future of Labuan Bajo, as ecological damage can undercut both tourism and traditional livelihoods. The development has established capitalism in Labuan Bajo, the influx of private investments aimed at developing tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation services.

3. Foreign stakeholders in Labuan Bajo's development and cause of displacement of natives

The expansion of tourism has led to the displacement of local communities, as land is increasingly bought up for commercial purposes. Cultural commodification has become a concern, as traditional customs and practices are often packaged and sold for the benefit of tourists. Moreover, the environmental strain from uncontrolled tourism activities, such as pollution and habitat degradation, threatens the very natural resources that draw visitors to the region. The rapid growth of Labuan Bajo as a premier tourist destination has attracted extensive foreign investment, leading to both economic opportunities and significant displacement challenges for local communities. While this development has modernized infrastructure and created jobs, it has also led to increased living costs, land ownership conflicts, and social inequalities. Several prominent foreign-owned resorts have developed along prime coastal areas, once accessible to local communities for fishing, recreation, and gathering. For instance, a large international hotel chain recently acquired beachfront land traditionally used by local fishermen. This development led to restricted access to the coast, forcing fishermen to venture further from their homes to reach viable fishing spots. As these resorts consume large amounts of freshwater and land resources, locals report increased difficulty accessing essential resources, like clean water, which has led to higher living costs and further economic strain on lower-income households (Wijaya, 2021: 63-65).

The expansion of tourism has led to the displacement of local communities, as land is increasingly bought up for commercial purposes. Foreign investors often purchase land at rates locals cannot afford, displacing residents who traditionally relied on that land for fishing, farming, and housing. In some cases, locals are pressured or incentivized to sell their property below its market value, only to see it redeveloped into tourist facilities. This economic displacement impacts traditional livelihoods and weakens the social fabric of the community, as locals are pushed away from their ancestral land (Ramdani & Suparman, 2020: 87-88). Moreover, the environmental strain from uncontrolled tourism activities, such as pollution and habitat degradation, threatens the very natural resources that draw visitors to the region.

The shift in land ownership from locals to foreign investors has led to significant cultural changes in Labuan Bajo. Traditional practices and communal spaces are increasingly replaced by foreign-run enterprises that cater to tourist expectations, affecting locals' sense of identity and community cohesion. With fewer opportunities for locals to benefit directly from high-end tourism, the community experiences cultural erosion as traditional values and ways of life make way for more commercialized lifestyles aligned with international tourism (Sitorus, 2022: 102). Tour companies, many of which are foreign-owned, have increased boat traffic around the waters of Labuan Bajo, especially near Komodo National Park. This growth in marine tourism has led to a reduction in fish stocks and pollution from boats, affecting local fishing communities who rely on these waters for their livelihood. For instance, fishermen in the nearby village of Kampung Ujung have reported lower catches and pollution from boat waste. Some are now forced to abandon fishing altogether and seek lower-paying work within the tourism sector, such as being drivers or guides, which contributes to the breakdown of traditional livelihoods (Lestari, 2020: 69-70). In addition to economic impacts, local culture and traditions are increasingly sidelined as more land is allocated for tourism infrastructure. Traditional community spaces, like the Labuan Bajo town square, were previously used for local markets and cultural gatherings but have been converted into parking areas or commercial spaces to accommodate tourists. One community member shared that their family's stall, selling traditional handmade crafts, could not compete with commercial stores selling imported items catering to tourist preferences, pushing them out of the market and weakening traditional cultural practices (Sitorus, 2022: 103).

4. A framework for social justice of liberation theology and neoliberal critiques

In light of the challenges posed by unchecked capitalist practices, liberation theology offers a critical perspective on the dynamics at play in Labuan Bajo. This theological framework emphasizes the importance of prioritizing human dignity, community welfare, and environmental stewardship over profit. It advocates for a more equitable distribution of resources and the need to protect the vulnerable, urging stakeholders to consider the moral implications of their economic decisions.

As a foundational figure in liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez views capitalism critically, arguing that it inherently favours those with economic power, often exploiting the vulnerable and deepening social inequalities. He emphasizes a “preferential option for the poor,” calling for a reorientation of societal values that prioritizes human welfare over profit. He argues that Christianity requires solidarity with the marginalized, challenging economic systems that concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few (Gutiérrez, 1988: 35).

Leonardo Boff critiques capitalism’s environmental and social consequences, particularly the exploitation of natural resources and the disregard for community needs. In “Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor,” he argues for an economic model that respects both humanity and nature, emphasizing that true development must be sustainable and inclusive, aligning with ethical and spiritual values (Boff, 1997: 42).

Liberation Theology provides a robust framework for addressing social justice by critically examining neoliberal ideologies that prioritize profit and market efficiency over human dignity, equality, and community welfare. Theologically grounded in the preferential option for the poor, Liberation Theology directly challenges the systemic inequalities and social injustices perpetuated by neoliberal economic policies. Gustavo Gutierrez, often called the father of Liberation Theology, critiques the exploitation inherent in neoliberal systems, calling it a “structural sin.” He asserts that true liberation must include both spiritual and material dimensions, advocating for a society where resources are equitably distributed (Gutierrez, 1988: 45–52). Enrique Dussel also critiques neoliberalism as perpetuating “structural sin,” where unjust systems exploit the poor and emphasizes the importance of “an ethical praxis that prioritizes the excluded” profit over human dignity. He emphasizes that economic systems are not neutral but deeply intertwined with power dynamics that marginalize the weak. (Dussel, 2013: 112). In regions like Labuan Bajo, where tourism-driven development displaces local residents, this framework demands policies ensuring that economic benefits are shared equitably, addressing disparities caused by market-driven development and identifies this as a structural sin that prioritizes market forces over the well-being of local communities.

Liberation Theology’s preferential option for the poor calls for policies and actions that prioritize marginalized groups in society. Jon Sobrino critiques directly oppose neoliberalism’s tendency to prioritize market efficiency over human needs. He emphasizes the need for structural changes that empower the poor as active participants in shaping their destinies. He calls for prioritizing the needs of the poor and oppressed in social and economic policies. He argues that the poor must not only be passive recipients of aid but active participants in their liberation but creating systems that reflect the values of equity, dignity, and solidarity (Sobrino, 1993, p. 89). In Labuan Bajo, this could involve creating mechanisms for community participation in development planning and ensuring fair compensation for displaced residents. The principles of Sobrino could guide the creation of a community council that reviews and approves all proposed development initiatives in Labuan Bajo. This council could be composed of elected representatives from affected communities, ensuring that their voices are heard.

Neoliberal development often commodifies and erodes local cultures. Liberation Theology argues for the preservation of cultural heritage as an act of resistance and liberation. Pui-Lan, critiques how neoliberalism often replicates colonial systems by commodifying local cultures and entrenching dependency on foreign powers. She emphasizes the need for postcolonial communities to reclaim their identity and autonomy. She also critiques the neoliberal systems which perpetuate cultural hegemony, calling for the empowerment of

local communities to reclaim their identities and narratives (Kwok, 2005:179). In Labuan Bajo, Community-owned cultural tourism initiatives could be developed, where locals manage and profit from cultural performances, traditional crafts, and guided tours. These projects would resist cultural domination while promoting economic empowerment. Initiatives in Labuan Bajo could include community-led cultural tourism projects that celebrate and preserve local traditions while ensuring economic benefits stay within the community.

Graham Ward, highlining the rights of local communities in any new urban development, and stresses that urban development should prioritize equitable access to resources and opportunities, particularly for marginalized groups. He critiques neoliberal urbanization for often sidelining the poor (Ward, 2005: 88–95). Urban development in Labuan Bajo should include affordable housing for displaced residents, public infrastructure that benefits locals (such as clean water and healthcare facilities), and accessible public spaces. Liberation Theology offers a powerful critique of neoliberalism by highlighting the importance of social justice, equity, and the rights of marginalized communities. It calls for policies that prioritize the poor, protect cultural identity, and ensure fair participation in development.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis condemns the “idolatry of money” and the tendency of free-market capitalism to marginalize the poor. He identifies the poor as the primary victims of social injustice, stressing that the pursuit of profit often occurs at their expense. He highlights the systemic exclusion and inequality perpetuated by such economic systems, which fail to prioritize the dignity and well-being of marginalized communities (Pope Francis, 2013: 52–53). Similarly, in *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis expands his critique by addressing the ecological consequences of economic practices. He draws a clear connection between exploitative economic systems and environmental degradation, urging an integrated approach to development. This approach, he argues, must balance economic growth with the safeguarding of the earth and the protection of human dignity (Pope Francis, 2015: 74).

5. Balancing the ethical and inclusive development

Liberation theologians argue that economic systems must be restructured to prioritize the well-being of the poor and the marginalized. Governments must not only create conditions for economic growth but also ensure that the benefits of this growth are equitably distributed. According to Gutierrez, the structural inequalities that exist within economic systems need to be addressed by governments through redistributive policies and social justice frameworks (Gutierrez, 1988:60–65). He stresses that economic growth should not be pursued at the expense of the poor, but rather in a manner that directly benefits them. A key tenet of Liberation Theology is the need for the marginalized to have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Sobrino, stresses the need for a participatory approach to development, where those who are oppressed or displaced are not just passive recipients of charity, but active agents in shaping their own futures (Sobrino, 1993:77). Governments must create platforms for local communities to be involved in the decision-making processes, especially in areas affected by development projects. Liberation Theology extends its concern for justice beyond human social issues to encompass ecological concerns. The earth and its resources, according to Liberation Theology, are gifts for all humanity, particularly the poor, who are often most affected by environmental degradation. Governments, under the guidance of Liberation Theology, must ensure that economic growth is pursued with a commitment to environmental justice, protecting the planet as a shared resource. Gutierrez emphasizes that the struggle for liberation is inseparable from the struggle for a just relationship with nature (Gutierrez, 1988: 70–73). The government must implement policies that not only promote economic growth but also prioritize environmental sustainability, ensuring that tourism, agriculture, and industrial development do not harm the environment or the livelihoods of the poor. From the perspective of Liberation Theology, the government plays an essential role in ensuring that economic growth does not exploit the poor or destroy the environment. In the context of Labuan Bajo, the

government must embrace a development approach that centers on the well-being of its people, ensuring that economic benefits from tourism are equitably distributed. This involves creating inclusive policies that give local communities a meaningful role in decision-making, safeguarding their rights and dignity. By adopting a development model that balances growth with social justice and environmental sustainability, Labuan Bajo can move towards a more just and ethical future, where the needs of the marginalized are prioritized and the natural environment is preserved for future generations.

6. Pathways to ethical and sustainable development in Labuan Bajo

As Labuan Bajo rapidly transforms into a premier tourism destination, it is essential to ensure that local communities are not marginalized in the process. A balanced approach to development is needed, where economic growth goes hand-in-hand with social justice, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. The following points outline key recommendations that can guide Labuan Bajo's development while keeping its local population at the center of progress. These suggestions focus on fostering inclusive development, empowering local communities, and ensuring that the benefits of tourism are shared equitably.

6.1. Balancing Economic Growth and Community Well-being

Labuan Bajo's rapid transformation into a tourism hub brings substantial economic benefits, but it also displaces local communities and marginalizes their cultural identities. Development efforts must prioritize the well-being of the people by creating policies that protect their rights, provide fair compensation for displaced residents, and involve them in urban planning. Economic growth should be aligned with ethical practices that enhance the quality of life for all, not just a select few. Sustainable practices, such as community-based tourism, can ensure local participation in and benefit from economic opportunities.

6.2. Liberation Theology as a Framework for Ethical Development

Liberation Theology provides an ethical lens to evaluate development by emphasizing justice for the marginalized. In Labuan Bajo, the preferential option for the poor should be central to all policies, ensuring that the needs of local communities are prioritized. This theological framework challenges systemic inequalities and calls for a moral obligation to protect human dignity, cultural identity, and environmental sustainability. Policies inspired by Liberation Theology would advocate for equitable distribution of tourism revenues, empowering marginalized groups to become active stakeholders in the region's growth.

6.3. Participatory Governance for Inclusive Development

Active participation of local communities in decision-making processes is crucial to creating inclusive and sustainable development. Establishing participatory governance structures, such as local councils or committees, would give residents a platform to voice their concerns and influence development initiatives. These mechanisms can bridge the gap between government bodies, foreign investors, and local stakeholders, ensuring that projects align with the aspirations of the people most affected. Inclusive governance fosters trust and collaboration, leading to fairer and more sustainable outcomes.

6.4. Education and Empowerment as Catalysts for Local Involvement

The government must prioritize education and skill-building initiatives to empower local communities. Programs in tourism management, foreign languages, environmental conservation, and cultural

preservation can enable residents to actively participate in and benefit from the booming tourism sector. By equipping locals with the necessary skills, they can become entrepreneurs, guides, and cultural ambassadors, reducing dependence on external labor and fostering a sense of ownership in the development process. These initiatives should be complemented with scholarships and funding for local entrepreneurs.

6.5. Sustainable Tourism as a Pathway to Equity

Tourism practices must focus on sustainability, both environmentally and socially. Developing eco-tourism projects that protect natural habitats and involve local communities can ensure long-term benefits. For example, community-owned eco-lodges and cultural heritage tours managed by residents would allow them to retain control over resources and profits. Policies must also address environmental concerns such as marine pollution and overfishing by regulating tourist activities and enforcing conservation laws. Sustainable tourism should serve as a model that prioritizes the well-being of both the people and the planet.

6.6. Collaborative Development Models

Foreign entrepreneurs should collaborate with local communities to create mutually beneficial partnerships. Such collaborations could include profit-sharing models, co-managed enterprises, and training programs that empower locals while leveraging international expertise. Government policies should incentivize partnerships that prioritize ethical practices and fair resource distribution. By ensuring that the benefits of development are shared equitably, these collaborative models can reduce exploitation and foster a more inclusive economy.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the path forward for Labuan Bajo lies in embracing a holistic approach to development that respects both economic aspirations and ethical imperatives. By fostering collaboration among all stakeholders and grounding decisions in the principles of liberation theology, Labuan Bajo can pave the way for a future that is not only prosperous but also just and sustainable. The exploration of development in Labuan Bajo reveals a pressing need for a model that harmonizes economic growth with ethical considerations. As the region transforms into a major tourism hub, it is crucial to recognize the voices of local residents who express concerns about displacement, cultural erosion, and environmental degradation. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive development practices that prioritize social equity, ensuring that the benefits of tourism extend to all community members. By integrating sustainable tourism practices and empowering local stakeholders, Labuan Bajo can foster a development trajectory that respects both its economic potential and its rich cultural heritage.

Liberation theology provides a compelling framework for guiding development in Labuan Bajo, emphasizing the necessity of an inclusive, justice-oriented approach. This theological perspective calls for a commitment to human dignity, social justice, and the common good, urging all stakeholders—including government authorities, private investors, and community members—to collaborate in creating a development model that uplifts rather than displaces. By prioritizing ethical responsibility alongside economic interests, Labuan Bajo can ensure that its growth benefits all stakeholders, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. To further advance ethical and sustainable development in Labuan Bajo, several areas warrant additional research and action. Field studies focusing on the community's impact from tourism can provide valuable insights into the social and economic dynamics at play, helping to inform more effective policies. Exploring additional ethical frameworks, such as indigenous rights and environmental justice, can enrich the dialogue around development practices. Finally, developing actionable policies that

prioritize sustainable growth—such as fair wages, affordable housing, and cultural preservation—will be essential in ensuring that local residents are the primary beneficiaries of Labuan Bajo's transformation. The integration of economic development and sustainable planning has become increasingly important as societies acknowledge the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental aspects. Finding a careful balance that aligns economic growth, social well-being, and environmental protection is crucial. This requires collaboration among government agencies, businesses, communities, and individuals to create a sustainable and prosperous future. By integrating these dimensions, societies can tackle present challenges while preserving resources and opportunities for future generations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

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