

**HEALTH
WORKERS
DEMAND
JUSTICE
AT COP26**

**MARCH WITH US,
6 NOV**

PLAY THE HEALTH CARD

The case for climate & health justice at the UN Climate Talks



medact

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About Medact

Medact is a global health charity that uses evidence-based campaigns to support health workers to take action on structural barriers to health equity and justice, in an effort to bring about a world in which everyone can access their human right to health.

About Health for a Green New Deal

Health for a Green New Deal is a campaign supporting members of the health community to organise for a just transition to a zero-carbon economy. Get involved at health4gnd.uk.

About this briefing

This briefing was written to lay out the reasoning behind the demands of the Health for a Green New Deal campaign in the run up to the COP26 UN Climate Talks in Glasgow in November 2021.

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INTRODUCTION

The UK is about to host the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP26 climate talks in Glasgow. This briefing sets out key policy demands to which the UK government must commit in order to achieve the just, sustainable, transformative change required to minimise catastrophic climate change. Specifically, it highlights the health-justice case for urgent action – a move oil and gas lobbyist representing companies like Exxon Mobil, while seeking to undermine climate and health research, once infamously called “playing the health card”.¹

COP26 comes at a pivotal moment in history. We are still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – an anthropogenic (human-caused) environmental disaster caused by a zoonotic pathogen – which has already claimed nearly 5 million lives globally.² Last year saw climate records broken yet again, with the hottest year in Europe and the Arctic on record, and the third-hottest globally, despite predominating La Niña conditions that usually results in colder weather.³ This year, a “1 in 1000 year” heat wave across the Pacific Northwest, that would have been “virtually impossible” without anthropogenic climate change,⁴ resulted in hundreds of excess deaths.⁵ In July, unprecedented rainfalls in Germany and Belgium killed at least 222 people and caused widespread destruction in China.⁶ The northern hemisphere continues to experience a record-breaking wildfire season,⁷ with emissions from fires in Siberia already having exceeded the annual emissions of Germany.⁸

The 6th Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published in August highlighted the “unequivocal” impact of human emissions on the global environment, and the responsibility of this change for heatwaves, flooding, drought, and concurrent extreme weather events including wildfires. It concluded that all but the most drastic emissions reductions scenarios – including negative emissions toward the latter part of the century – are likely to commit us to well over 2°C warming by the 2081-2100 period, but that immediate and sustained global decarbonisation could “strongly limit” the drivers of climatic impact.⁹

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The need for immediate and transformative action has never been clearer. Yet despite its rhetoric of “leading the way” on decarbonisation,¹⁰ the actions of the UK government fail to measure up to the scale of the challenge faced. This briefing explains four key demands for UK leadership on health and climate justice at COP26:

- Reduce emissions in line with the UK’s historic climate debt, recognising the economic legacy of early industrialisation and colonial exploitation, and financially support Global South countries to reduce their emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change
- Rapidly transition to a zero-carbon economy that does not further exploit Indigenous communities and Global South countries through natural resource extraction
- Immediately end all domestic and international financial, regulatory, and legislative support for new fossil fuel extraction projects
- Completely insulate the COP26 talks from the influence of highly polluting industries, following the approach taken by the UN Framework Convention on Tobacco Control toward the tobacco industry.

REDUCE EMISSIONS IN LINE WITH THE UK'S HISTORIC CLIMATE DEBT

- The UK has a disproportionate historic responsibility for the climate crisis
- The UK therefore owes a climate debt to the Global South
- The UK's current Nationally Determined Contribution is inadequate and policies are inadequate to meet current targets
- *The UK must reduce emissions in line with its historic climate debt and financially support Global South communities to reduce their emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change*

THE UK HAS A DISPROPORTIONATE HISTORIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Global heating from carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases results from the total amount of these gases in the atmosphere. CO₂ from human activities – and its heating effect – persists in the atmosphere for hundreds of years. Thus different states' responsibilities for the current extent of climate change come not just from their present emissions, but also their past emissions trajectories.

The United Kingdom – given its history of early industrialisation – bears a large proportion of this responsibility. It is the sixth-highest historic emitter since 1850,¹¹ and (relative to 2005 populations) had the highest per-capita historical emissions of any nation.¹² Industrialised nations like the UK owe their prosperity today to disproportionate exploitation of a shared, and finite, global CO₂ emissions budget. Furthermore, the human cost of climate change resulting from this exploitation disproportionately affects those least responsible and who have benefited least, being inflicted upon lower-income and marginalised communities locally and globally.^{13, 14}

THE UK OWES A CLIMATE DEBT TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH

This observation – that the wealth of industrialised nations comes chiefly from the entwined processes of colonialism and industrialisation, driven by exploitation

of people, land and natural resources – has given rise to the concept of ‘climate debt’,¹⁵ defined in the Bali Principles of Climate Justice as “that [which] industrialised governments and transnational corporations owe the rest of the world as a result of their appropriation of the planet’s capacity to absorb greenhouse gases.”¹⁶ The UK’s own colonial and industrial history makes it the fourth greatest climate debtor internationally (behind the USA, Russia, and Germany), accounting for 7% of total global climate debt.¹⁷

The UK government claims that it “raise[s] the bar for global climate ambition” with its own emissions reductions commitments.¹⁸ Shortly after the December 2020 publication of a previous Medact report upon which this briefing builds, the government announced to the UNFCCC its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). The UK’s agreed figure was of a 68% reduction in emissions by 2030 (compared with annual emissions in 1990), en route to the existing ‘net zero’ target set for 2050.¹⁹ However, this NDC insufficiently reflects current UK climate debt. Moreover, current decarbonisation policy is inadequate to achieve even this limited goal.

CLIMATE DEBT: the debt that industrialised governments and transnational corporations owe the rest of the world as a result of their previous greenhouse gas emissions.

NATIONAL DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS (NDCS): emission reduction targets set by each country in order collectively to reach the goal of keeping global temperature increases “well below” 2°C relative to pre-industrial levels, in accordance with the Paris Agreement – a legally binding international treaty adopted at the COP21 climate talks in Paris, 2015.

THE CURRENT NDC IS INADEQUATE AND POLICIES ARE INADEQUATE TO MEET CURRENT TARGETS

Illustrative estimates of a just and historically accurate NDC would require the UK to commit to a 200% emissions reduction by 2030, according to the Climate Equity Reference Project. This would entail not just achieving zero carbon emissions domestically, but also funding emissions reductions projects in communities from whose past exploitation the British economy has benefited, and who now sit on the

front lines of climate change – our ‘climate creditors’.^{11, 20} Even more conservative estimates of a fair carbon budget – only taking into account present excess per capita emissions, and ignoring historic responsibilities – would require reaching net zero emissions by 2027-2032.²¹

The shortfall in our international emissions reductions commitment is greater even than the shortfall for our domestic emissions: between 2011 and 2020, greenhouse gas emissions reductions from UK Climate Finance reached just 31 megatonnes of CO2 equivalent (MtCO2e), a small fraction of the 800MtCO2e demanded *annually* by the estimated historically accurate NDC.²² These efforts are likely to be further hampered by the reduction of total overseas development aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of GDP (though the government has committed to protect its climate finance provision against this reduction).²³

Insufficient as existing targets are, current policy proposals are not even on track to realise these reductions. The most recent report of the Climate Change Committee to UK Parliament highlighted a significant policy gap in ambition across sectors, with almost all priority areas of action for decarbonisation – from dietary change to industrial decarbonisation – falling short of what would be required to achieve stated 2030 targets.²³

THE UK MUST REDUCE EMISSIONS IN LINE WITH ITS HISTORIC CLIMATE DEBT AND FINANCIALLY SUPPORT GLOBAL SOUTH COMMUNITIES TO REDUCE THEIR EMISSIONS AND MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The current NDC is inadequate to reflect the UK’s historic responsibility for, and present capacity to respond to, the climate crisis. A just and historically accurate commitment to emissions reductions requires a transition to zero domestic emissions before 2040, as well as supporting zero-carbon development in climate creditor nations.

TRANSITION TO A ZERO-CARBON ECONOMY WITHOUT FURTHER EXPLOITING FORMERLY COLONISED COMMUNITIES

- UK decarbonisation policy risks promoting green colonialism
- Carbon offsetting undermines climate adaptation capacity in the Global South
- Offshoring of CO2 emissions conceals the UK's true responsibility for climate change
- *The UK must transition to a zero-carbon economy without exploitation of colonised communities*

UK DECARBONISATION POLICY RISKS PROMOTING GREEN COLONIALISM

A just transition to a low-carbon economy cannot be achieved if it replicates the patterns of colonial exploitation that drove fossil-powered industrialisation. Yet the areas in which the UK has seen the greatest progress on decarbonisation, namely its renewable energy and transport systems, risk doing just this through a 'green colonialist' approach embedding extractivism, which harms communities in the Global South, in moving towards a low-carbon society.^{24, 25}

The UK has built its strategy for a 'greener transport future' on the development of electric vehicles and their relevant infrastructure.^{26, 27} This not only misses a crucial opportunity to improve human health through supporting active travel options like walking and cycling; it also drives the global demand for rare earth minerals such as cobalt and lithium. Between 2011 and 2060 it is expected that the mining of these minerals will increase by 150%;²⁵ getting to net zero globally without limiting demand would require 34 million tons of copper, 40 million tons of lead, 50 million tons of zinc, 162 million tons of aluminium, and 4.8 billion tons of iron.^{28 (pp139-141)} Reserves are largely located in communities in the Global South. Demand for these minerals is exacerbating social and environmental stresses in these communities.

Over half the world's supply of cobalt comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Much of that comes from unregulated artisanal mines, estimated to employ over 150,000 workers – 40,000 of them minors.²⁹ With little in the way of occupational health protections, work in this industry is often lethal. The annual death rate for workers is estimated at 1 in 200 workers annually.³⁰ Meanwhile lithium mining in Chile's Salar de Atacama desert is creating a "hydrological sacrifice zone", where the rate of water extraction far exceeds the capacity of the already-arid region, threatening freshwater supplies for Indigenous Atacameño communities.²⁴

GREEN COLONIALISM: measures taken – usually by Global North countries – to prevent environmental destruction and install renewable resources, at the expense of other – usually Global South – countries' economic and political control over their own natural resources.

EXTRACTIVISM: the process of extracting natural resources to create wealth, often in ways that damage communities and the environment.

CARBON OFFSETTING UNDERMINES CLIMATE ADAPTATION CAPACITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Carbon off-setting initiatives, which allow UK companies to achieve 'carbon-neutrality' while continuing their business-as-usual models, risk driving unsustainable land-use change abroad. Land purchasing in the Global South for tree plantations or biofuel carbon sequestration projects disrupts traditional patterns of land access and management, and inflated land prices prevent local access to land resources while increasing the precarity of employment.^{31, 32}

OFFSHORING OF CO2 EMISSIONS CONCEALS THE UK'S TRUE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

By 'offshoring' almost half of CO2 emissions, the UK shifts responsibility onto less-industrialised nations while masking the true extent of its carbon footprint. Consumption patterns within the UK drive a rampant demand for imported products, yet emissions associated with overseas production are not included within the UK's

carbon footprint. An estimated 46% of the UK's true carbon footprint is 'offshored' in this fashion, making the UK the biggest net importer of CO2 emissions per capita in the G7.³³ The UK needs to take responsibility for these hidden emissions and factor them into emission reduction targets.

OFFSHORING: This involves basing certain activities overseas, which in the case for heavily polluting industries, resulting in emissions being attributed to other nations.

THE UK MUST TRANSITION TO A REAL-ZERO ECONOMY WITHOUT FURTHER EXPLOITING FORMERLY COLONISED COMMUNITIES

Green colonialism is not a necessary evil of a zero-carbon economy. A unifying theme of policy proposals, advanced worldwide under the banner of a 'Global Green New Deal', centre global justice at the heart of rapid decarbonisation by safeguarding communities already at the frontlines of the climate crisis.^{24, 34}

The Global Green New Deal movement offers a wealth of policy proposals across the energy, transport, food, land and housing sectors, that provide resources for securing such a globally just transition. These proposals – increased access to active and public transport infrastructure, locally, sustainably-produced food drawing on agroecological land management, community-owned renewable energy, and more – also have the potential to realise significant benefits for human health, increasing physical activity, improving diets, reducing air pollution, and supporting healthier relationships with the natural environment.³⁴

END UK SUPPORT FOR THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY

- New fossil fuel infrastructure is incompatible with a just transition
- The UK continues to subsidise heavily-polluting industries
- The UK's progress on ending overseas fossil fuel finance is insufficient
- ***The UK must immediately end domestic and international financial and regulatory support for the fossil fuel industry***

In order to restrict global warming, CO₂ emissions will ultimately have to fall to near-zero.³⁵ To remain below 1.5°C we have a remaining global carbon budget of 400-500 GtCO₂e³⁶ – current plans for fossil fuel extraction would far exceed this. Present international governmental commitments to extractive developments would produce 50% more fossil fuels than is consistent with limiting warming to 2°C, and 120% more than the budget for 1.5°C.³⁷ If all proposed new power plants are included, committed emissions would reach 852 GtCO₂e.³⁸ There is therefore no room for new extraction projects if we are to comply with the Paris Agreement, let alone appropriately minimise the risks posed by climate change.

NEW FOSSIL FUEL INFRASTRUCTURE IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH A JUST TRANSITION

In the UK, plans for a proposed new coking coal mine in Cumbria remain unclear. While the final report following a public enquiry completed in October 2021 is awaited, this development has signalled a concerning indication of continued commitment towards future fossil fuel production. Emissions resulting from this proposed mine would amount to a further 8.4MtCO₂e annually over 50 years.³⁹ The 500 jobs expected to be created by the colliery are dwarfed by the potential of a just transition to a low-carbon economy, which the IPPR predicts could provide 46,000 jobs for the North of England in the energy sector by 2030.⁴⁰ More recently, news that approval would likely be granted for development of the Cambo Oil Field – an 800-million barrel oil field west of the Shetland Islands – has highlighted further hypocrisy in the government's stated goal of making the UK a leader on climate

responsibility. If developed, emissions from the field would be approximate the annual emissions of 16 coal-fired power plants.⁴¹

JUST TRANSITION: A shift towards a sustainable economy that is socially just, and protects and secures workers rights and livelihoods at the same time.

THE UK CONTINUES TO SUBSIDISE HEAVILY-POLLUTING INDUSTRIES

Beyond such regulatory support, public institutions continue to prop up polluting industries through favourable financial arrangements.

The UK government provides large subsidies – more than any other European nation – to the fossil fuel industry through selective tax breaks (with £1.1 billion in subsidies going to the North Sea oil and gas industry alone from 2018-2020). Pandemic-induced refinancing initiatives have ignored the imperative to decarbonise. UK schemes such as the Bank of England's Covid Corporate Financing Facility had no sustainability weighting, and as such saw the transfer of large sums directly to the most-polluting companies; the oil and gas industry alone has received £1.3 billion through such mechanisms.⁴² The UK government is now set to face a legal challenge over its continued support for fossil fuel production, which conflicts with the target of net-zero emissions.⁴³

THE UK GOVERNMENT PROVIDES LARGE SUBSIDIES TO THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY THROUGH SELECTIVE TAX BREAKS – MORE THAN ANY OTHER EUROPEAN NATION

THE UK'S PROGRESS ON ENDING OVERSEAS FOSSIL FUEL FINANCE IS INSUFFICIENT

One major point of progress is the announcement that the UK government will no longer provide 'any new direct financial or promotional support' for the fossil fuel energy sector overseas, other than in 'limited circumstances.'⁴⁴ The UK supplied £21 billion in support for oil and gas exports through trade promotion and export finance in the past four years, so this policy shift represents progress. Nonetheless, major loopholes in this policy, such as the exclusion of gas power stations, weaken its

positive potential. Other important exemptions severely undermine this commitment. UK international infrastructure funding is exempt and will continue to channel funds towards fossil fuel projects. In addition to direct harms from carbon emissions, these investments will prove unhelpful for local economies in the medium to long term as fossil fuel technologies become increasingly untenable and these infrastructures become obsolete.

THE UK MUST IMMEDIATELY END DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL AND REGULATORY SUPPORT FOR THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the latest IPCC report a “death knell for coal and fossil fuels.”⁴⁵ We cannot afford to extract the majority of planned fossil fuel reserves if we are to have any chance of avoiding the worst health risks of climate change. Therefore, the government must withdraw its support for new fossil fuel developments in the UK or abroad. Without a commitment to ending support for fossil fuel extraction and infrastructure development, the UK cannot hope to lead international action on climate change mitigation at COP26.

PREVENT INDUSTRY INFLUENCE TO ENSURE A FOSSIL-FREE COP26

- Industry is fuelling the climate crisis
- Industry influence continues to subvert the UNFCCC process
- *The UK must insulate climate negotiations from the influence of industry following the approach taken by the UN Framework Convention on Tobacco Control towards the tobacco industry*

INDUSTRY IS FUELLING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The fossil fuel industry is disproportionately responsible for anthropogenic climate change. The largest companies, which account for 71% of greenhouse gas emissions,^{46, 47} continue to increase the carbon intensity of their operations, in direct contradiction to internationally-agreed emissions reductions targets.^{48, 49} These companies have historically played a major role in funding the denial of climate science, and continue to exert their political influence to undermine national and international climate change mitigation policies.^{1, 50, 51, 52}

INDUSTRY INFLUENCE CONTINUES TO SUBVERT CLIMATE ACTION

Campaigners have for some time been calling for the UK government to exclude the fossil fuel industry from the COP26 negotiations. However, the industry has continued to enjoy ample opportunity to influence the course of negotiations. Interim UNFCCC talks in Bonn in June 2021 hosted 45 delegates from the fossil fuel industry.⁵³ In rejection of campaigners' challenges, COP26 president Alok Sharma has reiterated his commitment to allowing polluters to sponsor and influence the UNFCCC negotiations, claiming that such "inclusion" is necessary for the UK to act as an "honest broker."⁵⁴

This statement, however, assumes that representatives of polluting industries have any interest in participating in such negotiations in good faith when their track record would suggest this is certainly not the case. For many years, the industry exploited the same tactics as the tobacco industry – often working with the same institutes

and researchers – to discredit scientific research on climate science.⁵² They have specifically worked to reject research on the health impacts of climate change, as the example in the boxed case study highlights. Fossil fuel industry representatives claim to have drafted sections of both the Kyoto Protocol⁵⁵ and Paris Agreement,⁵⁶ watering down the main international policy mechanisms for climate change mitigation to serve industry interests.

INDUSTRY RESISTS EFFORTS TO "PLAY THE HEALTH CARD": In 1996, the Global Climate Coalition (an international industry lobby group against climate change mitigation, with Exxon Mobil and the American Petroleum Institute among its leading members) briefed its members to resist attempts of national governments to “play the health card” with “an unfounded argument” that climate change would have damaging effects on human health. In the same year, Exxon developed an explicit strategy to undermine climate and health research.¹

THE UK MUST INSULATE CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS FROM INDUSTRY INFLUENCE FOLLOWING THE APPROACH TAKEN BY THE UN FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON TOBACCO CONTROL TOWARD THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

There is recent precedent for how policymakers should respond in the face of industry interference in addressing major public health threats. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) explicitly excludes tobacco industry representatives from participation, and the updated Global Strategy to Accelerate Tobacco Control proposes that “all WHO FCTC related activities undertaken are [...] insulated from any influence by the tobacco industry.”⁵⁷ This strategy has been effective, contributing to a “tobacco industry denormalisation” that, by highlighting the damaging influence of the industry’s actions on health, appears to reduce smoking prevalence.⁵⁸ There is evidence that similar mechanisms may work to promote effective climate policy, with framing climate action explicitly in terms of resisting fossil fuel expansion and reducing local harms such as air pollution attracting wider public support.⁵⁹

Heavily polluting industries should not be allowed to participate in UNFCCC negotiations. They should be denied lobbying or consultation opportunities with individual state delegates prior to the negotiations and they should not be offered

sponsorship opportunities at any event related to climate change mitigation. Such strict insulation is a proportionate response to an industry that has sought to undermine collective action on climate change at every opportunity.⁶⁰

THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON TOBACCO CONTROL: A treaty negotiated with the World Health Organisation to reduce harms caused by tobacco.

CONCLUSION

It is not too late for the UK to use its COP26 presidency to guide action at the pace and scale needed to keep temperature rises to within 1.5°C. However, if the UK is to make the most of this opportunity, and play a meaningful role in inspiring ambitious action on the climate crisis beyond the climate talks in Glasgow, an immediate change of policy direction is needed.

Whereas the news that oil companies such as BP will not be granted a formal role at COP26 is encouraging, they are not the only party whose climate commitments “don’t stack up”.⁶¹ As this briefing has explained, financial and regulatory support for the fossil fuel industry, as well as the possibility of a number of new high-emission projects, including a deep-coal mine in Cumbria and an oil-field off the coast of Shetland, threaten to further derail the UK’s meagre progress on climate mitigation.

The launch of the UK government’s hotly anticipated strategy for reaching ‘net zero’ has been plagued by concerns that the plans lack the necessary ambition and funding. Not only does the strategy’s plan to create 440,000 green jobs pale in comparison to the 1.24 million that research by the Trade Union Congress has indicated could be established over two years,⁶² the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has come under fire after it transpired that the figure does not refer exclusively to newly created jobs.⁶³

Elsewhere, major oil-producing nations including Saudi Arabia, Australia and Japan have been hard at work lobbying the UN to play down the need to move away from fossil fuels.⁶⁴ While demanding that key wording referring to the need for “urgent

action” be “eliminated” from UN reports ahead of COP26, oil-producing nations, mostly members of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, have also been arguing in favour of unproven Carbon Capture Storage technology in order to continue exploiting fossil fuel reserves and further delay a just transition to zero carbon.

As the cause of raising global ambition to tackle the climate crisis faces setback after setback, the signs of a growing human health crisis have become ever more severe. The latest report from the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change makes for alarming reading.⁶⁵ Rising sea levels, food and water insecurity, extreme heat, and the spread of new diseases imperil the lives of millions around the globe. Climate change, the Lancet highlights, is now on track to become the “defining narrative of human health”. As the climate crisis gathers pace, deep health inequalities are becoming further entrenched, with agricultural workers in low and medium-income countries among the worst affected by the record temperatures seen over the past year.

A recent letter to world leaders, coordinated by the Global Climate and Health Alliance and signed by more than 400 organisations representing around 45 million healthcare professionals around the world, highlights a path forward for the COP26 presidency and world leaders.⁶⁶ With communities and nations across the Global South bearing the brunt of the health impacts of the climate crisis, wealthy nations, the countries chiefly responsible for both current and historic emissions, must commit to doing their fair share. As we have argued in this report, this necessarily means ending support for carbon-intensive industries, directing funds towards creating green jobs and infrastructure while supporting Global South nations to decarbonise in a way that is fair, including through mechanisms such as climate reparations.

Such measures to address the climate crisis will not only have significant positive environmental impacts, they are also a strategy to tackle the stark inequalities in global health that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. All over the world, healthcare professionals are getting ready to join the thousands of others who will be taking to the streets during the COP26 climate talks in Glasgow. Despite attempts to obfuscate and delay solutions, the voice of the health community could not be clearer on the scale of the challenge posed by the climate crisis. To salvage a chance of preventing a worst-case climate scenario, the time has come to play the health card.

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