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COVID-19: Issues and Challenges of Migrant and Diaspora Communities



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COVID-19: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF MIGRANT AND DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

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COVID-19: Issues and Challenges of Migrant and Diaspora Communities

Arsala Nizami*

Executive Summary

Ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerabilities of the migrant communities have increased manifold. With a high contagion rate, the disease has led to worldwide closure of workplaces. This resulted in unprecedented challenges to migrant and diaspora communities such as job losses, discrimination, non-payment of wages, among others. Against this backdrop, on the occasion of 'International Labour Day', GRFDT organised a webinar titled 'COVID 19: issues and challenges of migrant and diaspora communities' on May 1st, 2020. The Discussion brought together scholars from diverse domains to throw light on the issues and challenges of migrant and diaspora communities. This policy brief is an outcome of the Discussions that identifies issues and challenges of the migrant and diaspora communities along with giving a number of key recommendations for protection and welfare of these communities.

The key policy recommendations are inclusive of - a). Legal and social protection for migrants and refugees in various countries. Host countries and home countries may collaborate and sign agreements for protection of such groups; b). Need to identify the most vulnerable groups within migrants and refugee communities and provide health facilities and proper livelihood to them; c). Easing of visa restrictions for entrepreneurs and skilled workers, d). Women to be given proper health, legal and livelihood opportunities. Protective gears to be provided to those women who are involved in healthcare services; e). Special protection programmes to be developed for children that protect them from COVID-19 at one level and take care of their immunization and vaccination at the other, f). Reintegration and repatriation of returning migrant workers, g). Facilitation of skills and education for the unprivileged children.

Keywords: COVID-19, Migrants, Indian Diaspora, Diaspora Communities, COVID 19 Pandemic, Labour Emigrants

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Note: Views expressed are of author(s).

Introduction

On ‘International Labour Day’, GRFDT organized an virtual panel discussion on ‘COVID-19: Issues and Challenges of Migrant and Diaspora Communities’. Scholars from fourteen countries had participated at the discussion forum. Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 and its induced lockdown, the migrant community has become a face of the pandemic nationally as well as internationally. COVID-19 and the movement of people have a very close relationship. The pandemic became global as a result of the movement of the people. The subsequent lockdown resulted in another pandemic that affected the migrant communities the worse as they not just faced with the challenge of losing their employment, but also that of survival.

The high concentration rate in terms of contagion of and deaths by the pathogenic disease has become a serious and unprecedented challenge especially for the migrant and diaspora communities. The increase in cases of COVID-19 has brought a halt to a major part of the economy. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), global economic growth is seen to be declining to 2.4 percent a whole year compared to an already weak 2.9 percent in 2019(OECD 2020). It was further noted that the global economy is estimated to rise to a modest 3.3 percent in the year 2021 (OECD 2020). However, in its report, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) mentioned that the expected recovery in 2021 is quite uncertain. This has resulted in creating deep anxiety for millions who have lost their jobs. Prior to the spread of COVID-19, the migrant stock of many countries was increasing. However, the unexpected halt in migrations along with increasing returns has the potential to affect the national as well as the world economy. Against this backdrop, the Panel Discussion brought together scholars from a diverse field of work and academic domains to throw light on the issues and challenges of migrant and diaspora communities.

Fig.: COVID 19 and Work Hour Loss



Source: ILO nowcasting model (see Technical Annex 1).

Source: ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition, Updated estimates and analysis, June 2020.

The COVID-19 has not only changed the course of migrations drastically but there are apprehensions that future migration experience has become more vulnerable. Therefore, such panel discussions are necessary as they become a ground for future policies. The webinar started with Dr. Smita Tiwari

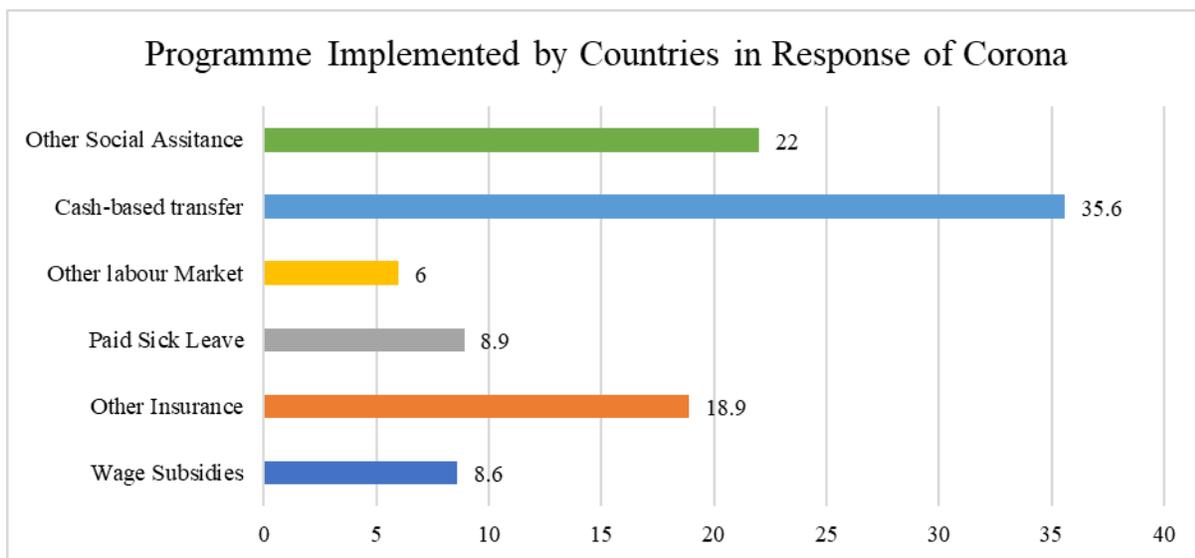
presenting the welcome note and requesting the moderator, Dr. Nandini Sen to start the discussion. Dr. Sen, after introducing the panelists, asserted that during the pandemic, the usual life has become chaotic as there is immense fear to remain safe. However, in such a crisis also it is necessary to see the silver lining and discuss the issues that are of immense importance not just at a regional level, but at the global level as well. In this regard, Dr. Sen started the discussion and asked Prof. Brij Maharaj a pertinent question: What are the implications of COVID-19 for refugees and undocumented migrants in India and South Africa?

The Problem is grave for the poor and marginalized: Prof. Brij Maharaj

Professor Maharaj asserted that pandemic has raised anxieties of people across the globe. The usual routine has been disturbed with means of transport such as airplanes, trains, and buses being shut down. However, the poor and the marginalized have been the worst affected because of the pandemic. In India, a 4-hour intimation was given for the lockdown. This suggests a lack of consideration towards poor people. Poor people are part of the precarious economy and live on the day to day subsistence basis. With a paucity of sustenance resources at hand, the migrants decided to move to their hometown, where they will at the least not die out of hunger. The issues of lockdown intertwined with migration have brought forward horrendous stories of migrants trying to walk hundreds of kilometres to reach their homes. Thus, in India COVID-19 induced lockdown hit the marginalized the worst by aggravating poverty and sustenance issues.

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— Prof. Brij Maharaj



Source: Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, 9 APRIL 2020, UN Women.

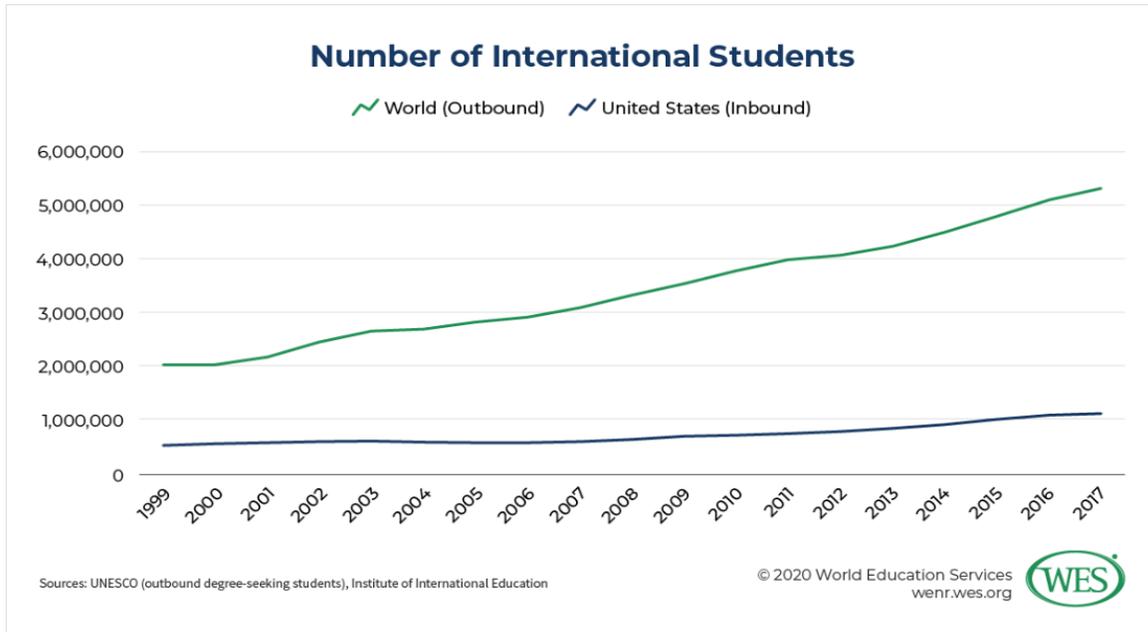
In South Africa, there was a lease time of around 12-13 days before the lockdown. Sufficient time was given for preparations for the lockdown. Various advisories for remaining safe were issued such as

washing hands regularly. Additionally, the poor were given soap bars as well. However, the availability of water is a problem in South Africa. Other serious issues are related to corruption, race class division, and xenophobia, that stands exposed during the pandemic. COVID-19 cuts across race, caste, and class, and it knows no boundaries. Rich and poor are getting the infection irrespectively. But the problem is grave for the poor and marginalized because of their vulnerabilities. The concept of social distancing which is being promoted during the pandemic is an elite concept, different from the realities of the poor.

Uncertainty of H1B Visa is a Challenge for the US as well as Indian Professionals: Ashook Ramsaran

Mr. Ashook Ramsaran, President of Indian Diaspora Council and Entrepreneur based in New York, spoke on the impact of COVID-19 on the diaspora and migrant communities in the US and Canada. He asserted that COVID 19 has a global economic, social, and domestic impact, which has led to a slowing down in manufacturing, reduction in employment, limited trade, etc. All these problems are intertwined and need a robust solution. The trends of persons catching COVID19 infection are increasing and will continue to increase until and unless a vaccine or proper cure is developed for the same. The economic impact is estimated to be a 20-25% slowdown in manufacturing, energy services, and trade for the year 2021-2022. It affects society as business and trade are reduced forcing people to be at home.

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Source: Schulmann, P. (May 26, 2020). Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Coronavirus Crisis on International Student Mobility to the United States. World Education Services. Retrieved on 07 August 2020 from <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/05/perfect-storm-the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-on-international-student-mobility-to-the-united-states>

In the US, there are 4.1 million people of Indian origin. Of those 2,50,000 are on H1B visas, which may not be renewed. There is uncertainty and apprehensions that they may be asked to go back. This could be due to a slowdown in the economy and the resultant unemployment. This mostly affects the poor and unskilled. We, nevertheless, should focus on a positive side on developing a vaccine, on innovation and entrepreneurship, better preparedness with bioengineering, usage of digital forums, etc.

The skilled Indian migrants are doing fine, whereas the working class are badly hit in Malaysia: Dr. Denison Jayasooriya

Dr. Denison Jayasooriya, scholar and public figure from Malaysia discussed foreign migrants and the Indian diaspora in Malaysia. The COVID 19 cases have been 671 in Malaysia, with 103 deaths. The Government has introduced immediate cash transfers, food assistance, and special assistance. The major impact has been that of Movement Control Order. While the cases are low, the arrests have been rampant upon movements. There are about 2 million migrant workers in Malaysia, the majority of whom are from Indonesia, but a sizable number are from Nepal, India, and other countries. These migrant communities are badly hit because of the movement control order. Being confined without cash, food, and other basic amenities, they are vulnerable. It's worse off for illegal migrants as they are not provided any kind of assistance and they may get arrested if they come out; therefore, they are living in shabby conditions.

Among the Indian community, the skilled migrants are doing fine, but people at the bottom are badly hit. The increase of indebtedness, and domestic violence, dearth of social protection mechanisms, inequality etc. are some of the grave issues of poor Indian migrants. The real struggle is towards the post-COVID development agenda and the need to build resilience in these communities. However, the role of civil society is appreciable. Civil society is helping in providing basic amenities, food, and finances. The positive side of the pandemic however is that it has helped in galvanizing people's spirit in terms of solidarity and strengthening linkage between rural and urban.

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— Dr. Denison Jayasooriya

The discussions by the three panelists led the moderator Dr. Sen to ask them a common question regarding the policy measures that should be emulated by other countries that their country is following. All three panelists pointed towards the role of civil society, faith-based philanthropic communities, social activists to be playing a crucial role in helping the poor and marginalized.

Migrant Women face disproportionate challenge due to COVID 19: Sadananda Sahoo

Next panelist, Dr. Sadananda Sahoo discussed the gendered aspect of the COVID-19 lockdown. The impact of pandemic affected several sectors including the service sector, in which women are hugely represented. One of the reports by UNFPA suggested that women represent 70% in the health and social sector. Being the frontline workers, women face health risks. Additionally, financial, and social aspects

The impact of pandemic affected several sectors including the service sector, in which women are hugely represented.

— Dr. Sadananda Sahoo

are also crucial to the emerging issues for women across the globe. COVID-19 may lead to demographic, political, skill requirement changes across the sectors. Therefore, there is uncertainty about several sectors, which can have huge implications for women as they face income and health vulnerabilities. Furthermore, women are exposed to increased domestic violence due to the lockdown.

Job Loss is a huge challenge for Returnee Migrants: Feroz Khan

Dr. Feroz Khan discussed the impact of return migration and remittances on children. Due to the pandemic, Indian migrants in host countries are on the verge of job loss, which leads to shrinking of the remittances. There are high chances that a reduction in remittances will reduce the amount of investment in children’s education. Due to misinformation about COVID 19, people are saving money for essential commodities. Therefore, they are reducing their spending on education. Similarly, the impact of increased return migrations will again lead to cutting down of expenses poor children’s education. Thus, COVID 19 will widen the gap between rich and poor. Rich students can continue their education during the pandemic through e-learning. However, the impact is worse on poor children as they don’t have access to computers or the internet.

Due to the pandemic, Indian migrants in host countries are on the verge of job loss, which leads to shrinking of the remittances.

- Dr. Feroz Khan

India must think seriously about the reintegration of the returning workers: Rakesh Ranjan

Dr. Rakesh Ranjan discussed the problems of the Indian migrant workers in the Gulf region. It has been estimated that nearly 40,000 migrant workers have been infected by the current pandemic. GCC is a heterogeneous region, each country has a different set of rules regarding migrant workers; therefore, the

Region	2009	2016	2017	2018	2019e	2020f	2021f
(\$ billion)							
Low and Middle Income	307	446	487	531	554	445	470
East Asia and Pacific	80	128	134	143	147	128	138
Europe and Central Asia	36	46	55	61	65	47	49
Latin America and the Caribbean	55	73	81	89	96	77	82
Middle-East and North Africa	33	51	57	58	59	47	48
South Asia	75	111	118	132	140	109	115
Sub-Saharan Africa	29	39	42	48	48	37	38
World	437	597	643	694	714	572	602
(Growth rate, percent)							
Low and Middle Income	-5.0	-1.5	9.1	9.0	4.4	-19.7	5.6
East Asia and Pacific	-4.8	-0.5	5.1	6.8	2.6	-13.0	7.5
Europe and Central Asia	-14.7	-0.3	20	10.9	6.6	-27.5	5.0
Latin America and the Caribbean	-11.3	7.4	11	9.9	7.4	-19.3	5.9
Middle-East and North Africa	-6.2	-1.2	12.1	1.4	2.6	-19.6	1.6
South Asia	4.5	-5.9	6.2	12.1	6.1	-22.1	5.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	-0.2	-8.3	9.3	13.7	-0.5	-23.1	4.0
World	-5.1	-0.9	7.7	8.0	2.8	-19.9	5.2

problems of migrants in different countries are of different magnitude. Qatar for instance, has most of the migrants that are construction workers.

Fig.: Remittance trends (2009-2021)

Source: Migration and Development Brief 32, Knomad, The World Bank, April 2020.

They have been isolated in workers- camp with restricted mobility. Health care, basic food, and finances are crucial issues of concern for these workers. Oman, another Gulf country, stresses migrant workers to return to their home countries because of

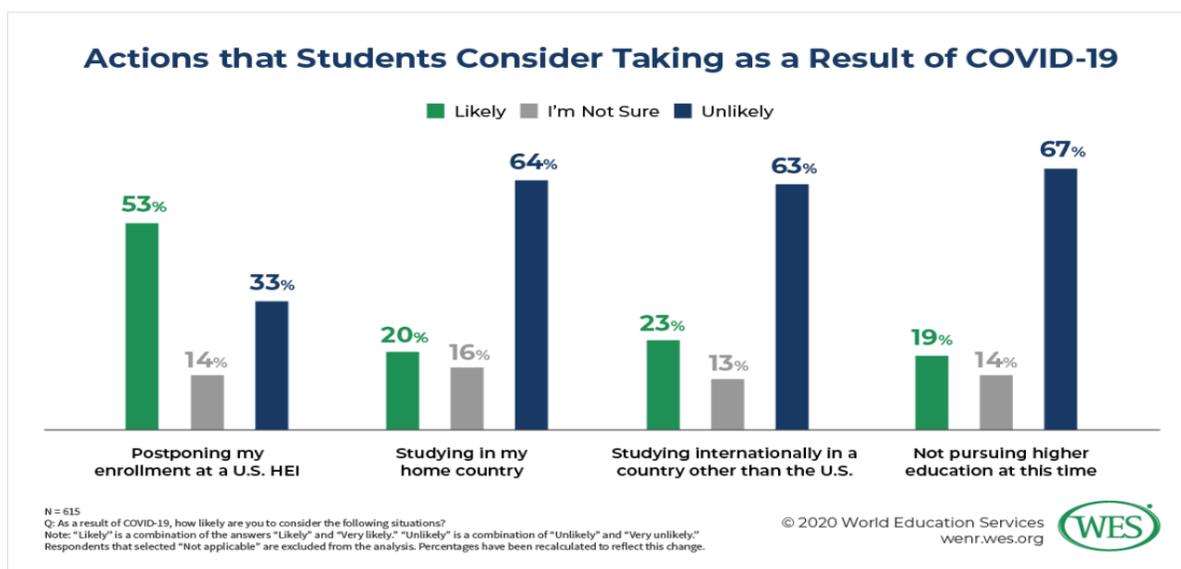
which workers are in stress as they are not able to work and must return. Similarly, migrants are facing different sets of issues in different GCC countries. Both India and GCC governments are not taking the issues of labor seriously. There is a need on the part of the Indian government to strategies the employment and reintegration of the returning workers.

Both India and GCC governments are not taking the issues of labor seriously. There is a need on the part of the Indian government to strategies the employment and reintegration of the returning workers.

— Dr. Rakesh Ranjan

Mobility of Teachers and Students are greatly affected due to COVID 19: Monika Bisht

Dr. Monika Bisht analyzed the impact of COVID 19 on globalization of higher education and issues and challenges of Indian students during the current pandemic. Education sector is one of the most affected sectors in India. In terms of globalization of higher education, students have been vulnerable in both sending and recipient countries. Supply of education services, cross border face to face consumption of education services, cessation of the mobility of teachers and other staff has been some of the areas of concern for students.



Source: Schulmann, P. (May 26, 2020). Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Coronavirus Crisis on International Student Mobility to the United States. World Education Services. Retrieved on 07 August 2020 from <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/05/perfect-storm-the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-on-international-student-mobility-to-the-united-states>

Due to the pandemic, there is an overdependence on e-learning, which challenges the existing regular form of education. This in turn affects the quality of education. The cessation of the mobility of students has also hindered the global demand and supply of students. Additionally, there has

Education sector is one of the most affected sectors in India. In terms of globalization of higher education, students have been vulnerable in both sending and recipient countries.

— Dr. Monika Bisht

also been an impact on the student exchange programs, issuance of student visas, and higher education in foreign universities. In such a scenario, students are apprehensive about their future and demand for robust policies.

Policy Suggestions

A variety of issues and its policy implications were discussed. There are both short term and long-term challenges with regards to migrant communities.

The panel discussion culminated in several policy recommendations:

- There should be legal and social protection for vulnerable groups such as migrants and refugees in various countries. There are reports of atrocities against migrants, incidences of xenophobia, unfavorable working and living conditions of migrants from the destination countries. Because of such atrocities, destination countries should develop legal and social protection tools and mechanisms for such communities. Home countries may also sign Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or distinct agreements to ensure such protection at this time of crisis.
- Migrants and workers in the bottom line must be given better access to health services and livelihood. Every country should keep in mind the Sustainable Development Goal Agendas. Since most of the countries have huge international migrants' stock, it is in the best interest of these states also to work towards providing health facilities and proper livelihood to their migrants to promote and achieve their sustainable development goals.
- Entrepreneurship should be promoted and hence the visa regulations for skilled workers need to be relaxed. Stringent visa regulations often prohibit entrepreneurs and skilled professionals to migrate to their preferred destinations. Setting up businesses in host countries benefits the host land as well as homeland equally as it creates job opportunities. Therefore, easing of visa restrictions specifically for entrepreneurs and skilled workers shall ensure labor and other vulnerable migrants their employment security.
- Women and vulnerable groups should be given better health, legal protection, and livelihood opportunities. Many of the women migrant workers are health care providers and therefore are at the forefront in the fight against COVID-19. This puts them and their families in high-risk. Therefore, better protective gear, health, legal, and social protection should be provided to them.
- Special social protection programs should be developed for children specifically in under-developed and developing states. This should be firstly inclusive of providing complete information about COVID-19 as well as rules of social distancing. At the second level, care should be given for proper and timely vaccination and immunization of children. Additionally, parents and caretakers should be properly counseled regarding providing proper care to children, specifically vulnerable children. Furthermore, urgent attention is required to facilitate education and skills during COVID 19. This is specifically regarding those children who don't have access to online education system. While middle class and rich children have access to the online education. However, the problems are with children in poor families, whose education has come to a halt.
- Sending countries should have adequate mechanism to integrate migrate workers in the local labour market productively. Returning migrants have suddenly lost their job and sense of security due to the pandemic, which not only affects them but also their families. Therefore, reintegration and rehabilitation is a necessary exercise for these migrant workers.

Brief Profile of the Speakers

Nandini C Sen, Associate Professor of English at the Bharati College, University of Delhi.

Brij Maharaj, Senior Professor of geography at the University of Kwazulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa.

Denison Jayasooriya, Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnic Studies, UKM, Malaysia

Ashook Ramsaran, Guyanese-born, was the former president of GOPIO (New York) and currently president of Indian Diaspora Council International.

Sadananda Sahoo, Faculty at the School of Interdisciplinary and Trans-disciplinary Studies (SOITS), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

Feroz Khan, Currently associated with the Institute for Research and Development in School Education (IRDSE), Modern School.

Rakesh Ranjan, Assistant Professor at the Centre for Development Practice and Research, Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Monika Bisht, Working with the Institute for Research and Development in School Education, New Delhi.

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