

Roundtable discussion report

Inclusive Agripreneurship : Challenges & Opportunities



 Agribusiness and
Innovation Platform


INTERNATIONAL CROPS RESEARCH
INSTITUTE FOR THE SEMI-ARID TROPICS

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Table of Content

SUMMARY	03
EVENT DETAILS	04
CONTEXT: WHY INCLUSIVE AGRIPRENEURSHIP	06
DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS	06
• STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE	07
• CHALLENGES	08
• SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS	09
• POLICY INTERVENTIONS	10
ROLE OF AIP- ICRISAT	17
CONCLUSION	18

SUMMARY

Inclusive Agripreneurship is essential for fostering equitable economic growth, enhancing food security, and promoting sustainable development in the agricultural sector.

Engaging a broader base of participants in agricultural activities, inclusive agripreneurship can significantly enhance food production and availability, promotes gender equality and empowering women to take on leadership roles and provides young people with opportunities to develop innovative solutions and technologies for the agricultural sector. However, achieving inclusive agripreneurship requires addressing significant challenges such as access to finance, education, training, market access, and policy and regulatory reforms. At the same time, it presents numerous opportunities that can shape agricultural entrepreneurship.

The Roundtable meeting on "Inclusive Agripreneurship: Challenges & Opportunities" was convened at the Agribusiness and Innovation Platform at ICRISAT, Patancheru with an aim to bring together diverse stakeholders— Incubators, Startups, Financial institutions, Private companies, and community leaders—to discuss specific challenges, innovative solutions, and strategies for promoting inclusivity.

The event featured prominent speakers from various organizations, including MANAGE, Harvest Plus, Hieffer International, Aghub, Think Ag, and more. The session focused on real-world challenges and solutions in inclusive agripreneurship, with industry experts sharing their insights and experiences.

The participants identified several key challenges, including limited access to capital, market access and linkage difficulties, lack of awareness about support programs, inadequate mentorship, and issues with scaling and sustainability post-grant period.

They also highlighted problems at the ideation level, such as unclear problem statements and business models, insufficient training for pitching ideas, lack of necessary infrastructure, high costs of business idea validation, language barriers in pitching, high competition, and regulatory hurdles.

To address these challenges, the experts proposed several solutions, including developing a centralized digital database of agri startups in India, re-orienting incubator and accelerator programs to align with the evolving entrepreneurial ecosystem, increasing platforms for ideation and validation, enhancing awareness of government support programs, providing long-term support through incubation and acceleration programs, offering financial assistance to reduce validation costs, investing in necessary infrastructure, and providing adequate mentoring and handholding at the ideation and pitching stages.

This report provides a summary of the discussion at the Roundtable meeting and the insights and recommendations emerged from the meeting, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, continuous learning, and innovation in overcoming the challenges in inclusive agripreneurship and fostering sustainable economic growth.



EVENT DETAILS

The Round Table on Inclusive Agripreneurship: Challenges & Opportunities was held on **21 June 2024**, at AIP – ICRISAT, Patancheru, Hyderabad. The event was chaired by Dr. Victor Afari Sefa, Acting DDG-R and Research Program Director - Enabling Systems Transformation, ICRISAT, and moderated by Dr. Dinesh Kumar Chauhan, CEO & Head, AIP-ICRISAT. The round table brought together a diverse group of speakers and participants, including MANAGE, Harvest Plus, Hieffer International, Aghub, Think Ag, and more. The primary goal of the event was to discuss specific challenges, innovative solutions, and strategies to promote inclusive agripreneurship.

Chair: Dr. Victor Afari Sefa , Acting DDG-R and Research Program Director - Enabling Systems Transformation, ICRISAT

Moderator: Dr. Dinesh Kumar Chauhan, CEO & Head, AIP-ICRISAT

Speakers

- Dr. Saravanan Raj, Director, MANAGE
 - Mr. Binu Cheriyan, Country Director, Harvest Plus
 - Dr. Shyam Kumar Katta, Hieffer International
 - Dr. Kalpana Shastri, Managing Director, Aghub
 - Mr. Hemendra Mathur, Co-founder, Think Ag
 - Mr. Mendu Srinivasulu, Head Agri – Smart Inputs
 - Ms. Deepti Bhimala, Founder, NobraC Innovations Pvt Ltd
 - Dr. Jagadeesh Gandla, Chief Operating Officer, Bio FABA
 - Mr. Govardhan Reddy, CEO, Desi Nutri - Skandhanshi Agro Foods
 - Mr. Srikanth Kotha, Founder, Aisystech
 - Mr. K Vijay Kumar, Agrifriend Advanced Biotech Projects
-



CONTEXT : WHY INCLUSIVE AGRIPRENEURSHIP ?



ENTREPRENEURIAL SCENARIO IN INDIA

Entrepreneurship has been pivotal in India's emergence as a global economic powerhouse, creating jobs and driving economic growth. According to the GEM India Report (FY 21–22), India's entrepreneurial activity surged in 2021, with the total entrepreneurial activity rate rising to 14.4% from 5.3% in 2020. The government has rolled out various schemes, such as Startup India and Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, to promote entrepreneurship and support new businesses. As of March 2022, India boasts over 60,000 registered startups, with unicorn startups valued at over \$319 billion. Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) contribute around 30% to India's GDP and 50% to total exports.

In the agricultural sector, agribusiness entrepreneurship is a key promoter of agricultural growth in developing countries where the majority of the population is engaged in agriculture. Several studies have highlighted the importance of agriculture in reducing poverty and rural distress through disruptive innovations. Thus, giving due impetus for the holistic development of the agri-entrepreneurship ecosystem is necessary for overall economic development and national prosperity. In India, the regime over the past several years has actively promoted the entrepreneurial spirit through various interventions across sectors. As more than half of the country's population depends on agriculture, the growth in the number of agri-startups plays a crucial role in transforming the lives of farmers and rural people. Moreover, the success of the agri-startups depends on the economically feasible focus area within agriculture and support from government institutions. The government has also approved a Rs. 500 crore "Accelerator Fund" to support agri-startups, fostering innovation and modernizing the agricultural ecosystem.

INCLUSIVE AGRIPRENEURSHIP

Inclusive Agriprenurship refers to entrepreneurial activities in agriculture that actively involve, and benefit marginalized groups, such as smallholder farmers, women, youth, and other marginalized groups. This concept aims to create opportunities for these groups, promoting economic inclusion, reducing inequalities, and promoting sustainable development.

Objectives

Inclusive entrepreneurship policies strive to provide equal opportunities for all individuals to create sustainable businesses, regardless of their background, age, or gender. These policies focus on groups that are under-represented in business creation or face greater barriers, including women, youth, the unemployed, seniors, and migrants.

The primary objectives of Inclusive Agriprenurship:

- **Increase Awareness and Motivation:** To raise awareness about the potential of self-employment and build motivation to pursue entrepreneurial activities in agriculture and allied sectors.
- **Equity and Access:** Breaking down barriers and providing equal access to resources
- **Gender Inclusivity:** Ensuring women have equal opportunities to participate in and lead agricultural ventures
- **Youth Engagement:** Providing young agripreneurs to share their ideas and experiences
- **Supportive Policies and Frameworks:** Policies that support land rights, access to credit, and subsidies
- **Technology and Innovation:** Integration of modern technology (Digital platforms, mobile applications, and precision agriculture tools)
- **Market Access and Value Chains:** Supporting smallholders in reaching larger markets to ensuring fair trade practices



In recent years, agripreneurship has become a crucial pathway towards sustainable development, especially in emerging economies. It encompasses innovative solutions that enhance productivity, efficiency, and inclusivity in the agricultural sector. However, achieving Inclusive Agripreneurship involves overcoming significant challenges such as access to finance, education, training, market access, policy & regulatory reform, etc., while capitalizing on numerous opportunities that shape agricultural entrepreneurship.

Inclusive agripreneurship holds significant potential for driving sustainable development and economic inclusion in the agricultural sector. By addressing challenges with initiatives such as entrepreneurship training, coaching, and mentoring, microfinance is expected to lead to an increase in business creation. Leveraging these opportunities, stakeholders can create a more equitable and prosperous future for marginalized groups in agriculture.



ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS



STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE ON INCLUSIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The perspectives of different stakeholders, including incubators, accelerators, entrepreneurs, startups, development partners and financial enablers are summarized below:

» Incubators and Accelerators

Incubators and accelerators play a crucial role in promoting a robust agripreneurship ecosystem. Organizations like MANAGE's Centre for Innovation and Agripreneurship (CIA), Ag-Hub, and ThinkAg have initiated various programs to support aspiring agripreneurs. These initiatives focus on capacity building, targeted training for women and youth, and connecting tech startups with rural farmers. However, there several challenges were highlighted and discussed that need to be addressed to enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Policy reforms	High costs associated with the validation process for deep tech and biotech startups pose a significant barrier. Reducing these costs through policy reforms and providing subsidies or grants for validation can reduce this burden.
Collaboration and Partnership	Many startups attempt to solve problems independently, ignoring the power of collaboration and partnership. Encouraging collaborative projects and partnerships can enhance innovation and resource sharing.
Lack of Clarity of Problem Statement	Founders often lack a clear definition of the problem their business model aims to solve. This can be addressed by incorporating more comprehensive problem identification workshops and mentorship programs that focus on defining and refining problem statements.
Financial Prudence	Startups and Agri entrepreneur often face challenges in managing finances effectively due to lack of understanding about the subject. Implementing financial literacy programs and providing access to financial management tools and advisors can help startups manage their resources better.
Dependence on Grants	Many startups rely heavily on grants and subsidies and struggle to secure further investments after 4 or 5 years. Encouraging alternative funding sources, such as venture capital, and educating startups on investment strategies can reduce this dependency.
Focus on Emerging Areas	Traditional incubator models are outdated, necessitating a focus on specific sub-impact sectors and contemporary issues such as drones, biotechnology, plant proteins etc. Updating incubation models to align with current trends and emerging areas in agripreneurship can enhance relevance and effectiveness.
Inclusivity	The influx of non-agricultural graduates into the agripreneurial sector brings fresh perspectives but also highlights the need to support graduates from agricultural backgrounds. Tailoring support programs to cater to both groups can foster a more inclusive ecosystem
Customized programs	Tailoring incubation and acceleration programs to suit the evolving entrepreneurial landscape is crucial. Continuously updating programs to reflect changes in technology, market demands, and policy landscapes can ensure sustained relevance and

"Speakers Note"

"Founders often lack clarity in defining problems, face high validation costs for deep tech and biotech, and struggle with financial management. Many startups overlook the power of collaboration. There is a need for programs focusing on scalability, region-specific interventions, leveraging partnerships, and sharing local success stories to inspire and guide new initiatives". - **Mr. Hemendra Mathur, Co-Founder, Think Ag**



"I observed that despite existing policies, only around 1-2% of young agripreneurs receive adequate funding. Urban incubation centers thrive, but rural areas lack support. Many potential agripreneurs are unaware of available resources, and training infrastructure remains inadequate." - **Dr. Saravanan Raj, Director, MANAGE**



"Agri-startups face funding gaps, language barriers in pitch decks, lack of market access, and need tailored support. We emphasize pitch decks in local languages and robust capacity building to foster inclusive entrepreneurship." - **Dr. Kalpana Shastri, Managing Director, Ag-Hub**

**Entrepreneurs and young startups**

The young startups and entrepreneurs shared the several common challenges they face. These include difficulty in establishing effective market connections for smallholders, limited funding that hinders expansion and innovation efforts, and farmer reluctance to adopt new technologies due to awareness gaps. Navigating traditional dealer and distributor networks without significant financial backing poses additional challenges. Biotech startups struggle with overcoming mainstream acceptance issues compared to other tech sectors and encountering complex market entry barriers. Furthermore, there's a recognized limitation in domain knowledge specific to the agricultural industry, prompting a need for collaboration with institutions to enhance expertise in applying AI technologies effectively. These challenges collectively underscore the uphill battle young agri-startups face in integrating innovative solutions and achieving sustainable growth in the agricultural sector.

- **Market Connections:** Difficulty in establishing effective market connections for smallholders.
- **Funding:** Limited funding that hinders expansion and innovation efforts.
- **Technology Adoption:** Farmer reluctance to adopt new technologies due to awareness gaps.
- **Distribution Networks:** Navigating traditional dealer and distributor networks without significant financial backing.



- **Biotech Acceptance:** Biotech startups like Agri-Friend Advanced Biotech Projects face challenges in overcoming mainstream acceptance issues compared to other tech sectors and encountering complex market entry barriers.
- **Domain Knowledge:** A recognized limitation in domain knowledge specific to the agricultural industry, prompting a need for collaboration with institutions to enhance expertise in applying AI technologies effectively.

Speakers Note :

AgriBiotech lacks the glamorous image of sectors like education, affecting investor support and market acceptance, especially for biotech startups. Despite innovations like CRISPR-based rice varieties, market entry remains complex. Elevating AgriBiotech's profile is crucial to attract investment and mainstream acceptance, similar to deep tech." - Dr. Jagadeesh Gandla, Chief Operating Officer, Bio FABA (Federation of Asian Biotech Associations)



Development Partners and financial enablers

The promotion of inclusive agripreneurship faces significant challenges, as observed by organizations like Heifer International, Samunnati, and Harvest Plus. Access to finance remains a substantial barrier, with small startups struggling to secure necessary investments ranging from essential for scaling effectively. The limited availability of high-quality agri inputs, such as biofortified seeds, fertilizers, coupled with low awareness among farmers about their benefits. Additionally, there is a lack of adequate market linkages, making it difficult for surplus farm produce to reach commercial markets. Farmers often view agriculture as unreliable for income due to market information dependency, leading to suboptimal pricing for their produce. These challenges are compounded by insufficient rural incubation services and the difficulty in finding affordable mentorship, especially in tier II and III cities. Addressing these barriers requires concerted efforts to enhance awareness, provide financial support, foster market linkages, and create enabling environments through incubation services and strategic partnerships.



“Speakers Note”



*"The significant challenges in promoting inclusive agripreneurship with biofortified seeds include the limited availability of high-quality seeds, low farmer awareness of their nutritional benefits, and inadequate market linkages for surplus produce." - **Mr. Binu Cheriyan, Country Director, Harvest Plus***



*"There's a significant need for rural incubation to support entrepreneurs, as access to finance remains a substantial barrier for small startups. Many agripreneurs see agriculture as unreliable due to market information dependence, leading to suboptimal pricing." - **Dr. Shyam Kumar Katta, Director-Programs, Heifer International***

*We propose policy interventions, such as offering breaks within academic degrees for students to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. This initiative aims to foster a supportive environment within educational institutions and cultivate entrepreneurial acumen among students." - **Dr. Bheema Reddy, Manager, IP and Technology Transfer, Indo Innovation Centre – AICTE***

CHALLENGES

The following are some of the key challenges discussed :

Challenges in market access & linkage : Market access and linkage are significant challenges for agri-entrepreneurs, especially those in rural areas. Many agribusinesses struggle to connect with larger markets and buyers, which limits their sales opportunities and revenue growth. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure and logistics further hinder the efficient transport and distribution of agricultural products, making it difficult for agri-entrepreneurs to compete in broader markets.

Lack of awareness about supporting programs & schemes for startups : Many agri-entrepreneurs are unaware of the various government and private sector programs and schemes designed to support startups. This lack of awareness prevents them from taking advantage of funding opportunities, training programs, and other resources that could help their businesses grow.

Access to right and affordable mentorship : Accessing the right and affordable mentorship can be particularly challenging in the agri-entrepreneurship sector. Many entrepreneurs lack connections with experienced mentors who understand the specific needs and challenges of agricultural businesses.

Scaling & sustainability difficulties post-grant period : Many agri-startups face challenges in scaling and maintaining sustainability after the initial grant period of 4-5 years approximately. Once grant funding runs out, these businesses often struggle to secure additional funding or revenue streams to support ongoing operations and growth.

Lack of clarity in problem statements and business models at the ideation level : At the ideation level, many agri-entrepreneurs struggle with defining clear problem statements and developing viable business models. This lack of clarity hinders their ability to attract investment and support, as well as to execute their ideas effectively.

Insufficient training for pitching ideas : Effective pitching is essential for securing funding and support, but many agri-entrepreneurs lack sufficient training in this area. Poorly presented ideas can fail to attract investors, even if the underlying concepts are strong.

Lack of training infrastructure : The absence of adequate training infrastructure is a significant barrier for agri-entrepreneurs. Many rural areas lack access to training centers and educational resources that can help entrepreneurs develop the skills they need.

High cost of business idea validation : Validating business ideas is expensive, especially for resource-constrained agri-entrepreneurs. Costs associated with market research, prototyping, and testing can be prohibitive, preventing many startups from moving beyond the ideation stage.

Difficulties in pitching business ideas for grants in vernacular languages : Many agri-entrepreneurs face difficulties in pitching their business ideas for grants due to language issues. Pitching in vernacular languages is challenging when grant processes and documentation are typically in English.

High competition among agripreneurs : The agri-entrepreneurship sector is highly competitive, with many startups competing for limited resources, funding, and market share. This intense competition make it difficult for new entrants to gain a foothold and succeed.

Regulatory and legal hurdles: Navigating regulatory and legal requirements are complex and time-consuming process for agri-entrepreneurs. Compliance with various laws and regulations require significant resources and expertise, which many startups lack.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

To address the above discussed challenges, several solutions were suggested. The following are some of the key solutions:

Development of a centralized digital database of agri-startups in India: Creating a centralized digital database for agripreneurs in India would provide a comprehensive resource for identifying and supporting new ventures in the agricultural sector. This database could facilitate connections between startups, investors, mentors, and support programs, encourage more collaborative and informed entrepreneurial ecosystem. It would also enable policymakers and stakeholders to better understand agripreneurship landscape and tailor their support accordingly.

Reorientation of incubator and accelerator programs to meet the changing needs of the entrepreneurial ecosystem : To address the shifting demands of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, incubator and accelerator programs need to be reoriented to offer more relevant resources, training, and support, they can better assist agri-startups in navigating contemporary challenges. This includes integrating new technologies, sustainable practices, and market trends to ensure that these programs remain effective and impactful.

Providing more platforms for ideation and validation : Increasing the number of platforms for ideation and validation is crucial for nurturing innovative agri-business ideas. These platforms can offer spaces for entrepreneurs to test their concepts, receive feedback, and refine their business models before seeking larger investments. Hackathons, innovation labs, and pitch events are examples of initiatives that help in promoting creativity and validate business ideas in the early stages.

Increasing awareness about support programs & schemes : Enhancing awareness about the various support programs and schemes available from the governments is essential for agri-entrepreneurs. Many entrepreneurs miss out on valuable opportunities due to a lack of information. Effective communication strategies, outreach programs, and partnerships with local organizations will help disseminating information and ensure that entrepreneurs are well-informed about the support they can access.

Offering long-term support through incubation and acceleration programs : Providing long-term support through incubation and acceleration programs can help agri-startups achieve sustainable growth. Rather than focusing solely on short-term gains, these programs should offer ongoing mentorship, resources, and networking opportunities that extend beyond the initial phases of development. This continuous support can help startups navigate challenges as they scale and evolve.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Financial assistance : Financial assistance aimed at reducing the cost of business idea validation can significantly benefit agri-entrepreneurs. Grants, subsidies, and low-interest loans will help cover the expenses associated with market research, prototyping, and testing, making it more feasible for startups to validate their concepts and attract further investment. This support will bridge the gap between ideation and successful market entry.

Investing in necessary infrastructure development :

Investing in the development of necessary infrastructure is essential for the success of agri-startups. This includes physical infrastructure, such as training , incubators ,digital infrastructure etc. Improved infrastructure will enhance efficiency, reduce costs, and enable better access to markets and resources, creating a more conducive environment for agri-entrepreneurship.

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Providing adequate mentoring and handholding : Offering adequate mentoring and handholding at the ideation and business pitching stages is critical for agri-entrepreneurs. Experienced mentors will be able to provide valuable insights, guidance, and support, helping entrepreneurs refine their ideas and effectively pitch them to investors and grant committees. Structured mentoring programs and personalized coaching can significantly enhance the chances of success for early-stage startups.

SUGGESTED POLICY INTERVENTIONS

Some of the policy interventions were highlighted as crucial during the roundtable discussion. These interventions may facilitate in creating a supportive environment where agripreneurs from diverse backgrounds can thrive, contributing to sustainable agricultural development and economic growth. A few of the policy suggestions are as follows:

Integrating Entrepreneurship into the Curriculum

Integrating agripreneurship into the agriculture and allied sectors' academic curriculum is a crucial policy intervention to encourage student entrepreneurship. By incorporating entrepreneurship education within academic degrees, students can gain essential skills and knowledge while pursuing their studies. Additionally, policies should allow students to take breaks from their academic programs to pursue entrepreneurial ventures, providing them with the flexibility to experiment with and develop their business ideas. Such an approach ensures that students can seamlessly blend their academic and entrepreneurial pursuits, ultimately contributing to a more innovative and entrepreneurial mindset among graduates.

Review Funding Policies

Reviewing funding policies is essential to ensure better distribution and accessibility of funds for agri-entrepreneurs. Current funding mechanisms often fall short in reaching deserving startups, particularly those in rural or underserved areas. By reevaluating these policies, the government can identify and eliminate barriers that hinder equitable access to financial resources. This may involve streamlining application processes, creating targeted funding schemes that address the unique needs of agri-startups. Improved funding policies can provide the necessary financial support for agri-entrepreneurs to innovate, grow, and contribute to the agricultural sector's development.

Promote Public-Private Partnerships

Promoting public-private partnerships is a strategic policy intervention to create a supportive funding ecosystem for agri-entrepreneurs. Encouraging collaborations between government entities, private investors, and financial institutions can leverage the strengths of each sector to provide comprehensive support to startups. These partnerships can offer a mix of funding options, including grants, loans, and equity investments, along with mentoring, training, and market access opportunities. By fostering a collaborative environment, public-private partnerships can enhance the availability of resources, reduce financial risks, and promote sustainable growth for agri-startups. This approach ensures that agri-entrepreneurs have access to a robust support network, facilitating their success and contributing to the overall economic growth of the agricultural sector.

Role of Agribusiness Innovation Platform of ICRISAT in promoting inclusive agripreneurship

The Agribusiness and Innovation Platform (AIP) at ICRISAT plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive agripreneurship by providing tailored support to agricultural startups and agribusiness ventures. Recognizing the sector's significance in economic development and food security, AIP offers robust Business Incubation Services aimed at nurturing innovation and accelerating the growth of startups. Through a supportive ecosystem led by industry experts, mentors, and advisors, AIP helps entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of the agricultural landscape. We provide comprehensive support including business development guidance, market analysis, access to funding, mentorship, networking opportunities, and specialized training. AIP fosters collaboration with industry leaders, research institutions, and investors, creating an environment where startups can thrive through knowledge exchange and strategic partnerships, thus enabling their success and contribution to sustainable agriculture.



CONCLUSION



The round table on "Inclusive Agripreneurship: Challenges & Opportunities" highlighted critical challenges such as access to capital, market linkages, and ideation clarity. Proposed solutions include a digital startup database, revamped support programs, and enhanced mentorship. The event concluded with a commitment to collaboration and innovation, with the objective to promote sustainable growth in agripreneurship.

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About

The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) is a pioneering International Organization committed to developing and improving dryland farming and agri-food systems to address the challenges of hunger, malnutrition, poverty, and environmental degradation affecting the 2.1 billion people residing in the drylands of Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and beyond.

ICRISAT was established under a Memorandum of Agreement between the Government of India and the CGIAR on the 28 March 1972. In accordance with the Headquarters Agreement, the Government of India has extended the status of a specified "International Organisation" to ICRISAT under section 3 of the United Nations (Privileges and Immunities) Act, 1947 of the Republic of India through Extraordinary Gazette Notification No. UI/222(66)/71, dated 28 October 1972, issued by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

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