

EMPOWERING THE POOR OR ENRICHING THE RICH: PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI'S EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES AND THE DIALECTICS OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the paradoxical outcomes of President Muhammadu Buhari's empowerment programmes and their effectiveness in alleviating poverty in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. Despite Nigeria's vast natural and human resources, over 63 percent of its population remains multidimensionally poor, underscoring the urgency of credible poverty alleviation strategies. Buhari's administration introduced the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) including N-Power, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), Conditional Cash Transfers, and the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme intended to create jobs, empower vulnerable households, and stimulate grassroots economic development. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates quantitative data from government and international reports with qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups conducted across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Findings revealed that while the initiatives achieved short-term gains such as temporary income support, modest business growth, and improved school attendance structural weaknesses limited their transformative potential. Key challenges included poor targeting, corruption, political patronage, inadequate funding, and weak institutional frameworks. Additionally, limited integration with long-term human capital development strategies, alongside gender and regional disparities, hindered sustainable poverty reduction. The study concludes that the programmes often functioned more as consumption-smoothing mechanisms than as enduring solutions to multidimensional poverty. It recommends strengthening governance and accountability, expanding investments in education and healthcare, and aligning empowerment initiatives with broader economic diversification to ensure that future social interventions achieve lasting poverty alleviation.

Keywords: Poverty Alleviation, Empowerment Programmes, National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP), Human Capital Development, Nigeria

Introduction

Poverty is one of the most enduring global challenges, undermining economic growth, human development, and social cohesion. In developing countries, particularly in sub-saharan Africa, poverty persists not only as a lack of income but as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing limited access to education, healthcare, sanitation, and opportunities for upward mobility (UNDP, 2023). Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, paradoxically harbours one of the highest concentrations of extreme poverty in the world. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), over 63% of

Nigeria's population is classified as multidimensionally poor, with disproportionate impact on women, youth, and rural dwellers.

Successive Nigerian governments have initiated various poverty alleviation and social empowerment programmes aimed at addressing this crisis. These have ranged from Operation Feed the Nation (1979), Better Life for Rural Women (1987), to the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) in the early 2000s. However, the results have often been underwhelming, plagued by issues of mismanagement, elite capture, and lack of sustainability (Aiyede, 2019). In this context, the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) introduced the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), comprising initiatives such as N-Power, GEEP, Conditional Cash Transfers, and the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme. These were touted as bold, pro-poor policies to address unemployment, support vulnerable households, and stimulate grassroots economic development.

While Buhari's empowerment programmes were presented as radical departure from past failures, public discourse and emerging evidence suggest a more complex reality. On one hand, government sources and supporters claim that millions of Nigerians benefited from skills acquisition, small-scale financing, and social safety nets (FGN, 2021). On the other, critics argue that these schemes were marred by poor targeting, corruption, inadequate monitoring, and political patronage, resulting in benefits skewed toward the politically connected rather than the genuinely poor (ICIR, 2023; Olarinmoye, 2020). The contradiction raises a critical question: Have these programmes genuinely empowered the poor, or have they merely served as instruments for enriching elites and reproducing inequality?

This study interrogates that tension by examining the dialectics of poverty alleviation under Buhari's empowerment programmes. It seeks to assess not just the policy intentions and surface outcomes, but also the distributional logic, institutional dynamics, and socioeconomic impacts of these interventions. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of whether state-led empowerment efforts in Nigeria are vehicles for structural transformation or tools for elite consolidation.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Poverty

Poverty is a multifaceted and deeply entrenched global phenomenon, commonly understood as a condition of severe deprivation in basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, shelter, health, and education. Traditionally, poverty was measured using income-based thresholds, such as the World Bank's definition of extreme poverty as living on less than \$1.90 per day (World Bank, 2022). However, scholars and development practitioners have since acknowledged that poverty is not merely about low income, but encompasses a range of social, economic, and psychological deprivations.

Types of Poverty

Absolute Poverty: Refers to a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, based on a fixed minimum threshold that is consistent across locations and over time. This is often measured against the international poverty line (World Bank, 2022).

Relative Poverty: Defined in relation to the economic standards and median income of a particular society. It conceptualizes poverty as social exclusion and the inability to participate fully in the normal life of that community due to a lack of resources (OECD, 2023; Townsend, 1979).

Multidimensional Poverty: Recognizes that poverty includes simultaneous deprivations in various dimensions of well-being, such as education, health, living standards, and quality of work. This approach provides a more holistic picture than income measurement alone (Alkire & Foster, 2011; UNDP & OPHI, 2023).

Amartya Sen's capability approach reframed poverty as the deprivation of basic capabilities what individuals are able to be and do. Thus, poverty is not just a lack of income but a denial of opportunities to lead a life of value (Sen, 1999). This broader view underpins modern tools like the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which is now widely used by institutions such as the UNDP and Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022).

In Nigeria, poverty is deeply rooted in structural and systemic issues, including poor governance, weak institutions, unemployment, regional inequalities, and corruption. Rural areas, particularly in northern Nigeria, face disproportionate levels of poverty due to poor infrastructure, insecurity, and limited economic opportunities (NBS, 2022).

Poverty Alleviation

Poverty alleviation refers to strategies, policies, and programmes aimed at reducing or eliminating poverty and improving the well-being of vulnerable populations. These strategies are designed to empower individuals economically, socially, and politically so that they can escape the poverty trap.

Approaches to Poverty Alleviation

1. **Welfare-based Approaches:** Involve the provision of direct assistance such as food aid, cash transfers, and subsidies to support the poor temporarily.
2. **Empowerment-based Approaches:** Focus on building the capacity of individuals through education, skills acquisition, microcredit, and employment schemes (Chambers, 1983).

3. Structural Approaches: Aim to reform the underlying political and economic systems that generate poverty e.g., land reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and inclusive governance.
4. Market-led Approaches: Encourage private sector participation, job creation, and entrepreneurship as a path to poverty reduction (World Bank, 2021).

In Nigeria, poverty alleviation programmes have been implemented for decades from Operation Feed the Nation (1979), Better Life for Rural Women (1987), to the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP, 2001), and more recently, National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) under President Buhari. These programmes typically aim to increase access to capital, employment, and social services among the poor and vulnerable groups (Olarinmoye, 2020).

However, scholars argue that poverty alleviation efforts in Nigeria often fall short due to issues such as poor programme design, elite capture, corruption, lack of continuity, and inadequate targeting mechanisms (Ajakaiye & Olaniyan, 2012). For poverty alleviation to be effective, it must be inclusive, transparent, sustainable, and tailored to local contexts.

National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP)

The National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) represent Nigeria's flagship framework for addressing poverty, unemployment, and social vulnerability through targeted, government-led interventions. Established in 2016 under the Office of the Vice President, the NSIP was designed to improve the living conditions of poor and vulnerable citizens while stimulating inclusive economic growth (National Social Investment Office, 2017).

NSIP operates as an umbrella initiative with four key components: N-Power, which provides skills acquisition, internship, and employment opportunities for young graduates and non-graduates; the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP), which supplies free meals to primary school pupils while supporting local agriculture; the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), offering microcredit to small-scale traders, farmers, and artisans; and the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) scheme, which provides financial support to the poorest households to improve nutrition, health, and education outcomes (World Bank, 2020).

The conceptual basis of the NSIP lies in social protection theory, which emphasizes state responsibility in cushioning citizens from socio-economic shocks (Barrientos, 2013). It aims to create a social safety net that reduces inequality and fosters human capital development. Empirical assessments show positive impacts such as improved school attendance, enhanced household consumption, and increased microenterprise activity (Akanbi & Akinbode, 2021). Barrientos, A. (2013). *Social assistance in developing countries*. Cambridge University Press.

Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP)

The Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) is a key component of Nigeria's National Social Investment Programmes, designed to provide collateral-free microcredit to small-scale entrepreneurs, traders, farmers, and artisans in order to promote financial inclusion and stimulate grassroots economic growth. Introduced in 2016 and implemented through schemes such as MarketMoni, TraderMoni, and FarmerMoni, GEEP targets individuals who typically lack access to formal banking services, offering loans with minimal interest to support petty trading, agricultural production, and small businesses (National Social Investment Office, 2017; World Bank, 2020). Grounded in microfinance and inclusive growth theories, the programme seeks to reduce poverty by enabling recipients to expand their enterprises, increase household income, and create jobs within local communities (Akanbi & Akinbode, 2021). While evaluations report increased financial participation and improved livelihood outcomes, challenges persist, including inadequate repayment rates, politicization of loan disbursement, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms, all of which raise concerns about sustainability and long-term poverty-alleviation impact (Obi & Okoye, 2022).

Review of Literature on Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

Previous studies have examined the dynamics of empowerment and poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria, highlighting their mixed outcomes, governance challenges, and implications for sustainable poverty reduction. Research has largely focused on federal interventions such as the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), which encompasses the N-Power initiative, the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), and TraderMoni/MarketMoni microcredit schemes, but there remains a need for deeper analysis of their long-term poverty-reduction capacity and distributional effects (World Bank, 2022).

Adewale (2019) evaluated the early phase of the N-Power scheme using household surveys across six states and found that beneficiaries experienced a short-term rise in disposable income and basic consumption. However, many participants reported difficulty transitioning to stable employment after exiting the programme, indicating limited sustainability of the gains. Similarly, Yusuf and Aribisala (2020) investigated TraderMoni loans to petty traders in Lagos and Kano States and observed improved working capital and daily sales among recipients, but noted that the small loan size and repayment constraints limited significant upward mobility.

Eze and Okafor (2021) examined the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) through a quasi-experimental design in selected rural communities. Their findings show that microcredit access increased business start-ups and marginally reduced household poverty levels, yet benefits were concentrated among individuals who already possessed basic financial literacy and market access. This suggests that microcredit alone is insufficient without complementary capacity-building initiatives.

Gender-focused evaluations also shed light on empowerment outcomes. Ibrahim and Bassey (2022) assessed women beneficiaries of the MarketMoni scheme in Northern Nigeria and concluded that while participants recorded higher profits and greater decision-making power in household finances, cultural norms and weak market linkages constrained the transformative potential of these gains. Likewise, Nwosu et al. (2021) documented that women-led microenterprises supported by NSIP loans were more resilient during economic shocks, but still faced barriers in scaling beyond subsistence level.

Beyond microcredit, other studies have explored cash transfer components. Garba and Ojo (2020) analysed the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) sub-programme in three North-Central states and reported improvements in school attendance and food security among recipient households. Nevertheless, the researchers highlighted issues of irregular disbursement, inclusion errors, and local elite capture, which undermined programme credibility and reach.

Several scholars have addressed the governance and structural limitations of these initiatives. Oladipo (2019) identified weak beneficiary registries, political interference, and inadequate monitoring as key factors reducing the impact of federal empowerment programmes. In the same vein, Chukwu and Musa (2022) argued that macroeconomic instability especially inflation and currency depreciation erodes the real value of small cash transfers and microloans, turning many interventions into temporary palliatives rather than pathways out of poverty.

Overall, empirical evidence indicates that Nigeria's empowerment programmes under President Muhammadu Buhari provided short-term income support and modest business improvements for targeted groups, particularly women and youth. However, challenges of inadequate funding, poor targeting, weak institutional capacity, and a lack of long-term integration with labour markets have limited their effectiveness in achieving lasting poverty alleviation (World Bank, 2022; Eze & Okafor, 2021). These findings underscore the need for more rigorous longitudinal studies and stronger governance mechanisms to ensure that future empowerment strategies genuinely lift the poorest households rather than primarily enriching those already better positioned to access programme benefits.

Human Capital Development Thesis in the Context of Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria:

Human capital development encompassing education, health, skills acquisition, and productive capacity is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable poverty alleviation in Nigeria. The literature highlights that investments in people's capabilities directly affect employment opportunities, income generation, and social mobility, while also shaping long-term national growth prospects (Becker, 1993; Todaro & Smith, 2020). Scholars consistently argue that poverty alleviation programmes that overlook human capital accumulation risk producing short-term relief without lasting economic empowerment (Ogunmola & Akinola, 2021; Obadan, 2019).

Empirical evidence underscores education as a critical determinant of poverty reduction. Adeyemi and Ogunsola (2016) demonstrate that access to quality basic and secondary education significantly increases household income potential and reduces intergenerational poverty transmission. Similarly, Olanrewaju (2020) finds that skill-oriented tertiary education and vocational training are pivotal in equipping youths for Nigeria's evolving labour market, especially in technology and agro-processing sectors. Yet, disparities in educational access across regions and gender lines remain a major barrier to human capital formation (UNDP, 2023). Poor educational infrastructure, teacher shortages, and persistent insecurity in northern Nigeria further exacerbate these gaps (Adebayo & Usman, 2021).

Health outcomes are equally central to the human capital–poverty nexus. Studies by Okeke and Eze (2018) reveal that inadequate health infrastructure, high maternal and child mortality rates, and endemic diseases such as malaria and cholera significantly reduce labour productivity and household savings. The National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2021) also shows a direct correlation between poor health indicators and income poverty, particularly in rural communities where primary healthcare services are limited. Programmes such as the Basic Health Care Provision Fund (BHCPF) have shown modest success in improving maternal and child health, but funding shortfalls and governance issues hinder scalability (World Bank, 2022).

Skill acquisition and vocational training emerge as key strategies for empowering Nigeria's large youth population. Empirical studies show that vocational education and entrepreneurship programmes, such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) initiatives, significantly improve employment rates and reduce poverty among participants (Yusuf & Ojo, 2022). Similarly, Adedeji et al. (2020) find that youth empowerment schemes that integrate digital skills and small business financing create pathways out of poverty, especially in urban and peri-urban areas. However, the uneven quality of training and weak linkages to job markets limit the long-term impact of many government-sponsored skill-development programmes (Iwuoha & Iwuoha, 2021).

The role of government policies and poverty alleviation programmes is another recurrent theme. Evaluations of Nigeria's National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) reveal mixed outcomes. While conditional cash transfers and school feeding programmes provide immediate relief, their contribution to human capital accumulation is less robust when not paired with strong education and health investments (Garba & Nwankwo, 2019). Akinlabi (2022) argues that poverty alleviation policies often focus on consumption smoothing rather than capacity building, thereby missing opportunities to expand the productive potential of beneficiaries.

Gender dynamics also feature prominently in the discourse on human capital and poverty. Women's education and health have been shown to yield high returns in terms of child welfare, household income,

and community development (Nwosu & Okafor, 2020). However, cultural norms and structural inequalities frequently limit women's access to education, healthcare, and formal employment. Programmes aimed at women's empowerment, such as microcredit schemes and maternal health initiatives, are found to be most effective when combined with broader legal and institutional reforms that address discrimination (Ololube et al., 2021).

Moreover, regional disparities pose a significant challenge. Northern Nigeria consistently records lower human development indices compared to the south, driven by insecurity, weak infrastructure, and cultural barriers to education (UNDP, 2023; Adebayo & Usman, 2021). Empirical research shows that targeted regional interventions, including community-based education and healthcare initiatives, can narrow these gaps, but success depends on sustained funding and local participation (Okonjo-Iweala, 2022).

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of integrating human capital development into broader economic diversification strategies. For instance, Eboh and Onwuka (2023) argue that linking human capital investments with agricultural value chains, renewable energy, and digital industries creates synergies that multiply poverty-reduction effects. Similarly, Onwuegbuchulam (2020) highlights the need for public-private partnerships to scale up training and health services, citing successful collaborations in the Lagos technology ecosystem as a model for other states.

The empirical literature converges on the thesis that human capital development is both a means and an end of poverty alleviation in Nigeria. Education, health, and skill acquisition remain pivotal levers for reducing poverty, but their impact is mediated by governance quality, gender inclusion, and regional equity. Sustainable poverty alleviation thus requires comprehensive policies that integrate human capital investments with economic transformation and institutional reforms, ensuring that Nigeria's growing population becomes a demographic dividend rather than a development burden.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Human Capital Theory. Human Capital Theory emerged in the 1960s through the pioneering works of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964, 1993). The theory rests on the central premise that people constitute the most valuable asset of any economy and that purposeful investment in their education, health, and skills generates measurable economic returns. Unlike the classical view that saw labor as a homogeneous input, Human Capital Theory distinguishes human effort as qualitatively improvable through knowledge acquisition, training, and improved health standards. In this framework, expenditures on schooling, vocational training, healthcare, and skill-enhancing activities are considered investments analogous to capital investments in machinery because they raise the productivity, creativity, and earning potential of individuals.

Application to the Study

The theory provides a strong lens for interrogating President Muhammadu Buhari's empowerment programmes, notably the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) which include N-Power, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), Conditional Cash Transfer, and the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme. These initiatives were designed to enhance the skills, health, and income-generating capabilities of Nigerians, particularly youth and vulnerable groups, thereby increasing the nation's stock of human capital.

From the Human Capital perspective, N-Power's vocational training and work-placement schemes represent direct investments in employable skills, while the school feeding programme promotes child nutrition and learning capacity both critical for future productivity. Micro-credit under GEEP seeks to stimulate entrepreneurship and self-employment, further aligning with the theory's principle that economic growth depends on the improved capabilities of citizens.

However, the study reveals that weak institutional frameworks, corruption, and limited integration with long-term education and healthcare systems curtailed the transformative potential of these programmes. Temporary stipends and poorly monitored loans provided short-term relief but did not sufficiently enhance beneficiaries' enduring productivity or earning power. Consequently, the expected "returns" on these human capital investments were diminished, illustrating a key critique of the theory: without supportive economic structures and sustained policy commitment, human capital investments may not achieve their full poverty-alleviating impact.

Human Capital Theory underscores that effective poverty alleviation in Nigeria requires more than cash transfers or ad hoc employment schemes; it demands systematic, well-governed investments in education, healthcare, and skill development, coupled with economic reforms that create real opportunities for a more skilled population.

Methodology

This study adopted qualitative descriptive research design to provide both breadth and depth in evaluating the effectiveness of President Muhammadu Buhari's empowerment programmes in alleviating poverty. Data were drawn from secondary sources, including official government documents such as the Impact Assessment Report on the National Social Investment Programmes (FGN, 2021), the Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (NBS, 2022), and international datasets from the World Bank and UNDP.

Discussion on President Buhari's Empowerment Programmes and the Questionability of Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

President Muhammadu Buhari's administration (2015–2023) placed notable emphasis on social investment as a vehicle for poverty reduction, introducing a suite of empowerment initiatives under the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP). Key components included the N-Power youth employment scheme, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) micro-credit initiative, National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, and the Conditional Cash Transfer scheme. These interventions sought to stimulate job creation, enhance human capital, and provide safety nets for vulnerable households (National Social Investment Office, 2021).

Empirical studies acknowledge that the programmes registered some immediate successes. For instance, Adeola and Olojede (2021) report that N-Power temporarily absorbed thousands of unemployed graduates into teaching, agricultural extension, and health-care roles, offering stipends and limited skill acquisition. Likewise, GEEP disbursed small-scale loans to market women and petty traders, while the school feeding programme improved school attendance and child nutrition in several states (World Bank, 2022). These short-term gains underscore the administration's recognition of social protection as a developmental imperative.

However, scholars widely debate the sustainability and transformative capacity of these initiatives. Okeke and Odu (2022) argued that many programmes functioned more as consumption-smoothing mechanisms than as pathways to durable economic empowerment. N-Power beneficiaries, for example, frequently faced delayed stipend payments, limited professional growth, and abrupt exit plans without guaranteed employment transitions (Olawale & Yusuf, 2023). Evaluations of GEEP also highlight low repayment rates, weak monitoring, and allegations of political favoritism in loan disbursement (Akinlabi, 2022).

Structural and governance constraints further complicate the poverty-alleviation narrative. Nigeria's persistent infrastructure deficits, inflationary pressures, and high youth unemployment dilute the impact of cash transfers or stipends (IMF, 2022). Moreover, researchers point to issues of data integrity, bureaucratic inefficiency, and corruption within programme management (Ojo & Ibrahim, 2021). Such weaknesses foster perceptions that the schemes were vulnerable to elite capture and electoral patronage rather than purely developmental intent.

Another critical dimension is the limited integration of these empowerment initiatives with broader human capital development strategies. While stipends and microloans provided temporary relief, the absence of systematic links to quality education, vocational training, and long-term job creation curtailed their capacity to break intergenerational poverty cycles (Garba & Nwankwo, 2019). Adediji et al. (2020) emphasize that without robust investments in health, digital skills, and infrastructure, social investment programmes risk becoming palliative rather than transformative.

Gender and regional disparities also shaped outcomes. Though women were targeted through GEEP's MarketMoni and TraderMoni components, cultural and logistical barriers limited rural women's access to

loans and training (Nwosu & Okafor, 2020). Northern Nigeria, grappling with insecurity and weak local governance, often faced delayed or truncated programme rollout, widening existing development gaps (UNDP, 2023).

Consequently, while Buhari's empowerment programmes marked a significant expansion of Nigeria's social protection architecture, their ability to deliver sustainable poverty alleviation remains contested. The literature converges on the view that short-term cash-based interventions, absent structural economic diversification, strong institutional frameworks, and deliberate human capital development, cannot substantially reduce multidimensional poverty. For poverty alleviation to be both credible and enduring, future administrations must couple social investments with long-range strategies in education, health, infrastructure, and private-sector job creation, ensuring that empowerment evolves from temporary relief to lasting economic transformation.

Conclusion

President Muhammadu Buhari's empowerment programmes have been pivotal in addressing poverty and unemployment in Nigeria. However, despite their performance, these initiatives faced substantial challenges that hindered their effectiveness. Corruption, inadequate funding, implementation gaps, socio-cultural barriers, and political interference significantly reduce the impact of these programs on poverty alleviation. To achieve sustainable poverty reduction, it is crucial to address these issues and enhance the effectiveness of the empowerment initiatives.

Recommendations

Arising from the above findings the following recommendations are made:

- i. **Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms:** To combat corruption and ensure that resources reach the intended beneficiaries, it is essential to strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms within the empowerment programs. This can be achieved by implementing transparent processes, regular audits, and involving civil society organizations in monitoring activities. Enhanced oversight will help to detect and prevent the misappropriation of funds, ensuring that the resources are used effectively to alleviate poverty.
- ii. **Increase Funding and Ensure Timely Disbursement:** Adequate and timely funding is critical for the success of empowerment programs. The government should allocate sufficient budgetary resources to these initiatives and ensure that funds are disbursed promptly. Additionally, exploring partnerships with international organizations and the private sector can provide additional financial support. Adequate funding will enable the programs to reach a larger number of beneficiaries and sustain their operations over the long term.

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