ESPN Thematic Report on Social Investment

Ireland

2015

Mary Daly
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EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN)

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The European Social Policy Network (ESPN) was established in July 2014 on the initiative of the European Commission to provide high-quality and timely independent information, advice, analysis and expertise on social policy issues in the European Union and neighbouring countries.

The ESPN brings together into a single network the work that used to be carried out by the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, the Network for the Analytical Support on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Protection Reforms (ASISP) and the MISSOC (Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection) secretariat.

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Summary

- Ireland has elements of a social investment approach and is moving further in this direction in that more recent reforms have greater social investment resonance as compared with earlier ones. However, other policies are not characteristic of social investment, especially the general cut-backs in services and so social investment has to compete with other (and in some cases contradictory) policy orientations.
- A social investment approach is most visible and most advanced regarding activation of those who are unemployed. Here, a host of new services targeting activation has been put in place, dating from 2010 on. This has involved as well as new services significant reform of existing services, and a better streamlining of responsibilities between public bodies.
- There is some movement on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and this is generally in the direction of social investment. The main measure of note here is the free universal ECEC year on a half-time basis for 3-4 year olds (introduced in 2010 with plans to extend it to 2-3 year olds in the next five years). The Area-Based Child Poverty Initiative (of 2012-13) is also significant as is the 2014 national framework on children and youth policy, both of which are underpinned by principles of social investment. That said, there is much work to do for on the whole: ECEC is under-developed in Ireland, childcare is extremely expensive, it has a strong social class gradient, is primarily private, it makes it difficult for parents to make satisfactory arrangements and the gaps for the youngest cohort are notable. The under-development of ECEC is due to two main factors: the lack of public investment, the limited nature of subsidies for childcare and the general underdevelopment of ECEC as a sphere of public policy; the historical emphasis being on cash benefits over services in the Irish welfare state. Parenting support is also very under-developed as a general service in Ireland, although there are measures for parents of the least-advantaged children as part of the Early Start education programme and also the Area-Based Child Poverty initiative.
- In regard to parental employment, work-life balance as a policy approach is under-developed in Ireland and there is no discernible movement in the direction of social investment (indeed hardly any policy momentum in the sphere of work-life balance at all). As well as childcare-related shortage and high costs, employment leaves for parents are (apart from maternity benefit) minimalistic and gender specific. Ireland does little to encourage greater father engagement in caring for children having no statutory entitlement to paternity leave and no paid parental leave. Moreover, care for older people is also under-provided, with a strong reliance on family care-giving.
- In regard to those furthest from the labour market – which in Ireland involves especially long-term unemployed people, lone parents and others in jobless households - the aforementioned move to activation and targeting is very important as are two further measures taken in the last two years. First, in 2013 the Jobseeker’s Allowance Transitional Payment was introduced to ‘cushion’ the impact on lone parents of having to move from the One Parent Family Payment to Jobseeker’s Allowance (which they have to do when their child reaches a certain age). Secondly, Budget 2015 announced the introduction of a new Back to Work Family Dividend (which allows people to retain their child-related welfare payments for up to two years upon taking up employment) to help unemployed households with children return to work.
- There is some complementarity among the social investment measures. Notable in this regard is the aforementioned children and young people’s framework which treats ECEC, child poverty and the Youth Guarantee in an integrated fashion. That said, planning and governance in the three main domains of social investment still proceed more or less independently. However, regarding the matter of complementarity more broadly, the social

compensation measures are attuned more and more to a social investment approach, especially in regard to activation of the unemployed and the interaction between benefits and work incentives.

- Overall, while there are elements of a social investment approach in place in Ireland and there has been significant movement in this direction since 2010, the approach is not yet embedded in Ireland and has to compete with alternative discourses and historical policy emphases.

1 Assessment of overall approach to social investment

A social investment approach – which is not the traditional approach of the welfare state in Ireland – is now identifiable but it is specific to a number of fields of policy and movement in the direction of social investment is steady but not totally consistent. The approach is most visible and most advanced regarding activation of the unemployed. Here, a host of new services, many of them one-stop shops, targeting activation has been put in place, with most of these dating from 2010. In addition, reform of benefits is taking account of work incentives.

A social investment approach is less advanced in early childhood development with policy on ECEC relatively weakly developed. However, the free pre-school year for 3 to 4 year olds (which has existed since 2010) and the newly-announced children and youth policy framework (see below) are notable as social investment-oriented measures as is the Area-Based Child Poverty Initiative (which, however, is limited to some 13 localities). In terms of the picture as a whole, there is still large under-provision of ECEC and parenting support is not widely available.

Turning to employment, and especially female employment, Ireland has not generally embraced the work-life balance policy approach. Its employment leave is most generous for mothers and there exists no paid paternal or parental leave (although a statutory right exists for the latter). Moreover, there is no movement in the direction of social investment (indeed hardly any policy momentum at all in this field). Furthermore childcare is a major barrier to higher employment and while there have been some moves to subsidise childcare among the low-income sectors, this is very limited. Also care services and support provisions for older people are very under-developed.

In regard to those furthest from the labour market, the aforementioned move to activation and targeting is very important as are two further measures taken in the last two years. First, in 2013 the Jobseeker's Allowance transitional payment was introduced mainly to 'cushion' the impact on lone parents of having to move from the One Parent Family Payment to Jobseeker's Allowance (which they have to do when their child reaches a certain age). Secondly, Budget 2015 announced the introduction of a new Back to Work Family Dividend (which allows people to retain their child-related welfare payments for up to two years upon taking up employment) to help unemployed households with children return to work.

Narrowing the time period down to developments since February 2013 and the adoption of the Social Investment Package, policy in Ireland has assumed an even stronger social investment approach over this period. Of central relevance here is the national policy framework for children and young people, issued in April 2014. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* represents the first overarching national children's policy framework across the age ranges in Ireland, spanning children and young people (0 – 24 years). The Framework is broadly in line with a multi-dimensional social investment approach, in that it is universalist in orientation but specifies a child poverty target of lifting over 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020.

In regard to the question of whether there is complementarity among the social investment measures, there is some. Notable in this regard is the aforementioned children and young people's framework which treats ECEC, child poverty and the Youth Guarantee in an integrated fashion. In addition, the Framework views parental employment as one of the major ways of meeting the poverty target for children. That said, planning and governance in the three main domains of social investment still proceed more or less independently. However, on the matter of complementarity more broadly, the social compensation measures are attuned more and more to a social investment approach, especially in regard to activation of the unemployed. Moreover, research shows that the effectiveness of Irish social transfers has improved since the onset of the economic and fiscal crisis; social transfers reduced the pre-transfer poverty rate by 53% in 2004, rising to 63% by 2007 and 71% by 2011 (Watson and Maitre 2013: 37).

2 Assessment of specific policy areas and measures/instruments

2.1 Support for early childhood development

Early childhood development policies in Ireland mainly consist of income supports for families with children (both universal and targeted) and to a lesser extent ECEC services. Pride of place in the former is the universal child benefits which are comparatively generous in Ireland, although they have been significantly cut back in value in recent years. In terms of ECEC policies, the predominant policy measure is the free pre-school year for all 3 to 4 year olds. This, while universal, is part-time – consisting of a maximum entitlement of 3 hours per day, 5 days per week, 38 weeks per year. Since its establishment in January 2010, there has been a very positive response to it with some 94% of eligible children enrolled in ECEC services in the 2011/12 school year.[1] The state pays a capitation fee to participating playschools and day-care services and the participating services must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of the national standards. A recent important development is the publishing of the first overarching national children's policy framework across the age ranges in Ireland, spanning children and young people (0 – 24 years). Entitled *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, this framework lists earlier intervention and prevention as well as better support for parents and generally better services among its signature cross-cutting transformational goals. In regard to earlier intervention, the framework commits to continue to raise the quality of early years care and education, to introduce a second free pre-school year subject to resources becoming available and the provision of free GP care for those aged 5 years and under. One of the most significant commitments is to the development and implementation of a *National Early Years Strategy* which was promised for 2014 but has not yet been issued.

As it stands, Ireland is considerably above the average in terms of ECEC participation by children aged between 3 years and the minimum school age (European Commission 2013). However, the younger age group (0 – 3 year olds) is particularly under-provided for in Ireland and the country has not met the Barcelona Targets for this age group (ibid). With only some 10% of the cohort in formal ECEC, the main form of ECEC provision for the under 3s, as Barry and Sherlock (2011) describe it, is in largely paid and unpaid care by relatives, home-based childminders, and crèches/nurseries in the private marketplace or run by community organisations. Recent research on new mothers' patterns of returning to employment after childbirth found that some 42% of the relevant infants were cared for by relatives (McGinnity et al 2013). The same study found that over 50% of childminders and over 80% of relatives caring for these mothers' children had no childcare-related qualifications. There is a social class gradient present, in two respects. First, care by relatives – frequently a grandmother – is more important for low-income families (and also younger mothers) as compared with other population sectors (ibid). Second, when it comes to children under three years, only 8% of those in the two lowest-income quintiles are in childcare compared with 34% of those in the richest quintile (European Commission 2013: 38).

With a considerable volume of the childcare in Ireland provided in people's homes, it is unlikely that the children get the kind of developmentally-enriching experience that is implied by social investment. There are other notable features of ECEC provision in Ireland for children aged under three years; in particular part-time use of ECEC predominates over full-time (Janta 2014: 4-5).

In terms of quality, indicators only exist for formal ECEC and even these are sketchy (indicating a lack of active monitoring of developments). In regard to the ratio of teaching staff to children Ireland is placed around average (at around 14.0) on EU figures (Bouget et al. (2015), Annex 3, Table 4A.4). In terms of qualifications and

[1] Cited at: http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Early-Childhood/

training, Ireland compares poorly, with only one in five childcare centre employees having Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) or third-level qualifications in childcare (McGinnity et al 2013).

The survey undertaken by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2012 sheds further light on the features of Ireland's ECEC provision and how it ranks vis-à-vis that of other countries (Pascal et al 2013). Ireland scored 18th overall (out of 43 countries) in terms of the elements considered to constitute quality in provision (comprehensive and effective strategy, clear legal right to pre-school, effective subsidies that reach underprivileged families, student/teacher ratio of under 15, well-trained teachers, parental involvement in pre-school, at least 98% of pre-schoolers enrolled at age 5/6, well-defined curriculum and health and safety standards, healthy nourished children upon entry). Ireland performed least well in terms of effective subsidies and the level of training of staff. This survey also raises the big issue of affordability, with Ireland in 29th position on this criterion. On the ESPN data (Bouget et al. (2015), Annex 3, Table B.7), Ireland is one of the countries (in fact 6th highest) where ECEC fees are very high (at 53.5% of the average wage). In general, public spending on childcare is low in Ireland (and minimal for the under 3s) and the arrangement of benefits and tax allowances does relatively little to reduce the cost to the average parent, although they do help low-income parents (outlined in next section).

Ireland's level of public investment in early years services is among the lowest in Europe. According to the OECD, Ireland spends 0.4% GDP on ECEC services, well below the OECD average of 0.7% GDP and the international benchmark of 1% GDP. If we look just at expenditure on services prior to school entry, expenditure in Ireland amounts to approx. €300m, or less than 0.2% GDP – a fraction of the OECD average (Start Strong 2014). This figure is unchanged by Budget 2015 and the increase in the level of investment over time is severely limited. One further particularity of the Irish situation should be noted. It has long been a weakness of Ireland's early years provision that policy responsibility is shared between Departments. In particular, while the Department of Children and Youth Affairs holds the budget for the funding schemes, including the Free Pre-School Year and the Community Childcare Subvention, the Department of Education and Skills has policy responsibility for much of the quality of services.

Overall, the tradition – and still a dominant form of provision in Ireland – is for childcare rather than early education.[2] Furthermore Ireland is a country where informal childcare predominates over formal childcare. It is not clear whether this is a preference or the only option available to parents and families. But what is clear is that, looked at from the point of view of provision, research and available evidence suggests that: a) Ireland is one of the countries where child-care costs are very high; b) cost is a major factor militating against the use of childcare; c) high child-care costs are not compensated for by subsidies and benefits (Janta 2014).

While the new framework on children and youth policy makes parenting support one of its signature emphases and states a commitment to it as a universal service, parenting support is not highly developed in Ireland and where it exists is primarily targeted on low-income parents and those thought to be at risk. Parental engagement and support is, for example, integral to the Early Start programme – a pre-school programme for 3 and 4 year olds targeted on the most disadvantaged children. The Home School Community Liaison coordinator works with the Early Start staff to develop a structured plan to support parents, ranging from initial contact with families to the enrolment of new pupils at open days. A programme of structured activities throughout the year is developed with the aim of developing parents' involvement as prime educators, providing them with the relevant skills to maximise their child's participation in the pre-school process and thus laying the foundations for future educational achievement. Parenting support is also integral to the Area-based Child Poverty Initiative (known as the ABC programme). Introduced on a more widespread basis in 2013 (although on a pilot basis) to 10 new areas, the goal of this programme,

[2] For the differentiation between care and education as paradigms see Scheiwe and Willekens (2009).

building on and continuing the work of an earlier programme, is to provide services and interventions oriented to improve early child development and prevention and to work closely with parents in this regard. The new initiative is strongly oriented towards a social investment approach.

Shortcomings in existing provision suggest that Ireland needs to put in place a policy for ECEC which attends to achieving: full coverage for the cohorts; equal access for all children and parents; subsidies and policies that improve affordability with attention to demand-side measures as well as those on the supply side; upgrade training and quality more broadly. Parenting support should also be more widely developed.

When the benefit elements of policy measures are evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in reducing poverty through a comparison of poverty rates pre and post benefit receipt, the results are very impressive, with social transfer reducing the pre-transfer poverty rate by 71% in 2011 (Watson et al 2013). Transfers were particularly effective for jobless households (which have high numbers of children and are strongly associated with poverty). In regard to the poverty gap, the largest percentage (relative) improvement in poverty reduction effectiveness since 2004 has been for children (20% improvement). However in regard to poverty rates, the reduction for children was only slightly above average (54% vs. 48% on average in 2011) although it has shown an improvement since 2004 (13%).

2.2 Supporting parents' labour market participation

The employment rate of women in Ireland in 2014 was 55.9%.[3] While the rate had been as high as 60.5% in 2008, during the economic crisis the figure dropped significantly, falling to 55.2% by 2012. Whether the falling rate is due to the recession or to the persistence of patterns that are gendered in nature is unclear but in international comparison Ireland has a relatively high proportion of women (some 30%) saying that they have reduced their working hours to take care of the youngest child in the household (Janta 2014: 14). Ireland is also one of the EU Member States with the largest difference in the employment rates of women and men of prime age comparing those with and without children aged under 12 years (ibid: 16). It is also marked by strong differences in the employment rates of lone and partnered mothers.

How are social policies implicated in this pattern and to what degree do they support the participation of parents, especially women, in the labour market? In general this is a weakness in policy in Ireland, although there are some pockets of change (especially in regard to lone parents claiming benefits).

2.2.1 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

This is an ongoing issue in Ireland. As mentioned supply is low, costs are high and parents generally mix and match childcare piecing together a set of arrangements that is the best possible for them under the circumstances. Since 2010 investment in childcare is more or less limited to subsidies to create ECEC for low-income or potentially disadvantaged children. And yet childcare is acknowledged by government and the NRP as necessary for parents to work. But achieving the access for all and the high quality that would be the mark of social investment has not been realised in government policy (although it is strong in government rhetoric).

There is no demand-side subsidy except for low-income families. The latter consists of a Community Childcare Subvention Programme which was introduced in 2010, under which a maximum subvention of €95 per week for a full-time place is paid to low-income parents who are working or on welfare-based training and education programmes. The scheme is currently restricted to centre-based community services and is administered on an annual basis. Approximately some 20,000 households currently benefit.[4] The level of subsidy is generally low, and parents have to pay the

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[3] Cited at http://ec.europa.eu/ireland/ireland_in_the_eu/impact_of_eu_on_irish_women/index_en.htm#1

[4] Cited in https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/EarlyEducationandChildcare/Pages/CCS.aspx

difference – which is beyond the means of many low-income families. The national lobby organisation for advancing children's early care and education, Start Strong (2014), has called for this subvention to be extended much more widely. In particular, they recommend making the subsidised places on offer through the subvention available in all services – both private and community services as well as individual childminders – as long as those services meet quality standards. They also recommend introducing a 100% subsidy for families with particularly high levels of need and making all public funding schemes conditional on the quality of services.

One other measure of importance is the After-School Child Care (ASCC) scheme which is designed to help to offset some of the after-school child-care costs that are associated with availing of an employment opportunity in a bid to encourage more individuals to take up employment. The scheme was piloted in a small number of locations from May, 2013, and, following the results of the pilot, the eligibility criteria for the scheme have been reviewed and amended in order to open it to a wider group. From October 2013, the scheme was introduced nationally. Initially it was planned that in 2014, the scheme would provide 800 subsidised after-school child-care places at a cost of €2 million. The target number has been increased to 1,800.

While these measures are leading in the right direction, major gaps and blocks remain.

2.2.2 Maternal/paternal/parental leave schemes

A priority area for social investment is ensuring that parenthood does not result in long-term under-utilisation of parents' (especially women's) skills. Ireland compares poorly in this regard – there is a statutory right to maternity pay and leave, to parental leave and to carer's leave but no paternity leave exists and the parental and paternity leaves are unpaid. Moreover there have been no developments in the last years that suggest a social investment approach.

Maternity leave is the most developed and the most generous. Most working women receive 26 weeks of Maternity Benefit paid at a weekly rate of €230; the remaining 16 weeks are unpaid. Mothers who are already on certain social welfare payments are entitled to half-rate maternity benefit and almost half of women have been estimated as receiving top ups from their employers also while on maternity leave (McGinnity et al 2013). There have been no changes to Maternity Benefit – other than regular uprating of the benefit level – since 2007.

Ireland does little to encourage greater father engagement in caring for children or gender equality in that regard. There is no statutory entitlement to paternity leave in Ireland and no paid parental leave. There is an entitlement to unpaid parental leave of up to 18 weeks per parent. Leave is an individual entitlement that cannot be transferred, except where parents are employed by the same employer in which case they can transfer a maximum of 14 weeks of their parental leave entitlement to the other parent, subject to the employer's agreement. Both parents can take the leave at the same time. An unpaid carer's leave is also available, to provide full-time care for a dependant (e.g., a child with a severe disability). This has recently been extended from 65 weeks to 104 weeks. There is in Ireland no statutory right to work on a part-time basis.

There is only limited evidence available on the uptake of the leaves and this does not appear to be something that is officially monitored. The evidence that exists suggests relatively low take-up, although uptake of the parental leave is rising, standing at around a third (Drew and Watters 2014).

2.2.3 Long-term care

In Ireland there is a tradition of family-based care of older people and state policy and provision has reflected that. Supports for community and/or family care are minimal and recent cut-backs in health and other services have made an impact in cutting the relevant services further (Nolan et al 2014). Providers have cut many community services. Moreover, eligibility for publicly-funded social care is now restricted only to those with the highest needs (and the lowest assets/incomes). Given the greater likelihood that women take on caring tasks, especially when longer hours and more intensive care are needed, such restrictions threaten women's participation in the labour market in particular among other potentially negative impacts.

2.3 Policy measures to address social and labour market exclusion

As mentioned, Ireland tends to concentrate its assistance for employment on those on low-income and especially benefit recipients. Apart from the general activation measures (described below) two measures of note – redolent of a social investment approach to jobless households – have been taken in recent years. First, in 2013 the Jobseeker's Allowance transitional payment was introduced to 'cushion' the impact on lone parents of having to move from the One Parent Family Payment to Jobseeker's Allowance (which they have to do when their child reaches a certain age). Effectively the transitional allowance exempted them from having to meet the availability for work condition normally attaching to Jobseeker's Allowance. Secondly, Budget 2015 announced the introduction of a new Back to Work Family Dividend to help unemployed households with children return to work. The essence of the change, due to come into operation in 2015, is that households upon taking up or returning to employment will retain a greater part than heretofore of the benefits allocated for their children while they are claiming benefits. The Dividend amounts to a wage supplement of €2,324 per child over the two years. This is in the form of a grant in that it will not be means-tested and is graduated in that the calculation rests on the first year's entitlement being paid in full and the second year's being halved. This is an interesting and novel development in the Irish case and goes some way towards meeting the CSR on low-work intensity households. It has been criticised as being an inadequate response especially in the light of continuing high costs of and low public investment in childcare (Social Justice Ireland 2014: 16).

While the targeting of individual unemployed people has been improved substantially with the Intreo service and the expansion of job preparation and other activation measures, the system is not yet at a stage where parents in such households can be identified and targeted. Lone parents receive more policy attention than partnered parents and it is partnered persons (women especially) who have suffered most under the recession and the policies pursued to address it (especially the cut-backs in benefits and services) (Keane et al 2014).

2.3.1 Unemployment benefits

Reforms over the last years have reduced the value of the benefits paid and made them more conditional. The statistics show for example a decline in the net replacement rate of unemployment benefits from 57% in 2008 to 53% in 2011 (Bouget et al. (2015), Annex 3, Table B.8). A recent analysis of the work incentives inherent in the Irish benefit system showed that high replacement rates tend to be found for individuals who receive payments in respect of adults or children who are financially dependent on a jobseeker (Savage et al 2014). However, most of Ireland's unemployed individuals are single or do not receive additional payments in respect of adults or children. The Rent Supplement scheme is one factor leading to higher replacement rates than the UK's Housing Benefit. Hence, the research suggests that monitoring the impact of the shift to a new Housing Assistance Payment will be important in this context.

2.3.2 Minimum income

Ireland is usually seen as having a fairly comprehensive means-tested social assistance system, payable to those with insufficient resources. This system is becoming more conditional with particular emphasis on the entitlements of the unemployed and lone parents. In this and other ways minimum income provision is more cognisant of work incentives.

When income adequacy is examined in terms of consensual budget standards, the most recent work on Ireland indicates that in 2014 social welfare could not meet the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living for 199 of the 213 urban sample household types examined in the research (Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice 2014). Child income supports did not meet the direct cost of a child in 3 of the 4 age groups examined (only in the pre-school age group were child income supports deemed adequate). Furthermore, the high cost of private childcare and private rented accommodation were said to substantially impact on the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living and the subsequent Minimum Income Standard required. The household type demonstrating the greatest income inadequacy was the two parent household with two children, one at primary and another at second level. The household in question was said to face a deficit in income of almost €123 per week, which, when calculated on an annual basis is almost €6,400.

2.3.3 Active labour market policies

This is a policy domain which has been strongly infused in Ireland by a social investment approach. The innovations involved have been introduced since 2010 by and large and have involved a major shift in policy orientation in Ireland. Moreover active labour market policies continue to be a major driver of reform and remain on an expansionist curve. In the recent Budget for example, the Department of Social Protection was allocated funds to provide 300,000 work and training places under the Pathways to Work programme and €12 million for the JobPath programme. Moreover Ireland has actively embraced the Youth Guarantee, although it is introducing it on a staged or phased basis. Furthermore, the idea of a one-stop shop in relation to activation is integral to policy reform in Ireland.

2.3.4 Social services

As well as those listed above, there are enabling services to be found also in other service domains. For example, under the remit of the Department of Education there is a National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (Department of Education 2011). Among the initiatives here are a set of programmes oriented to enabling parents and communities to support children's literacy and numeracy Development. Among the innovative measures supported here are a television programme – a joint initiative between a number of broadcasting corporations and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) for a television series showcasing the educational tools and techniques that are available to families and following their progress as they use them. There is also an online set of tools and skills - www.helpmykidlearn.ie – which was developed by NALA to support implementation of the Strategy and is particularly targeted at the parents of children aged 0-12.

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