

THE SOMALIA EXCEPTION

Constrained Delivery, Disciplined Design, and What Happens When Portfolios Scale

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89% of commitments rated S+	2 Highly Satisfactory	0 Projects below MS	\$2.8bn Active portfolio scaling
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Executive Summary

Between 2011 and 2023, the World Bank approved 14 projects in Somalia. Nine were rated Satisfactory or Highly Satisfactory by the Independent Evaluation Group. Five were rated Moderately Satisfactory. Zero were rated below MS. The Satisfactory rate — 64 percent by project count, 89 percent by commitment value — exceeds the Bank’s global average. The MS+ rate is 100 percent. Not one project failed.

The empirical puzzle. Somalia is a country that in 2012 was considered a failed state. Al-Shabaab controlled large swathes of the territory. Per capita income was \$592. Tax-to-GDP stood at 3.2 percent. Seventy percent of the population lived below the poverty line. Yet the Bank’s Somalia portfolio outperforms its portfolios in stable, middle-income Ghana (FCI: 0% S+), oil-rich Angola (MTI DPF: 0% S+), and Africa’s largest economy Nigeria (Water: 0.4% of commitments rated S+).

The institutional thesis. Somalia succeeded not despite constraint, but because constraint prevented the Bank from behaving normally. Limited resources prevented pipeline-driven lending. Insecurity prevented the neglect of supervision. Capacity constraints prevented over-ambitious objectives. HIPC conditionality imposed external discipline. Donor pooling imposed accountability. The normal institutional incentives — scale before learning, approval volume over quality, commitment growth over verified results — were temporarily suspended.

The scaling risk. The active Somalia portfolio has exploded from 14 rated projects worth ~\$900 million to 39 active projects worth \$2.8 billion. Seven are rated High risk. Nine are Additional Financings totalling \$502 million. The IEG Country Program Evaluation (March 2025) warned: ‘Rapid portfolio growth may risk overwhelming government absorptive capacity.’ The external constraints that compelled discipline are being removed one by one.

The structural finding. The Bank has no institutional mechanism for preserving implementation discipline during scale transitions. Successful pilots trigger institutional pressures — pipeline demand, managerial incentives, IDA replenishment logic — that systematically destroy the conditions which enabled the initial success. Four country cases, four instruments, four sectors. The variable that appears to best explain the divergence in outcomes is the degree of discipline in portfolio design.

1. The Empirical Puzzle

This note examines why a disciplined delivery model produced strong results in one of the world’s most difficult operating environments — and whether the Bank’s institutional incentives permit those features to survive once portfolios scale.

Six companion case studies on this platform document the opposite pattern: persistent failure despite substantial financing. In Nigeria’s water sector, seven IEG-rated projects over 34 years committed \$1.1 billion with 0.4 percent of commitments rated Satisfactory. In Angola, six DPF operations over 24 years committed \$2.2 billion with zero Satisfactory. In Ghana’s FCI portfolio, 14 projects over 27 years achieved zero Satisfactory. In the DRC, 49 projects committed \$6.7 billion with 6.1 percent of commitments rated Satisfactory. In South Africa, the Bank committed \$9.13 billion in the energy sector around Eskom. The DRC Inga 3 TA (\$107 million) was rated Highly Unsatisfactory — a new \$250 million successor is already deteriorating.

While five Somalia projects were rated Moderately Satisfactory — indicating meaningful shortcomings — the absence of projects rated below MS remains highly unusual for a fragile and conflict-affected state portfolio. FCS countries typically exhibit the Bank’s weakest delivery records. Somalia is the exception.

CASE SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The four country cases were selected because they represent large World Bank engagements in Africa across distinct instruments and sectors where IEG evidence demonstrates persistent implementation patterns — either consistently strong (Somalia) or consistently weak (Nigeria water, Angola DPF, Ghana FCI). The comparison is not between methodologically equivalent units: Somalia is a full-country portfolio while the others are sector or instrument slices. This asymmetry is acknowledged. All ratings data are drawn from the IEG ICRR/PPAR database (March 2026 extract), deduplicated by Project ID, with PPAR ratings taking precedence where both exist.

2. The Record

#	Project	FY	Rating	GP
1	Rapid Response Rural Livelihoods	2011	MS	Agriculture
2	Recurrent Cost & Reform Facility	2015	MS	Governance
3	ICT Sector Support Phase II	2020	S	Digital
4	Special Financing Local Development	2020	MS	Urban
5	Core Economic Institutions (SCORE)	2021	S	FCI
6	Reengagement & Reform DPF (\$459M)	2022	S	MTI
7	Somalia Urban Resilience	2022	MS	Urban
8	Recurrent Cost & Reform Phase 2 (\$169M)	2022	HS	Governance
9	Urban Investment Planning	2022	S	Urban
10	Water for Agro-pastoral Productivity	2023	S	Water
11	Somaliland Civil Service	2023	MS	Governance
12	Somali Electricity Access (\$7M)	2023	HS	Energy
13	Capacity Injection	2023	MS	Governance
14	PFM Capacity Strengthening (\$44M)	2023	S	Governance

Two Highly Satisfactory. Seven Satisfactory. Five Moderately Satisfactory. Zero below MS. Eight Global Practices: governance, agriculture, digital, urban, FCI, MTI, water, energy. The results are not confined to a single sector or instrument.

IEG’s Country Program Evaluation (March 2025) validated this assessment: ‘Given a challenging starting point, results are commendable.’ However, it also noted that ‘half of IEG’s project validations explicitly noted that the risks to the achieved development objectives were significant or substantial.’ The results are real but not yet secure.

	Somalia	Nigeria Water	Angola DPF	Ghana FCI
Period	2011–23	1990–2026	1999–2023	1997–2024
Projects (IEG-rated)	14	7 (+1 active)	6	14
Total committed	~\$900M	\$1.8bn	\$2.2bn	~\$500M
S+ rate (by commitment)	89%	0.4%	0%	0%
Projects below MS	0%	86%	100%	64%
Scale trend	Gradual, earned	Rapid (\$5M→\$700M)	Escalating after each U	Fragmented, unsustained
Supervision model	Intensive + third-party	ISR self-reporting	Limited implementation verification	Inconsistent
Reform anchor	HIPC conditionality (now expired)	None	None (oil cushion)	None
Series of Projects	Yes (7 of 12)	No	Programmatic DPF	No
Government systems used	Yes (deliberate)	PIU-based	Treasury (unverifiable)	PIU-based

3. The Somalia Model: Why Constrained Delivery Works

The CPE identifies specific design features that produced these results. Taken together, they describe a model of constrained delivery — a set of institutional disciplines that the Bank was compelled to adopt by Somalia’s extreme operating environment.

DISCIPLINED DELIVERY: FIVE OPERATIONAL FEATURES

1. Selective portfolio growth — lending volume calibrated to absorptive capacity, not pipeline targets.
2. Iterative scaling — each phase earns the next through verified results, not projected ambition.
3. Intensive supervision — supervision budgets and staffing proportional to portfolio risk, with third-party verification.
4. Realistic, capacity-matched objectives — projects aim to build foundations, not transform sectors.
5. External accountability anchor — a structural mechanism (such as HIPC conditionality or donor pooling) that imposes discipline from outside the Bank’s standard incentive structure.

All five features were present in the Somalia portfolio. None was consistently present in Nigeria Water, Angola DPF, or Ghana FCI. The fifth feature raises the question of whether the first four can be sustained without it.

Selectivity. Fourteen projects over 12 years. Average project under \$50 million (excluding the DPF). Annual lending averaged \$81 million pre-arrears clearance. The CPF Board Chair Summary stated the strategy should focus on ‘high selectivity and design of WBG operations despite limited resources.’

Realistic objectives. The CPE found that ‘most projects identified realistic objectives with a recognition of what could be achieved given the fragility and low-capacity environment.’ Projects aimed to build foundations — a payroll system, a business registration framework, a communications law — not to transform entire sectors.

Government systems, not PIUs. The Bank ‘deliberately chose to disburse Recurrent Cost and Reform Financing funds through the country’s own financial management system as it was being built.’ This eschewed the standard FCS practice of channelling resources through NGOs or dedicated project implementation units.

Series of Projects and iterative scaling. Seven of 12 validated projects ‘involved piloting an approach and scaling it up.’ The Recurrent Cost programme went from Phase 1 (MS) to Phase 2 (HS). Each phase earned the next.

Third-party monitoring. A monitoring agent (Abyrint) reviewed every RCRF transaction, identified \$5.4 million in payroll exceptions, and provided real-time feedback. This created external verification that ISR-based self-reporting does not.

Multi-Partner Fund and donor coordination. The pooled fund created external accountability: multiple donors scrutinising the same portfolio, coordinating policy dialogue, and funding enhanced supervision.

HIPC as external discipline. The HIPC process ‘was effective in encouraging the federal government and federal member states to agree on critical issues of fiscal federalism.’ Whether this constitutes genuine reform ownership or compliance with external conditionality is an open question. With HIPC completed in December 2023, the CPE warned that ‘a new framework to anchor the statebuilding reform agenda is needed.’

THE DEEPER INSIGHT

Somalia succeeded not despite constraint, but because constraint prevented the Bank from behaving normally. Limited resources prevented pipeline-driven lending. Insecurity prevented the neglect of supervision. Capacity constraints prevented over-ambitious objectives. HIPC conditionality imposed compliance. Donor pooling imposed accountability. The normal institutional incentives were temporarily suspended. Now that HIPC is complete, the Multi-Partner Fund is no longer the primary financing vehicle, and IDA resources are flowing at scale, the external constraints that compelled discipline are being removed one by one.

4. What Highly Satisfactory Looks Like in a Fragile State

IEG awards the Highly Satisfactory rating to fewer than 3 percent of projects globally. Somalia has two.

Recurrent Cost & Reform Financing Phase 2 (P154875, \$169M, HS). This project financed civil service salaries through the government’s own financial management system and introduced disbursement-linked indicators tied to verified reform milestones.

Indicator	Baseline	Achievement	Target
Civil servants paid on time	8%	75%	22% (revised)
Wage bill self-financed by FGS	40%	86%	40% (revised)
Inter-governmental transfers to FMS	\$15M (2018)	\$59.6M (2020)	45% increase
Teachers financed through govt payroll	0	3,720	—
Female health workers trained	0	750	750
DLI targets met	0	30 of 44	—
CIM staff appointed (FGS + Puntland)	0	205	—

The ICR Review documents significant risks: political instability, clan-based wage bill expansion, sustainability dependent on continued donor financing. The HS rating reflects achievement against objectives, not the elimination of structural risk.

Somali Electricity Access Project (P165497, \$7M, HS). A \$7 million grant that expanded electricity access through solar home systems and built the sector’s regulatory framework. Nigeria’s Water Rehabilitation Project committed \$260 million and was rated Highly Unsatisfactory. The difference in commitment is 37 to 1. The difference in outcome is the maximum distance on IEG’s rating scale.

5. The DPF That Was Rated Satisfactory – and What That Actually Means

The Somalia Reengagement and Reform DPF (P171570, \$459 million) was rated Satisfactory. Angola’s Growth and Inclusion DPF series (\$1.7 billion) was rated MU for all three operations. The instrument is the same. The outcomes are opposite.

But the comparison requires an important qualification: the Somalia DPF was not a standard policy reform operation. It was a HIPC-linked reengagement instrument. The prior actions were largely HIPC triggers and IMF Extended Credit Facility benchmarks – conditions designed by the Bank and the Fund, not a discretionary reform agenda chosen by the Somali government.

Feature	Somalia DPF	Angola DPF Series
Reform origin	Bank/IMF HIPC triggers	Nominally government-owned
Government incentive	Existential (\$4.5bn debt relief)	None (oil revenue cushion)
Prior actions	Concrete, verifiable, externally set	Tracked adoption, not implementation
IMF coordination	Tightly linked to ECF benchmarks	Parallel but not binding
Results framework	Linked to HIPC triggers	39% of prior actions had no indicators
Ownership question	Compliance-driven	Reform-resistant
Outcome rating	Satisfactory	MU (management rated MS; IEG downgraded)

THE IMPLICATION FOR DPF AS AN INSTRUMENT

If the DPF instrument produces a Satisfactory rating primarily when external conditionality is overwhelming and the lenders hold the pen, that is not evidence that the instrument works. It is evidence that coercive leverage works. The 54 percent of IDA that now flows through DPF operations does so under the standard model, not the HIPC model. Angola’s record may be more representative than Somalia’s.

6. The PFM Story: Building State Financial Infrastructure

Two projects in the Somalia portfolio address the most fundamental question in statebuilding: can the government manage its own public finances?

PFM Capacity Strengthening (P151492, \$44M, Satisfactory). This project strengthened domestic revenue mobilisation, expenditure control, and accountability across the Federal Government, Puntland, and Somaliland. It established the SFMIS, operationalised a large taxpayer office, and automated revenue receipts.

Recurrent Cost & Reform Phase 2 (P154875, \$169M, HS). This project extended the payroll system to Federal Member States including Puntland. The Capacity Injection Project appointed 110 specialists into Puntland State Government positions with retention exceeding 90 percent after 12 months.

The CPE documents that the SFMIS ‘now covers all federal government transactions and has built-in budget controls.’ Annual financial statements are prepared using IPSAS and submitted to the Auditor General within three months. Audited annual government financial statements have been published since 2019.

The Capacity Injection sustainability question. The 110 professionals placed in Puntland were recruited at salary levels significantly above regular civil service pay — a premium financed by the project. This model has been tried across Africa, including in Sierra Leone and Uganda, and the pattern is well documented: once the project closes and the salary premium ends, the disconnect between project-financed staff and regular civil servants becomes a source of institutional tension, and the injected capacity degrades rapidly as professionals leave for the private sector, donor agencies, or other project-financed positions. The 90 percent retention rate at 12 months is encouraging but was measured while the project was still active. The harder question is what happens at 36 or 60 months after project closure, when the salary differential reasserts itself. If the government cannot absorb these positions into a sustainable wage bill, the capacity gains documented by IEG may prove temporary — another form of project-dependent achievement that does not survive the transition to domestic financing.

THE VERIFICATION QUESTION

The critical question for any country's accountability institutions — auditors general, parliamentary oversight committees, civil society — is whether these systems function as documented. If they do, Somalia has built genuine foundations for accountable public finance in barely a decade. If the systems exist formally but do not function in practice, that gap between documented achievement and operational reality would itself be a finding of considerable importance.

7. Comparative Failures: Nigeria, Angola, Ghana

Nigeria Water. The sole Satisfactory project was a \$5 million community-managed pilot — 0.4 percent of total commitments. The six projects rated below Satisfactory committed \$1.1 billion. SURWASH (\$700 million) is rated MU at mid-term with fewer than 1 percent of beneficiary targets achieved after three years.

Angola DPF. Six rated DPF operations, zero Satisfactory. The last three — a programmatic \$1.7 billion series — carried word-for-word identical IEG lessons. The successor pipeline totals \$2.15 billion.

Ghana FCI. 14 FCI projects over 27 years, zero Satisfactory, 64 percent hard failure rate. The recurring pattern was reform churn: each new TTL or Practice Manager introduced a different approach, abandoning the previous one before results could materialise. No approach was sustained long enough to build institutional continuity.

These comparisons are not methodologically symmetrical. The analytical value lies in identifying common patterns: in the three failure cases, portfolio ambition systematically exceeded institutional capacity, supervision intensity declined as project size grew, and results frameworks tracked form rather than function. The association between constrained delivery and stronger outcomes is consistent across all four cases, though establishing strict causality would require a larger sample.

8. The Scaling Problem: Why Success Deteriorates

The most analytically significant finding in this series is not that the Bank fails — it is the mechanism by which success is converted into failure:

Step 1: A small, constrained operation produces results (Nigeria's \$5M pilot; Somalia's early trust-funded projects).

Step 2: The Bank scales the commitment (Nigeria: \$5M → \$250M → \$700M; Angola: \$17M → \$450M → \$1.7bn).

Step 3: Supervision intensity collapses as project complexity and geographic scope increase.

Step 4: Institutional incentives — pipeline pressure, approval culture, TTL rotation — override the design disciplines that produced the initial success.

Step 5: The project fails. The lesson is documented. The next operation is larger.

Somalia is now entering Steps 2 and 3. Data from the World Bank's project database (May 2026) reveals the transformation:

Metric	Rated Portfolio (FY2011–23)	Active Portfolio (May 2026)
Projects	14	39
Total commitment	~\$900M	\$2,796M
Average project size	~\$50M (excl. DPF)	\$74M
Approvals per year	~1.2	6–11 (2025–26)
Projects rated High Risk	0	7 (\$917M)
Safety net exposure	\$0	\$700M+

Additional Financing as stealth scaling. Nine active operations are Additional Financings totalling \$502 million. The HS-rated Recurrent Cost programme (\$169 million) now carries \$375 million across parent and AF operations. Urban Resilience has \$420 million. These are no longer the small, focused operations where 89 percent of commitments were rated Satisfactory.

The safety net risk. Over \$700 million in safety net commitments. The CPE warned: ‘An estimated 14 percent of the government’s budget was allocated to safety net payments, which is not sustainable given low domestic resource mobilisation.’

Seven High-risk projects. \$917 million rated High environmental and social risk — one-third of the active portfolio. The rated portfolio contained no High-risk projects.

The institutional mechanics are well understood. Bank budget allocations reward approvals over supervision. Supervision budgets do not scale proportionally with portfolio size. TTL turnover weakens institutional memory. Management incentives favour commitment growth. ISR systems rely on self-reporting, creating optimism bias that IEG field evaluations routinely correct downward. As portfolios expand, monitoring dilution becomes structural.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

The Bank has no institutional mechanism for preserving implementation discipline during scale transitions. Successful pilots trigger institutional pressures — pipeline demand, managerial incentives, IDA replenishment logic — that systematically destroy the conditions which enabled the initial success. The evidence from Nigeria, Angola, and Ghana suggests this is not an aberration but a structural feature of how the institution operates.

9. Alternative Explanations and Limitations

Smaller portfolio size. A smaller portfolio is inherently easier to supervise. This is likely part of the explanation — but it reinforces rather than contradicts the central argument that scale degrades quality.

Higher supervision budgets. The Multi-Partner Fund financed enhanced supervision and third-party monitoring. If these resources are reduced as IDA becomes the primary source, supervision intensity may decline.

HIPC conditionality. HIPC created external pressure that compelled compliance. The DPF's Satisfactory rating may reflect the binding nature of HIPC conditionality more than the quality of DPF design. Whether reform momentum survives without this external leverage is perhaps the most important open question.

Lower expectations in FCS environments. IEG may calibrate expectations downward. However: two HS ratings (top 3 percent globally); quantitative indicators exceeded targets by multiples; results were consistent across eight GPs; an independent monitoring agent verified results; and the DPF was implemented under simultaneous IEG, IMF, and bilateral scrutiny.

Somalia's structural conditions forced discipline. Low capacity forced realism. Insecurity forced supervision. These are structural conditions, not merely good management. The Somalia model may not be fully replicable.

Somalia may ultimately prove an outlier rather than a transferable model. The portfolio is young, the sample is small, and sustainability risks are significant. Whether Somalia's results survive the current scaling phase will itself be a test of the thesis advanced here.

10. Conclusion: Can the Bank Institutionalise Disciplined Delivery?

The Somalia portfolio suggests that disciplined selectivity, iterative scaling, intensive supervision, third-party verification, and realistic objectives can produce strong results even in extreme fragility. The IEG Country Program Evaluation confirms this while warning that rapid scaling poses significant risks.

The companion case studies document what happens when these disciplines are absent. The Bank's institutional incentives systematically reward scale, approval volume, and lending growth over disciplined implementation and iterative learning.

THE FINDING

The Somalia portfolio demonstrates that the Bank can deliver when portfolio design is disciplined, supervision is intensive, objectives are realistic, and scaling is earned rather than assumed. The challenge for reform is whether these features can be institutionalised rather than arising only when extreme circumstances compel them.

Four country cases. Four instruments. Four sectors. The variable that appears to best explain the divergence in outcomes is not country income, institutional capacity, conflict status, or lending instrument. It is the degree of discipline in portfolio design. Somalia may ultimately prove an outlier rather than a transferable model — but the consistency of the pattern across four cases suggests the association is not coincidental.

Somalia may be the most important portfolio in Africa — not because it proves the Bank can succeed in fragility, but because it reveals the conditions under which the institution is capable of disciplined delivery at all. The implication is that several disciplines associated with Somalia's performance emerged under

conditions of externally imposed constraint rather than through the Bank's standard operational incentives. The question for reform is whether the Bank can impose on itself what Somalia imposed on it.

Outcome ratings are an imperfect proxy for development impact. But they remain the Bank's primary standardised mechanism for comparative portfolio assessment. When the same rating system produces 89 percent of commitments rated Satisfactory in one of the world's most fragile states and zero percent in stable, middle-income Ghana's competitiveness portfolio, the signal is difficult to attribute to measurement error alone.

The deeper institutional driver may be the political economy of IDA replenishment itself. Larger commitments signal institutional relevance. Approval volume affects managerial standing. Pipeline growth demonstrates demand for IDA resources. Delivery quality, by contrast, is lagged, weakly incentivised, and measured through systems that rely substantially on self-reporting. The Bank has no institutional mechanism for preserving implementation discipline during scale transitions — no circuit breaker that prevents successful pilots from triggering the pressures that destroy what enabled their success. That is the structural problem this series documents. And it is a problem the Bank's own evaluation architecture has identified repeatedly without producing institutional change.

Annex A: Rated Project Data

All ratings from IEG ICRR/PPAR database, March 2026. PPAR ratings used where both exist.

P-code	Project	FY	\$M	Rating	Eval
P113218	Rapid Response Rural Livelihoods	2011	\$7M	MS	ICRR
P148428	Recurrent Cost & Reform Facility	2015	\$16M	MS	ICRR
P152358	ICT Sector Support Phase II	2020	\$10M	S	ICRR
P156257	Special Financing Local Development	2020	\$9M	MS	ICRR
P152241	Core Economic Institutions (SCORE)	2021	\$11M	S	ICRR
P171570	Reengagement & Reform DPF	2022	\$420M	S	ICRR
P163857	Somalia Urban Resilience	2022	\$9M	MS	ICRR
P154875	Recurrent Cost Phase 2	2022	\$144M	HS	ICRR
P150374	Urban Investment Planning	2022	\$3M	S	ICRR
P167826	Water for Agro-pastoral (WAPR)	2023	\$30M	S	ICRR
P155123	Somaliland Civil Service	2023	\$10M	MS	ICRR
P165497	Somali Electricity Access (SEAP)	2023	\$7M	HS	ICRR
P149971	Capacity Injection	2023	\$34M	MS	ICRR
P151492	PFM Capacity Strengthening	2023	\$44M	S	ICRR

Annex B: Active Portfolio (May 2026)

39 active projects, \$2.8 billion committed. Source: World Bank Projects Database, 21 May 2026.

P-code	Project	\$M	Approved	Risk
P170922	Urban Resilience Phase II	\$278M	Dec 2019	High
P173731	Recurrent Cost Phase 3	\$214M	Jun 2020	Substantial
P173315	Crisis Recovery	\$188M	May 2020	High
P513127	Infrastructure for Access & Jobs	\$160M	May 2026	High
P173088	Electricity Sector Recovery	\$146M	Dec 2021	High
P172031	Damal Healthcare	\$133M	Jun 2021	Substantial
P506857	Second Economic Resilience DPF	\$125M	Aug 2025	—
P507443	BOOST Social Protection	\$112M	Sep 2025	Substantial
P501662	SPRING (productive growth)	\$105M	May 2025	Substantial
P181341	ASCENT (clean energy)	\$96M	Nov 2023	Substantial
P177900	AF: Recurrent Cost Phase 3	\$92M	Jun 2022	—
P168115	SCALE (livelihoods)	\$91M	Mar 2019	—
P177627	Barwaaqo Water	\$88M	Dec 2022	Substantial
P177298	Public Resource Management	\$75M	Dec 2022	Substantial
P176369	AF: Safety Net Locust Response	\$75M	Jun 2021	—
P174769	AF: SCALE	\$70M	Jun 2021	—
P181407	2nd AF: Recurrent Cost Phase 3	\$69M	May 2024	—
P178032	Fisheries (Badmaax)	\$55M	Jun 2024	High
P176898	Women's Education & Skills	\$47M	Jun 2022	High
P173119	Horn of Africa Infrastructure	\$43M	Sep 2022	High

Note: Table shows 20 largest operations. Additional smaller projects and AFs account for the remaining ~\$530 million. Nine of the 39 active projects are Additional Financings totalling \$502 million.

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