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Pathways to Sustainable Economic Development: Household Adoption, Benefits, and Challenges of Organic Farming in Rural Kerala

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Abstract

Organic farming has emerged as an important strategy for achieving sustainable economic development by ensuring ecological balance, improving household food security, and reducing dependence on chemical inputs. This study investigates the dynamics of organic farming adoption at the household level in Elamad Panchayath, Kollam district, Kerala, focusing on trends, influencing factors, economic benefits, and challenges. Utilizing a descriptive research design and primary data from 60 households, the research reveals that health consciousness is the primary driver for adoption, with homemakers playing a pivotal role. While organic farming significantly reduces household expenses and offers modest income generation, persistent challenges such as pest management, high input costs, and limited formal support hinder full adoption and scalability. The findings underscore the potential of household organic farming as a pathway to sustainable economic development through enhanced food security and reduced dependency on market produce, but also highlight critical areas for policy intervention, including targeted training, simplified certification, and improved market linkages to foster wider and more impactful adoption.

Keywords: organic farming, household adoption, sustainable economic development, Kerala, India, economic benefits, challenges, food security, health consciousness, rural development

Introduction

Global and National Context of Organic Farming

Organic farming represents an environmentally sustainable agricultural practice, prioritizing soil health, biodiversity preservation, and ecological equilibrium. It relies on natural techniques to nurture plant growth, eschewing chemical fertilizers, pesticides, synthetic growth regulators, and genetically modified seeds. Instead, it employs organic pesticides, composted green manures, and alternative plant nutrients derived from natural sources. These practices are designed to enrich the soil's chemical, biological, and physical properties while maintaining nutrient balance, thereby fostering soil health and controlling weeds, pests, and diseases in an eco-friendly manner. Globally, organic farming has gained prominence as a sustainable alternative to conventional agricultural practices, primarily due to its health benefits, environmental sustainability, and long-term economic potential.

Within the Indian agricultural landscape, the concept of organic farming is not unfamiliar. The Green Revolution marked a significant shift with the introduction of high-yielding and hybrid seeds, alongside the widespread adoption of artificial fertilizers and pesticides. While these aimed to

increase productivity to feed a growing population, the excessive use of chemical inputs eventually led to environmental degradation and health concerns. Consequently, there has been a gradual replacement of chemical fertilizers and pesticides with organic alternatives such as organic manures, composts, and tinctures. Presently, organic farming is emerging as a pivotal agricultural method in India, driven by increasing health awareness and the adoption of eco-friendly farming practices, which in turn have created new markets for organic products both domestically and internationally.

India holds a prominent position in the global organic sector, ranking 1st globally in the number of organic producers with over 1.2 million farmers and 6th in terms of organic agricultural land, encompassing approximately 3.7 million hectares as of 2021. This robust base of producers is a testament to the growing interest in organic practices across the country. The organic food industry in India is experiencing substantial growth, valued at INR 131.41 billion in 2024 and projected to reach INR 625.69 billion by 2028, expanding at an impressive Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 37.01%. This rapid expansion highlights the increasing consumer demand for organic products and the sector's strong commercial potential.

Several states in India have been particularly proactive in promoting organic farming. Sikkim, for instance, achieved the distinction of becoming the first 100% organic state in India in 2016, setting a national example for sustainable agriculture. Himachal Pradesh has made significant strides, especially in apple cultivation, while Uttarakhand has focused on organic farming in hill areas for fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants. Madhya Pradesh has emerged as a leader in organic cotton production, showcasing the potential of organic farming in diverse agricultural sectors. India produces and exports a wide array of organic products, including fruits, vegetables, cereals, pulses, cotton, tea, coffee, and spices, with a significant presence in global organic spice production.

To support this growth, the Central Government has introduced various initiatives. The National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) certifies organic products to international standards, enhancing marketability. The Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY), launched in 2015, promotes organic farming through traditional practices and financial assistance. Other key programs include the Soil Health Management (SHM) Scheme, Mission Organic Value Chain Development (MOVCD), and provisions under the Rastriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) and National Horticulture Mission (NHM), all aimed at fostering sustainable agriculture and boosting farmers' income.

In Kerala, organic farming has evolved significantly over the past few decades, positioning the state as a key player in the movement towards sustainable agriculture. Known for its rich natural resources, diverse agro-climatic conditions, and high level of biodiversity, Kerala provides an ideal setting for organic farming practices. The increasing shift towards organic farming in Kerala is driven by a combination of factors such as environmental sustainability, the health consciousness of consumers, and the desire for higher incomes for farmers. The Kerala State Organic Farming Mission (KSOFM), a prominent initiative by the state government, provides critical support for farmers transitioning from conventional to organic farming by providing subsidies, training, and access to organic inputs. Districts like Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad have become hotspots for organic farming, excelling in crops such as pepper, cardamom, organic fruits, and vegetables. The state's organic sector is further supported by increasing local and international demand, NPOP certification, and the crucial role of farmer cooperatives like the Kerala Organic Farmers' Association (KOFA).

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing awareness of the health benefits, environmental sustainability, and long-term economic potential of organic farming, its adoption at the household level remains limited. Many households face significant challenges that impede their transition to and sustained practice of organic methods. These include high input costs, limited

knowledge regarding organic techniques, restricted access to organic inputs, and difficulties in maintaining organic practices over time. Furthermore, there is uncertainty regarding the precise economic benefits of household-level organic farming, as financial outcomes may vary considerably across different households.

Study Focus

This study seeks to analyse the extent of organic farming adoption, explore the key factors influencing households to transition to organic methods, identify the challenges faced in sustaining organic farming, and assess its economic impact on households in Elamad Panchayath, Kollam district, Kerala.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Analyze the extent of organic farming practices in households.
2. Identify the key factors influencing households to adopt organic farming.
3. Assess the economic benefits experienced by households practicing organic farming.
4. Explore the challenges households face in sustaining organic farming.

Need and Significance

Understanding the adoption of organic farming at the household level is crucial for promoting sustainable agricultural practices. This study holds significance for various stakeholders, contributing to a holistic approach to sustainable development.

For **Households**, the study provides valuable insights into the advantages and potential challenges of organic farming, empowering them to make informed decisions about their agricultural practices and food choices. This direct benefit at the individual level can lead to improved health outcomes and greater food security.

For **Policy Makers and Government Bodies**, the findings can be instrumental in identifying key barriers to adoption and designing effective policies that specifically support and encourage household organic farming. Such targeted policies are essential for fostering a more sustainable agricultural sector that is responsive to the needs of its citizens.

For **Researchers and Academicians**, the study contributes to the existing literature by offering a deeper understanding of sustainable agriculture at the micro-level and shedding light on household economic behavior in the context of eco-friendly practices. This adds valuable empirical data to the broader academic discourse.

For **Organic Farming Promoters, NGOs, and Environmental Organizations**, the study's findings can be utilized to develop targeted awareness programs, implement effective financial incentives, and design practical training sessions. These interventions are crucial for supporting households in adopting and sustaining organic farming practices, thereby expanding the reach of sustainable agriculture initiatives.

Materials and Methods

Study Area and Sample

The study was specifically conducted in Elamad Panchayath, located within the Kollam district of Kerala, India. This geographical focus allowed for an in-depth analysis of organic farming practices within a specific local context. A sample size of 60 households was chosen for the study. These households were purposively selected based on their active engagement in organic farming practices, ensuring that the data collected directly pertained to the experiences of practitioners.

Research Design

A descriptive research design was adopted for this study. This design was chosen to systematically investigate and describe the extent, challenges, and economic impact of organic farming among the selected households, providing a snapshot of current practices and perceptions.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was utilized to select the participating households. This non-probability sampling technique ensured that only households actively practicing organic farming were included,

thereby directly addressing the study's objectives by focusing on relevant cases.

Data Collection

Primary data was gathered through direct personal interviews conducted with the heads of the selected households. A structured questionnaire was employed during these interviews to collect consistent and comprehensive information across the sample. The questionnaire specifically covered key factors influencing organic farming adoption, sustainability challenges faced by households, and the financial benefits experienced. To provide additional insights and contextual information, secondary data was meticulously sourced from various reliable channels. These included government reports, academic journals, and official agricultural department websites, which supplemented the primary data with broader trends and existing knowledge.

Data Analysis

The collected data underwent rigorous analysis using both statistical and descriptive methods. Key techniques included percentage analysis, and the presentation of findings through tables and charts, which facilitated clearer interpretation and understanding of trends and patterns in household organic farming.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into household organic farming, it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. The research was based on a relatively small sample size of 60 households, which may not fully represent the broader population of households practicing organic farming across diverse regions. The geographical confinement of the study to Elamad Panchayath, Kollam district, further limits the generalizability of its findings, as agricultural conditions, socio-economic factors, and challenges may vary significantly across different geographical areas.

The reliance on self-reported data from households introduces a possibility of response bias, where individuals might consciously or unconsciously overstate their farming practices or economic benefits, or understate challenges. Furthermore, organic farming often requires several years to show its full economic and environmental impact. This study, being limited to a shorter time frame, might not have fully captured the long-term outcomes and benefits that accrue over an extended period. Finally, the study might not have fully captured the influence of external factors such as market fluctuations, evolving government policies, and climate variability, all of which can significantly impact organic farming adoption and sustainability.

Findings and Results

This section systematically presents the data collected, addressing each objective of the study.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic analysis provides a foundational understanding of the individuals and households engaged in organic farming in the study area. The age-wise distribution of respondents reveals that the majority (46.7%) fall within the 41-60 age group, indicating that middle-aged individuals are the most actively engaged in organic farming at the household level. The 25-40 age group accounts for 26.7% of the responses, reflecting moderate engagement, likely driven by increasing awareness and interest in sustainable living. However, only 18.3% of respondents are under the age of 25, suggesting that youth participation remains relatively low.

The gender-wise distribution shows a significant female dominance, with 63.3% of respondents being female, while males constitute 36.7% of the total. This suggests that women are more actively engaged in or show greater interest in organic farming at the household level.

In terms of educational qualification, a substantial majority (63.3%) of respondents have completed graduate-level education or higher, followed by 31.7% with secondary education. A small proportion (5%) have only completed primary education, and none of the participants reported having no formal education.

The data on household size indicates that the majority of households (66.7%) consist of 4 to 6 members, followed by 33.3% with 1 to 3 members. Notably, no respondents reported households with more than 6 members, suggesting that nuclear or moderately sized families dominate the sample population.

Regarding location, the majority of respondents (70%) are from rural areas, which aligns with the traditional agricultural context. Semi-urban and urban areas account for 18.3% and 11.7% respectively, indicating a relatively lower level of urban participation.

The occupational status of respondents reveals that the largest proportion (33.3%) are homemakers, highlighting their central role in adopting organic farming practices within the household. Private employees and those involved in business or self-employment each make up 16.7%, occupying the next highest positions. Surprisingly, farmers account for only 8.3% of the respondents, despite the survey's focus on organic farming. This diverse range of occupational backgrounds suggests that organic farming practices are not limited to professional farmers alone.

Finally, the income level of households shows that the majority of respondents (43.3%) earn between Rs 10,000 and Rs 30,000 per month, indicating they belong to the lower-middle-income segment. 21.7% of respondents have an income below Rs 10,000, placing them in the low-income bracket. A smaller proportion (18.3%) earn between Rs 30,000 and Rs 50,000.

Extent of Organic Farming Practices

The study assessed the degree to which households have adopted organic farming practices. The data reveals a mixed adoption landscape: 53.3% of respondents follow partially organic practices, utilizing a combination of both chemical and organic inputs. Meanwhile, a slightly smaller group, 46.7%, practices fully organic farming, completely avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

When examining the reasons for partial adoption, the most significant barrier reported was the difficulty in controlling pests and diseases, cited by 57.1% of respondents. The high cost of organic inputs followed closely, affecting 45.2% of participants. Additionally, 23.8% mentioned both the limited availability of organic supplies and the lack of sufficient knowledge or training as obstacles.

Regarding experience, the majority of practitioners (50%) have been engaged in organic farming for 1 to 3 years, indicating a relatively recent surge in interest. A quarter of respondents (25%) have less than a year of experience, while only 15% have more than 6 years, and 10% have 4 to 6 years. This suggests that most practitioners are still in the early stages of adoption.

In terms of types of organic farming, home gardening is the most popular form, practiced by 58.3% of respondents, indicating a preference for small-scale, personal cultivation. Community or shared organic farming accounts for 18.3%, reflecting collaborative efforts, while backyard farming is practiced by 13.3%.

The methods adopted by respondents show that the most commonly used organic techniques are organic manure (53.3%) and composting (51.7%), highlighting a strong preference for basic, natural soil enhancers. More advanced techniques like vermicomposting (21.7%) and natural pesticides (23.3%) are adopted to a lesser extent.

Finally, the land area used for organic farming indicates that practices are primarily on a small scale. One-third of respondents (33.3%) each use less than 1 cent and 1–5 cents of land, respectively. A smaller proportion (20%) use 6–10 cents, and only 13.3% utilize more than 10 cents.

Factors Influencing Adoption

The study explored the primary motivations and knowledge sources driving households to adopt organic farming practices. The primary driver behind the adoption of organic farming among respondents is an overwhelming concern for health benefits, cited by 90% of respondents. Environmental concerns follow at 25%, while cost-effectiveness ranks third at 20%, indicating that sustainability and affordability are factors, but not the main motivators. Less

frequently cited factors include leisure gardening (18.3%), availability of resources (11.7%), and social influence (11.7%).

Regarding the source of knowledge about organic farming, social media and the internet ranked highest, with 31.7% of respondents citing them as their primary source of information. This highlights the growing impact of digital platforms in spreading awareness and knowledge. Family and friends followed closely at 30%, indicating a strong peer-to-peer influence in promoting organic practices. Magazines, journals, and newspapers accounted for 25% of awareness, reflecting the continued relevance of traditional media. In contrast, formal channels such as government programs (8.3%), training/workshops (5%), and educational institutions (3.3%) were significantly less influential, suggesting that institutional outreach remains relatively limited.

The majority of participants view organic farming positively in terms of food quality. A total of 55% strongly agreed, and 38.3% agreed that organic farming enhances food quality, leading to a combined 93.3% positive perception. This indicates a strong belief among participants that organic produce is superior in terms of health, freshness, and nutritional value.

Economic Benefits Experienced

The study assessed the economic impact of organic farming on households. Only 18.3% of respondents reported receiving external support, while a significant 81.7% stated that they did not receive any assistance. This clearly highlights a gap in the reach and effectiveness of support systems for household organic farming.

According to the responses, 80% reported that their monthly expenses were slightly reduced due to organic farming. A smaller group (16.7%) stated that their expenses were significantly reduced, leading to a total of 96.7% experiencing some level of reduction. Only 3.3% felt there was no impact at all.

Regarding the impact on household income, the majority (55%) indicated that their income had increased slightly, while 18.3% stated that the question was not applicable to their situation (likely not selling produce). Additionally, 21.7% reported no impact on income, and only 5% experienced a significant increase in income. This suggests that while income benefits from organic farming are evident, they tend to be modest or may not apply to everyone.

In terms of monthly savings from growing organic food, a majority (46.7%) reported saving less than □500, while 38.3% of participants saved between □500 and □1000. Additionally, 13.3% indicated savings in the range of □1000 to □2000. This shows that while the level of savings varies, nearly everyone benefits financially to some extent from growing their own organic food.

A significant majority of participants (68.3%) believe that organic farming is financially viable in the long run, indicating strong confidence in the economic sustainability of organic agricultural practices. In contrast, 18.3% feel that organic farming is not financially viable over time, suggesting that some respondents may have encountered or perceived economic challenges in this sector. Meanwhile, 13.3% remain uncertain, reflecting hesitation or a lack of sufficient information regarding the long-term financial benefits.

A large majority of respondents (71.7%) expressed a clear intention to expand their organic farming practices, indicating strong and growing interest in deepening their involvement. In contrast, 18.3% stated that they do not plan to expand, suggesting some hesitation, possibly due to constraints such as space, time, or resources. Additionally, 10% of respondents were uncertain about their future plans.

Challenges Faced in Sustaining Organic Farming

The study identified several key challenges that households face in sustaining organic farming practices. The foremost challenge in sustaining organic farming is pest and disease management, cited by 60% of respondents. This is followed by a lack of awareness and knowledge (33.3%), high costs of organic inputs and soil fertility maintenance

(28.3%), and the lack of proper markets for organic produce (23.3%). These challenges highlight the financial, technical, and informational barriers to organic farming.

Regarding training opportunities, a significant majority (65%) of respondents reported having no access to formal training or educational resources related to organic farming, while only 35% had access. This suggests that a significant majority of participants lack access to formal training or educational resources related to organic farming.

When comparing the effort required, a substantial 70% of respondents perceive organic farming as more labour-intensive and challenging than conventional methods. Only 20% disagreed, and 10% were unsure. This perception could be a key reason why some farmers hesitate to adopt or sustain organic farming practices.

Difficulties in achieving organic certification were also noted. A significant majority of respondents (63.3%) marked the question as "not applicable," indicating that many either have not attempted to obtain organic certification or are not yet involved in formal organic farming processes. Among those who have pursued certification, a notable portion (31.7%) reported facing difficulties, while only a small number (5%) stated they encountered no issues.

Finally, price competition poses a significant hurdle. A majority (56.7%) of respondents reported facing difficulty selling organic produce due to price competition with conventional products, which are typically cheaper. Only a small portion (13.3%) did not experience this issue, while 30% stated that the question was not applicable, likely indicating that they are not involved in selling their products.

Summary of Key Household-Level Findings

Category	Key Findings
Demographics	Majority are middle-aged (41-60), highly educated (graduate+), female homemakers in rural areas, lower-middle income. Farmers constitute only 8.3%.
Extent of Adoption	53.3% partially organic, 46.7% fully organic. Most are new (75% < 3 years' experience). Home gardening (58.3%) is dominant. Organic manure (53.3%) & composting (51.7%) most common methods. Small-scale land use (<5 cents for 66.6%).
Influencing Factors	Overwhelmingly driven by health benefits (90%). Knowledge primarily from social media/internet (31.7%) and family/friends (30%). High belief in organic food quality (93.3% positive).
Economic Benefits	96.7% report reduced monthly expenses (80% slight, 16.7% significant). 55% report slight income increase. Most savings < □1000/month. 68.3% believe in long-term financial viability. 71.7% plan to expand.
Challenges	Pest/disease management (60%) is top challenge. Lack of awareness/knowledge (33.3%), high input costs (28.3%), lack of markets (23.3%). 81.7% received no external support. 65% no formal training. 70% perceive more effort than conventional farming. 31.7% faced certification difficulties. 56.7% faced price competition.

Conclusion

Organic farming at the household level in Elamad Panchayath, Kollam, Kerala, is a growing practice driven primarily by health consciousness, with homemakers playing a central role. While it offers tangible economic benefits through reduced household expenses and modest income generation, its full potential is constrained by significant challenges. These include difficulties in pest and disease management, high input costs, and a pervasive lack of formal training and external

support. The reliance on informal knowledge networks, while effective for initial adoption, contributes to the prevalence of partial organic practices, hindering a complete transition to fully sustainable methods. Despite these barriers, there is strong optimism among practitioners regarding the long-term viability of organic farming and a clear intention to expand, demonstrating a resilient, grassroots movement. For household organic farming to become a more robust pathway to sustainable economic development, interventions must address the interconnected nature of these challenges, moving beyond self-sufficiency to foster greater market integration and scalability.

Recommendations

To maximize the potential of household organic farming and align it more effectively with pathways to sustainable economic development, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders:

1. Enhancing Knowledge, Training, and Awareness

1. **Integrate Organic Farming into Educational Curricula:** Advocate for the inclusion of organic farming modules in school and college curricula, particularly in life sciences, home science, and agriculture-related programs. This should be complemented by short-term certificate courses and internship opportunities in collaboration with organic farms and NGOs to provide practical exposure.
2. **Tailor Communication and Training Materials for Homemakers:** Recognizing their central role, design targeted communication and training materials for homemakers. Offer flexible learning options such as online tutorials, mobile applications, or community WhatsApp groups to ensure accessibility. Simultaneously, launch urban organic farming initiatives like rooftop gardening and balcony farming kits, coupled with composting workshops, to engage urban populations.
3. **Develop Localized Training Modules:** Create localized training modules on organic pest control methods, such as neem extract, garlic sprays, and companion planting. These should be accompanied by simple, step-by-step guides (printed or digital) in local languages. Model demonstration plots can build trust in these methods.
4. **Train Local Youth as "Organic Ambassadors":** Develop programs to train local youth who can educate and assist households in starting or improving organic farming practices, leveraging peer-to-peer learning within communities.
5. **Create a Local Organic Farming Helpline:** Establish a local organic farming helpline or WhatsApp support group to offer real-time guidance and troubleshooting to farmers and household-level practitioners, addressing immediate operational concerns.

2. Providing Financial Incentives and Resource Access

1. **Include Household-Level Organic Farming in State Policies:** Advocate for the inclusion of household-level organic farming in state agricultural policies, supporting micro-level subsidies, low-interest loans, and integration into existing welfare schemes (e.g., MGNREGA, Self-Help Groups).
2. **Encourage Low-Cost Organic Practices:** Promote and subsidize low-cost organic practices, such as composting kitchen waste, using cow dung, neem oil, and natural repellents. Advocate for government subsidies or community seed/input banks to reduce upfront costs for households.
3. **Distribute Low-Cost Organic Farming Starter Kits:** Provide beginners with affordable starter kits (seeds, compost, and guidebooks) to encourage participation and reduce initial entry barriers.
4. **Establish Community Resource Centers:** Set up community composting centers to help households manage waste and produce organic manure collectively. Additionally, create community seed banks where households can

access and exchange organic, native seeds at little or no cost, and establish community tool-sharing centers to lend gardening tools and equipment, reducing individual purchasing costs.

3. Strengthening Market Linkages and Economic Viability

1. **Introduce a Simplified Local Organic Certification Scheme:** Launch a simplified local certification scheme tailored for household-level produce to boost its credibility and encourage marketing, making the process less daunting for small-scale practitioners.
2. **Create Local Organic Branding and Niche Markets:** Establish local organic branding and niche markets, such as weekend organic bazaars, eco-conscious housing societies, or tie-ups with health stores. Encourage community-supported agriculture (CSA) models where consumers pre-pay for farm produce, ensuring a direct market for growers.
3. **Build Direct Linkages and Support for Value Addition:** Create designated stalls at local weekly markets where household farmers can sell surplus organic produce without middlemen. Facilitate direct linkages between organic growers and local consumers using platforms like WhatsApp or local bulletin boards. Promote small-scale entrepreneurship and value addition, such as making and selling organic pickles or herbal teas, and provide training on branding, packaging, and online selling to enhance income from small yields.

4. Fostering Community Engagement and Support

1. **Leverage Middle-Aged Group as Community Champions:** Develop programs that utilize the experience of the middle-aged group as mentors, guiding both older and younger generations through workshops, demonstration farms, or neighbourhood initiatives.
2. **Promote Community/Shared Gardening Models:** Encourage smaller households to pool their efforts by promoting shared or community gardening models. Introduce labour-saving tools or vertical farming techniques suitable for households with fewer members and limited time.
3. **Publicly Recognize Organic Farming Households:** Publicly recognize and celebrate households practicing organic farming through local awards, appreciation events, or certificates to motivate others and build a sense of community achievement.
4. **Engage Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Local NGOs:** Involve these groups in spreading awareness, offering training, and supporting group marketing efforts, leveraging their established community networks.
5. **Collaborate with Health Centers:** Partner with local health centers and doctors to promote organic food as part of a healthy lifestyle and wellness programs, reframing outreach to focus on health-first messaging supported by testimonials and success stories.

By implementing these comprehensive and integrated recommendations, policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders can collectively address the challenges faced by households in adopting and sustaining organic farming. This will facilitate its expansion, transforming it from primarily a self-sufficiency strategy into a more significant contributor to local economies and rural livelihoods, thereby strengthening sustainable economic development at the micro-level and fostering a more resilient and environmentally conscious agricultural future.

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