

Annual Report

April 2023 - March 2024

In partnership with











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Foreword by Project Director



Martin Omukuba

Project Director

Dear colleagues, partners and friends,

Over the past one year, the PlayMatters project has registered achievements that speak to a shift in the education of children, especially the vulnerable ones in emergency settings. PlayMatters 2.0 Year 1, specifically, showed a project that exemplifies our shared commitment to enhancing education through play-based learning and community collaboration. It was a period of significant progress, measurable impact, and focused investment in transforming learning environments for children in challenging settings. Through strong partnerships and a coordinated approach, the project achieved noteworthy results in Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania laying a great foundation for quality education.

At the close of Year 1, we not only met our reach targets but exceeded them, achieving nine out of 10 of our Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) across the three countries.

The one KPI where we recorded an underachievement (KPI6) reflects a planned adjustment in our delivery approach to enhance the value of our intervention, addressing the specific needs and conditions of the communities we serve.

Our Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM) concluded its year with outstanding performance, achieving an impressive 98% financial burn rate and significant overachievement in key areas. This strong finish speaks to our dedication to maximising the impact of our resources. The financial stewardship across both the core project (Outcomes 1–3) and the ERM (Outcome 4) was exemplary, demonstrating our commitment to prudent and impactful spending. By the end of their respective periods, both the PM core and ERM components had nearly fully utilised their allocated budgets, ensuring that resources were utilized for the benefit of the children and communities where we serve

One of our primary focuses in Year One was addressing critical barriers to learning, including unsafe infrastructure and limited access to educational materials. We renovated 109 schools, creating safer and more supportive learning environments that foster student engagement and well-being. These renovations are not merely structural improvements; but an investment in each child's safety, a critical factor for meaningful Learning through Play (LtP). Additionally, recognising the importance of interactive, play-based resources, we distributed **246,810 sets of LEGO Bricks** to schools in Uganda and Ethiopia. By providing these materials, we are not only equipping schools with learning materials but also embedding the values of creativity, resilience, and play in education.

Moreover, PlayMatters recognises that education must be inclusive, addressing the diverse needs of all learners, especially adolescent girls. With this in mind, we distributed **16,947** menstrual hygiene management kits, ensuring that adolescent girls can attend school confidently and consistently.

The enthusiasm and involvement of System Actors has been invaluable in creating the positive impact of the project we see today. Across all three countries, System Actors have expressed their excitement about how PlayMatters interventions are boosting enrollment and inspiring greater interaction between learners and teachers. The buy-in from our critical stakeholders has been instrumental, as their support amplifies our reach and reinforces the sustainability of our approach. By fostering collaborative relationships with System Actors, we are able to strengthen the educational system, creating ripple effects that extend beyond our project interventions. During our annual system Actors' workshops, it is always evident that this shared commitment has contributed to the appreciation and adoption for play-based learning and has proven essential to our collective success.

As we reflect on these achievements, we recognise that the journey is far from over. The challenges facing education in our project areas are complex, requiring ongoing innovation, collaboration, and resilience. Yet, the results of this past year affirm that we are on the right path, building brighter futures for children through the power of play.

Our Year One results would not have been possible without the dedication of our teams, partners, and supporters. It is through their unwavering support that we have been able to bring the vision of PlayMatters to life, making a tangible difference in the lives of children and their teachers. Together, we are demonstrating that LtP can be a powerful tool for learning, one that fosters resilience, creativity, and hope in every learner.

Ilook forward to continuing building on the results we achieved last year. I thank the **LEGO Foundation**, our project partners and most of all, the teachers, children and communities we work with for their continued support. Let us remain steadfast in our mission to create a nurturing, inclusive, and playful learning environments where every child has the opportunity to thrive.



Foreword by Director of Technical and Research



Anne Smiley
Director, Technical & Research

Dear colleagues, partners and friends,

The Year 1 Annual Report for the PlayMatters project reflects an ongoing commitment to strengthening educational systems in Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania through the integration of Learning through Play (LtP). This year, our team made significant strides, guided by regional frameworks and PlayMatters' evidence-based LtP definition. These foundational resources have informed our work across the three countries implementing the project, ensuring that our content and approaches are consistently aligned with our goal of enhancing the educational experiences and well-being of children in both humanitarian and development contexts.

Over the course of the year, each PlayMatters country team rolled out comprehensive training and support packages tailored to teachers, trainers, Continuous Professional Development committees, school leaders,

and community members. These materials incorporated gender-responsive and well-being elements, equipping educators with critical skills to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. In Ethiopia's Tigray region, our adapted teacher-facing materials for accelerated education supported the reintegration of overage children affected by conflict like the brief on the PlayMatters Emergency Response Mechanism indicates.

In this first year, PlayMatters positioned itself as a thought leader in LtP integration across East Africa. We developed a range of learning studies and implementation research products, capturing best practices and insights to guide future LtP initiatives. A process evaluation of our humanitarian-development nexus efforts provided particularly valuable findings on strengthening LtP within fragile education systems, shaping our approach to implementation in challenging settings.

Central to our success has been establishing partnerships for scale, including key Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with Kotebe University and Save the Children in Ethiopia. Our work with Uganda's Teacher Development Management System and the integration of LtP into the national School Management Committee training manual illustrate our collaborative efforts to embed PlayMatters within government frameworks. In Tanzania, we are proud to have our project resources featured in the national digital library for teachers, further advancing the accessibility of LtP materials for educators.

Year I represents a solid foundation upon which we continue to build, learning from our experiences and deepening our partnerships to ensure lasting impact for children across the region. I am deeply appreciative of the commitment demonstrated by our country teams, partners, and stakeholders. Together, we are paving the way toward a future where all children can learn, grow, and thrive through play, despite the challenging circumstances they find themselves and their families in.



Technical Review

Finalization of the PlayMatters Core Package: A Major Milestone

In Year 1 of the PlayMatters 2.0 project, a significant milestone was reached with the finalisation of the PlayMatters Core Package, which includes six elements: teacher training, teacher CPD, school leadership, community engagement, teaching and learning materials, and enabling school environment. This package stands as a testament to the project's commitment to fostering holistic, play-based learning by addressing the needs

of school leaders, teachers, communities, and children in the three implementing countries: Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania.

Through extensive collaboration, validation, and fieldwork, the project has successfully developed and integrated several key components into the PlayMatters core package.

Developing the Core Concepts Framework

The PlayMatters technical team spearheaded the development and validation of the PlayMatters Core Concepts Framework, a cornerstone of the Core Package. This framework takes the PlayMatters LtP Definition as its foundation and incorporates essential elements, such as integrated gender and wellbeing components, Six Bricks learning methodology, and school-based continuous professional development (CPD). These components were meticulously designed to foster safe, engaging, and inclusive learning environments across diverse educational settings.

The Core Concepts Framework has set clear content standards and alignment

across multiple areas within the project. Specifically, it has defined expectations for content packages targeted at various key stakeholders, including Trainers of Trainers (TOTs), teachers, CPD committees, School Management Committees (SMC), Community Management Committees (CMC), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA), and community leaders. This alignment ensures that all participants, from trainers to community leaders, share a unified understanding of the goals and approaches of play-based education.

Six Bricks Training

As a foundational element of the framework, the PlayMatters project partnered with Care for Education (CFE) to conduct Six Bricks training sessions. These workshops were held in three major locations: Addis Ababa in June 2023, Kampala in July 2023, and Kasulu, Tanzania in August 2023. Six Bricks is a handson, interactive learning tool that uses colored LEGO bricks to engage children in activities

that develop cognitive and social skills through play.

By training local educators and leaders, the PlayMatters project empowered them to use Six Bricks as an effective tool in their daily interactions with children.

Country-Based Content Finalization and Rollout

With the regional training sessions successfully completed, the project moved toward country-based content finalization processes. By December 2023, these processes concluded across the countries, resulting in revised and adapted materials that were tailored to the unique needs and contexts of each participating country.

This tailored approach underscores the project's commitment to culturally relevant and locally appropriate education, ensuring that play-based learning methods resonate with children and educators in each region.

Integrating Psychosocial Wellbeing

Recognising the importance of mental and emotional health in children's learning experiences, the project also incorporated additional resources to bolster psychosocial wellbeing. TeamUp and PlayWell activities were integrated into specific country contexts to strengthen this aspect of the curriculum. These activities provide structured movement-based exercises designed to promote emotional resilience, and social connection among children.

The finalisation of the PlayMatters Core Package marked a pivotal achievement in the project's journey, demonstrating the potential of play-based education to enrich learning environments and foster positive outcomes for children.

As the project moves forward, the materials, frameworks, and training initiatives implemented will continue to inspire educators, leaders, and communities to embrace play as a powerful educational tool across East Africa.



Sustainability

Sustainability and Scale

In Year 1, the PlayMatters project made substantial progress in advancing sustainability and scaling initiatives across the three countries. By fostering partnerships, influencing policy, and aligning with local educational systems, PlayMatters has set the stage for impact and broader reach.

One of the key milestones was the successful Regional System Actors workshop held in Dar es Salaam in August 2023. This workshop gathered representatives from all three PlayMatters countries—Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania—to discuss and align on policy priorities essential for scaling and sustaining play-based learning initiatives.

By bringing together diverse stakeholders, the workshop provided a platform for each country to share experiences, challenges, and strategies to advance play-based learning.

Influencing Policy Priorities

Over the past two years, the PlayMatters project has had a noteworthy influence on policy within each country, with a total of 13 policy priorities being identified and impacted in Year 1 alone. These priorities guide the integration of Learning through Play (LtP) principles into national education policies, frameworks, and training programs.

This focus on policy alignment ensures that play-based education can be adopted as a

standard practice within existing educational structures, providing a foundation for sustainable and scalable implementation.

See Table 1, Page 9

Sustainability, Transition and Scaling Plans

Building on the momentum from the regional workshop, each country team has developed tailored sustainability, transition, and scaling plans. These plans are designed to address unique country needs, creating pathways for the continuous use and expansion of PlayMatters resources.

For example, Ethiopia's team has worked to engage Kotebe University to integrate LtP into ECD teacher training modules, and an MoU with Save the Children in Ethiopia to share resources and technical assistance, while Tanzania has focused on digitizing and disseminating PlayMatters content into the

National Teachers' Digital Resource Library at the national level.

PlayMatters' achievements in Year 1 reflect a strong commitment to ensuring that play-based learning is both sustainable and scalable. By influencing policy, creating country-specific scaling plans, and forming strategic partnerships, the project has laid a foundation for lasting change.

Table 1: Policy Priorities and Summary Progress by Country

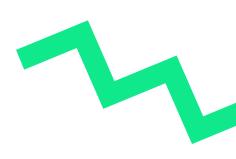
Country	Policy Priority	Milestone 1	Milestone 2	Milestone 3	Milestone 4	Milestone 5	Achievement Rate (%)
	Policy Priority	Early Engagement	Initiating Collaboration	Maintaining	Integrating of Evidence based LtP in New or Existing Policy or Program	Sustained engagement with stakeholders or institutions on evidence based LtP implementation	Overall, Policy Priority ACHIEVEMENT
	Engage TETD to integrate LtP into Continuous Professional Development interventions and teacher training through Teacher Training Institutions.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	Support BED and NCDC efforts to promote LtP as an innovative pedagogy and approach to better the delivery of pre-primary and primary classroom curriculums.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
UG	Engage EiE Partners through existing coordination and or partnerships fora to inform, advocate for the adaption of LtP in all 13 Refugee Hosting Districts.	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	100%
	MoES (TETD, BED) accredit LtP content/resources and technical (human) resource network to facilitate the integration of LtP policy implementation.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	Integrating LtP in the TDMS.						0%
	Integration of LtP in Tanzania Teacher Continuous Professional Development Framework through working with the Teacher Institute of Education, Teacher Training Colleges, Refugee and Host Schools.	✓	✓	✓	✓		80%
	Integrating LtP into government MOCDGSWSG and PORALG on parenting package by 2021.	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
TZ	Integration of LtP in the Teacher Continuous Professional Development Strategy (in-service teachers' training for pre-primary and primary).	✓	✓	✓	✓		80%
	Integration of LtP in School Leadership training manual through ADEM.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	Integrating LtP into Pre-Primary Education Teachers Training Strategy.	✓	✓	✓	✓		80%
ET	Integrating LtP into Teachers and Educational Leaders Continuous Professional Development Model.	✓	√	✓			60%
	Integrating LtP into Teacher Education Policy.	\checkmark					20%
	Integrating LtP into General Education Curriculum Framework.						0%

Main Key (Achievement Rate in %)

Achieved On Track Pending						
Key (Abbreviations)						

TETD BED TDMS NCDC Teacher Education and Development Training Department Basic Education Department Teacher Development and Management System National Curriculum Development Centre MoES Ministry of Education and Sports EiE Education in Emergencies MOCDGSWSG PORALG Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups Presidents Office - Regional Administration and Local Government Agency for the Development of Educational Management

ADEM



Research and Evidence

Research and Learning

PlayMatters project took substantial strides in research and learning in Year 1, solidifying its commitment to evidence-based play-based education across the three countries. Through rigorous formative and implementation research, stakeholder interviews, and the dissemination of critical research products, PlayMatters has built a robust understanding of its impact and refined its approach to

meet the needs of children, educators, and communities in humanitarian settings.

These efforts underscore the project's dedication to continuous learning and informed, data-driven decisions.

Strengthening the Evidence Base

Last year, PlayMatters completed baseline evaluations for implementation research across Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. These baseline assessments provide a crucial snapshot of educational and psychosocial groundwork laying contexts, the understanding the initial conditions and needs within each country's education system.

Additionally, midline data collection was conducted in Ethiopia and Tanzania, enabling the project to track early changes and adjust strategies as necessary. The insights gathered from these evaluations help PlayMatters to better tailor its interventions to suit the unique needs of each region.

Humanitarian-Development Nexus

A major achievement in Year 1 was the completion of a humanitarian-development nexus process evaluation. This evaluation included in-depth interviews with PlayMatters System Actors, staff, and other stakeholders across all three countries. The focus of this evaluation was to explore the intersection between humanitarian response and long-term development goals within PlayMatters' programming, particularly in how LtP can address the unique challenges faced by children and educators in crisis-affected areas.

PlayMatters developed and disseminated 12 research products. These products collectively

offer insights into the benefits of play-based learning, and effective implementation strategies. These research products are being shared across PlayMatters' networks, helping to build awareness of play-based education's transformative potential. They also serve as valuable resources for partners and stakeholders seeking to integrate LtP into their own educational frameworks.

By disseminating its research, PlayMatters is contributing to the broader educational discourse, promoting data-driven, play-based approaches to support children's learning and wellbeing in challenging environments.

Country Highlights

Ethiopia

In Year 1, Ethiopia made remarkable strides in integrating Learning through Play (LtP) into its educational system, benefiting both teachers and students. As PM 2.0 began towards the end of the 2022-2023 academic year, 960 teachers and facilitators were re-trained in LtP methods, enhancing their capacity to incorporate interactive, play-based teaching strategies into their classrooms. For the 2023-2024 school year, LtP content was fully revised, validated, and endorsed by regional authorities, with Six Bricks and other LtP resources incorporated. Through the Trainer of Trainers (ToT) program, an additional 1,134 teachers received training, supported by demonstration videos in five local languages.

In Tigray, collaboration with the Regional Education Bureau facilitated LtP training for 179 teachers, empowering them to integrate play into teaching while supporting students' emotional well-being. Leadership support was also strengthened through two-day training sessions for 371 school administrators and 348 members of Parent Teacher Student Associations, equipping them with essential skills to foster an LtP environment. Additionally, LtP materials were distributed to 63 schools, benefiting over 67,000 students with tools for engaging learning experiences.

PlayMatters also extended engagement by training 269 Community Play Ambassadors (PAs) and 69 TeamUp Facilitators, who led 1,464 play-based community sessions. Local outreach activities, such as PlayDates and Parent-Teacher Engagement meetings, involved parents in play-based education, promoting at-home support for their children's learning.

The Ethiopian government showed strong support for LtP policy integration, aligning with PlayMatters to prioritize LtP across early childhood and teacher education. A two-day workshop and a conference in March 2024 gathered stakeholders to discuss PM 2.0's achievements and policy integration efforts. PlayMatters has also outlined a plan for scaling up, aiming to sustain LtP practices across Ethiopia by partnering with organizations like UNICEF and World Vision.

Through PM 2.0's efforts in policy alignment, teacher training, and community involvement, Ethiopia is fostering a more engaging and sustainable education system that emphasizes the transformative power of play in learning.





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Uganda

Uganda achieved significant milestones in integrating Learning through Play (LtP) into its educational practices, despite challenges with transitioning to a cost-effective, school cluster-based training model. Collaborating across nine districts, the PM 2.0 consortium refined and delivered the PlayMatters Core Package to support the adoption of interactive, play-based learning in classrooms.

This effort began with the training of 47 lead facilitators and master trainers, who then trained 189 trainers of trainers (TOTs). Consequently, 3,448 teachers from 261 schools participated in foundational LtP training, gaining skills in LtP, Six Bricks, and inclusive teaching practices. This training was supported by refresher sessions and mentorship from school-based Continuous Professional Development (CPD) committees.

The initiative also delivered educational resources to schools, benefiting 218,646 students and 3,144 teachers. Over 157,000 sets of Six Bricks were distributed to encourage interactive, play-centered learning, and multimedia equipment was deployed across cluster centers.

For early childhood development (ECD), stipends were provided to 490 caregivers, and minor school renovations improved learning conditions. Social-emotional learning (SEL) was promoted through audio lessons, and TeamUp recreational sessions supported the psychosocial well-being of 6,063 children.

Community engagement efforts involved 4,071 community leaders, trained to foster LtP-friendly environments in schools. A robust back-to-school campaigns helped increase attendance, and community-based parental meetings emphasised parental roles in supporting LtP.

On the policy front, PlayMatters worked with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) to advocate for LtP inclusion in curricula, ECCE policy, and funding, while expanding the LtP Community of Practice by 38%. Regular consultations with MoES and an annual leadership meeting with stakeholders advanced Uganda's progress toward sustainable, play-based education.

Through these coordinated efforts, Uganda is building a resilient educational system that places playful, inclusive, and engaging learning at the center of childhood education.



Tanzania

Tanzania made substantial progress in embedding Learning through Play (LtP) within its educational framework in Year 1, especially within host communities and refugee camps. Despite facing challenges from an influx of over 13,000 Congolese asylum seekers and the ongoing repatriation of Burundian refugees, the Tanzanian government has embraced LtP as a key educational strategy. In January 2024, the government officially approved the revised PlayMatters LtP Package, developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) and the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE). This package is slated for nationwide integration into the Learning Management Information System (LMIS), signifying a major step forward in making LtP a standard approach in Tanzania's schools.

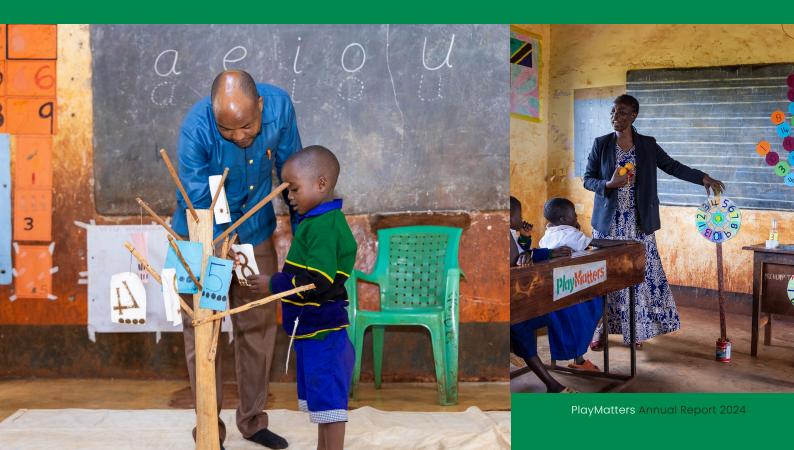
In partnership with TIE and local teacher colleges, the consortium trained 1,055 teachers on LtP methodologies. These trainings benefited teachers in both host communities and refugee camps, supporting their ability to foster playful, interactive learning in their Additionally, 264 teachers classrooms. received on-site supervision and mentorship from school quality assurers (SQAs) and Refugee Education Coordinators, further enhancing LtP implementation.

Community efforts engagement were also robust, with 29,007 parents and 20

community leaders participating in LtP awareness activities. Events like Play Day and Parents' Day introduced families to playbased learning techniques, encouraging them to support their children's education at home. By engaging district-level authorities and District Community Development Officials, PlayMatters strengthened community support for LtP activities, ensuring sustainable local involvement.

At a national level, PlayMatters engaged MoEST, PO-RALG, TIE, and ADEM in ongoing policy advocacy, resulting in a formalised Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between MoEST, PO-RALG, and the IRC. This MoU clarifies each partner's role, ensuring smooth project delivery and approval of LtP resources. The collaboration between PlayMatters and government agencies has led to improved oversight and coordination, and the integration of LtP into Tanzania's revised curriculum, launched in early 2024, reflects the government's commitment to enhancing educational quality through play.

With its strong community foundation, training programs, and formal government partnerships, Tanzania is set to expand Learning through Play as an essential part of its educational system, promoting a more engaging and inclusive learning environment for all students.



Emergency Response Mechanism

In response to the severe impacts of prolonged conflict and crisis on children's education in Ethiopia, the PlayMatters Emergency Response Mechanism (PM ERM) launched in September 2022. Designed as a \$15 million, one-year crisis complement to the broader PlayMatters project, PM ERM was developed to meet the educational, psychosocial, and basic needs of 150,000 vulnerable children across the conflict-affected regions of Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Oromia. In partnership with the LEGO Foundation, IRC, Plan International Ethiopia, and 10 additional sub-grantee partners, PM ERM supported communities in need, prioritizing schools in high-risk areas hosting internally displaced persons (IDPs) and facing urgent protection, nutrition, and infrastructure challenges.

Key achievements of PM ERM included the renovation of 591 classrooms, provision of essential furniture and playground equipment, and delivery of training to over **4,500 teachers** on psychosocial support, safeguarding, and Learning through Play (LtP) methods. This was PM's first deployment of LtP in an emergency context, empowering teachers to integrate play-based learning approaches even under challenging circumstances.

Additionally, PM ERM partners distributed nearly 92,000 textbooks, supporting the new Ethiopian curriculum and addressing severe shortages in learning materials. To improve attendance and well-being, 66,000 children received high-energy biscuits aligned with nutritional standards, while 13,935 girls were provided with menstrual hygiene management kits.

Health and protection services were critical components of PM ERM's impact. Partners screened over **36,000 children** for malnutrition, provided deworming treatment to over **51,000** children, and delivered essential medications. protection interventions included training staff and community members on referral pathways and case management, providing immediate assistance to 15,873 children. Moreover, case management services were extended to 5,325 vulnerable children, while support services were set up for unaccompanied or separated children.

PM ERM's swift implementation, strengthened by established relationships with local organizations, created a safer, more supportive school environments across Ethiopia, allowing thousands of children to continue learning, playing, and thriving even amidst crisis.



KPI Dashboard and Results Table

	Key Performance Indicator (KPI)	Extension	Year 1 Target
1	Number of children enrolled in LtP activities and/or receiving direct service provision (DSPs) including ERM	195,655	560,026
2	Percent of children that have received the Core PlayMatters Package	93%	96%
3	Percent of educators applying inclusive LtP methods in learning spaces	80%	90%
4	Number of schools receiving support from PlayMatters	518	416
5	Number of community leaders engaged/oriented on LtP activities	1,807	6,274
6	Number of children reach through PlayWell episodes	-	39,774
7	Number of education system stakeholders trained on LtP	283	709
8	Number of learning events conducted by PlayMatters	-	11
9	Number of research products/ events disseminated	-	12
10	Percentage of regional work plan activities completed	-	95 (106%)



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