

The governance of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives: what balance between control and innovative agility?

La gouvernance des coopératives agricoles marocaines : quel équilibre entre contrôle et agilité novatrice ?

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Date submitted : 11/12/2024

Date of acceptance : 24/01/2025

To cite this article :

BERRADA A. (2025) «The governance of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives: what balance between control and innovative agility?», Revue Internationale des Sciences de Gestion « Volume 8 : Numéro 1 » pp : 564 - 581

Abstract

This article explores the governance of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives, focusing on the interaction between organizational control and innovative agility. The aim of this research is to analyze the governance structures and practices within agricultural cooperatives, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face, in order to propose recommendations for improving their effectiveness. The methodology is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 50 agricultural cooperatives between 2020 and 2024, providing an in-depth understanding of the internal dynamics that govern their operations.

The analysis highlights the importance of finding an optimal balance between rigid control mechanisms and innovative practices, which is essential for enhancing the resilience and performance of cooperatives. Effective strategies identified include participatory governance, the implementation of continuous training programs, and the establishment of innovation committees. The article draws on agency theory, stakeholder theory, and resource-based theory to examine governance practices and propose improvements. It also emphasizes the need for increased transparency, effective communication, and active member engagement to ensure the long-term sustainability and success of agricultural cooperatives.

Keywords: governance; agricultural cooperatives in Morocco; control; innovation; innovative agility.

Résumé

Cet article explore la gouvernance des coopératives agricoles marocaines, en se focalisant sur l'interaction entre le contrôle organisationnel et l'agilité novatrice. L'objectif de cette recherche est d'analyser les structures et pratiques de gouvernance au sein des coopératives agricoles, ainsi que les défis et opportunités auxquels elles sont confrontées, afin de proposer des recommandations visant à améliorer leur efficacité. La méthodologie repose sur des entretiens semi-directifs menés auprès de 50 coopératives agricoles entre 2020 et 2024, permettant ainsi d'obtenir une compréhension approfondie des dynamiques internes qui régissent leur fonctionnement.

L'analyse met en évidence l'importance de trouver un équilibre optimal entre contrôle rigide et pratiques d'innovation, facteur essentiel pour accroître la résilience et la performance des coopératives. Parmi les stratégies identifiées comme étant efficaces figurent la gouvernance participative, la mise en place de programmes de formation continue et la création de comités d'innovation. L'article mobilise des théories de l'agence, des parties prenantes et des ressources et compétences pour étudier les pratiques de gouvernance et proposer des pistes d'amélioration. Il insiste également sur la nécessité d'une transparence accrue, d'une communication fluide et de l'engagement actif des membres pour assurer la pérennité et le succès des coopératives agricoles à long terme.

Mots-clés : gouvernance ; coopératives agricoles au Maroc ; contrôle ; innovation ; agilité novatrice.

Introduction

Agriculture, as a key sector of the Moroccan economy, is essential for the country's socio-economic stability. It accounts for approximately 15% of the GDP and employs nearly 40% of the active population, most of whom reside in rural areas, underscoring the strategic importance of the sector for regional development and poverty reduction (Ministry of Agriculture, 2021). The sector is characterized by a diversity of farms, ranging from large export-oriented enterprises to small family-owned farms. In this context, agricultural cooperatives play a fundamental role by enabling small producers to pool their resources and overcome challenges related to production, commercialization, and market access (FAO, 2019).

Historically, agricultural cooperatives emerged during the French protectorate in the early 20th century to modernize the agricultural sector. Over the decades, they have evolved into engines of rural development, contributing not only to improving farmers' living conditions but also to creating economic opportunities in regions with limited prospects (El Amrani, 2017). These cooperatives have driven economic transformation in rural areas, particularly by facilitating access to basic services such as education and electricity.

Moroccan agricultural cooperatives face numerous challenges, particularly in governance and management. Transparent and participatory management remains a critical issue. Studies by the FAO (2019) have shown that excessive centralization of power within some cooperatives, often in favor of founders, limits member participation and undermines good governance. Moreover, a lack of training in management practices and contemporary issues, such as international sustainability standards, hampers cooperatives' ability to grow and adapt to current market demands, both local and international (World Bank, 2020).

Climate change is another significant threat to agricultural cooperatives. Recurrent droughts, soil degradation, and water scarcity profoundly affect small producers. However, cooperatives play a crucial role in adapting agricultural practices to these new challenges. They promote the adoption of more resilient and environmentally friendly methods, such as organic farming, agroforestry, and sustainable water resource management (IFAD, 2021). Some Moroccan cooperatives have even obtained international certifications such as "organic" or "fair trade" labels, enhancing their competitiveness in global markets (FAO, 2019).

However, governance within these cooperatives remains complex, characterized by a constant tension between the need to maintain rigorous control and the necessity to innovate in response

to market shifts and environmental demands. This tension forms the core of our research question:

How can these organizations balance strict control with innovative agility to address rapid market changes and new environmental challenges?

This central question guides our exploration of governance mechanisms and internal dynamics within Moroccan agricultural cooperatives.

This article pursues two main objectives: first, to analyze and evaluate the theoretical models and current governance structures of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives, identifying their strengths and weaknesses; and second, to explore the tension between control and innovation within these cooperatives and propose practical recommendations for balancing these aspects to enhance their efficiency and resilience.

This article is structured into four main sections. The first section presents the theoretical foundations of cooperative governance, outlining the key concepts and theoretical models applicable to agricultural cooperatives, discussing agency, stakeholder, and resource-based theories, and explaining how these theories can inform cooperative governance.

The second section focuses on the governance of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives. It examines existing governance structures and mechanisms, describing the historical evolution of these cooperatives, their organizational structures, and their internal and external control mechanisms.

The third section explores the relationship between the need for control and the necessity for innovation. It identifies the challenges related to this duality and proposes strategies for balancing these two aspects, drawing on practical examples and case studies.

Finally, the fourth section presents the results of an empirical study based on semi-structured interviews with 50 Moroccan agricultural cooperatives. This section analyzes the collected data to identify trends and best practices in governance.

The conclusion synthesizes the key points discussed, outlines the theoretical and practical contributions of this research, and suggests directions for future research.

1. The theoretical foundations of cooperative governance

Cooperative governance refers to the mechanisms, processes, and relationships by which cooperatives are directed and controlled. It includes decision-making structures, management policies, and control mechanisms that ensure accountability and transparency (Cornforth, 2004). Cooperatives differ from traditional businesses due to their democratic structure, where each member has an equal vote, regardless of their financial contribution (ICA, 2015).

Governance is essential for several reasons. First, it ensures the active participation of members in decision-making, thereby strengthening legitimacy and engagement (Freeman, 1984). Second, it allows for the efficient management of resources by minimizing risks of power abuse and mismanagement (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Finally, good governance fosters trust and cooperation among members, which is crucial for the long-term success of cooperatives (Barney, 1991).

1.1. What Governance Models Exist for Cooperatives?

Governance models for cooperatives can vary significantly depending on their size, organizational structure, and operational context. Two main models can be identified: the traditional model and the innovative model (Chaddad & Cook, 2004).

1.1.1. Traditional Model: This model is characterized by a strict hierarchical structure and rigorous control mechanisms. Decisions are generally made by a small group of leaders, with limited member participation. This model emphasizes compliance and risk minimization but may limit flexibility and innovation (Cornforth, 2004).

1.1.2. Innovative Model: In contrast, this model favors a more flexible and participative structure, where members are actively involved in decision-making. Cooperatives adopting this model are often more open to innovation and experimentation, which can help them quickly adapt to market changes and new opportunities (Dyer & Shafer, 2003).

1.2. What Theoretical Foundations Can Be Leveraged for These Cooperatives?

Several governance theories can be applied to agricultural cooperatives, each offering distinct perspectives on control and innovation mechanisms:

1.2.1. Agency Theory: Proposed by Jensen and Meckling (1976), this theory examines potential conflicts of interest between managers (agents) and members (principals)

of a cooperative. Control mechanisms are essential to align the interests of agents with those of principals, thereby reducing the risks of opportunistic behavior.

1.2.2. Stakeholder Theory: Developed by Freeman (1984), this theory emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of all stakeholders, including members, employees, and the local community. Effective governance must balance these diverse interests to ensure the sustainability and success of the cooperative.

1.2.3. Resource-Based and Competency Theory: This theory, associated with Barney (1991), focuses on the specific resources and competencies of the cooperative. It highlights that cooperatives must develop and maintain key competencies to ensure effective governance and foster innovation.

2. Governance of moroccan agricultural cooperatives

Today, Moroccan agricultural cooperatives are governed by Law No. 112-12, which defines their legal framework and obligations. This law aims to strengthen transparency, accountability, and member participation while promoting innovation and operational efficiency (Ministry of Agriculture, 2021).

2.1. Governance Structures

Agricultural cooperatives have formal governance structures designed to ensure effective and democratic management. These structures typically include:

2.1.1. General Assembly: The General Assembly is the highest decision-making body, where all members have the right to participate and vote. It meets at least once a year to approve financial reports, elect Board of Directors members, and make strategic decisions (FAO, 2019).

2.1.2. Board of Directors: The Board of Directors is responsible for the cooperative's daily management. It is elected by the General Assembly and is generally composed of active cooperative members. Its responsibilities include implementing General Assembly decisions, supervising operations, and managing resources (Cornforth, 2004).

2.1.3. Control Committees: Various committees may be established to oversee specific aspects of governance, such as finance, internal audits, and regulatory compliance. These committees play a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability (World Bank, 2020).

2.2. Control Mechanisms

Agricultural cooperatives use several control mechanisms to ensure effective and transparent management:

2.2.1. Internal Controls: Internal controls include regular audits, strict financial management systems, and risk management policies. These mechanisms between the principal and the agent help detect and correct errors or irregularities within the agency framework (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

2.2.2. External Controls: External controls are carried out by government entities and certification bodies, which verify compliance with legal and ethical standards. These controls enhance the credibility of cooperatives among members and external stakeholders (Bosc et al., 2017).

2.2.3. Transparency and Communication: Transparency and regular communication with members are essential for maintaining trust and engagement. Cooperatives must provide detailed financial reports, organize regular meetings, and facilitate active member participation (Cornforth, 2004).

3. Between control and innovative agility

3.1. Concept of Innovative Agility

Innovative agility refers to an organization's ability to quickly adapt to environmental changes and innovate to remain competitive. In the context of agricultural cooperatives, innovative agility involves adopting new technologies, diversifying activities, and continuously improving management practices (Dyer & Shafer, 2003).

Agility is particularly crucial in a constantly evolving agricultural environment, marked by challenges such as climate change, fluctuations in agricultural product prices, and changing consumer preferences. To remain relevant and prosperous, cooperatives must be able to quickly adapt to these changes while maintaining efficient and responsible management (FAO, 2019).

3.2. What Are the Challenges of the Control-Agility Duality?

Agricultural cooperatives face tensions between strict control and the need for innovation. These tensions can be illustrated by several challenges:

3.2.1. Organizational Rigidity: Rigid governance structures can hinder innovation by limiting flexibility and the ability to respond quickly. Lengthy and bureaucratic

decision-making processes may discourage innovative initiatives (Chaddad & Cook, 2004).

3.2.2. Resistance to Change: Members and leaders may be reluctant to adopt new practices or technologies due to fear of the unknown or potential disruptions to existing operations. This resistance can slow down innovation efforts and limit the competitiveness of cooperatives (Bijman et al., 2012).

3.2.3. Balancing Interests: Cooperatives must balance the diverse interests of their members, which can complicate decision-making and the adoption of new initiatives. Innovative decisions may not always align with the expectations of all members, creating internal tensions (Freeman, 1984).

3.3.Strategies for Balancing Control and Innovative Agility

To balance control and innovative agility, agricultural cooperatives adopt several strategies, including:

3.3.1. Participative Governance: Encouraging active member participation in decision-making is an effective strategy for fostering acceptance of innovative initiatives within organizations. By adopting participative governance mechanisms, organizations enable members to contribute directly to decisions, which can strengthen their engagement and support for proposed changes. Cornforth (2004) indicates that consultation processes and democratic participation not only gather diverse ideas but also strengthen commitment to initiatives by involving stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Democratic participation mechanisms play a crucial role in giving members a voice in important decisions, which can lead to greater acceptance of innovative initiatives. When members feel heard and involved, their commitment to new initiatives is generally stronger (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007). This approach fosters a climate of trust and collaboration, essential for the success of innovative projects. Research shows that the inclusion of diverse perspectives also improves decision quality by enriching the thought process (Stringer, 2007).

Moreover, active participation in decision-making helps overcome potential resistance by incorporating members' concerns and suggestions from the outset. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), participative governance not only garners broader support for initiatives but also facilitates acceptance of changes by

addressing stakeholders' needs and expectations. In summary, participative governance mechanisms play a key role in the success of innovative initiatives by strengthening engagement and incorporating contributions from all organizational members.

3.3.2. Training and Skills Development: Investing in continuous training for members and leaders of an organization is a strategic lever for overcoming resistance to change. Training enables employees to develop new technical skills in response to rapidly evolving technologies while strengthening their capacity to adapt to organizational changes. As highlighted by the World Bank (2020), this investment enhances organizational agility, enabling the company to maintain its competitiveness in a constantly changing environment.

Additionally, research from McKinsey & Company (2021) shows that training helps reduce internal resistance by increasing employees' confidence in new working methods. It is also crucial that training includes management and innovation skills beyond technical abilities. Leaders, in particular, must be trained in change management, conflict resolution, and the implementation of innovative strategies to effectively lead organizational transformations.

According to Klein (2021), adequate training in these areas helps managers better understand and anticipate their teams' needs, facilitating the transition and implementation of new practices. This balanced approach not only mitigates resistance to change but also prepares the organization to evolve according to market demands.

Finally, continuous training plays a crucial role in transforming organizational culture. By investing in skill development, a company sends a strong message about the value placed on learning and continuous improvement. A Deloitte (2019) study reveals that organizations fostering a proactive learning culture are not only more resilient to change but also encourage an innovative climate. Thus, training contributes not only to reducing resistance to change but also to preparing the organization to anticipate and manage future challenges more effectively.

3.3.3. Innovation Committees: Establishing committees dedicated to innovation and development is an effective strategy for encouraging experimentation and the implementation of new ideas within organizations. These committees, often operating parallel to traditional governance structures, allow for increased flexibility

and speed. By avoiding standard bureaucratic processes, they foster a culture of experimentation and innovation (Dyer & Shafer, 2003).

Innovation committees also provide diverse perspectives and skills, enriching the creative process. Research shows that multidisciplinary teams, such as those formed in these committees, are more effective at generating innovative ideas and solving complex problems (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). By including members from different departments and specialties, these committees benefit from a variety of viewpoints, increasing the success rate of innovative projects and facilitating their integration into existing organizational practices.

Van de Ven (1986) confirms that diversity within teams stimulates creativity and fosters innovation. Lastly, innovation committees play a crucial role in transitioning innovative ideas into concrete solutions, contributing to their integration into the organization's long-term strategies. These committees test and refine innovative concepts in a controlled environment before large-scale deployment, reducing the risks associated with new initiatives (Bessant & Tidd, 2011).

This approach ensures that innovations are better adapted to the organization's operational needs, thereby increasing their likelihood of success. Christensen (1997) adds that organizations adopting structured innovation strategies are often better prepared to succeed in changing environments.

4. CASE STUDIES AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

For this study, a qualitative approach was adopted, based on semi-structured interviews and participant observations conducted with 50 agricultural cooperatives across various regions of Morocco between 2020 and 2024. This methodology enables an in-depth exploration of governance practices and internal dynamics within cooperatives (Yin, 2014). The interviews involved **members of the Board of Directors, ordinary members, and rural development agents**, while the observations took place during cooperative evaluation meetings.

The sample size of 50 cooperatives was determined based on the study's objectives and the qualitative methodology used. This size strikes a balance between the diversity of data collected and the feasibility of the study. In qualitative research, the goal is not statistical representativeness but to capture a deep understanding of the phenomena being studied. A sample of 50 cooperatives is sufficient to reach data saturation, where new information no

longer provides significant insights, while also ensuring adequate coverage of variations in governance structures.

The interviews, averaging 40 minutes in duration, allowed for the collection of detailed information without burdening the participants. Subsequently, the qualitative data were transferred into a spreadsheet to facilitate analysis and enhance its relevance. This process helped to organize and structure the data, enabling the identification of trends and patterns, thus providing more precise insights into the governance practices of cooperatives. Finally, the sample size is well-suited to the practical constraints of the study, particularly in terms of available resources and the time needed for data collection and analysis.

4.1. Questionnaire Design

The semi-structured questionnaire was designed to collect detailed and specific information on various aspects of agricultural cooperative governance. Each question was formulated to address a key governance aspect, aligning with the study's objectives. (Annex 1)

4.1.1. Governance Structure

These questions help understand the cooperative's organizational structure and decision-making mechanisms. They are essential for analyzing how governance is structured and how it operates in practice (Cornforth, 2004).

4.1.2. Control Mechanisms

The questions on control mechanisms aim to assess the rigor and effectiveness of internal and external control systems. They help understand how cooperatives ensure transparency and accountability for all stakeholders (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

4.1.3. Member Participation

These questions explore the level of member participation and the mechanisms used to foster this participation. They are crucial for understanding member involvement in governance and identifying potential obstacles (Freeman, 1984).

4.1.4. Innovation and Adaptability

The questions on innovation and adaptability aim to identify innovative practices and the factors that encourage or hinder innovation. They help understand how cooperatives adapt to changes and what the dynamics of innovation are (Dyer & Shafer, 2003).

4.1.5. Balancing Control and Innovation

These questions are designed to understand how cooperatives navigate the duality between control and innovation. They explore the strategies used to balance these two aspects and identify concrete examples of successes or failures (Chaddad & Cook, 2004).

4.2. Analysis of qualitative data with quantitative tools

The results of these interviews were recorded in an Excel format, which facilitated the organization and structuring of the data for a quantitative descriptive analysis. This quantitative approach allowed for the identification of trends and patterns in the observed governance practices, providing a clearer view of recurring behaviors within agricultural cooperatives. The use of this quantitative analysis tool helps complement the qualitative data collected, offering a solid foundation for identifying relationships and variations between different governance practices. By integrating quantitative elements into a qualitative approach, this mixed-methods approach enriches the interpretation of the studied phenomena while providing a structured framework for presenting the results.

The detailed quantitative analysis of the responses collected through the semi-structured interviews allows for the identification of trends and key points regarding the governance of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives. The table below summarizes the main analysis results.

Figure 1: Summary Table of Analysis Results:

Indicator	Value
Member Participation Rate	
- Average number of members attending General Meetings	70%
- Member participation rate in decision-making	30%
Audit Frequency	
- Cooperatives conducting regular internal audits	45%
- Cooperatives conducting regular external audits	25%
Adoption of New Technologies	
- Cooperatives that have adopted advanced technologies	40%
- Average annual investment in technology	5% of annual revenue
Member Perception of Innovation	
- Members considering their cooperative innovative	60%
- Main drivers of innovation:	
- Market demand	70%
- Government support	75%
- Access to new technologies	60%
Balance Between Control and Innovation	
- Cooperatives considering they have a good balance	65%
- Main strategies used:	
- Continuous training	60%
- Innovation committees	50%
- Participative governance	70%

Source: author's analysis

4.3.Discussion of Results

The results of the semi-structured interviews reveal that the majority of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives have rigorous control mechanisms, particularly through regular internal and external audits. This trend aligns with the theories of Jensen and Meckling (1976), who emphasize the importance of governance and control mechanisms in organizations to reduce agency costs and ensure efficient resource management. Additionally, Barney (1991) and Barney & Hesterly (2019) stress the fundamental role of internal resources and control

processes in maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage. However, the findings indicate that member participation in strategic decision-making remains low, which could limit the cooperatives' innovation and adaptability capabilities. This observation echoes the work of Cornforth (2004), who identifies a paradox in cooperative governance, where rigid control structures may restrict member participation and hinder innovation.

Regarding the adoption of new technologies, although some cooperatives are making progress, the majority remain limited. This situation is similar to the observations of Bijman, Hanisch, and Van der Sangen (2012), who note that despite the potential of agricultural cooperatives to adopt technological innovations, several barriers, such as the lack of financial resources and the limited capabilities of members, hinder this adoption. However, the concept of incremental innovation advocated by Christensen (1997) is also relevant here, suggesting that cooperatives can gradually evolve towards the integration of new technologies based on their resources and the evolving market needs.

The results also show that cooperatives that manage to balance control and innovation, by implementing strategies such as continuous training and the creation of innovation committees, are able to strengthen their resilience and performance. This approach mirrors the work of Tushman and O'Reilly (1996), who discuss ambidextrous organizations capable of managing both radical innovation processes and more rigid management processes. Dyer and Shafer (2003) also highlight the importance of an agile organization, especially in complex and rapidly changing environments, which is particularly relevant for agricultural cooperatives facing the challenges of the global market and local needs.

Finally, the alignment of cooperatives with innovation strategies linked to market demand and government support is in line with Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, which highlights the importance of interaction with external actors to stimulate innovation. Furthermore, the World Bank (2020), in its report on the performance of agricultural cooperatives, advocates for a more collaborative approach and better stakeholder management to enhance innovation capacities and the competitiveness of agricultural cooperatives.

Indeed, the results obtained from the interviews are consistent with the existing literature on governance and innovation in agricultural cooperatives. The need for rigorous internal control while allowing greater member participation to stimulate innovation is well-documented in the works of Cornforth (2004) and Tushman & O'Reilly (1996). The barriers to adopting new

technologies and the importance of external support, particularly through public policies and market demands, are also well highlighted in the literature, particularly by Bijman et al. (2012) and Christensen (1997). Thus, the results suggest that Moroccan agricultural cooperatives could benefit from improved participatory governance and greater attention to technological innovation, while maintaining effective control mechanisms to ensure their resilience and sustainable performance.

Conclusion

This article revealed that the governance of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives is characterized by a duality between control and innovative agility. The most effective governance models integrate robust control mechanisms while fostering innovation and active member participation (Cornforth, 2004). Cooperatives that successfully balance these two aspects tend to be more resilient and perform better.

Theoretically, this research enriches knowledge on the governance of agricultural cooperatives by highlighting the tension between control and innovation. It applies agency theory, stakeholder theory, and the resource-based view to analyze governance practices and propose improvement strategies (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Freeman, 1984; Barney, 1991).

Professionally, this study offers practical recommendations for cooperative managers and policymakers. It emphasizes the importance of active member participation, continuous training, and the creation of innovation committees to strengthen governance and support the sustainable development of cooperatives (World Bank, 2020).

The main limitations of this study include the sample size and the qualitative nature of the approach, which may limit the generalization of the results. Future research could focus on large-scale quantitative studies exploring other factors influencing cooperative governance, such as regional context, member characteristics, and public policies.

In conclusion, the governance of Moroccan agricultural cooperatives is a complex but crucial area for rural and economic development. A balance between rigorous control and innovative agility is essential to ensure the resilience and prosperity of cooperatives, thereby contributing to the well-being of rural communities and the sustainability of the agricultural sector.

Annexes

Annex 1 questionnaire structure

Question category	Questions
Governance Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe the governance structure of your cooperative? • What are the main decision-making bodies within the cooperative? • How are decisions made?
Control Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What types of internal and external controls are in place? • How is the cooperative's performance evaluated? • Are regular audits conducted? If so, by whom?
Member Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are members involved in decision-making? • Are there mechanisms to encourage active member participation? • What are the main challenges related to member participation?
Innovation and Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has your cooperative adopted any new technologies or practices recently? • What are the main drivers of innovation within the cooperative? • What are the main barriers to innovation?
Balancing Control and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your cooperative manage the balance between strict control and the need for innovation? • What strategies have been implemented to foster innovation while maintaining effective control? • Can you provide examples of successes or failures in this balance?

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