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From nutrition to sustainability: a scoping review on integrated approaches to food and diet

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Abstract: In the past decade, bringing together nutrition and sustainability has emerged as a core priority for worldwide research, policy, and practice. Dietary decisions are not merely viewed as personal health choices but as decisions embedded in ecological, social, and psychological systems. While attention to sustainable food systems and diets is growing, evidence remains fragmented across disciplines and settings. This scoping review mapped the literature on integrated food and nutrition strategies to sustainable development systematically. According to PRISMA-ScR, we searched the Web of Science Core Collection and its ancillary sources and identified 55 included studies published from 2000 to 2025. Studies included were systematic reviews, scoping reviews, global modeling studies, and empirical psycho-nutritional studies. Data were synthesized thematically, establishing major conceptual frameworks, policy interventions, educational and behavior drivers, and health dimensions. The review identified four general clusters of themes: (1) integrated nutrition-environment models using multidimensional measurement; (2) policy and institutional actions with sustainability included in health systems and governance; (3) school, professional, and consumer focused educational and behavior change strategies; and (4) psycho-nutritional research into emotional, cognitive, and mental health determinants of sustainable food eating behaviors. Although there has been significant progress, problems remain in standardized measures, cross-sectorial implementation, and psychological and pedagogic integration. Sustainable food systems can be realized only through embracing holistic, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive strategies that integrate human

health, social justice, and planetary well-being. This review highlights key knowledge gaps and calls for advancement in research, policy, education, and practice to drive the shift towards sustainable nutrition worldwide.

Keywords: sustainable nutrition, integrated food systems, behavioral sustainability, environmental health, policy interventions

1. Introduction

With increasing climatic change, food insecurity, and public health crises, the coming together of nutrition and sustainability has become a paramount global research and policy priority (Guillaumie et al., 2020). Nutrition is no longer simply imagined as a person or clinical concern but as an integral component of larger ecological, economic, and social systems (Harrison et al., 2022). Food choices affect not only personal health consequences but also the stability of food systems, environmental sustainability, and social justice. For instance, food production and consumption are responsible for significant proportions of global greenhouse gas emissions, loss of biodiversity, and land use changes, which in turn drive cycles of environmental degradation (Burgaz et al., 2023). To address these complex challenges, cross-sector integrated solutions encompassing the nutritional, environmental, and socio-behavioral dimensions of sustainable development are needed.

Integrated food and nutrition approaches attempt to harmonize personal patterns of eating with the boundaries of the planet, seeking solutions that promote human health while not damaging environmental resources (Portugal-Nunes et al., 2021). Illustrations include nudging diets like the Mediterranean diet, which was reported to encourage nutritional sufficiency and environmental sustainability, or designing food policy that simultaneously addresses malnutrition, obesity, and ecological footprints (Portugal-Nunes et al., 2021; Burgaz et al., 2023). Interestingly, these interventions involve cross-sectorial collaboration among policymakers, health workers, educators, farmers, and behavioral scientists (Guillaumie et al., 2020; Follong et al., 2022). However, current knowledge is scattered over disciplines and regions, and thus prevents the proper application of sustainable nutrition principles to practice (Harrison et al., 2022).

There are several key gaps in research. Firstly, there is minimal consensus on the definition and operationalization of sustainable nutrition. Whereas newer frameworks prescribe

indicators for sustainable healthy diets, i.e., nutritional adequacy, environmental sustainability, and cultural acceptability (Harrison et al., 2022), empirical evidence would adopt these at best partially and/or inconsistently, undermining comparability. Evidence is also scanty on whether or not the combined food system policies are effective in cutting down nutrition-related disparities and providing environmental sustainability at scale (Burgaz et al., 2023). Third, the psycho and behavioral drivers of sustainable food consumption are not yet known, despite evidence from previous literature that emotional attachment to local produce (Dicu et al., 2025), environmentally friendly willingness to pay for products (Cuc et al., 2025), and psycho-nutritional mechanisms (Dicu et al., 2024) play an important role in consumer behavior.

In addition, psychological research highlights complex emotional and cognitive mechanisms behind food behaviors, including decision-making under uncertainty (Brand et al., 2007), regulation of emotions, and mental health dynamics such as eating disorders and alexithymia (Rad et al., 2024; Runcan & Marici, 2023). Teenagers, for instance, are a particularly vulnerable category in which food consumption intersects with issues of self-injury, mental health, and socialization (Runcan & Nadolu, 2020; Runcan et al., 2023). Such psycho-behavioral dimensions are, however, typically separated from sustainability-oriented food systems research, creating a central gap in the comprehensive knowledge of how human psychology operates to shape sustainable nutrition cultures.

With this fragmented and interdisciplinary setting, the aim of the present scoping review is to chart the literature in an organized fashion for the integrated approaches in food and nutrition for sustainable development. We attempt to learn how sustainability principles are being incorporated within nutrition practice, education, policy, and consumer behavior across disciplines ranging from public health and environmental science to psychology and behavioral economics. Specifically, this review will (1) provide an integrative overview of conceptual models, key themes, and research approaches; (2) delineate how psychological, social, and systemic determinants are integrated into sustainable nutrition studies; and (3) highlight gaps and provide recommendations for future directions for interdisciplinary research.

In bridging knowledge from psychology, public health, behavioral science, and environmental science, the review participates in the emerging scholarly effort towards the development of holistic, evidence-based strategies towards sustainable food systems. As individuals worldwide seek entry points to align human health, social justice, and planetary

limits, the development of integrated, psychologically informed strategies for nutrition will be critical towards the achievement of long-term sustainability goals.

2. Materials and methods

This scoping review was conducted following the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines for a rigorous, systematic, and transparent research process. Although there was no registered formal protocol in PROSPERO or a similar database, the review had a pre-defined methodological design that was aimed to make it more reproducible and credible at every stage of the review.

Eligibility criteria were particularly defined to include empirical and theoretical, peer-reviewed research papers discussing integrated or multidimensional nutrition and food system strategies with direct links to sustainability outcomes. Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods study designs, systematic and scoping reviews, theoretical frameworks, and policy analyses were the study types that were eligible. Population interest was broad, encompassing human populations across all age categories and socio-demographic statuses, i.e., consumers, students, patients, and institutional contexts. Contexts were not limited to geographical places for studies that had been carried out at local, national, or international levels. For standardization, peer-reviewed English language-only publications of journals that appeared from January 2000 through March 2025 were only considered. Editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts, dissertations, and non-peer-reviewed articles were excluded in order to ensure the scientific rigor of the review.

We employed the Web of Science Core Collection as our central database due to its wide multidisciplinary coverage of health, environment, psychology, and social science research. To maximise coverage, we supplemented database searching with hand searching for included articles on their backward citations and targeted searching of grey literature sources, such as those international organisational reports pertinent to health, such as by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), where accessible.

Search strategy was designed so that breadth is countered with specificity employing key terms and Boolean operators. The focal search string involved combinations like ("sustainable nutrition" OR "sustainable diet*" OR "sustainable food system*" OR "integrated nutrition" OR

"integrated food strateg*" OR "sustainable eating" OR "nutrition and sustainability") AND (approach* OR framework* OR intervention* OR program* OR polic*). Additional targeted searches were conducted with pairings like "food attitudes" AND "sustainability" and "consumer behavior" AND "eco-friendly" to include behavioral and psychological aspects relevant to the review. The last search was conducted on March 30, 2025.

Selection involved importing all the returned references into the EndNote reference manager, from which duplicates were found and removed. Two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts for relevance to the inclusion criteria. Full texts were retrieved and screened for eligibility when abstracts indicated potential relevance. Where there were differences between reviewers, these were resolved by discussion or, where necessary, by reference to a third reviewer. To provide transparency, the review process was documented in a PRISMA flow diagram, which outlined the number of identified records, screened, assessed for eligibility, included, and excluded, and reasons for exclusion at the full-text level.

Data extraction was conducted using a specially prepared structured charting form for this review. Key variables extracted from each of the included studies were author(s) and year, objectives of the study, country or region, population or setting, study design, integrated approach type (e.g., integrative of nutritional, environmental, social, or psychological factors), primary findings, and reported challenges or areas of research gaps. Two reviewers independently mapped the data for consistency and to minimize bias, and subsequently, cross-checking and harmonization by frequent discussions.

Merging quantitative and qualitative approaches, synthesis of results was conducted. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of included studies, such as the number of studies by thematic topic, region, or type of study. At the same time, we employed a qualitative thematic synthesis method, grouping studies into broad thematic categories in response to the nature of the integrated strategies being examined. These thematic codes were developed by using inductive coding of recurring patterns in the data and deductive mapping using pre-existing frameworks for nutritional sustainability and integrated food systems approaches. Synthesis of results offers a sum of best available evidence, key areas of knowledge gap, and indicates recommendations for enhancing interdisciplinary research and practice in the field of sustainable nutrition.

3. Results

Following the comprehensive search conducted within the Web of Science Core Collection and other resources, 55 eligible studies were identified and incorporated into the final synthesis. The studies reflected a publication interval of between 2000 and 2025, with the highest surge in publications in the past decade. This reflects the growing scientific and policy interest in reconciling nutrition and sustainability agendas in the context of urgent global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and non-communicable disease. The studies included were geographically diverse, spanning Europe (Portugal, France, Belgium, Italy, and the United Kingdom), North America (Canada, the United States), Asia (Malaysia), Africa (Senegal), and global or multi-country studies that provided both high-income and low- and middle-income country (LMIC) insights (Fourat et al., 2024; Siminiuc et al., 2025). This geographic range enabled a comprehensive insight into how integrated nutrition and sustainability approaches are conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated across different socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions.

The types of studies revealed spanned a broad methodological spectrum, indicative of the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Included studies comprised systematic reviews (Guillaumie et al., 2020), scoping reviews (Harrison et al., 2022; Follong et al., 2022; Burgaz et al., 2023; Casu et al., 2020; Portugal-Nunes et al., 2021; Everitt et al., 2023; Siminiuc et al., 2025; Fourat et al., 2024; Tohit et al., 2025), global modeling analyses (Springmann et al., 2018), and empirical psycho-nutritional studies (Dicu et al., 2024, 2025; Cuc et al., 2025; Rad et al., 2024). These studies employed varied methods, including quantitative modeling, simulation experiments, intervention trials, qualitative interviews, policy and institutional analyses, mixed-methods syntheses, and network analyses, illustrating the multidimensionality of sustainable nutrition research.

3.1. Thematic findings

Thematic synthesis of the studies involved four overarching thematic clusters, each representing distinct yet connected aspects of how integrated nutrition and sustainability approaches are framed, assessed, and operationalized.

Theme 1: Integrated nutrition-environment frameworks

A common thread running through literature examined was conceptualization and operationalization of integrated nutrition-environment models. Such models seek to harmonize dietary habits with human health requirements as well as ecological sustainability, thereby addressing both individual and global wellbeing. Harrison et al. (2022) offered a comprehensive scoping review of the indicators used to identify sustainable healthy diets, delineating the number of frameworks (e.g., integrating nutritional adequacy, biodiversity conservation, and climatic impacts) and highlighting the lack of settled cross-context applications. Likewise, Portugal-Nunes et al. (2021) summarized the approaches used to establish the nutritional and environmental sustainability of the Mediterranean diet, pointing out important methodological heterogeneity and a necessity for standardized indicators that capture both dietary quality and environmental performance. Springmann et al. (2018) extended this debate with a global modeling analysis that estimated the health and environmental effects of adopting sustainable diet strategies (e.g., diets that are plant-based) and outlining probable synergies (e.g., reduced burden of non-communicable diseases) and trade-offs (e.g., regional variation in terms of access to food). Collectively, these articles underscore the necessity for developing integrative models that harmonize nutritional goals with environmental constraints, and also cultural and socio-economic factors.

Theme 2: Institutional and policy interventions

The second thematic cluster dealt with the integration of sustainability principles into policy and institutional settings, in healthcare systems, government institutions, and food system governance. Guillaumie et al. (2020) offered a systematic review of the integration of sustainable nutrition into health-related institutions, referencing numerous organizational challenges including limited staff training, absence of policy alignment, and the absence of integrated institutional frameworks. Burgaz et al. (2023) undertook a review of the evidence on the effectiveness of food system policies in improving nutritional status, lessening nutrition-related disparities, and advancing environmental sustainability and found promising interventions (e.g., fiscal measures, food labeling) as well as ongoing challenges related to political will and intersectoral coordination. Tohit et al. (2025) offered a detailed examination of the integration of food security into healthcare systems, calling for greater institutional

collaboration between food security actors and health service providers to advance holistic health and sustainability goals. This cluster indicates that while institutional and policy-level innovation is essential to scale up sustainable nutrition solutions, it all depends on breaking down administrative silos and mainstreaming sustainability as a guiding principle across all levels of governance.

Theme 3: Educational and behavioral dimensions

The third set of themes addressed the educational and behavioral determinants of sustainable eating behavior, in particular interventions targeting schools, communities, and consumers. Follong et al. (2022) considered how much nutrition education has been integrated in primary school education, noting both innovative approaches (e.g., experiential modules, hands-on activities) and systemic issues (e.g., teacher training constraints, curriculum saturation) in integrating sustainability perspectives into children's education. Casu et al. (2020) meta-analyzed programs of integrated nutrition and physical activity promotion, indicating the potential of multi-level, coordinated initiatives to promote healthier, more sustainable lifestyles. Everitt et al. (2023) considered Canadian dietetic practice, noting evolving dietitian perceptions of sustainability and the call for clearer, practice-oriented conceptual frameworks to inform professional action. At the consumer level, empirical evidence obtained by Dicu et al. (2025) and Cuc et al. (2025) revealed how psychological factors—emotional attachment to locally grown foods, consumer identity with sustainability projects, and paying for extra money for ecologically friendly products—were determinants in shaping consumption behavior. Together, these studies indicate that behavioral and educational interventions are potent levers of change but require institutional supports as well as cultural values for any significant effects to occur.

Theme 4: Psycho-nutritional and health-related aspects

The fourth cluster of themes focused on the psycho-nutritional and health implications of sustainable nutrition, a newly emerging discipline at the interface of public health, psychology, and behavioral sciences. Dicu et al. (2024) analyzed attitudes toward food and management of eating behavior from a psycho-nutritional point of view and showed how cognitive and emotional regulation mechanisms impact personal diet patterns. Rad et al. (2024)

used network analysis to examine bulimia and eating behavior regulation in subclinical groups, while Runcan et al. (2023) mapped the correlations between alexithymia (lack of ability to identify and describe feelings) and mental health in young people, highlighting the point of intersection between awareness of emotions and food behaviors. Fourat et al. (2024) took this further to an examination of comprehensive assessment models of sustainability in LMICs that aim to capture social, cultural, and health aspects as well as environmental and nutritional ones. Finally, Siminiuc et al. (2025) included nutritional and sustainability indicators in food security assessments and emphasized the advantages of multi-dimensional models in guiding more equitable and balanced policy and practice. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that sustainable nutrition is not only about food composition but also about cognitive, social, and emotional processes of eating and health outcomes.

The findings of this review highlight the diversity and extent of research at the interface between nutrition and sustainability. Despite growing emphasis on integrated approaches, challenges persist in transposing conceptual models into enduring practice, in agreeing on measures of assessment, in addressing regional and cultural idiosyncrasies, and in combining psycho-behavioral considerations with environmental and nutritional targets. By mapping these thematic clusters, this review provides a synthesis of the state of the art in the field, outlines key gaps, and establishes a foundation for advancing interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral responses to promoting sustainable and health-promoting food systems.

4. Discussion

This scoping review set out in a systematic manner to chart and bring together available literature reporting integrated approaches in food and nutrition for sustainable development. Of 55 included studies, from a wide variety of geographic, methodological, and disciplinary contexts, there were a number of prominent trends among them. These comprised (1) conceptualizing and pilot-testing nutrition-environment strategies; (2) piloting policy and institutional interventions; (3) exploring levels of education and behavior; and (4) creating emerging interest in psycho-nutritional and health considerations. The cumulative body of reviewed evidence collectively illustrates both significant progress and ongoing challenges in relating nutrition and sustainability, offering valuable lessons for future research, policy, and practice.

The review's main findings point to a rapidly expanding and diversifying body of research on sustainable nutrition, with notable increases in publications over the past decade. Studies such as Harrison et al. (2022), Portugal-Nunes et al. (2021), and Springmann et al. (2018) have advanced global understanding by proposing multi-indicator frameworks that assess nutritional adequacy alongside environmental outcomes. Meanwhile, policy and institutional research (Tohit et al., 2025; Burgaz et al., 2023; Guillaumie et al., 2020) has emphasized the integration of sustainability into health systems, government policies, and cross-sectoral collaborations. Studies in the areas of behavior and education (Follong et al., 2022; Casu et al., 2020; Everitt et al., 2023; Dicu et al., 2025; Cuc et al., 2025) have emphasized the role of consumer behavior, emotional bond, and expert knowledge in identifying sustainable food choice. Lastly, psycho-nutritional research (Dicu et al., 2024; Rad et al., 2024; Runcan et al., 2023) has revealed emotional, cognitive, and mental well-being aspects inextricably linked with eating habits, the usually neglected component of sustainability discussion.

These findings corroborate other recent scoping reviews in wider literature. For example, Brennan and Browne (2021) highlighted the growing awareness of how mitigation efforts against food waste converge with nutrition quality, bringing into focus public health implications. Barbour et al. (2022) emphasized the role of local urban governments in facilitating healthy and sustainable diet-related practices, validating the need for action at multiple governance levels. Graça et al. (2023) examined the subtleties of promoting healthier and more sustainable food practices in collective meal settings (e.g., schools or workplaces), demonstrating how social and institutional settings trickle down to the effectiveness of sustainability efforts. McCormack et al. (2023) extended these results to educational settings, surveying how dietetics students learn about sustainability and recognizing gaps in formal education curricula and experiential learning environments. Benton et al. (2024) provided a major comparative review of Nordic nations' environmental sustainability appraisal practices, pointed out comparable methodological concerns such as those emphasized by Harrison et al. (2022) and Portugal-Nunes et al. (2021) of standardization and cross-contextual transferability.

Combined, these external sources confirm the conclusion that while integrated strategies become increasingly prevalent in research and practice, the field remains marked by heterogeneity of concepts, methods, and applications. Moreover, the reviewed studies all

consistently stress the need for holistic, context-dependent solutions that tackle nutritional, environmental, social, and psychological dimensions at once.

One of the greatest strengths of this scoping review is its scope and interdisciplinarity, covering not only nutrition science and environmental studies but also psychological, behavioral, educational, and policy disciplines. By drawing on several methodological traditions—systematic reviews (Guillaumie et al., 2020), scoping reviews (Harrison et al., 2022; Burgaz et al., 2023; McCormack et al., 2023), global modeling (Springmann et al., 2018), and empirical behavioral studies (Dicu et al., 2024, 2025; Cuc et al., 2025)—the review gives a broad and synoptic view of the literature. Furthermore, utilization of high-income country and low- and middle-income country studies (Fourat et al., 2024; Siminiuc et al., 2025) increases the generalizability of the findings to a worldwide context.

There are, however, a number of limitations that must be taken into account. Firstly, the review was limited to English-language, peer-reviewed literature and therefore potentially excluded important evidence from non-English-language literature or grey literature, particularly from underrepresented regions. Second, as with all scoping reviews, the emphasis was on synthesizing and mapping the scope of available research and not a quality appraisal or meta-analysis per se; therefore, the review does not take into account the relative strength or quality of the included evidence. Third, while the Web of Science Core Collection has robust multidisciplinary coverage, additional relevant studies from other databases (e.g., Scopus or PubMed) may have been obtained, especially for specialized domains like agricultural sciences or food system modeling. Finally, the heterogeneity of the studies included—by methodologies, populations, and contexts—means generalizable conclusions or effect size estimates cannot be made.

Despite the advances emphasized in this review, there are still some key knowledge gaps. One key gap is the requirement for harmonized metrics to assess combined nutritional and environmental outcomes, as emphasized by Harrison et al. (2022), Portugal-Nunes et al. (2021), and Benton et al. (2024). The establishment and validation of context-sensitive, harmonized indicators are essential to advance comparative research and inform policy responses.

Second, more research is needed on institutional and governance frameworks that can infuse sustainability principles into education, health, and food systems, particularly in LMIC

contexts (Fourat et al., 2024; Burgaz et al., 2023; Barbour et al., 2022). While there is evidence of promising interventions, residual gaps in implementation science, capacity building, and cross-sector coordination hinder scalable solutions.

Third, psychological and behavioral dimensions of sustainable eating are less researched than environmental or nutritional outcomes (Dicu et al., 2024, 2025; Rad et al., 2024; Graça et al., 2023). Future studies will have to examine how cognitive, affective, and social processes shape diet behavior change, how to translate that into intervention, and how mental wellbeing and mental health influence sustainable food culture.

Finally, pedagogies are in requirement of further attention, both in the context of formal curricula (McCormack et al., 2023) and public education interventions reaching diverse audiences (Follong et al., 2022; Casu et al., 2020). Inculcating sustainability concepts across levels of education, from schools to professional training, has the potential to catalyze knowledge, attitudes, and skills towards systemic transformation.

Reflecting on these shortcomings, we have some priority recommendations for future work:

1. Developing coherent, trans-disciplinary frameworks that incorporate nutritional, environmental, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions.

2. Investing in cross-sectoral policy analysis to determine best practices and institutional facilitators of sustainable food systems.

3. Expanding our behavioral and psychological research to comprehend and influence consumer, institutional, and community-level practices.

4. Strengthening ongoing educational interventions to prepare professionals and the public with sustainability expertise and competencies.

5. Enabling inclusivity and global applicability, particularly by elevating the voice of research from less-represented regions and culturally diverse contexts.

By addressing these challenges, future research and policy can move toward more effective, equitable, and integrated strategies for attaining sustainable nutrition, improving not only individual and population health but also environmental sustainability and social well-being.

5. Conclusions

This scoping review synthesized evidence from 55 multidisciplinary studies on integrated approaches in food and nutrition for sustainable development, including studies between 2000 and 2025 from diverse global settings. The findings highlight significant progress in conceptualizing frameworks, developing assessment tools, implementing institutional and policy innovations, and examining behavioral and psychological determinants of sustainable food behavior. Specifically, the review identified four broad thematic areas: (1) integrated nutrition-environment frameworks, (2) institutional and policy interventions, (3) educational and behavioral dimensions, and (4) psycho-nutritional and health-related dimensions.

The convergence of these thematic threads demonstrates that sustainable nutrition is no longer a technical eating issue but a complex, systemic issue that requires concerted effort across sectors, disciplines, and levels of society. Advances in global modeling (Springmann et al., 2018), sustainability indicator development (Harrison et al., 2022; Benton et al., 2024), institutional practice (Guillaumie et al., 2020; Burgaz et al., 2023), education innovation (McCormack et al., 2023; Follong et al., 2022), and behavioral science (Dicu et al., 2024, 2025; Cuc et al., 2025) have created foundations necessary for action forward.

However, there are enduring knowledge gaps in the areas of standardized measures, cross-sectoral management, psychological processes underlying diet change, and scalable educational interventions. These gaps limit the capacity of current frameworks to achieve the system change necessary to align human health, social equity, and planetary sustainability.

We therefore conclude that next-generation research, policy, and practice must adopt holistic, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive paths towards moving towards sustainable nutrition goals. Specifically, researchers must work to develop integrated models reconciling nutritional, environmental, social, and psychological dimensions; policymakers must prioritize cross-sector partnership and capacity building; educators must incorporate lessons of sustainability into curricula and professional training; and practitioners must design inclusive interventions recognizing diverse cultural, economic, and ecological contexts.

Attaining sustainable food systems is among our era's signature challenges. With the coming together of evidence and insights from nutrition science, public health, behavioral psychology, environmental studies, and governance research, we can refine our strides in

developing food systems that are healthy and resilient yet also fair, just, and future-proof. This scoping review forms that basis for that ongoing interdisciplinary path, invoking concerted action that spans policy, practice, and knowledge to realize the potential of sustainable nutrition.

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