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**Bridging the divide:
Rural-urban Interactions and
livelihood Strategies**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most development theory and practice is implicitly based on the dichotomy between 'rural' and 'urban' areas, populations and activities. This is reflected in the division of policies along spatial and sectoral lines, with urban planners usually concentrating on urban nodes and giving scant attention to agricultural or rural-led development, while rural development planners tend to ignore urban centres and define rural areas as consisting only of villages and their agricultural land.

This, however, does not reflect the reality of households' livelihoods, which often include both rural and urban elements. For example, many urban enterprises rely on demand from rural consumers, and access to urban markets and services is crucial for most agricultural producers. In both rural and urban areas, a significant proportion of households relies on income diversification and on the combination of agricultural and non-agricultural income sources.

Even when spatial development policies have attempted to integrate rural and urban dimensions, they have often failed because they were based on inaccurate generalisations about the relationship between the two.

This paper reviews the ways in which urban and rural livelihoods are intertwined, drawing on many examples from around the world. It highlights how positive rural-urban interactions and equitable development can be fostered by backward and forward linkages between agricultural production and industry and services.

For these backward and forward linkages to be made and to work requires some major shifts in the way planners and policy makers think. Policies encouraging these mutually reinforcing linkages need to overcome the traditional separation between rural and urban planners. They also need to avoid generalisations and be grounded in the specifics of the regional context. One of the most important points to bear in mind is that the potential for rural-urban linkages to contribute to poverty reduction will only be realised if measures are taken to address wider social inequalities, such as access to resources and information. This therefore has numerous implications for activities such as local government, and rural extension services, as well as calling for the need to address such issues at national and international levels.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: RURAL-URBAN INTERACTIONS AND LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES

Cecilia Tacoli

Introduction

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This, however, does not reflect the reality of households' livelihoods, which often include both rural and urban elements. For example, many urban enterprises rely on demand from rural consumers, and access to urban markets and services is crucial for most agricultural producers. In both rural and urban areas, a significant proportion of households relies on income diversification and on the combination of agricultural and non-agricultural income sources.

This paper provides a review of the ways in which urban and rural livelihoods are intertwined, drawing on many examples from the empirical literature. It concludes with some recommendations for how natural resource policy makers and planners can take these aspects into account.

The rural-urban interface

Rural-urban interactions can be divided into two categories:

1. linkages across space (such as flows of people, goods, money and information and wastes); and
2. sectoral interactions, which include 'rural' activities taking place in urban areas (such as urban agriculture) or activities often classified as 'urban' (such as manufacturing and services) taking place in rural areas.

Rural-urban linkages are influenced and often intensified by macro-level changes, including structural adjustment and economic reform, which affect both urban and rural populations. Job insecurity and general increases in prices in the urban areas make it increasingly difficult for urban dwellers to support their relatives in home areas (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1998). Trade liberalisation and the growth of export-oriented agriculture have also resulted in the marginalisation of small farmers who must turn to non-agricultural rural employment or migrate to the towns. However, rural-urban linkages also vary according to local

historical, political, socio-cultural and ecological factors. Spatial development policies which have attempted to integrate rural and urban dimensions have often failed because they were based on inaccurate generalisations about the relationship between the two.

Definitions of 'rural' and 'urban'

The division between 'urban' and 'rural' policies is based on the assumption that the physical distinction between the two areas is self-explanatory and uncontroversial. However, there are three major problems with this view. The first is that demographic and economic criteria used to define what is 'urban' and what is 'rural' can vary widely between nations, making generalisations problematic (Box 1).

Box 1. Variations in the definition of urban centres

Asia remains a predominantly 'rural' continent, with two-thirds of its population living in rural areas in 1990. However, if both India and China were to change their definition of urban centres to one based on a relatively low population threshold of 2,000 or 2,500 inhabitants - as used by many Latin American and European nations - a large proportion of their population would change from 'rural' to 'urban'. Given the fact that India and China have a high share of Asia's population, this in turn would significantly change Asia's level of urbanization - and even change the world's level of urbanization by a few percentage points (UNCHS, 1996).

A second problem is that of the definition of urban boundaries. In Southeast Asia's Extended Metropolitan Regions, agriculture, cottage industry, industrial estates, suburban developments and other types of land use coexist in areas with a radius as large as 100 km, where the high mobility of the population includes circular migration and commuting (Firman, 1996). In sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture still prevails in peri-urban areas. However, elsewhere significant shifts in land ownership and employment patterns are taking place, often at the expense of both rural and urban poor people (Box 2).

Box 2. Land use conversion in the Philippines

In Manila's extended metropolitan region, large swathes of rice land have been converted into industrial, residential and recreational uses. Alternatively, land may simply lie idle, with cattle grazing on grassed-over rice fields whose owners await either development permits or more propitious market conditions. Although the 1988 Land Reform Law protects from conversion lands eligible for redistribution from landlord to tenant farmer, it has in fact accelerated the process of land conversion. This is because landlords keen to avoid losing their land have converted it to non-agricultural uses, and in many cases tenant farmers have been evicted and the land left idle (Kelly, 1998).

The third problem in the definition of the boundaries between 'rural' and 'urban' areas is the fact that urban residents and enterprises depend on an area significantly larger than the built-up area for basic resources and ecological functions. In general, the larger and wealthier the city, the more its industrial base and its wealthy consumers will draw on such resources and ecological functions from beyond its surrounding region (McGranahan, et al., 1996). The concept of a city's ecological footprint was developed to quantify the land area on which any city's inhabitants depend for food, water and other renewable resources such as fuelwood, and the absorption of carbon to compensate for the carbon dioxide emitted from fossil fuel use (Rees, 1992). The concept makes clear the dependence of any city on the resources and ecological functions of an area considerably larger than itself (although urban areas with limited industrial bases and with most of their population having low incomes will have much smaller and generally more local ecological footprints than large and prosperous cities).

Spatial linkages

Flows of people

Internal migration is often seen as essentially rural-to-urban and contributing to uncontrolled growth and related urban management problems in many large cities in the South. This has resulted in many policies to control or discourage migration. While migration restriction is infrequent, many countries have sought to make cities relatively inhospitable, for example bulldozing informal low-income settlements, or making it difficult for new migrants to secure property rights to land or access to public services. These measures generally have little impact aside from lowering welfare, especially for the poor. In fact, most of the growth in urban population is due to natural population increase. Since rural to urban migration is fastest where economic growth is highest - as migrants tend to move to places where they are likely to find employment opportunities - it is not in reality as problematic as it is made out to be (UNCHS, 1996). For example, secondary urban centres, especially in Latin America, have recently attracted new investment and industries which would have previously been directed to large cities. As a consequence, they have also increased their role as migration destinations.

Despite widely-held beliefs that flows are always rural-to-urban, migration from the urban to the rural areas is increasing. This type of movement is often associated with economic decline and increasing poverty. In sub-Saharan Africa, significant numbers of retrenched urban workers are thought to return to rural 'home' areas, where the cost of living is lower (Potts, 1995). Seasonal waged agricultural work in rural areas can also provide temporary employment for low-income urban groups (Kamete, 1998). Temporary and seasonal movement such as this is not reflected in census figures, and can make 'static' enumerations of rural and urban populations unreliable.

Complexity in migration direction and duration is matched by that in the composition of the flows, which reflect wider socio-economic dynamics. Although regional variations can be important, the number of migrant women has increased in many countries in the South. The age and gender of who moves and who stays can have a significant impact on source areas in terms of labour availability, remittances, household organisation and agricultural

production systems. In some cases, decision-making power over the management of natural resources is invested with the actual migrants and not with those who 'stay behind'. This can limit the impact of policy and project interventions.

Multi-spatial households

Household membership is usually defined as 'sharing the same pot', under the same roof. However, the strong commitments and obligations between rural-based and urban-based individuals and units show that in many instances these are 'multi-spatial households', in which reciprocal support is given across space. For example, remittances from urban-based members can be an important income source for the rural-based members, who in turn may look after their migrant relatives' children and property. These linkages can be crucial in the livelihood strategies of the poor, but are not usually taken into consideration in policy-making (Box 3).

Flows of goods

Exchanges of goods between urban and rural areas are an essential element of rural-urban linkages. The 'virtuous circle' model of rural-urban development emphasises efficient economic linkages and physical infrastructure connecting farmers and other rural producers with both domestic and external markets. This involves three phases:

1. rural households earn higher incomes from production of agricultural goods for non-local markets, and increase their demand for consumer goods
2. this leads to the creation of non-farm jobs and employment diversification, especially in small towns close to agricultural production areas
3. which in turn absorbs surplus rural labour, raises demand for agricultural produce and again boosts agricultural productivity and rural incomes (Evans, 1990; UNDP/UNCHS 1995).

Box 3. Multi-spatial households

In Old Naledi, a low-income settlement of Gaborone (Botswana), a third of all households own cattle and half retain land in their home village. This proportion does not decline with people's length of stay in the city. Rural assets have both monetary and social value, and serve as a safety net for low-income households with uncertain livelihood prospects in the city. However, although most of these households have no other assets, they are not eligible to relief or aid measures in case of loss as these are designed exclusively for rural dwellers (Kruger, 1998).

In Durban (South Africa), maintaining both an urban and a rural base also provides a safety net for low-income city dwellers in times of economic hardship or political violence. However, housing and rural development programmes do not acknowledge such multi-spatial, extended households: eligibility to subsidies and grants is based on the size of the co-resident household (either in town or in the countryside), and the funds can only be used in one of the two locations. Since urban housing subsidies are more widely available, this

may encourage urban-based members of multi-spatial households to cut their rural links (Smit, 1998).

However, spatial proximity to markets does not necessarily improve farmers' access to the inputs and services required to increase agricultural productivity. Access to land, capital and labour may be far more important in determining the extent to which farmers are able to benefit from urban markets. In Paraguay, despite their proximity to the capital city, smallholders' production is hardly stimulated by urban markets as their low incomes do not allow investment in cash crops or in production intensification to compensate for the lack of land (Zoomers and Kleinpenning, 1996). Patterns of attendance at periodic markets also show that distance is a much less important issue than rural consumers' income and purchasing power in determining demand for manufactured goods, inputs and services (Morris, 1997).

Markets are also social institutions in which some actors are able to enforce mechanisms of control which favour access for specific groups and exclude others (Box 4). Grain markets in South Asia tend to be dominated by large local merchants who control access to the means of distribution (transport, sites, capital, credit and information). Even in the petty retailing subsector, caste and gender are major entry barriers (Harriss-White, 1995).

Box 4. Market access and control in Senegal's charcoal trade

In Senegal, forests are officially owned by the state and managed by the Forest Service, which allocates commercial rights to urban-based merchants through licences, permits and quotas. Village chiefs control direct forest access, ultimately deciding whether to allow merchants' woodcutters into the forests. Despite their control, villagers reap only a small portion of the profits from commercial forestry. More substantial benefits accrue to merchants and wholesalers who, through their social relations, control access to forestry markets, labour opportunities and urban distribution, and access to state agents and officials. Local control and management of natural resources is therefore weakened by the lack of economic benefits which would encourage maintenance (Ribot, 1998).

Sectoral interactions

The growth of urban agriculture since the 1970s has long been understood as a response to escalating poverty and rising food prices or shortages, often exacerbated by structural adjustment and economic reform. Recent research shows that its nature may be changing, and that at least in low income nations, a significant proportion of high and middle-income urban farmers engage in commercial production (Mbiba, 1995). More needs to be known on how this may affect access to urban food markets for producers, especially smallholders, from surrounding rural areas.

The increase in non-agricultural rural employment, or deagrarianisation, is an ongoing process in most countries in the South. There are several reasons for this. Amongst them, environmental degradation, population growth and land subdivision make it difficult for

large numbers of farmers in many regions to rely solely on agriculture. Access to non-agricultural rural employment is mediated by culturally-specific formal and informal networks which may be based on income, political and/or religious affiliation, ethnicity, household type, gender and generation. This can constrain some groups' access to the opportunities provided by deagrarianisation and occupational diversification.

Urban centres and rural development

Since the 1970s, comprehensive rural-urban development frameworks have been formulated as an explicit attempt to promote rural development, and with the implicit aim of curbing migration to large cities. Integrated Rural Development has contributed the view of rural development as holistic and multifaceted, and including non-agricultural as well as agricultural activities. However, it has rarely included explicit urban components, and whenever a spatial dimension is included it is usually limited to marketing functions.

Other attempts take urban centres as their starting point. In the 'urban functions in rural development' (UFRD) approach, the strategy for promoting rural development is to develop a network of small, medium-sized and larger centres each providing centrally located functions (such as services, facilities and infrastructure) hierarchically organised (Rondinelli and Ruddle, 1978). Rural development is expected to be stimulated by filling in the supposedly missing functions (for example banking services) through selective investment in rural towns (Box 5). Translating this model into practice has been problematic for three main reasons:

1. 'urban functions' are assumed to benefit the entire surrounding region and all rural households irrespective of social and economic status: issues of access and control are not considered
2. the methods for selecting key towns for investment were not clear, and tended to focus only on the attributes of the towns themselves with no consideration of the rural potential
3. the model is based on generalisations which do not account for the rich variety in the roles of urban centres, which are determined by both the rural and regional context.

Box 5. Application of the UFRD approach in the Philippines

This USAID-funded programme was carried out in the Bicol Region in the late 1970s. A study conducted ten years later found that the selected towns were not performing the 'missing' functions and were themselves stagnating. Among the main reasons were that:

- the identified functions did not support rural development but rather the urban-based military and civil service personnel
- transport linkages to larger towns did not encourage the marketing and commercial functions of local towns, which were bypassed

since agricultural productivity did not increase, rural household expenditures for non-agricultural goods and services did not rise and did not start the 'virtuous circle' of urban and rural expansion (Koppel, 1987)

The underlying conceptual problem is the assumption that it is an absence of 'central places' that constrain development, rather than factors such as ecological capacity, land-owning structures, crop types and control on crop prices or access to markets, all of which in turn are shaped by rural-urban interactions within the specific regional context.

A third position on the role of small towns in rural development can be defined as 'intermediate' (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1986). Drawing on empirical case studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America, it shows that universal generalisations and prescriptions, which form the basis of most spatial planning models, are not valid. Centralised policies which do not take into account the peculiarities and specifics of small towns and their regions, may not be efficient. Real decentralisation of decision-making with investment and resource-raising at the local level may allow the articulation of local needs and priorities and stimulate both rural and urban development (Box 6). However, wider socio-economic issues such as inequitable land-owning structures and government crop purchasing policies and taxation are also likely to affect small towns and, by extension, migration to larger cities.

Box 6. Positive links between rural and urban development

The Upper Valley of the Rio Negro and Nequen in Argentina shows how rapid growth in agricultural production can be accompanied by rapid growth in employment linked to agriculture and urban growth. The Upper Valley is linked by railway to Buenos Aires, giving local farmers access to both national and international markets. In the 1950s, the area acquired provincial status, which increased the power and resources available to the local government. The landowning structure is relatively equitable, and most of the land is farmed by farmer-owners with sufficient capital to invest in intensive production, mainly fruit trees. The growing number of prosperous farmers has provided a considerable stimulus to local urban growth, with a chain of small centres developing along the railway. Urban-based enterprises were stimulated by demand from agricultural producers both as forward linkages (cold storage plants, industries producing packaging material, plants for the processing into juices, jams, dried or tinned fruit) and as backward linkages (production of inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides, or tools and machinery) (Manzanal and Vapnarsky, 1986)

Rural-urban linkages and rural livelihoods

The positive impact of rural-urban linkages on rural livelihoods is summarised in the 'virtuous circle', where rural and urban development are mutually dependent and integrated. However, rural-urban linkages should not be assumed to be beneficial in all circumstances. In some cases, they can increase inequality and the vulnerability of those groups with least assets.

Especially where land ownership is highly unequal, government policies and subsidised credit institutions set up in small towns tend to benefit already privileged urban elites and

large farmers. When inputs and services for agricultural development are locally available, those small farmers who cannot afford to buy them tend to lose their land to large farmers who in this way reinvest the profits from their increased production.

Non-agricultural rural employment can be an 'accumulation strategy' for farmers with assets and access to urban networks. For these groups, profits from urban-based activities are often re-invested in agricultural production, resulting in capital and assets accumulation. For other groups, however, engaging in non-agricultural rural employment may be determined by lack or loss of land, capital or labour. Moreover, social marginalisation can limit access to non-agricultural activities, and individuals and households with little access to social networks, such as in many instances woman-headed households or widows living alone, may be forced to find employment in unprofitable occupations as a 'survival strategy' (Baker, 1995; Seppala, 1996). The least remunerative of these activities do not reduce vulnerability and may rely on excessive extraction from the natural resource base (Box 7).

Box 7. Poverty, non-agricultural activities and natural resources

The cumulative effect of famines in northern Darfur (Sudan) has engendered a number of coping strategies among villagers, including trade, handicraft production, internal and international migration. However, these are not accessible for those with least assets, for whom the main activity is the collection of grass (as fodder for camels and donkeys) and fuelwood which they sell to petty traders in small village markets. Given the semi-desert nature of the region, the environmental costs of this activity are inescapable and it accelerates the deterioration of the area's overall natural resource base (El Bashir Ibrahim, 1997).

Migration as a livelihood strategy is also mediated by access to assets. Those who move tend to be young, physically fit and often better educated than average, and have access to urban-based social networks. The elderly and the poorest people do not usually migrate, and labour availability in peak agricultural seasons can become scarce. Over time, migration may erode village-based networks as migrants become part of urban-based networks, and remittances tend to decrease (Fall, 1998).

Migrant women tend to send higher remittances to home areas, although an important reason for moving is often to escape family constraints. The renegotiation of gender roles resulting from women's migration is however not always reflected in an increase in control over their own remittances. In many cases, women who stay in home areas also have limited control over remittances sent by male relatives. This partly reflects culturally-specific gender relations, but also in many cases women's lack of access to assets. Depending on specific locations and groups, projects facilitating the productive use of remittances may have the potential to contribute to poverty reduction (Box 8).

Box 8. Remittances and agricultural production

In Swaziland, poor agricultural production was traditionally explained as the outcome of men's migration to South African mining areas and of the inability of women to adequately carry the responsibility of production. However, a more crucial factor was the unavailability of new agricultural technologies. This began to change in the 1970s, when returning migrants bought second-hand tractors with their savings. Remittances from mine wages were used by women to hire tractors, therefore compensating for the lack of male labour. This has resulted in an increase in agricultural production and in the number of family fields under cultivation (Simelane, 1995).

Investigating rural-urban linkages

What is the most effective area on which to focus research aimed at understanding rural-urban linkages, and how can this best be carried out?

Rural-urban linkages can follow quite different paths. For local and project research, it is important to identify bottlenecks which prevent positive interactions. This can be done through the analysis of the patterns of different flows (of people, of goods and of the related flows of money and information) and subsequently through the analysis of their combined impact on rural-urban linkages. This holistic approach requires that both the rural and the urban components of the flows' trajectories are included in the analysis. For example, migration should be examined in terms of both labour supply and demand. In flows of goods, access to market price information and to the actual marketplaces should be considered.

The trajectories of the flows are not usually limited within the regional boundaries of a town and its hinterland. Migrants can go to a variety of places, including international destinations, and goods and services can be sold and purchased in many different locations. From the perspective of a rural household, the pattern of flows is thus more likely to resemble a network involving multiple linkages with a number of villages and towns, rather than revolving around a single urban centre (Douglass, 1998). The focus should therefore be on regional networks rather than on relations between a single village and a single centre. The initial demarcation of these networks can be based on the existing flows of goods and people between settlements.

Secondary data are not a reliable source of information, especially for population flows, since circular and temporary migration are not usually recorded in censuses nor in annual household registration data. The combination of participatory methods, small-scale household surveys and interviews with key informants is likely to be the most efficient approach for local, project related research. Participatory methods can help in the initial mapping of the flows, and in focus group discussions on the reasons for the patterns identified. Stratified household surveys allow a clearer understanding of how the nature of local rural-urban linkages affects the livelihoods of different groups. Key informants can

provide useful information on policies and practices which may not directly emerge from interviews with village respondents.

In the analysis of flows of goods, it may be useful to use commodity chain analysis, which consists of:

1. identifying the actors involved at all different stages of the chain (production, processing, exchange, transport, distribution, final sale, end use);
2. evaluating income and profit at each level through the analysis of prices and quantities of goods handled by the different actors;
3. evaluating the distribution of income and profit within each group along the chain, and where benefits are invested (locally or in more distant urban centres);
4. using the distribution of these benefits to trace out the mechanisms by which access to benefits is maintained and controlled (Ribot, 1998).

Policy implications

Why should natural resource policies and projects take into account rural-urban linkages? A first reason is that understanding the scale and nature of rural-urban linkages is essential in order to locate rural livelihoods and the rural economy within the wider regional context. Positive rural-urban interactions and the 'virtuous circle' of development are fostered by backward and forward linkages between agricultural production and industry and services. However, policies encouraging these mutually reinforcing linkages need to overcome the traditional separation between rural and urban planners. They also need to avoid generalisations and be grounded in the specifics of the regional context.

Political and administrative decentralisation involving real decision-making power and financial autonomy is more likely to overcome planning dichotomies and to identify local needs and priorities. This needs to be supported by the national government, which should also provide infrastructure and basic services. Incentives for localised and diversified foreign investment would help to avoid the weaknesses of investment in single resources and crops.

Balanced rural-urban regional development requires an equal distribution of benefits among the rural population, since increases in rural household income and expenditure are the springboard for the expansion of many urban-based enterprises. Inequalities in access to assets are the main reason why there are very few actual examples of 'virtuous circle' development. To strengthen the poverty reduction element of natural resource policies and projects, the potential of rural-urban linkages in widening choice and options should be taken into account. Increasing people's options also involves recognising the diversity of needs and priorities within any low-income population, not only because of different income but also because of gender, age and ethnicity.

The following is a tentative list of issues related to rural-urban linkages to keep in mind in the formulation of natural resource policies and projects:

- Agricultural production is assumed to benefit from proximity to urban markets. However, the degree to which households can take advantage of this proximity depends on their physical, human and financial resources, as well as their social capital and their access (in physical as well as social terms) to markets. Projects aiming to increase agricultural production should also consider the challenges raised by commercialisation, which can include merchants' monopolistic practices and competition from other areas, as well as lack of information on markets for small farmers.
- It should not be assumed that reinforcing the physical infrastructure connecting rural and urban areas is necessarily beneficial (because it reinforces local interactions) or negative (because it extracts resources from the region, bypassing local centres in favour of larger cities). A low intensity of rural-urban linkages can be the result of specific socio-economic conditions in a given rural area, which may also affect different groups in different ways, as well as the result of poor transportation systems. This calls for a better understanding of socio-economic conditions before steps are taken to strengthen physical linkages.
- Linkages between rural settlements and more than one urban centre are likely to be more successful for rural development as they increase the range of income diversification opportunities and the number of potential markets. This is also because in many cases different flows (for example of people and of goods) have different spatial patterns. Understanding these patterns and the reasons why some groups may be excluded from some or all rural-urban linkages can give indications of priorities for policy and project interventions.
- Migration is an important element of livelihood strategies. In many cases, it is more useful to understand households as multispatial rather than 'rural' or 'urban', and to encourage the positive linkages between spatially distant members, by recognising urban-based members' claims on rural assets and facilitating their contribution to the rural economy, for example through the productive investment of remittances.
- However, in some instances the household members who 'stay behind' in the rural areas have little say about the management of local resources, as control remains with the migrant members. This is particularly the case for women, although it is also mediated by a range of factors such as culturally-specific gender roles and relations, gender divisions of labour within households, land tenure and women's workloads. This should be taken into account when targeting extension messages in rural areas, so that assumptions are not made about who controls resources.

In summary, rural-urban linkages play an important role in the ways in which livelihoods are constructed, although the traditional dichotomy between 'rural' and 'urban' development theory and practice has underplayed their significance. How-

ever, while rural and urban relations should be seen as mutually reinforcing, generalisations on the nature of rural-urban linkages across different locations and in terms of how they affect different groups must be avoided. Within specific regional contexts, while there is potential for rural-urban linkages to contribute to poverty reduction, this will only occur in

a climate in which policies, social relations, institutions and incentives allow an equitable access to the assets (physical, natural, social and financial) necessary to support sustainable livelihoods.

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