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UNFPA – Evaluation

United Nations Population Fund

**Independent evaluation of UNFPA support to the 2020 round of population
and housing censuses, 2015-2024**

Summary

The Independent Evaluation Office conducted this evaluation as part of the UNFPA multi-year costed evaluation plan, 2024-2027. Focusing on the 2020 census round (2015-2024), it assessed UNFPA strategic positioning, effectiveness, capacities and partnerships in supporting national censuses. The evaluation builds on the first corporate evaluation of census support, which covered the 2010 round (2005-2014). It comes at a critical juncture, generating crucial evidence to advance the new demographic resilience outcome of the UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2026-2029, and to inform UN80 discussions on the normative functions related to population statistics and associated activities across the United Nations system.

I. Background

1. Censuses form the cornerstone of national statistical systems, providing essential demographic intelligence for evidence-based policymaking, allocation of public resources, and national development planning. They produce disaggregated data to identify underserved populations and achieve sustainable development in line with the principle of leaving no one behind. Governments, electoral bodies, United Nations organizations, academia, the private sector, civil society, the media and humanitarian actors all rely on census data.
2. As the first census cycle following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 2020 census round (2015-2024) generated critical baseline data for the Sustainable Development Goals. The round was marked by substantial digital transformation, with 78 per cent of countries adopting computer-assisted personal interviewing, up from just 9 per cent in the 2010 round (2005-2014). However, implementation was significantly disrupted by COVID-19, financial constraints and rising global fragility. Global population coverage fell from 93 per cent in the 2010 round to 85 per cent in the 2020 round, with 35 countries not conducting a census.
3. For decades, UNFPA has played a crucial role in supporting national Governments to operationalize the normative framework for censuses established by the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses. Guided by a dedicated strategy, UNFPA assisted approximately 160 countries in the 2020 round through policy dialogue, technical assistance, resource mobilization, operational support and South-South and triangular cooperation. UNFPA also actively engaged in the International Committee on Census Coordination to promote coherence, efficiency and alignment with global standards.

II. Purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

4. The purpose of this evaluation is to generate evidence to inform the development and implementation of the UNFPA strategy for the 2030 census round. Its objectives are to assess the UNFPA strategic positioning, partnerships and capacities for census support during the 2020 round.
5. The evaluation has a global scope, covering UNFPA support for censuses across all regions and programme countries. It examines UNFPA engagement at the global, regional and country levels. Thematically, it spans the full range of support provided throughout the census cycle, including technical, operational and political dimensions. Temporally, it focuses on the 2020 census round, encompassing support delivered between 2015 and 2024.
6. The primary intended users of the evaluation within UNFPA are: (a) the Executive Committee; (b) the Data and Analytics Branch; (c) the Population and Development Branch; (d) the Gender, Human Rights and Inclusion Branch; (e) the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Branch; (f) the Humanitarian Response Division; and (g) the UNFPA regional and country offices. The findings are also relevant to external stakeholders, including the UNFPA Executive Board, national statistical offices, civil society organizations, the United Nations Statistical Commission, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and other United Nations entities.

III. Evaluation methodology

7. The evaluation has a dual-purpose design that combines formative and summative elements, allowing it to assess the contribution of UNFPA to the 2020 census round while also informing future support for the 2030 round. It adopts a utilization-focused approach, prioritizing the generation of actionable insights. A reconstructed theory of change guided the evaluation, outlining causal pathways and critical assumptions that were empirically tested.
8. A mixed-methods approach integrated quantitative and qualitative data. Data collection comprised five evidence clusters: (a) desk reviews (more than 300 documents); (b) key informant interviews (more than 260 people); (c) a country office survey (112 country office participants); (d) country case studies (four in-country missions and 12 desk reviews); and (e) regional studies (one in-depth regional study).

9. Artificial intelligence was integrated into the evaluation to broaden the evidence base and strengthen analytical depth. Artificial intelligence tools were used to analyse documents from three large datasets: (a) country programme documents; (b) annual narrative reports from regional and country offices; and (c) country programme evaluations (more than 1,300 documents).
10. The evaluation utilized purposive sampling to select country case studies. Stakeholder mappings informed the selection of key informants for interviews at the global, regional and country levels. The online survey targeted all population and development focal points in UNFPA country offices.
11. To identify patterns, data analysis disaggregated findings by humanitarian setting, geographic region, income level and national statistical capacity. Qualitative insights were derived through content analysis, while contribution analysis served to validate the theory of change. Furthermore, descriptive statistics were employed to analyse quantitative survey data.
12. The evaluation adopted a participatory approach, engaging stakeholders throughout the process. An external advisory and internal evaluation reference group contributed to the evaluation design, the validation of findings, and the development of recommendations to ensure credibility and utility.
13. Throughout the evaluation, ethical safeguards were applied systematically, and the evaluation was conducted in accordance with the United Nations Evaluation Group Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation and Code of Conduct.

IV. Conclusions

Conclusion 1. Under challenging conditions, UNFPA delivered effective support to the 2020 census round, driven by country-level adaptability and technical leadership. This impact was achieved despite declining organizational priority and poor accountability mechanisms, which kept its contributions from reaching their full potential and limited its readiness for the growing complexity of future census rounds.

14. UNFPA made substantial – and often critical – contributions to the successful implementation of censuses during the 2020 round. UNFPA demonstrated adaptability, technical leadership and strong advocacy despite unprecedented challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Its support was instrumental in enabling censuses to proceed in many countries where they might otherwise have failed, while advancing important normative goals around data disaggregation and the principle of leaving no one behind. The corporate strategy for the 2020 census round provided a clear strategic framework for digital transformation and embedded operational and partnership arrangements to support countries’ transition to modern census approaches. These achievements were realized despite strategic and organizational constraints.
15. UNFPA is widely recognized as the lead United Nations entity in census support, with unique technical expertise and trusted relationships. However, census work has experienced a decline in institutional priority, accompanied by diminished resources and weak internal coordination. Moreover, limited accountability and insufficient monitoring and reporting mechanisms have led to reliance on individual champions and ad hoc solutions. This misalignment between the UNFPA mandate and its level of investment has constrained potential impact and raises concerns about sustainability. UNFPA strategic positioning has been comparatively weaker in areas requiring high-level political engagement, resource mobilization, sustained advocacy, and coordination across diverse stakeholders.
16. Looking ahead, UNFPA retains the fundamental assets for leadership – technical credibility, strong partnerships and mandate authority – yet remains insufficiently organized to fully leverage them. As countries adopt increasingly complex and diverse census methodologies, including combined and register-based approaches, UNFPA will need to rebalance towards more sustained engagement models, systematic capacity development and integrated support to national data ecosystems. Strengthening partnerships in civil registration and vital statistics, as well as broader administrative data systems, will be essential, as census support can no longer operate in isolation from these interdependent data infrastructures. Without strategic repositioning, UNFPA risks being unable to meet the expanded demands of future census rounds.

Conclusion 2. Although UNFPA strengthened its support for the dissemination, analysis and use of census data during the 2020 census round, the scope of these efforts remains insufficient to ensure that technical outputs are transformed into lasting policy impact.

17. UNFPA significantly strengthened its support for the dissemination, analysis and use of census data during the 2020 round. It advanced its normative agenda by promoting disaggregated data on discriminatory factors, linking census results to monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals and supporting thematic analyses aligned with its mandate. UNFPA also strengthened national capacity for advanced demographic analysis and increasingly leveraged census data to inform humanitarian efforts. However, many country offices remained disengaged from the later stages of data use.
18. Despite progress in the production of census-derived outputs, this has not translated into sustained use of data for evidence-based policymaking. Gaps persist in access to microdata, investment in analytical capacity beyond national statistical offices, and the promotion of a data-use culture among line ministries and civil society. These challenges stem from both resource constraints across the census cycle and the absence of a coherent corporate strategy. UNFPA support remains largely output-driven, with limited institutional learning and insufficient guidance to regional and country offices on transitioning from a technical assistance provider to strategic convenor linking data producers and users.
19. A central challenge for UNFPA is the imbalance between strengthened “supply-side” investments in data dissemination and analytical products and comparatively limited “demand-side” efforts focused on sustained capacity development and institutional strengthening. Missed opportunities to leverage coordinated approaches within United Nations country teams and partnerships have further widened this gap. Without addressing these systemic issues, UNFPA risks limiting the potential of its census support to national development planning and policymaking.

Conclusion 3. UNFPA effectively adapted its census support to the global COVID-19 crisis, demonstrating institutional resilience and technical leadership. However, its ability to deliver innovative and context-specific support in complex local crisis settings was hampered by inadequate corporate prioritization and the lack of a coherent organization-wide strategy, which limited scalability and sustained impact.

20. UNFPA rapidly recognized COVID-19 as a major threat to census operations and issued early guidance, reinforcing its role as a trusted technical adviser. It mobilized additional resources to support adaptations and safety measures, using census postponements to strengthen planning and methodologies. This swift and coordinated response to a global health crisis contrasts with its more uneven performance in humanitarian settings.
21. UNFPA demonstrated strong commitment to supporting censuses in humanitarian contexts. The corporate strategy for the 2020 census round reflected significant maturation in addressing humanitarian challenges, introducing innovative and hybrid methodologies, including the use of statistical modelling where access was constrained. UNFPA also promoted the use of census data to inform humanitarian action.
22. Nonetheless, structural constraints in humanitarian contexts limited results. Low census completion rates and the limited uptake of alternative methods, despite sustained UNFPA engagement, left many countries without updated data. This raises concerns about inefficiencies associated with prolonged preparations, persistent delays and equipment obsolescence. UNFPA lacks operational standards to trigger methodological adjustments, sunset clauses for stalled preparations, and minimum standards for alternative methods when traditional censuses are not feasible. While its technical expertise has enabled progress in specific cases, UNFPA has yet to establish a clear corporate priority on the intersection between census operations and humanitarian crises.

Conclusion 4. UNFPA possesses recognized technical leadership in census support but lacks the institutional architecture to wield this expertise effectively. Weak coordination mechanisms, inadequate resource mobilization, and absence of corporate accountability systems resulted in inconsistent quality of support that is dependent on regional initiative rather than organizational capability. This constrained UNFPA impact and efficiency gains during the 2020 census round.

23. UNFPA performance during the 2020 census round reveals a fundamental organizational paradox: while widely recognized as a technical leader in census support, this expertise was not matched by commensurate institutional architecture or strategic management systems. Coordination mechanisms largely functioned as information-sharing platforms rather than as strategic tools with clear accountability frameworks, performance monitoring, or resource allocation mechanisms.
24. The institutional framework exhibited significant structural gaps. The Inter-Divisional Working Group on Census (subsequently renamed the Inter-Divisional Working Group for Population Data Systems) operated without participation of business units responsible for communications and South-South and triangular cooperation. In parallel, the scope of the International Committee on Census Coordination remained narrow relative to the expanding census support ecosystem. Resource mobilization also posed a major challenge: the UNFPA Population Data Thematic Fund (now renamed the Demographic Futures Thematic Fund), launched in the middle of the 2020 round to address funding gaps, generated limited support, leaving no adequate corporate funding mechanism for this core area of work.
25. Regional offices proved the most effective operational tier. Some regions – notably Latin America and the Caribbean – have developed innovative team-based approaches that provided more robust guidance than offered by headquarters. However, this regional dynamism reinforced underlying structural deficiencies rather than resolving them. Without a comprehensive corporate framework in place, the quality of support varied across regions, with success dependent on individual leadership and regional initiative rather than established organizational systems. This ad hoc approach resulted in missed opportunities for cross-regional learning and inefficiencies in resource mobilization.

Conclusion 5. The UNFPA census support model relies on exceptional but overstretched technical experts, inadequate capacity building systems and fragmented partnerships. This is an unsustainable approach that cannot meet evolving country demands for modern census methodologies, despite recognized UNFPA technical excellence.

26. The 2020 round exposed a structural capacity gap. Although UNFPA possessed recognized technical expertise, it was concentrated within a small, overstretched group of regional advisers and chief technical advisers. In addition, a potential shift in the job profiles of regional advisers – from technical specialists to project managers – risks further eroding critical expertise within UNFPA. In the absence of robust capacity-building mechanisms to expand in-house expertise, UNFPA was unable to meet the full scale of country needs during the 2020 round, resulting in significant gaps in support.
27. Beyond technical expertise, UNFPA faces a critical gap in political engagement and advocacy capacity. It lacks systematic frameworks to navigate politicization of census operations, manage reputational risks, and engage with sensitive issues. While some country offices demonstrated strong engagement, these successes depended on individual initiative rather than institutional capacity. The lack of guidance and training on political risk left census processes vulnerable to politicization around inclusion, gender, ethnicity, and the leaving no one behind agenda.
28. Partnerships helped mitigate some technical gaps but were often transactional rather than strategic. Opportunities to leverage United Nations convening power for high-level political dialogue were frequently missed, and partnerships declined after the preparatory phase of censuses. South-South and triangular cooperation, despite being a long-recognized cost-effective approach and a comparative advantage for UNFPA, remains underutilized. While technical partnerships supported innovation, they were often hindered by weak coordination and limited integration with operational requirements.
29. As countries shift towards complex census methodologies, such as combined and register-based approaches, the current UNFPA capacity model is increasingly inadequate. This transition requires interdisciplinary expertise, broader partnerships and stronger inter-ministerial engagement. Most UNFPA achievements during the 2020 round were driven by individual commitment rather than institutionalized systems, creating vulnerabilities for future readiness. Without deliberate investment in both technical and political capacity, UNFPA ability to support modern census operations will be significantly compromised.

Conclusion 6. Knowledge management was explicitly identified as a critical gap in the evaluation of UNFPA support for the 2010 census round and incorporated as a priority in the 2019 UNFPA strategy

for supporting the 2020 census round. However, the UNFPA approach to generating, capturing and sharing census knowledge during the 2020 round remained fundamentally ad hoc and fragmented.

30. Effective knowledge management is essential to the UNFPA role as the leading technical partner for censuses and to its broader organizational capacity development. The absence of a comprehensive system to systematically capture and share lessons from census operations, combined with limited cross-regional exchange, has constrained the scaling of good practices and reduced opportunities for capacity building. Beyond limited internal documentation, UNFPA lacks mechanisms to synthesize lessons across regions or with global census partners, weakening its ability to strengthen the broader census support ecosystem and to position UNFPA as a knowledge leader.
31. The corporate strategy for the 2020 census round envisioned structured knowledge management mechanisms, including a census repository accessible to country offices, a database of good practices, and regional reference centres for census support. In practice, these initiatives were either not implemented or functioned sub-optimally. While UNFPA produced substantial technical guidance and facilitated important technical partnerships, there was no systematic approach to capturing operational lessons. The Census Community of Practice functioned largely as a static document storage rather than an interactive platform for peer learning, with limited content validation, updating, or integration of external knowledge. As a result, most knowledge remained internal, limiting its utility for national statistical offices, government partners, and the broader census support community. Feedback loops to inform strategic adaptation were generally absent, except for Latin America and the Caribbean, where a team-based support model facilitated a structured approach.
32. Weak knowledge management has undermined the UNFPA value proposition as the lead United Nations entity for census support and created strategic vulnerabilities for future readiness. UNFPA continues to rely on a narrow pool of experts without adequate systems to capture, institutionalize and transfer their knowledge. As countries adopt increasingly complex census methodologies, the inability of UNFPA to transform individual expertise into institutional assets has constrained its effectiveness during the 2020 round and poses a significant risk to its capacity to respond to the evolving demands of future census rounds.

V. Recommendations

33. The recommendations follow logically from the six conclusions. To remain fit for purpose, UNFPA support must adapt to the emerging shift toward combined and register-based censuses. While full field enumeration will remain dominant, the strategy for the 2030 census round must balance immediate technical support with long-term investments in administrative data, civil registration and vital statistics infrastructure to ensure countries are prepared for future census cycles.
34. This census transformation is taking place during a global data crisis characterized by declining census taking, reduced public participation in data collection and shrinking international funding. At the same time, UNFPA is navigating major structural reforms that present both opportunities and risks. While the Strategic Plan, 2026-2029 introduces a new outcome on demographic resilience that could elevate the work on population dynamics and data, the ongoing business model review and proposed merger with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) may reduce the capacity at the country and regional levels critical for the success of census support. Furthermore, the UN80 initiative is exploring options to optimize normative functions on population statistics and related activities.
35. The recommendations provide a roadmap for navigating these methodological and organizational shifts while reinforcing census support as a key corporate priority. To ensure their utility, the recommendations benefited from consultations with the evaluation reference group and senior management.

Recommendation 1. Develop a comprehensive operational framework for population data systems that reinforces census support as a core organizational priority and anchors it within UNFPA work on population data, demographic intelligence and adaptation to demographic change.

Key actions:

36. Develop a strategy for UNFPA support to population data systems that integrates census with civil registration, vital statistics, and other administrative and survey data generation systems. The strategy should align with the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses Revision 4 for the 2030 round, and guide implementation across development and humanitarian contexts while ensuring effective use of census data. Specifically, it should:
 - (a) define UNFPA leadership, convening and partnership-brokering roles within the international census architecture;
 - (b) prioritize long-term national statistical capacity-building over short-term gap filling;
 - (c) outline a twin-track approach supporting diverse censuses in the 2030 round while building foundational national capacity for transitions to combined and register-based methodologies, including through South-South and triangular cooperation;
 - (d) embed a partnership strategy that clearly defines the types and purposes of partnerships across all census phases and dimensions (technical, operational, political) and broadens engagement beyond national statistical offices to encompass all administrative data actors;
 - (e) include a visibility and communication strategy to strengthen partnership development and resource mobilization;
 - (f) embed a funding strategy that promotes the shift from funding to funding and financing, ensures that UNFPA resources are used as leveraging funds, and that is aligned with identified donor priorities;
 - (g) align the Demographic Futures Thematic Fund with census priorities through a dedicated, multi-year funding window for UNFPA census support to enhance predictability and sustainability.
37. Develop regional census operational plans to translate the census component of the global population data systems strategy into action, ensure that they are tailored to regional contexts, and promote coordination with other international organizations supporting censuses.
38. Develop and launch a living global census toolkit that consolidates both existing and new guidance, tools and templates for all census phases and dimensions (technical, operational, political), to support implementation of the global population data systems strategy and regional census operational plans. The toolkit should adopt a coordinated approach, leverage external guidance where appropriate, and include sections on issues identified by the evaluation, such as use of census data, quality assessment and census support in humanitarian contexts. Specifically, it should include:
 - (a) standardized tools for environmental scanning, planning, risk analysis and management, as well as reporting;
 - (b) guidelines for localized visibility and communication strategies to support partnership development and resource mobilization across diverse contexts;
 - (c) strategic guidance to support gradual transitions to combined and register-based censuses and to assess readiness to undertake the transition;
 - (d) specific guidance and tools to ensure more effective supply chain management, including timelines for engagement with the Supply Chain Management Unit;
 - (e) resources to strengthen data analysis and utilization through: (i) collaboration with United Nations resident coordinator offices and development partners; (ii) assessments of data-use bottlenecks; (iii) accessible data visualizations and thematic analyses; and (iv) establishment of multi-stakeholder data use forums and innovation labs to support census data application;
 - (f) operational standards for humanitarian settings, including: (i) protocols for methodological adjustments, minimum data standards, safety provisions, and contingency planning frameworks; (ii) clear investment criteria for support in volatile contexts, including sunset clauses, decision gates, and cost-effectiveness benchmarks; and (iii) guidance on alternative population estimation methods (e.g., model-based estimation, satellite imagery, small area estimation) in the absence of a census;
 - (g) quality assessment tools, including support for post-enumeration surveys, independent monitoring of field enumeration, and administrative reports on the conduct of censuses.

39. Develop strategic communication and advocacy plans and packages to help country offices support countries that are reluctant to undertake a census or allocate adequate resources to undertake a census, and to promote greater use of census data by Government, civil society and the private sector.

Recommendation 2. Transform the UNFPA organizational architecture for census support to ensure a more integrated, responsive and efficient approach to address evolving country needs.

Key actions:

40. Strengthen external coordination and coherence by advocating for broader membership in the International Committee on Census Coordination, based on a comprehensive mapping of actors involved in census support.
41. Strengthen internal coordination and coherence by developing updated terms of reference for the Inter-Divisional Working Group for Population Data Systems that provide for:
 - (a) regular meetings that enable linkages with strategic planning, inform adaptive programme management, and promote knowledge-sharing and learning;
 - (b) mechanisms to follow up on agreed actions to enhance accountability;
 - (c) specific meetings with headquarters business units responsible for operational and crosscutting support (e.g., procurement, human and financial resources, information technology, resource mobilization, communications, legal affairs) to discuss bottlenecks and actions to address them;
 - (d) specific meetings with chief technical advisers to ensure that discussions are grounded in practical, field-level census experiences.
42. Develop clear regional team-based approaches to plan and deliver support throughout the census round, ensuring effective and efficient use of existing capacities and resources within each region. These approaches should promote joint planning, and coordinated and flexible deployment of expertise, including horizontal support between country offices. They should also promote systematic consideration of country-specific factors, particularly language requirements and humanitarian or crisis contexts.

Recommendation 3. Build sustainable capacity in UNFPA personnel to strengthen long-term national statistical capacity, while developing expertise in emerging methodologies such as register-based census and systematic approaches to political engagement, including to promote greater use of census data.

Key actions:

43. Conduct and regularly update a capacity assessment for population data, demographic intelligence and adaptation to demographic change at the country level, with a focus on census to identify both capacity gaps and deployment needs. Link the initial assessment to the realignment of UNFPA country presence within the context of the Business Model Review.
44. Develop a structured capacity development programme for UNFPA staff, long-term consultants and partners to strengthen the capacity of country offices to provide effective and efficient census support. The programme should include:
 - (a) training for specialist staff on emerging areas (e.g., population register-based systems, satellite imagery, real-time processing) through strategic partnerships;
 - (b) Mandatory census 101 training course for all UNFPA personnel engaged in census support;
 - (c) integration of census awareness modules into the induction programme for all UNFPA staff, as well as leadership training for UNFPA country office senior management, including components on political economy and advocacy for census-taking;
 - (d) inclusion of dedicated content on census in United Nations Resident Coordinator training.
45. Establish a comprehensive framework to mobilize specialized technical expertise to fill capacity gaps by:
 - (a) expanding the roster of external consultants with expertise in population data, demographic intelligence and emerging technologies;

- (b) formalizing long-term agreements with private sector and academic institutions;
- (c) leveraging existing modalities for workforce mobility, such as secondments from national statistical offices and academia or detail assignments from other United Nations entities.

Recommendation 4. Create a dynamic knowledge ecosystem that systematically generates, captures, validates and shares census expertise and lessons learned from a technical, operational and political perspective to ensure institutional memory and continuous organizational learning.

Key actions:

46. Establish processes to identify, document and share technical, operational and political lessons from each UNFPA census engagement, and ensure that mandatory post-census reviews are conducted by country offices for all censuses and captured in the UNFPA knowledge portal.
 47. Launch a continuous series of global syntheses of lessons learned in collaboration with census partners, based on the analysis of mandatory post-census reviews, to directly strengthen the support capacity of UNFPA and partners at all levels.
 48. Launch a revitalized UNFPA census community of practice as a comprehensive and interactive platform covering all census phases and dimensions (technical, operational, political). The community should have the following features:
 - (a) guided document repository integrated into the UNFPA knowledge portal, including national census documents (e.g., census questionnaires, thematic analyses, post-enumeration surveys, administrative reports on the conduct of censuses);
 - (b) peer learning and exchange features with opportunities for the full and interactive engagement of community members;
 - (c) clear protocols and lines of accountability for generating, validating and integrating knowledge into the community in a systematic and timely manner;
 - (d) updated UNFPA Census Tracker with a clear user manual, roles and responsibilities, and mechanisms to ensure the timely contribution of all country offices and quality assurance of inputs;
 - (e) mechanisms and partnerships to capture external knowledge on censuses in a systematic manner.
 49. Explore opportunities and partnerships to develop a comprehensive external census knowledge platform that serves as a central repository of national census documents and data, providing practical reference materials to national statistical offices, other government partners and international organizations supporting censuses.
 50. Review all countries where the 2020 census round was postponed or disrupted and identify causes and potential UNFPA support for similar situations in the future, including high-level entry points for political engagement.
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