



Multi-stakeholder Partnerships in Global Affairs

Learnings from the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development in Times of Polycrisis

Policy and Practice Note

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Abstract

This article argues that coordinated and multilayered cross-sectoral collaboration is required to contribute to sustainable development and respond to the global polycrisis characterized by human-made destruction of the environment, climate change and globalization. Pandemics, regional wars, and banking crises not only create local suffering but increasingly have international consequences, threatening the progress made, be it regarding poverty, education, health, or human rights. The article outlines the potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships as inclusive mechanisms of collaboration in global affairs by exemplarily outlining learnings from the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). Despite the promising potential and contributions of PaRD, the article illustrates the need to overcome the principal problem of imbalanced power allocation in global affairs, as decisions at a global level are usually made by governments, with stakeholders from civil society being involved in pre-consultations but remaining without decision-making power.

Keywords

polycrisis – globalisation – global affairs – multi-stakeholder partnerships – religion – civil society – sustainable development – 2030 Agenda

1 Introduction

Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in South Africa in 2002, there seems to be consensus that multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) are important mechanisms of collaboration in global affairs, especially in times of polycrisis (Biermann et al. 2007). The 17th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), “Partnerships for the Goals”, specifically addresses strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising global partnership, since the 2030 Agenda calls for action by all countries worldwide (United Nations n.d.). To ensure that no one is left behind, this includes partnerships between governments, multilaterals, the private sector, and civil society. The 2030 Agenda specifically identifies MSPs as a key element in achieving the SDGs. It says:

Multi-stakeholder partnerships ...

17.16 Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries

17.17 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships. (United Nations n.d.)

Accordingly, multilateralism and MSPs have gained attention in global affairs (UNEP n.d.). In the German context of international development cooperation alone, over 45 MSPs are currently operational in all key sectors:

The substantial number of new MSPs launched over recent years also reflects a new and less hierarchical, but more integrative, understanding of the relationship between stakeholders from the private sector and government. Private sector stakeholders – both those with a focus on generating profits and those not-for-profit – are increasingly involved in formulating and implementing policy measures. (Partnerships 2030 2017)

There are many reasons why MSPs have gained importance in international development cooperation. Postmodernism seems to have increased, at least partially, the willingness to seek new forms of intersectional collaboration and transgress formerly separated spheres, also amongst governments. Today's global challenges, such as environmental destruction, pandemics, and banking crises, are multifaceted. Polycrises demand multiplex collaboration. Multiplex

in the present context means including all key stakeholders in the process of finding solutions to multilayered problems, including governmental, multilateral, academic, and civil society actors, and developing solutions inclusively from a variety of perspectives. The multiplicities of current global challenges demand a holistic and evidenced-based understanding of issues and way forward. They transcend the capacities and expertise of individual nations, organisations, and sectors (Stibbe and Prescott 2016). The following outline of the potentials and challenges of MSPs is based on concrete experiences over nearly a decade since the inception of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) in 2016. The paper also draws on the experiences of colleagues who have been working in other MSPs in the context of international development cooperation.

2 Added Value of Multi-stakeholder Partnerships

The following key added values can be derived from successful MSPs:

1. **Trust:** Developing and maintaining trust is fundamental for successful collaboration and creating impact. MSPs provide conducive frameworks to build trust among stakeholders by creating room for long-term engagement based on personal exchanges. Stakeholders who are otherwise sceptical of each other get recurrent opportunities to meet and overcome reservations and possible prejudices. A prerequisite for this is honest and transparent communication and decision-making, developing a common language and opportunities to commit to shared goals. Once trust has been built, it ultimately leads to greater commitment and ownership among stakeholders (Khane 2017).
2. **Access:** Stakeholders who otherwise do not collaborate systematically with each other get the opportunity to access a wide range of views, entities, and sectors. This can be especially valuable for smaller NGOs which would otherwise have neither the capacities nor the knowledge of how to approach governments. Governments on the other hand can collaborate with diverse civil society actors in a coordinated way and can draw on the knowledge and ideas embodied in these stakeholders for policymaking and when developing new initiatives and programmes.
3. **Ownership:** Including stakeholders representing different perspectives and interests and involving affected communities enhances the overall ownership as well as the legitimacy and acceptance of proposed solutions, as they reflect a broad range of voices and concerns from policy to the grassroots level. This is especially true when partnerships operate

based on principles of collaborative governance on an equal level, where decision-making involves transparency and consensus-building as well as shared responsibility, and accountability among stakeholders.

4. **Impact:** By pooling human and financial resources, networks, technical expertise, and experiences, and by providing a conducive environment for learning and innovation, MSPs offer avenues for creating synergies and leveraging collective action beyond established hierarchies and protocols. It also allows existing impact to be amplified and scaled up in a coordinated way.
5. **Efficiency:** MSPs enable stakeholders to retrieve and share information without much effort. By facilitating the exchange and dissemination of promising practices but also failures at the policy and operational level, MSPs can foster adaptive solutions and improve the effectiveness of interventions over time. They create room to identify the potential to scale up the impact by replicating successful approaches and thus accelerating progress towards sustainable development. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online conferencing tools have created easy, quick, and cost-efficient opportunities for networking, dialogue, and consultations while keeping the CO₂ footprint low.
6. **Flexibility:** MSPs are often established as voluntary undertakings operating under their own principles and pursuing a common vision and mission. Compared to more regulated processes of governments, they can act in creative and flexible ways to achieve specific goals in a short time span.
7. **Localisation:** The need of the hour is to better understand the intertwining of the local and the global and vice versa. Local contexts and dynamics ought to be understood first before context-sensitive responses can be developed which are accepted by the people, including traditional authorities, which usually enjoy a high level of trust and authority due to their long-standing local rooting. Localisation is by no means a one-way process. MSPs facilitate spaces where the dialogue between local and global is not only created but maintained over time. Drawing on local experiences and ideas, MSPs support attention being placed on actual needs and the adaptation of successful practices from other regions to specific regional needs. When local perspectives and experiences are heard by governments and multilateral entities, more inclusive decisions can be taken, also at the global level.
8. **Visibility:** The pooling of resources and the possibility of getting the support of a secretariat that supports the coordination of an MSP enables the impact to be showcased in a coordinated way at a global level, for

instance through a common website, newsletters, and publications. This is particularly helpful for smaller NGOs contributing to the SDGs which do not have the bandwidth and expertise to demonstrate their impact at an international level. This valorises the work of local stakeholders and increases opportunities not only to be visible but also to be heard and included in consultations when new policies and programmes are developed. This also increases the opportunities for stakeholders to initiate new collaborations through joint projects that can catalyse long-term partnerships.

3 Challenges of Multi-stakeholder Partnerships

While MSPs offer much potential, they also face various challenges which are amplified by an increasingly dynamic world, where political priorities and attention keep shifting quickly:

1. **Power:** Multi-stakeholder partnerships involve actors with varying levels of influence and resources. Power imbalances can undermine equal participation and inclusive decision-making. Stronger actors, especially key funders of MSPs, may dominate discourses and shape outcomes in their favour, marginalising the perspectives and interests of less powerful stakeholders. Therefore, MSPs need to develop a governance structure which ensures a fair distribution of decision-making power among all stakeholders.
2. **Priorities:** Stakeholders have divergent interests, resources, and approaches. Balancing these differences and creating overarching goals and priorities with which all stakeholders can identify demands developing a common understanding and inclusive consultations. It is especially important that solutions and policies that impact the local level are developed in consultation with local stakeholders.
3. **Coordination:** Aligning efforts among diverse stakeholders is much more complex and resource-intensive than in the case of single and more homogeneous entities. MSPs are sometimes based on elaborate coordination systems which need time and patience. Decision-making might be unwieldy, but chances are high that decisions are not based on one single perspective or wrong assessments since MSPs include actors with different levels of information, understanding, structures, decision-making processes, timelines, and resource allocation. Achieving coordination and ensuring effective collaboration requires a professional

and well-equipped coordination mechanism, for instance through a secretariat which receives the required staffing, funding, and infrastructure to work on a long-term basis.

4. **Accountability:** Multi-stakeholder partnerships often operate in a complex governance landscape where accountability but also monitoring mechanisms and capabilities are not evenly distributed. Without a robust monitoring and accountability mechanism, an honest and self-critical reflection on the progress made is difficult. Developing an inclusive strategy process which delivers strategic planning equipped with clear priorities, responsibilities, and indicators measuring progress towards the commonly agreed goals demands stamina and sufficient human and financial resources.
5. **Commitment:** MSPs often operate over extended periods. Maintaining engagement and onboarding new stakeholders is challenging. It is a common experience among MSPs that there is a smaller number of highly engaged stakeholders at the centre of the partnership and many less active members at the periphery. Ensuring ongoing commitment requires stakeholders with high intrinsic motivation to work towards the agreed goals, since MSPs usually have no formal enforcement mechanisms for active participation. As stakeholders have varying levels of commitment and workloads, and civil society organisations often rely heavily on volunteers, creating a sense of belonging and identification with the higher purpose of the partnership and realistic chances of bringing about the envisioned change is key. This can be achieved through opportunities for virtual but also personal exchanges, especially to collaboratively develop work plans and to network, showcase progress, and learn through regular gatherings of all key stakeholders.
6. **Competition:** It is in the very nature of MSPs to be inclusive, complement the strengths of stakeholders, and avoid duplication of efforts and structures. Resistance, especially from established actors who prioritise their own vested interests over the wider success of the relevant thematic area or sector, can create friction and conflicts of loyalty and weaken partnerships. This is especially true when relatively new partnerships work towards more inclusive and globally coordinated approaches and aim to overcome established power relations, parallel structures, and inefficient working modalities.
7. **Sustainability:** The financing of partnerships which may not even be legal entities remains a challenge, especially if key funders withdraw their monetary or in-kind support. The diversification of funding sources from an early stage is key. Depending on the thematic topic, funding by

governments may be complemented by foundations or membership fees. Governments in particular experience frequent rotations of staff and fluctuations in responsibilities and priorities. When an MSP is dependent on the personal engagement of individual officers but has no thematic structural rooting in a ministry or subordinate agency, there is a risk of losing long-term political backing and financial support. Ensuring a structural rooting beyond the personal commitments of individuals among the involved main funders is therefore one key factor for continued resource allocation and sustainability.

8. **Impact:** Measuring impact is a principal challenge for all interventions and needs additional resources and expertise. The OECD/DAC core evaluation criteria include the following points: Relevance – Is the intervention doing the right things? Coherence – How well does the intervention fit? Effectiveness – Is the intervention achieving its objectives? Efficiency – How well are resources being used? Impact – What difference does the intervention make? Sustainability – Will the benefits last? (OECD 2021). Measuring the impact of an MSP has specific challenges. A successful MSP needs to demonstrate that the achieved impact would not have been possible without the partnership itself. Has more been achieved together by the MSP than individual stakeholders would have accomplished? For a holistic assessment, one also needs to keep in mind the impacts on involved individuals at a cognitive level. This is true for instance when encounters in a partnership lead to transformation in thinking and acting. When stakeholders inform their networks about their positive experiences in the MSP, they can contribute to the questioning of established perceptions, procedures, and behaviour, and help in developing a greater willingness for new and more inclusive approaches and policies (Partnerships 2030 2018).

Addressing these challenges consciously from the very beginning of an MSP is helpful as they are faced overarchingly and independently from the specific subject matter, as experience over the last decade indicates. Let us now turn to a concrete example of an MSP in the context of religious engagement in global affairs.

4 Religion Matters!

Secularisation theory has dominated political discourses in many countries in recent times. Secularisation assumes that religion is becoming less significant or even irrelevant in so-called developed societies. This assumption

is underpinned by the decline in formal membership especially to Christian churches in many parts of Western Europe in the last decades. However, surveys show that around four out of five people worldwide still affiliate themselves with a religion and that their number is growing (Pew Research Center 2018; Pew Research Center 2022; Ipsos 2023). Even in countries which have progressed substantially in terms of economic development, including India, Indonesia, or Arabic countries like the United Arab Emirates, most of the population still affiliates to a religion.

Religion does not only provide a sense of belonging. Religion offers orientation at the individual and collective level, inspires trust in a higher divine power, encourages ethical reflection and behavioural change, and helps build resilience in times of suffering. It is also one of the most powerful inspirations for people to engage in voluntary work, social welfare, and development cooperation.¹ Religious actors provide locally rooted practices of mediation and informal justice as well as educational, social, and health services, also in times of crisis and in areas where the state reaches its limits. Furthermore, religious actors amplify the voices of vulnerable and marginalised groups and make human rights violations public.

5 Bringing a Political Strategy to Life: the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)

Recognising not only the overarching spiritual and ethical importance of religion in many countries but also the fact that many contributions to the SDGs are being made by religious actors, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) developed the strategy “Religions as Partners in Development Cooperation” (BMZ 2016). It is based on two main convictions:

- 1) The very fact that religion and faith are so influential in BMZ partner countries begs for a professional approach and taking the perspectives and contributions of religious actors seriously in international development cooperation.
- 2) Only by joining forces with civil society, and this includes religious actors since they are one of the strongest pillars of civil society, can the SDGs be achieved. As a result of this new and more inclusive approach, the BMZ commissioned the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale

1 It is beyond the scope of this article to reflect on the ambiguities of religious actors, especially the misuse of religion for political, monetary, colonial, and missionary purposes.

Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, its implementing agency for international cooperation, to establish a Programme on Religion for Sustainable Development at the end of 2015. Based on talks with international partners, the need for global coordination in the field was soon identified. Together with other governments, a unique global alliance was created in 2016: the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). Its Secretariat has since been attached to the Programme on Religion for Sustainable Development (GIZ 2023).

PaRD aims to provide a safe space for continued dialogue, learning, and collaboration between governments, multilateral entities, academia as well as religious, traditional, indigenous, and other civil society actors to better inform policy and practices in achieving the SDGs. Building on the diversity of religious and interfaith actors in the world, PaRD has more than 170 members from over 40 countries today, including several governments (including Canada, Denmark, Indonesia, and the USA), multilateral organisations (e.g. the African Union), academic institutions, and over 120 civil society organisations, particularly those that are faith-based. There is also a regular exchange with UN agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Through PaRD, existing contributions to the SDGs by members are bundled, amplified, and showcased at a global level through news articles, social media, videos, publications, and conferences. Members develop new networks and cooperation and organise expert workshops and consultations. Interdisciplinary workstreams led by experts from key constituencies offer a conducive framework to work intersectionally on concrete matters in the current priority areas: health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), water, environmental protection and climate action (SDGs 6, 13, 14, 15), sustaining peace (SDG 16), food security (SDG 2), localisation as well as freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), which is regarded as a fundamental principle of human rights and a precondition for sustainable development (PaRD n.d.-c). Global challenges such as pandemics and emerging issues like artificial intelligence or online safety with increasing incidents of hate speech, which need immediate attention, are addressed through taskforces (PaRD n.d.-b; PaRD n.d.-c; PaRD 2022a; PaRD 2022g; PaRD 2020; PaRD n.d.-a; PaRD 2022e; PaRD 2022d; PaRD 2022f).

6 Selected Achievements of PaRD

The following selected examples highlight concrete contributions of religious and faith actors through the framework of PaRD.

1. **Visibility:** The contributions of religious actors to the SDGs were made visible in 2022 among others at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the Geneva Peace Week, regional forums on religion and COVID-19 in southern Africa, the World Population Conference, World Water Week, World Food Day, and the G20 Interfaith Forum.

Another example is the collaboration with the International Development Law Organization on a multi-religious-stakeholder consultation on customary and informal justice. The aim is to build consensus on the evidence base and develop key recommendations for policymakers and practitioners which include the perspectives of faith and traditional actors. The outcomes shall be presented at a relevant UN conference.

A current example which made the contributions of religious actors visible at the world level is the first ever Faith Pavilion at a UN Climate Change Conference, which was organised jointly by the Muslim Council of Elders, the Faith for Earth Coalition of UNEP, the PaRD Secretariat, and other stakeholders. According to the Greenhouse Agency, a London-based PR firm, the Faith Pavilion at COP28 gained widespread recognition in the media, with over 4,000 articles mentioning it. Leading media outlets such as AFP, *Politico* and *The New York Times* reported on the Faith Pavilion. Euronews, which claims to reach around 145 million people every month, published an op-ed which was co-authored by the author of this article (PaRD 2023a; PaRD 2023b).

2. **Faith-sensitive guidelines:** PaRD members developed the publication *Faith-Sensitive Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) to Foster Resilience in Children on the Move* (PaRD et al. 2021). Its recommendations aim to mainstream the inclusion of faith-sensitive approaches to support the psychosocial well-being of children on the move. Faith-sensitive MHPSS approaches can restore connections and relationships among children and adults and enhance a child's sense of belonging and resilience capacity. MHPSS needs to be informed and inspired by faith, as children often carry with them religious and spiritual beliefs and traditions from their families and communities of origin. These beliefs and traditions are part of children's identity and can contribute to their sense of purpose, belonging, and, ultimately, their resilience. This work exemplifies the added value of PaRD being an MSP. Experts from civil society, including religious organisations, academia, governments (e.g. Mexico, Germany), multilaterals (e.g. UNICEF, UNDP), and quasigovernmental organisations like the United States Institute of Peace, contributed their knowledge and experiences, and jointly developed recommendations. PaRD members in turn used the recommendations to improve policies in their subsequent countries and regions.

3. **Strengthen peace and inclusion:** Projects initiated through PaRD have created spaces to strengthen peace and social cohesion, and the inclusion of women and youth. In Nigeria and Pakistan, PaRD members have been working against the misuse of religion by extremists and bringing together people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds since 2022. In Kenya, interfaith dialogue forums have brought together youth from villages and government officials to work together to prevent extremism and combat stereotypes that non-Muslims hold about Muslims.
4. **Women as agents of change:** Faith-inspired members of PaRD together with the German, Canadian, and Danish governments and UNEP showcase annually the contributions of religious women as agents of change, including in the field of environmental protection during UN Commissions on the Status of Women (PaRD 2020).
5. **Fostering freedom of religion or belief:** PaRD members, including the USA and Denmark, and leading experts from religious organisations and academia organised an exchange at Wilton Park in 2022 on understanding the linkages between FoRB and the SDGs. A common understanding of the subject could be reached by acknowledging that fostering peace and security necessitates valuing individuals' dignity and acceptance irrespective of religion and belief. Recognising the potential of FoRB to bridge gaps between religious and secular actors and foster collaboration grounded in shared human rights and social responsibility was regarded as equally important. Probably the most important common insight the participants came to was understanding that strengthening FoRB means increasing the likelihood of achieving the SDGs. This is because religious actors can only work at full capacity when they are not restricted in their way of life and in providing social services but find a conducive political and societal framework. Drawing upon these premises, the first policy recommendations were developed and brought into the high-level International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London (PaRD 2022b) and considered in the German *Federal Government's Third Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief* (BMZ 2023).

7 Learnings from PaRD

The following learnings could be derived since the inception of PaRD:

Bridging barriers: PaRD exemplifies interdisciplinary collaboration on and the development of a common understanding of specific matters between actors from different cultural, religious, linguistic, political, and

societal backgrounds. This helps in dismantling prejudices and bridging barriers between secular and religious actors (see §2.1, 2.2).

Harnessing the convening power of civil society in decision-making: Related to the point of “access” and “ownership” of MSPs, it remains challenging to ensure that the positive potential of religious actors is more systematically included by decision makers. There is a general problem concerned here, as the COPs exemplify. A Conference of the Parties (COP) refers to a committee tasked to discuss and adopt an international treaty. The term COP however has become especially popular in association with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Also here, decisions are solely made by member states (usually at ministerial level). All those from civil society who provided recommendations and were involved in pre-consultations usually have no say when it comes to decision-making. Taking MSPs seriously means not only listening to them but using their convening power and including them in decision-making (see §2.2, 2.3).

Collaboration on an equal level: Based on internal learnings since its inception, PaRD has developed a governance structure which ensures that all key constituencies are represented in the Steering Board, where key decisions are taken consensually. Initially, PaRD distinguished members from partners. Member seats were reserved for governments and partner seats for NGOs. Civil society stakeholders perceived this as a massive imbalance. After intensive debates, the difference between members and partners was dissolved. Since then, the Steering Board has consisted of three representatives from governments, three from multilateral entities, six from faith-based or other civil society organisations, one from academia, and *ex officio* the Head of PaRD Secretariat. This distribution ensures a strong representation by all key stakeholders. Since the reform, voices criticising an uneven distribution of power have rarely been heard (see §3.1).

Diversity through inclusivity: In the past three years, PaRD has welcomed more than 40 new members. The partnership has been joined by organisations from previously unrepresented religions and traditions, including Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs, but also Indigenous and interfaith organisations.

An inclusive and externally moderated process was initiated to develop a five-year strategy, which was consensually adopted in 2021 (PaRD 2021). Its emphasis on increasing diversity within the membership is mirrored in the conceptualisation of the traditional Annual Forums on Religion and Sustainable Development. PaRD's Annual Forums have established themselves as one of the key global gatherings in the field, which enables members and other relevant stakeholders to network and make their contributions to the SDGs visible. In November 2022, one of the largest and most diverse PaRD Annual

Forums was held in Indonesia with over 160 participants – 41 per cent of whom were women – from 35 countries. For the first time in PaRD, representatives of Indigenous communities were actively involved in discussions, especially on environmental protection. The joining of the largest Muslim country in the world, the Republic of Indonesia, just after the Annual Forum is regarded as a significant success since it is the first government from Asia to become a PaRD member (PaRD 2022c, PaRD 2023c). The Annual Forum 2024 in Brasilia was co-organised with the G20 Interfaith Forum and brought together more than 350 participants from all over the globe (see §2.3, 2.5, 2.7).

Complementarity and mutual learning: Rather than creating competition, PaRD has been striving to complement the strengths of key stakeholders. This resulted in attempts to reduce duplications and inefficiencies, and to foster closer collaboration with existing initiatives like the Faith for Earth Coalition from UNEP, G20 Interfaith Forum, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities, Religions for Peace, and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (see §2.5, 3.1, 3.2).

8 Outlook

With a view on the potential that the partnership discussed here as an example holds, and without neglecting the challenges faced, it can be argued that the investment of time and resources dedicated over the past years has created an added value for members and partners of the MSP. However, there are areas where PaRD could play a more active and significant role in global affairs, for instance in mediation and reconciliation (after conflicts and wars), in creating conducive spaces to nourish unifying values while respecting diversity, and in sharing inclusive methods of collaboration across sectors and age groups. PaRD could also play a role in helping to develop much needed alternative paradigms and models to measure development and prosperity. A vision that PaRD could support is the establishment of a globally binding holistic well-being index. Such an index could be based on scientific evidence complemented by spiritual wisdom which acknowledges a cyclical and interdependent understanding of life, and regards well-being as the core indicator for prosperity and development, and not merely income or linear economic growth based on the exploitation of Mother Earth, humans, and animals (Singh 2022; Singh n.d.)

It is certainly desirable to complement the outlined initial learnings with independent interdisciplinary quantitative and qualitative research and learn more systematically from the experiences of MSPs. Nonetheless, the discussed points indicate that such partnerships hold relevant potential as inclusive and

collaborative alliances for sustainable global progress in an interconnected world facing multifaceted crises. However, achieving true impact requires a shift towards balanced power-sharing, enabling all stakeholders, including civil society, to participate more actively in decision-making.

Issue and Editors

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