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# Who chooses what, when? International development financing and spaces for participation

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The DeCID project aims to develop a new approach for the participatory design of social infrastructure for children in urban areas affected by displacement. In partnership with humanitarian actors, local communities, municipalities and academics, the DeCID team developed a practical handbook to support those involved in the co-design. DeCID is a project led by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (UCL) and CatalyticAction, and funded by UKRI through the Global Challenges Research Fund.

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## ABSTRACT

### Who chooses what, when? International development financing and spaces for participation

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“Participation” is a well-established, mainstream concept in the international development industry, and participatory techniques are used widely by different types of actors. Research about participation in development – and in the Global South more generally – has tended to focus on either the relationship between development practitioners and their intended beneficiaries or the incorporation of citizen participation in municipal budgeting. A comparatively recent phenomenon, participatory grantmaking, offers an opportunity to look at participation at the intersection of these two threads: It involves relationships between people in wealthy and poor countries, and it deals directly with decision-making about funding. Drawing on the work of Andrea Cornwall, this paper argues that the traditional approaches to participation used by an international nongovernment organization largely fail to create spaces that can effect transformative social change, while participatory grantmaking, by contrast, creates spaces in which transformation is possible for both donors and recipients of funding. Mainstream development actors who have “empowerment” and “transformation” as stated goals or values could learn from participatory grantmaking’s theory and practice.



# 01

## INTRODUCTION

Twenty years after the publication of Cooke and Kothari's *Participation as Tyranny*, "participation" is a thoroughly mainstream concept in the international development industry. Notwithstanding the rich critical literature that exists around participation, the concept is as slippery as ever, able to serve as a "boundary object" (Green 2010) that can mean different things to different actors simultaneously, depending on their values and purposes (Cornwall 2008). One growing use of the word is in the concept of "participatory grantmaking," a trend in some philanthropic and foundation circles in which donors are ceding some or all decision-making power over grant funds to the people and institutions who receive those grants (Gibson 2017). Participatory grantmaking has roots in techniques of deliberative democracy that have been used by community organizers for decades (ibid.), and its incarnation as an increasingly mainstream idea in international philanthropy owes much to feminist activists. The Dutch feminist funder Mama Cash was created in 1983 and became the template for "women's funds" that began to spring up around the world in subsequent decades (Mooza and Kinwili 2015). Younger groups like FRIDA Young Feminist Fund and the Red Umbrella Fund, which is led by and works for sex workers, are at the forefront of participatory grantmaking practice today. Over the past several years, large traditional funders like Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation have begun to take an active interest in participatory grantmaking, suggesting that it may be entering the international philanthropic mainstream (Gibson 2018).

Participatory grantmaking stands in contrast to more conventional approaches to participation in international development, wherein high-level decisions about funding – with respect to technical approaches, timelines, and goals, for example – are made by institutional managers. Participation by intended beneficiaries in different parts of a project cycle may inform these decisions and may play a role in monitoring and evaluating projects. But beneficiaries' decision-making power is generally limited to a narrow range of choices laid out by whomever is implementing a development project.

Studies of participation in developing countries have generally followed two tracks. The first, dating back to at least the 1970s, considers the interactions between development practitioners – the staff of nongovernmental organizations, aid contractors, donor agencies, and national and local government officials – and the people who are supposed to benefit from development projects. The second considers "participatory budgeting," participation by citizens in how money is allocated and spent by municipal governments, especially as pioneered in Brazil (Cabannes 2004). Both schools argue forcefully for greater participation in funding decisions across a variety of contexts and scales, albeit with important caveats. Comparatively little attention

has been paid to what might be seen as the intersection of these two tracks: participation in decisions about how money – the main resource development projects bring to bear – is allocated and spent in the international development industry. The growth of participatory grantmaking as a model for transnational funding of development and social activism offers an opportunity to examine this nexus and to reassess and perhaps change mainstream development practice. In turn, understanding the dynamics of participation in funding decision-making is critical to addressing the power imbalances that make development both needed and problematic in the first place.

As the feminist activist Lydia Alpízar has written, “collective change processes for long-term social transformation ... cannot be built without resources” and “all those who proclaim their concern with advancing a more just, equitable, and sustainable world, and particularly those who are currently advocating ‘investing in women and girls,’ have a responsibility to resource women’s rights organizing in appropriate ways and with serious money” (quoted in Arutyunova and Clark 2013). While she was referring specifically to women’s rights and gender equality, the point is generalizable to any effort to effect social transformation that addresses deeply rooted structures of power and oppression. Michael Edwards makes a related point when he writes, “In market-based societies ‘money talks,’ but it rarely speaks the language of democracy and social justice. ... And that means that different ways of raising and spending money pose questions that are not simply technical in nature but also political – questions that must be integrated into the search for social change so that modes of funding are able to challenge pre-existing inequalities instead of reproducing them, as philanthropy and foreign aid have tended to do to date” (Edwards 2013, 5). The international development industry privileges the language of the market at the expense of other types of funding, which in turn privileges organizations willing and able to speak that language and to execute the kinds of programs that fit within market logics (ibid.).

Mosse (2011) takes this a step further, arguing that the international development industry contributes to “neoliberal institutional policy-making,” which involves the upward transfer of “rule making and policy framing from poor country governments to the international stage, international agencies, private organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or companies; and the delegation downwards of risk to ‘responsibilized’ regions, localities, communities, and ultimately individuals” (ibid., 4). Mosse also argues that “extraordinary power is invested in ‘global’ policy ideas, models or frameworks that will travel and effect economic, social, and (within a ‘governance agenda’) political transformation across the globe” (ibid., 3). In much of the Global South, international actors such as the United Nations and large nongovernmental organizations, which draw on these global ideas and frameworks, have major influence over the way policies and practices are shaped at the national and subnational levels.

With this in mind, the central question this paper seeks to address is: How does participation in decisions over how money in development is allocated and spent affect the potential of development initiatives to effect transformative social change? Specifically, how do more

conventional approaches to participation in development, in which ultimate control over resources is maintained by donors or their intermediaries, compare with approaches such as participatory grantmaking, in which participation extends to vesting decision-making power in the hands of the people to whom funding is meant to be distributed? I will argue that participation in funding decisions substantially increases the potential for effecting transformative change that impacts not only the recipient of the funding but also the donor. That is, such participation changes – in a bounded and limited but still meaningful way – the power dynamic between funders and recipients. NGOs and private philanthropies, by embracing greater participation in this critical way, can help create conditions wherein the poor and marginalized play a greater role in defining knowledge about the conditions they face at the local, national, and international levels (Mosse 2011).

Following the introduction, this paper has three main sections. The first is a review of literature about participation in international development and in governance initiatives in the South, with a particular focus on power relations.<sup>1</sup> The literature review introduces the main analytical framework for the paper: Cornwall's concept of "spaces of participation" as aligned along axes of durability and intent (Cornwall 2002). The second consists of two brief case studies. One is of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program, Pakistan (AKRSP), which has espoused what I would call a conventional approach to participation within international development. The other is of FRIDA Young Feminist Fund, through which young feminist activists from the South directly control which organizations and activists will receive funds in a given year. Through the case studies, I will compare with what purpose and power these actors use participation, looking specifically at the literal and metaphorical spaces they create, and evaluate the degree to which their approaches have or could contribute toward transformative change. Finally, the paper concludes with some reflections on how international development actors who have not been drawn to increased participation in funding decisions might be convinced to consider it.

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## Different ways of raising and spending money pose questions that are not simply technical in nature but also political.

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<sup>1</sup> I will follow Kabeer's usage of "South" and "West" as "short-hand for historically specific forms of experience": respectively, that of states that have been "impacted by the colonial experience" and that of Europe and North America (Kabeer, Citizenship and the boundaries of the acknowledged community: identity, affiliation, and exclusion 2002).

# 02

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Development: big-D and little-d

Development is both an “immanent, unintentional process” of social or economic change and an “intentional practice” (Cowen and Shenton 1998, 50), a dichotomy which Cowen and Shenton, among others, refer to as “little-d” and “big-D” development (Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington 2007, Hart 2001). As an intentional practice, “big-D” development traces its roots to the birth of industrial capitalism, when “the unleashing of markets for labor, land, and money ... wreak[ed] profound havoc and generate[d] countertendencies and demands for intervention and social protection” (Hart 2001, 650). As capitalism was developing in the West, it was being fuelled by colonialism in the South. Colonial administrators in Africa, Asia, and Latin America began imposing ideas of development as economic modernization and the construction of certain forms of social and political organization on colonized peoples (Midgley 2013). As colonies began to achieve independence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, an industry arose to continue the work of development that had begun during the colonial period (Cowen and Shenton 1998). For the purposes of this paper, development forms “the project of intervention in the ‘third world’ that emerged in a context of decolonization and the cold war,” which rich countries built alongside the exploitation of colonies and, later, the states that succeeded colonies after state colonialism subsided in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Hart 2001, 650). The international development industry is the constellation of organizations – governmental, multilateral, and nongovernmental – whose primary purpose is to carry out this “project of intervention.”

The goals, strategies, and techniques avowed and used within this industry have varied substantially over time. They have also varied across different types of practitioners. Sometimes they have been focused on driving economic growth, sometimes on basic material well-being, sometimes on ideas of human freedom, and sometimes, solidarity. Despite these differences, actors within the industry have in common their main activity or technique: the transfer of resources from Western to Southern countries. These resources can take different forms, including grants-in-aid, technical knowledge, political support, and loans<sup>2</sup>. Note that defined as it has been here, the international development industry does not include person-to-person resource

<sup>2</sup> The lending aspect of this industry arguably contradicts the other forms of resource transfer in that a loan (if repaid) ultimately results in a transfer of resources away from the recipient; however, I would argue that loans still fit the definition of “big-D” development because they are meant to catalyze economic growth and social development and are considered to be supportive resource transfers within the logic of major industry actors such as the World Bank (see, e.g., (World Bank 2020)).

transfers such as remittances, foreign investments whose primary aim is to turn a profit, or the work of organizations whose primary purpose is religious, such as churches.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it includes only those organizations whose main goal is “big-D” development as such.

International development industry actors can be grouped roughly into five categories:

- Bilateral government donor agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Swiss Development Cooperation
- Multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank
- Private companies that serve as vectors for funds provided by bilateral donors, such as Adam Smith International and Chemonics
- Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee, which often serve as vectors for bilateral and multilateral donor funds but may also have their own financial resources to transfer
- Private philanthropic organizations, such as the Ford Foundation and Gates Foundation

This paper focuses on two of these organizational types, NGOs and foundations, which share the key characteristics of being independent of direct government control (although both are dependent on favourable government tax policies, and many of the former are dependent financially on government agencies) and of being explicitly not-for-profit. As such, they are at least theoretically free from the need to align directly with government policies or to orient themselves around delivering a financial return to shareholders.

Unlike bilateral donor agencies, NGOs and foundations are not accountable to elected bodies such as parliaments, which may control purse strings without having the time or inclination to develop a deep understanding of international development strategies or techniques (Eyben 2010).

The paper will concentrate on grants-in-aid to poor people in the South, whether direct (as in cash disbursements) or indirect (as in paying for services or the construction of infrastructure), rather than loans, equity investments, technical exchanges, or other types of transfers.

<sup>3</sup> Development industry actors, in my definition, may have a religious affiliation or be based on religious values without having overt proselytizing or religious services as key parts of their mission. World Vision, Tearfund, Lutheran World Relief, and Islamic Relief are just a few among many examples of this type.

## 2.2. Participation in the international development industry

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, critics began to point out that the strategies and techniques of the international development industry were not having the positive impact on the poor that proponents had suggested they would (see, e.g., Crosswell 1978, Seers 1979). One major strain of criticism was that development, as it had been practiced since the end of the colonial period, paid insufficient attention to the actual wants and needs of the people it was meant to serve. In other words, to that point, the industry had been too top-down, led by bureaucrats in the capitals of rich and poor countries alike with little sense of the lived reality of poor people. In that sense, it replicated the relations of power, often implemented through the control of knowledge, through which elites maintained their dominance over poor and marginalized groups (Midgley 2011). This recognition led to a surge in interest in “participatory” approaches to development, especially with respect to knowledge production. For example, the creation of the Rapid Rural Appraisal technique in the 1980s used a variety of open-ended techniques, such as transect walks, diagramming, and sketched maps, to gather knowledge about a given place or population *with* the people who lived there. This was quite different from previous survey techniques for extracting data (Chambers 1994).

Like development itself, participation as a technique dates back to colonial times, when administrators used community-level projects to mollify colonial subjects (Cornwall 2008). But in the 1970s, practitioners such as Robert Chambers began to advocate for development work that centered the knowledge of “local” people, that is, those who lived in the (primarily rural) places where development projects were being carried out (Chambers and Gujit 2011). The idea of participation as a way to improve development work spread rapidly and by the 1990s was ubiquitous in the development industry (Cornwall 2011).

However, the participatory turn associated with Chambers and others in the 1970s and 1980s is not only situated in the colonialist tradition. It borrowed heavily from the adult education theory and practice of Paulo Freire in Brazil (Freire 2005), as well as the techniques of participatory action research pioneered by the Colombian Orlando Fals Borda (Fals Borda 2006). These two approaches to participation share characteristics identified by Hickey and Mohan (2005) as critical to the success of participation in development: They are “pursued as *part of a wider radical political project ... and they seek to engage with development as an underlying process of social change* rather than in the form of discrete technocratic interventions” (emphasis added). Freire went so far as to situate his praxis within a “revolutionary” struggle (Freire 2005, 75).

But the 1980s also saw the rise of neoliberalism, an ideology that embraces the supremacy of private markets and a concept of citizenship based around the idea of citizens as consumers (Kabeer 2005, Fontenelle and Pozzebon 2018). As participation came to be

embraced by neoliberal actors such as the World Bank, it lost much of its radical edge. Large bilateral and multilateral development agencies adopted participation as a way to legitimate their work: By consulting people about what they wanted, agencies could confidently state that they were serving needs voiced by the poor. Participation was also seen as a way to increase efficiency in the use of development funds, by, for example, counting participation by beneficiaries in project execution as “cost share.” It was also believed to increase the likelihood that project investments would be sustained, by allowing “people a voice in the character of the project” and thereby lessening the danger that a project would be abandoned (White 2011, 59-60, emphasis in original). Proponents argued that “the more people are involved in decision-making for a project, the more the community” was driving it (Kyamusugulwa 2013).

The retreat of the state from the provision of services in many post-colonial countries combined with the embrace of “local knowledge” by large development funders led to a new need for private intermediaries who could operate “closer” to development beneficiaries than could high-level government bureaucrats. NGOs began to fill the gap, and the number and reach of NGOs exploded throughout the 1980s.

However, over this same period, critics began to argue that participation was being used to help maintain the neoliberal status quo, which enforced the exploitation and oppression of poor people in order to promote a narrow vision of economic growth and stability. Pablo Alejandro Leal wrote that the rise of participation in development was promoted as a way to put a “human face” on the damaging structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Leal 2011).

The apogee of participatory-development critiques may be Cooke and Kothari’s *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, published in 2001. Building on the work of previous scholars and practitioners, they argued that participation as it was being practiced in the mainstream development industry relied on simplistic assumptions about why people participate and labelled people who didn’t want to participate “irresponsible”; risked turning grassroots organizations into rubber-stampers for investments that would have happened even with local opposition; maintained exploitation and exclusion of marginalized people; and, through its “cleaning up” of local knowledge, served to erase challenges to the status quo (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

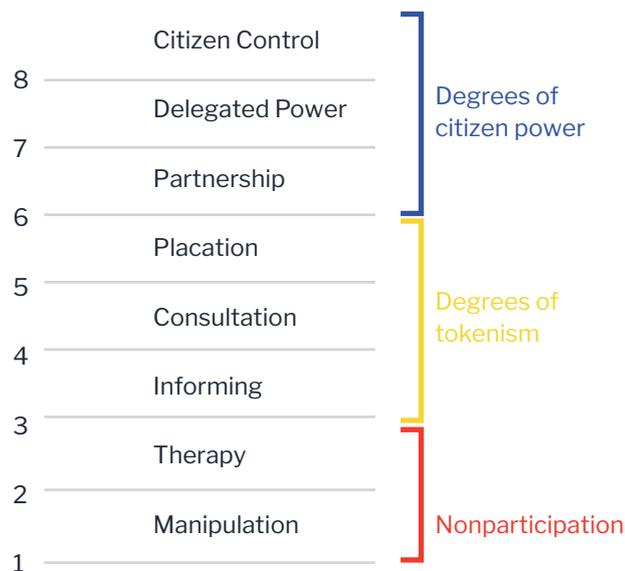
Cornwall (2008) writes that “participation ... constitutes a terrain of contestation, in which relations of power between different actors, each with their own ‘projects,’ shape and reshape the boundaries of action.” Whether intentionally or not, participation always involves political choices (Leal 2011). What all the critiques shared was a view that participation, as widely practiced in the development industry during these decades, served to de-center power, depoliticize development, and thereby preclude the possibility of genuine intentional social transformation.

### 2.3. Analyzing participation

As participatory techniques, such as rapid rural appraisal, came into common practice in the development industry during the 1970s and 1980s, scholars began to look at participation through a variety of analytical lenses as a way to examine power relations and the transformative potential – or lack thereof – of different kinds of interventions and programs. An early and influential such lens was Arnstein’s (1969) “ladder of citizen participation,” in which various forms of participation are ranked according to the level of influence citizens have over determining government policy or action. Subsequent analyses of participation within the international development industry often followed Arnstein’s normative idea of ranking types of participation in terms of how likely they are to shift power toward the relatively less powerful, such as White’s (2011) grouping of participatory approaches into forms she labelled nominal, instrumental, representative, and transformative.

In Arnstein’s terms, Leal’s claim that participation gives a “human face” to damaging practices means that participation in development failed to rise above the level of “placation” and fell short of a genuine transfer of power. Leal argues that the participatory approaches that spread widely in the 1980s were a co-optation of a more radical tradition of participatory research and pedagogy pioneered by Freire, Fals Borda, and others (Leal 2011). Regardless of the specific techniques and terms used, the continuity in the use of participation to placate and manipulate from the colonial era to the era of neoliberalism is striking.

**Figure 1.** Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation. Source: Arnstein (1969).



## 2.4. Participation, space, and social transformation

Cornwall (2002, 2) made a substantial contribution to the analysis of participation in development by emphasizing the importance of how spaces are created and shaped to the potential for participation to empower or disempower people, arguing that “spaces for participation can be thought ... in abstract terms as the ways in which opportunities might be conceived or perceived, and more concretely, in terms of the actual sites that are entered and animated by citizens.” She identified two axes of difference along which types of participation can be differentiated: the “durability of participatory initiatives in space and time” and the “location of the impetus behind efforts to engage participation” (ibid., 1). And she further specified a distinction between the participatory actions of Freire and others, which were animated by a radical desire for “expansion ... moving out of constrained places and isolated spaces, widening the scope for action and multiplying potential sites for engagement, and about growing in an organic, self-realizing way – in confidence, in capacity, in wellbeing”; and the mainstream development industry discourse, which uses empowerment to emphasize “relocating the poor within the prevailing order: bringing them in, finding them a place, lending them opportunities, empowering them, *inviting them to participate*” (ibid., 2, 3; emphasis in original).

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**When marginalized people choose to participate in something based on a sense of common interest or identity, the spaces they create may be simultaneously an essential basis for organizing and a way to “deepen” their own marginalization.**

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Cornwall argues that decisions made by development actors about the literal and metaphorical spaces for participation have a profound influence over whether they “challenge or reproduce existing structures and meanings” (Cornwall 2002, 7). For example, the terms used to describe the participants can have an effect on what they “are perceived to be able to contribute or entitled to know or decide, as well as the perceived obligations of those who seek to involve them” (ibid., 8). The distinction of some people as “experts” and others as “beneficiaries” implies a very different kind of relationship from designating all participants as “peers” or “citizens.” The physical design of a space of encounter can also affect relations — for example the arrangement of seating or the actual location of the space, be it in a school, a public gathering area, a government office, or private premises. These can render participants more or less comfortable, for example, and on more or less equal footing as they engage with one another (Villanueva 2018).

Cornwall identifies different “clusters” of participatory spaces, differentiated along the axes of durability and impetus. Broadly, some participatory spaces are designed and created by external funders, and others “emerge more organically out of sets of common concerns or identifications” (Cornwall 2002, 18). And some, such as political marches, are fleeting, while others are institutionalized and may last for many years. Importantly, these distinctions are not normative: Externally funded institutional participation may lead to profound benefits for participants’ quality of life even while restricting deliberation and democracy. Bottom-up initiatives may serve conservative or radical ends, and when marginalized people choose to participate in something based on a sense of common interest or identity, the spaces they create may be simultaneously an essential basis for organizing and a way to “deepen” their own marginalization (ibid., 21).

## 2.5. Participatory budgeting and citizen power

In the 1990s, participation also began to take on new meaning in governance, with the spread of participatory budgeting (Cabannes 2004) and other forms of direct, democratic citizen participation in municipal planning (Taylor, Nanz and Taylor 2020). Participatory budgeting was pioneered in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil. As it spread, eventually to thousands of cities, it took on huge variety in terms of structures, formalization, participants, and motivation (Cabannes 2004, Cabannes and Lipietz 2017). Cabannes and Lipietz (2017), like Cornwall, identify the impetus behind participatory budgeting as having a major impact on its potential to create radical social and political change. It has followed a similar trajectory to participation in development: from a radical experiment in democratization to widespread adoption for “good governance” and “technocratic” ends that maintain existing structures of unequal power.

Cabannes and Lipietz point out that these less radical approaches have also had positive outcomes. In Mozambique, for example, where a participatory budgeting initiative led to markedly better relations between city residents and municipal officials. This is a critical point of comparison for participatory grantmaking in international development: While it creates invited rather than claimed spaces participatory budgeting can change the relationship between purse-string holders and citizens in the direction of greater transparency and mutual understanding.

# 03

## CASE STUDIES

The first case study examined here, that of AKRSP, falls clearly into the first cluster identified by Cornwall. AKRSP itself is a durable, regularized institution, and the spaces AKRSP has created for participation over the last four decades are themselves durable, regularized institutions that serve as intermediaries between people and government authorities. These spaces are “bounded” in the sense that membership is circumscribed by geographic location, and their form and function were defined in advance by AKRSP itself. While AKRSP and its context are of course unique, I argue that in these broad strokes, it is typical of international NGOs’ participatory work on community and local development.

The second case study, FRIDA Young Feminist Fund, does not fit quite so neatly into Cornwall’s framework. On the one hand, it is a durable, regularized institution. On the other hand, it makes no prescriptions over the form or function of the activists and organizations it funds, except that they must be new (founded in the past five years) and belong to the affinity group of the organization’s founders, namely, young feminist activists. This hybridization, between the top-down spatial arrangements of international NGOs and foundations and the self-selection of participants based on shared concerns and identities, offers an opportunity for the development industry at large to re-examine and perhaps change its practices.

In their transcendence of power relations that are embedded in traditional development approaches such as that used by AKRSP, participatory grantmakers like FRIDA offer an opportunity to help create a new vision of citizenship, or what Evelina Dagnino (2011, 421) calls a “project for a new sociability: a more egalitarian way of organizing all social relations.” A number of scholars and activists have argued for an understanding of citizenship that goes beyond the neoliberal conceptualization of citizens as primarily market actors, toward one in which citizens involve themselves “substantively” in their own governance (Kabeer 2005) (Hickey 2010).

Dagnino was writing about participatory governance, not transnational relationships, but her argument that more substantive forms of citizenship are “a way to transform deeply embedded social practices ... [they imply] moral and intellectual reform: a process of social learning, of building new kinds of social relations in which citizens become active social subjects” (ibid., 422) has clear echoes in the relations created by participatory grantmaking. Although such relations exist alongside political citizenship and may not directly affect governance, they encourage the “solidarities from below” that are essential to “reshaping

the world in more equal terms” (Featherstone 2012, 4). As Cornwall and Gaventa (2000) put it, participatory grantmaking creates a space in which poor people can be not just “users and choosers” but “makers and shapers.”

### 3.1. Aga Khan Rural Support Program

AKRSP was founded in 1982 – right at the beginning of the neoliberalism-linked NGO boom discussed above – by Swiss-based AKF, to aid the development of rural villages in Pakistan’s mountainous north. I worked for AKF from 2010-2019 and was based in Pakistan for the final three of those years. This section will draw mainly on AKRSP’s own writing about itself and outside secondary research, but it will also reflect my own decade of experience working closely with it.

AKRSP began as a small project, but from the beginning was very consciously intended as a laboratory and a template that other private rural development agencies, as well as government departments, could learn from and replicate (Aga Khan Rural Support Program 1983, Khan n.d.). In this it was successful: Over the next two decades, the AKRSP model led to the creation of copycat organizations across Pakistan and in several other countries in South Asia (Rural Support Programs Network n.d.). Today, nearly 8.5 million households in Pakistan alone are at least nominally integrated into a community organization set up by a Rural Support Program – that is, about a quarter of Pakistan’s population. Rural Support Programs are a major partner of both the government of Pakistan and international donors, as well as multilateral agencies like the UN, in every province and region of the country (Rural Support Programs Network 2020).

As a domestic organization founded by a foreign one whose first leader, Shoaib Sultan Khan, self-consciously integrated his years of experience as a Pakistani civil servant with the writings of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century German community organizer (Khan n.d.), AKRSP represents a fascinating hybrid of the kind of simplistic, long-distance relationality identified by Graeber (2007c) as characteristic of neoliberal economic and social relations and very deep, long-term, hyperlocal relationship building. On the one hand, AKRSP’s theory of change – that communities can be empowered by the introduction of a predetermined organizational structure alongside some small set of investments – calls to mind Graeber’s description of international development projects as “tak[ing] what are really complex and interwoven processes of action and chop[ping] them up and redefin[ing] them as discrete, self-identical objects” (Graeber 2007c, 95-96). AKRSP’s founders believed in the efficacy of their approach to village-level organization and development and believed the approach could and should be replicated widely with minimal variation from place to place.

AKRSP’s approach fits neatly within the neoliberal framework: assuming that the retreat of the state is a given and that its absence should be filled by private actors, including NGOs. Its “strategy of sustainable, participatory development results in the creation of

user-pays services for education and health facilities, such as Aga Khan health facilities and schools, dovetailing with the Pakistani government's 'wholehearted embrace' of education 'as a market like any other'" (Settle 2011, 396).

On the other hand, AKRSP has always had a sense of itself as a patient, long-term partner for the rural poor, not bound by any one project, and as "totally accountable" to its beneficiaries (Khan n.d., 253, 257). Gilgit-Baltistan is rugged and remote, and its connective infrastructure is poor even today. A small rockslide or flash flood can – and frequently does – cut off an entire valley for days at a time. These conditions make predictable, linear progress on any kind of project very difficult. Several of my colleagues had spent 30 years or more working for AKRSP and sometimes reminisced about days-long treks to spend weeks in high mountain villages in the years before jeepable tracks existed beyond the Karakoram Highway. A logical framework or a Gantt chart hold little meaning in such conditions.

While AKRSP's commitment to participation may be durable, its purpose was to prepare "the communities to embrace change and benefit from the opportunities offered by evolving socio-political, economic and administrative context of the region" (S. Ali 2016, 7). This aligns closely with Cornwall's description of the mainstream development idea of "relocating the poor within the prevailing order: bringing them in, finding them a place, lending them opportunities, empowering them" (Cornwall 2002, 3, emphasis in original).

In a 1986 interview, AKF's then-Director of Special Programs, Robert D'Arcy Shaw, who oversaw AKRSP in the 1980s, said, "The major objective is management – internal management within the organization itself and through our outreach to the local people, an improvement in their own management capability" (de Spoelberch, Shaw and Bartel 1986, 28). Therefore, he said, "the starting point, without which nothing else could have been done, is the social organization of the village itself. The villagers really have to feel that they are in the driver's seat with respect to defining what they want to do and what would be mutually beneficial for everyone in the village" (ibid., 30). Shaw also highlighted the long-term nature of AKRSP's commitment to the villages it was working with: at minimum, 10 years to start. That one decade has become nearly four: In Cornwall's terms, there is no doubt that AKRSP's commitment to participation is "durable" in both space and time.

From the beginning, AKRSP saw its terms of engagement with villages as non-negotiable. Villages that were reluctant to comply fully with AKRSP's approach were simply not included in the organization's plans. And even within the hundreds of villages that have participated in AKRSP's development programs over the decades, the organization's varying success across its geographic area of action "suggests a veneer of non-differentiation that the AKRSP conforms to in constructing its own identity, even while religiocultural differences shape the organization's successes and failures" (Settle 2011, 393). In other words, AKRSP interpreted the "intimate spaces" of the villages in ways that "render[ed them] technical" and mirrored the national- and global-scale neoliberal trend of "vertical disaggregation" identified by

Mosse (2011, 4), in which “rule making and policy framing” are reserved for elites and risk is delegated to “‘responsibilized’ regions, localities, communities, and, ultimately, individuals.” This ties back to Cooke and Kothari’s notion that participatory-development techniques “clean up” local knowledge, by raising what I would call the “hammer and nail” problem. AKRSP has a set of resources and tools at its disposal, and so it interprets the information it gets from the participatory processes it uses in a way that renders them addressable by those resources and tools.

Freire’s discussion of the notion, implicit in what he calls the “banking” approach to education, that individuals are vessels to be filled by teachers possessed of some “true” knowledge (2005, 75-76), adds a layer of understanding to Cornwall’s spaces of participation. The structure of AKRSP’s participatory techniques created a space in which poor people were invited to join a process led by self-designated experts who brought with them a package of techniques that were supposed to lead to what the experts deemed desirable outcomes. That is, much apart from its erstwhile role as a literal bank<sup>4</sup> and funder of development projects, AKRSP uses this “banking” approach to knowledge. By using participatory techniques to incrementally improve people’s access to markets and basic services, AKRSP’s managers and experts decide the size and the shape of the cup of development knowledge and action that is available. They seek to help their beneficiaries better adapt to their place in the world, without questioning it and without confronting the institutions and structures that marginalize and oppress them.

A draft internal strategy document from 2017 recommits the organization to reaching “extreme and transitory poor, women, youth and other vulnerable communities” (Aga Khan Rural Support Program 2017, 5), but the solutions proffered are the same market-led approaches the organization has been using since the 1980s. It is worth noting that the strategy document was prepared in a self-described “participatory” manner but lists no special outreach to its constituents beyond its day-to-day interactions with them. The formal participants in the development of the strategy were members of the staff and the board of directors, officials from local and regional government, bilateral donors, AKF, and other agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network (Aga Khan Rural Support Program 2017, 1-2).

It is crucial to recognize that AKRSP’s “beneficiaries” have never been passive recipients and, in fact, have always been capable of interpreting AKRSP’s actions in their own way and using the resources AKRSP brought in to their own ends. For example, AKRSP’s early leadership outright denied there were “vested interests or power structures” in its target villages (de Spoelberch, Shaw and Bartel 1986, 29); a stance that would seem to preclude any transformative action focused on power. The spaces for participation it created reflected that analysis. With AKRSP’s guidance, villagers were trusted and

expected to create representative bodies and to organize their own activity within those bodies in the best way they saw fit. But in the first couple of years, no attention at all was paid to gender and the differential ability of women and men to participate in village-level bodies. At first, AKRSP set up only VOs without explicitly gendering the expected participants. Within a couple of years, however, a letter arrived at the AKRSP office in Gilgit from a group of women in a village where a VO was up and running. These women berated AKRSP for setting up an organization only for their menfolk and demanded that AKRSP help them set up a Women's Organization (WO) through which they could organize and represent their interests. So, AKRSP began setting up WOs, and when it enters a new village now, it sets up both VOs and WOs as a matter of standard practice. This demonstrates AKRSP's flexibility in response to feedback from its beneficiaries. But it also reflects the ways even an invited, top-down space of participation can create openings for new claims to representation or authority.

As Parker (1999) points out, the relationship between a comparatively powerful and wealthy actor and the less powerful people with whom it interacts is never one-sided. AKRSP's creation of the VO system enabled women in Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral to "create their own 'spaces of control' in which new aspects of influence [were] developed" (ibid.). In 2017, AKRSP's then-General Manager told me during a visit to a village in Baltistan that a group of young women college graduates with whom we had just met would not, a generation earlier, have been allowed to greet strangers, let alone attend university or find work outside the home. The supra-village Local Support Organizations (LSOs) that AKRSP began to establish in 2004 have active participation from women, and every woman who has been elected to government office from Chitral district was first involved in her local WO<sup>5</sup>.

It would be ridiculous to claim that women and men are now equal in northern Pakistan, and the changes described above cannot be attributed solely to AKRSP – it is but one institutional actor in a complex social, political, and economic ecosystem. However, it is an important actor and these anecdotes illustrate contributions toward a profound change in the social relations of the area. In Cornwall's terms, AKRSP has opened spaces for empowerment, "widening the scope for action and multiplying potential sites for engagement" that women in AKRSP's catchment area can take advantage of (Cornwall 2002, 2). Settle reported that among people she interviewed in Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral, "broadening consciousness" is seen as one of the organization's signature successes (2011, 392).

That scope-widening helped open the way for what Graeber (2006) would define as revolutionary action – "any collective action which rejects, and therefore confronts, some form of power or domination and in doing so, reconstitutes social relations" – by the women who wrote that letter and the women (and men) who decided to begin sending their girls to university.

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## **The spaces for empowerment AKRSP created are constrained by its rigid adherence to a particular model and approach and by its control over the resources that create and foster those spaces.**

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That said, the spaces for empowerment AKRSP created are constrained by its rigid adherence to a particular model and approach and by its control over the resources that create and foster those spaces. AKRSP's relationship with the communities it serves may not be one-sided, but it is explicitly unequal. The next case study is of an organization whose approach to supporting poor and marginalized people is based on a very different understanding of what participation can mean.

### **3.2. FRIDA Young Feminist Fund**

At a 2008 meeting of the Association of Women in International Development (AWID), participants noted that while young feminist activism was growing all over the world and donor interests in funding girls and young women were on the rise, most young feminist organizations did not have enough money to carry out their work (Nepon and Hart 2015). Just 2.5% of official development assistance, as reported by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, goes to projects dedicated primarily to gender equality or women's empowerment. The number of organizations that are in a position to receive grants from bilateral donors, which tend to have complex proposal, accounting, and reporting requirements, is limited (Arutyunova and Clark 2013). AWID and the Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres decided to create a fund for young feminist activists that would allocate funding according to the preferences of activists themselves. FRIDA – its letters stand for Flexibility, Resources, Inclusivity, Diversity, Action – launched in 2012 under the financial auspices of the Tides Foundation. It is now fully independent and has a small staff and dozens of volunteer advisors around the world (FRIDA Young Feminist Fund 2020, Nepon and Hart 2015).

From the beginning, FRIDA decided to adhere to participatory grantmaking, which Gibson (2018, 8) defines as grantmaking that “cedes decision-making power about funding – including the strategy and criteria behind those decisions – to the very communities that funders aim to serve.”

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## **FRIDA argues that its approach to funding decision-making will help to “shift power dynamics in philanthropy” by “changing expectations on who decides and how donors and ‘grantees’ work together”.**

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FRIDA's grantmaking process begins with outreach to feminist organizations, both formal and informal, by volunteer advisors and existing and past grantees. Applications are invited once a year and screened by advisors, who do not make recommendations but only determine whether an application is eligible. Grantees must be women or trans people under 30 years old (and staff must be women or trans people under 35) (Nepon and Hart 2015). Grants are small, averaging a little under USD 9,000 as of 2017 (FRIDA Young Feminist Fund 2020). Eligibility criteria include a requirement that the organization must have been founded within the past five years and that the application focus on one or more of three areas: advancing and defending women's lives from a feminist perspective; improving the lives of young women/trans youth at local, national, regional, or international levels; and inclusive organizing, collective action, and feminist movement building (Nepon and Hart 2015). Activists and organizers who have themselves applied for funding then vote on which applications should be funded (FRIDA Young Feminist Fund 2021).

FRIDA argues that its approach to funding decision-making will help to “shift power dynamics in philanthropy” by “changing expectations on who decides and how donors and ‘grantees’ work together” (Nepon and Hart 2015, 5, 7). The expectation is that having young feminists vote on their peers' applications will give “those groups a birds-eye view of grantmaking that usually sits within foundations, and [allow] them to see the breadth and the range of what's happening within their country and across the region” (ibid., 18). This viewpoint helps them understand better what funders are looking for, which in turn helps them learn how to mobilize resources outside FRIDA. In Cornwall's terms, FRIDA's intention is in part to expand the space of engagement to which its peers have access.

At the same time, as a founding advisor of FRIDA, Angelika Arutyunova, wrote, “I don't like connecting FRIDA's work to ‘empowering young feminists’ because I want to connect it to challenging the current funding system and hopefully actually empowering funders” by opening them to learning from the activists they fund (Nepon and Hart 2015, 23). Other participatory grantmakers, such as the Red Umbrella Fund's Dennis van Wanrooij, echo this point,

that it is grantmakers' responsibility to see themselves "not as a funder but as a colleague with [their] grantees" (quoted in Gibson 2018, 9). In this sense, FRIDA and other funders are engaged in building solidarity across space. They are fostering what de Sousa Santos (2014, 134) called "subaltern, insurgent cosmopolitanism ... the fusion of local, progressive struggles with the aim of maximizing their potential ... through translocal/local linkages." FRIDA connects local feminist activists to each other and to global perspectives and conditions, a necessary step to countering the neoliberal order (Harvey 2009).

Spaces can be important in a literal sense for many of the groups that FRIDA supports: for example, with respect to the challenge that lesbian, bisexual, queer, and trans women and girls have in finding or creating safe places in the physical world or online and the importance of creating such spaces for such activists to connect, express themselves, learn from each other, and organize (FRIDA Young Feminist Fund 2016). Participatory grantmaking proponents frequently use space as a metaphor to distinguish traditional decision-making practices around funding from their own practices — for example, distinguishing between peer review panels and "one person sitting behind a desk," expressing discomfort with the model of "three people in a room making a decision," or rejecting "closed-door grantmaking practices" (Gibson 2018, 17, 21).

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## **The space created between funders and recipients does not replicate the systems of domination that put one in a position to offer money to the other, but rather enables both to consider the problems they face and to seek solutions together.**

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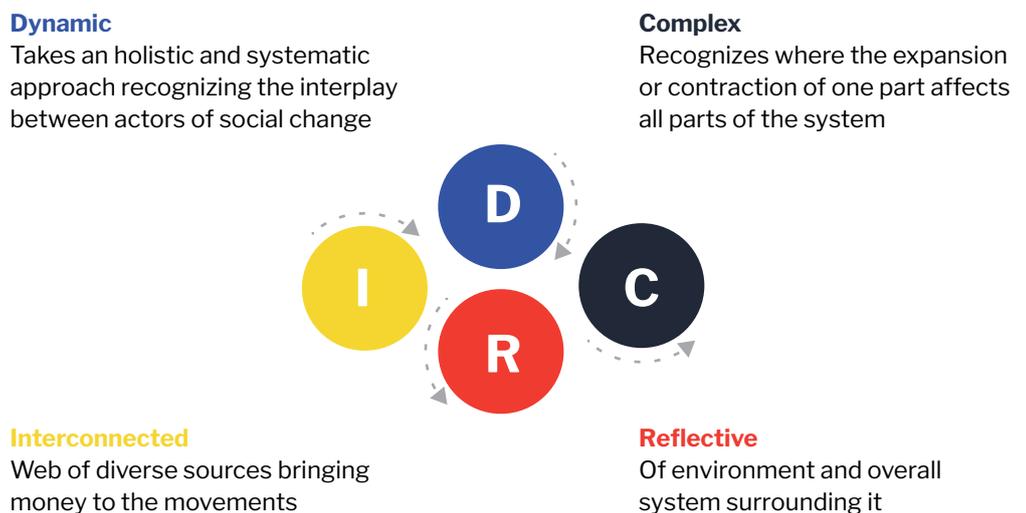
Returning to Freire, participatory grantmaking as practiced by FRIDA could be seen as "problem-posing" education, in which the space created between funders and recipients does not replicate the systems of domination that put one in a position to offer money to the other, but rather enables both to consider the problems they face and to seek solutions together (Freire 2005, 79). Unlike AKRSP, the space FRIDA creates does not impose any uniformity on its grantees but incorporates them in whatever form and tactics they have deemed appropriate for their own struggle. It enables supported groups to organize and advocate in situationally appropriate and strategic ways. For example, the Argentine group Colectiva Feminista Rabiosa has held "feminist political training sessions [...], which cover feminist theory, transgender identities and lesbofeminism. In addition creating a safe space for knowledge sharing, these workshops have served as a platform to mobilize feminist political activism" (FRIDA Young Feminist Fund 2016, 13). FRIDA's flexibility as a funder in turn enables activists to be flexible by organizing and to be flexible in responding to crises and opportunities, for example when Colectiva Feminista Rabiosa

issued a statement after the suicide of a young lesbian that led to national attention to homophobia (FRIDA Young Feminist Fund 2016, 14). This embrace of diversity is another critical aspect of subaltern insurgent cosmopolitanism (de Sousa Santos 2014).

FRIDA, like other international participatory grantmakers, does not see participatory grantmaking as the only legitimate way to transfer resources to people in the South. Participatory grantmaking may not be appropriate for all situations, such as when funding must be disbursed very quickly or when an envisioned project requires a high level of technical knowledge. Rather, they argue that it contributes to a “transformative funding ecosystem,” (Arutyunova and Miller 2018). Edwards (2013, 7) first proposed the idea of a funding ecosystem as a counterbalance to the “funding monoculture” that predominates in the international development industry. Such a way of thinking, he argues, “emphasizes the inter-dependence and complementary nature of all the different components, and is framed by the possibilities of abundance instead of scarcity ... [an ecosystem] *contains* some market elements but is not *dominated or defined* by them” (ibid., 7, emphasis in original). He organizes a funding ecosystem into three different elements, which can be complementary if they are balanced: democratic, commercial, and institutional. However, as Edwards acknowledges, these elements are not in reality neatly separated from one another. Some institutional funding, for example, is more democratically controlled than others, and the overlap between these two elements is a place where it may be possible to encourage more impactful contributions to social transformation.

Dagnino (2011, 424) offers a note of caution about any private philanthropy in her discussion of citizenship, which is that relationships such as those of participatory grantmaking may contribute toward a situation in which “poverty and inequality are effectively withdrawn from the public (political) arena.” However, I would argue that with its heavy focus on solidarity and the need to support collective action, FRIDA does not fall into the trap of “understanding ... solidarity as a strictly private moral responsibility” (ibid., 425). Rather, it has the potential to support what Harvey called the “dialectical connectivity” between localized activism and “global conditions” (Harvey 2009, 96).

**Figure 2.** Transformative funding framework. Source: Arutyunova and Miller (2018).



# 04

## CONCLUSION

Participation in decision-making about funding represents a major shift toward the potential of the international development industry to genuinely empower people in the South. Conventional participatory approaches, such as those used by AKRSP, may be durable (although often they are not), and the projects that result from their application may have profoundly positive effects on the lives of beneficiaries. But in their positioning of NGOs as outside experts and emissaries of international donors, inviting beneficiaries into a space for development that the NGOs themselves conceived, created, and control, these approaches replicate the structures of power that marginalize people in the first place. They fail White's (2011, 67) test of participatory processes, which is: "If it is genuine, the process must be transformative, not only for the 'weaker' partner but also for the outside agency and for the relationship between them."

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**Participation in decision-making about funding represents a major shift toward the potential of the international development industry to genuinely empower people in the South.**

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Participatory grantmakers such as FRIDA Young Feminist Fund represent a much greater radical and empowering potential. Their commitment to participation is as foundational as AKRSP's: It satisfies the "durability" test of Cornwall's framework. But it also transforms the space created by funding from a closed room into which donors retreat and then emerge with strategy and allocations in hand into one that simply does not exist unless it is populated by the people who may – or have already – received the funding themselves. FRIDA is creating a transnational community of peers, who learn from each other and build solidarity with each other. By modelling at the global level the ways power over financial resources can be distributed more equally, to mutual benefit, this transformation of social relations has the potential to promote "substantive" forms of citizenship. Participatory grantees gain not just the money to do whatever work they deem important, they also develop relationships with wealthy allies that would not otherwise have been possible, creating a basis for transnational solidarity and collective action.

AKRSP and its peers in the traditional development sector should experiment with sharing control over their own resources to a much greater degree than they have. These experiments even could take place within the organization as currently constituted. As Fox (2020)

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## FRIDA is creating a transnational community of peers, who learn from each other and build solidarity with each other.

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argues, even conventional development projects can create space for “countervailing power” to emerge. In fact, AKRSP already has some experience of this: A recent irrigation and agricultural development project in Gilgit-Baltistan, funded by USAID, unintentionally led to the creation of a Water Management Board made up of representatives from communities in the catchment area of a particular dam and from several government agencies. This form of co-governance of resources was entirely new in that region and is successful enough that the regional government has proposed adopting it in other places. As the organization’s founder, Shoaib Sultan Khan, wrote, “AKRSP is an NGO but by its sheer scale of operations, it aims at influencing government thinking” (Khan n.d.). Clearly, it can influence government practice. A longtime conduit of government funding to communities, AKRSP could seek actively to increase participation by ordinary citizens in how these funds are allocated and spent.

At the same time, it could – and, I would argue, should – engage its constituents at a much earlier stage in the decision-making process about how its own unrestricted funds are allocated and spent. In other words, rather than seeing itself as a “facilitator” and “catalyst” for locally driven development of “the poor” (Aga Khan Rural Support Program 2017, 2-3), it could experiment with initiatives in which, as with FRIDA, it could see itself as a peer of its fellow denizens of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral, and seek much more actively to create solutions together. This would not be a stretch organizationally: The vast majority of AKRSP’s staff and management are themselves from the region. And it could transform AKRSP’s relationship with its constituents for the better, ending the perception of the organization as “the cow that drinks its own milk” (Settle 2011, 394).<sup>6</sup>

If my conclusion is correct, that more participatory forms of decision-making about development funding have a more transformative impact on both recipients *and donors*, a follow-up question emerges that might be a fruitful subject of future research: What are the implications of a wider adoption of the principles and techniques used by these small foundations and networks? With wealthy and prominent institutions like the Ford Foundation and Tides Foundation now looking seriously at participatory grantmaking, those larger implications are already starting to take shape. Further study of participatory grantmakers like FRIDA is merited. And staff of the big bilateral donor agencies who are interested in genuine social transformation, and who shape so much of what organizations like AKRSP are free to do, would be wise to pay attention to this growing practice.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, I heard this metaphor myself from a man I met in Nagar district in 2017. He told me that AKRSP was very good at getting his and his neighbors’ goats to produce more milk, but that it was also very good at squirting that milk into its own mouth.

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