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Dewi, a medical volunteer, checks the blood pressure of Syamsul, 75. Around 1,500 people were displaced and found shelter in a coconut farm when a powerful earthquake struck the coast of Indonesia in 2018.

PHOTO: Andri Tambunan/ActionAid

Preliminary research summary

# A FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF WOMEN-LED LOCALISATION IN THE CENTRAL SULAWESI RESPONSE

June 2019

**Almost three years on from the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain's commitment to 'localisation',<sup>1</sup> there continues to be a lack of consensus on how the humanitarian community can follow through to meaningfully shift power and resources to local actors within preparedness and response efforts. Moreover, Grand Bargain signatories remain ambiguous, and at worst silent, on the crucial contribution of women's leadership<sup>2</sup> within these processes. Local women-led organisations still receive a fraction of overall humanitarian funding<sup>3</sup> and women are still largely underrepresented within formal humanitarian decision-making structures and coordination mechanisms.<sup>4</sup>**

This is despite growing and compelling evidence<sup>5</sup> which highlights that across countries and contexts, local women and women-led partners bring valuable skills and assets to localised humanitarian action. They are often able to gain access to hard-to-reach communities and those most marginalised within them, they bring a strong understanding of the local context and the needs and realities of women, girls and the community as a whole, and they offer crucial insight into how to engage with key stakeholders. If local women and women-led organisations are not supported to lead within localisation processes there is the risk that the needs of communities will not be met, and that their exclusion will reinforce structural inequalities.

In September 2018, a series of powerful earthquakes struck the Central Sulawesi Province of Indonesia. This triggered a tsunami, which resulted in significant damage and loss of life across the affected districts of Palu, Donggala, Sigi and Parimo. 2,000 casualties were recorded and around 200,000 people were displaced from their homes.<sup>6</sup> The Indonesian government responded quickly to establish its leadership in the response, setting restrictions on the nature of international engagement and confirming that assistance be channelled via national or local humanitarian partners.<sup>7</sup> In many respects this response marked a 'new' approach and way of working for the humanitarian community, which forced international actors to rethink and reposition their roles.<sup>8</sup>

In partnership with local women and women-led organisations, ActionAid<sup>9</sup> undertook a qualitative feminist research study<sup>10</sup> to understand, within the unique parameters of the Central Sulawesi response, the challenges and opportunities for women-led localisation. Drawing on an initial (and-to-be-completed) analysis of data, this Preliminary Research Summary provides an overview of early findings and potential recommendations to the Indonesian government and other Grand Bargain signatories. The analysis and validation process will continue over July and the full research report is due to be published in August 2019, ahead of the Grand Bargain Asia and Pacific Regional Conference on Localisation of Aid which will be held in Jakarta on 26-27 August 2019.

# EARLY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Existing gender inequalities have been exacerbated and disrupted following the Central Sulawesi disaster. This has created new risks, but also opportunities for change.

Central Sulawesi is understood to be a largely patriarchal society, within which women and girls continue to experience inequalities at many levels. Women and girls are exposed to different forms of gender-based violence (GBV), are often expected to maintain roles and activities within the domestic sphere, and are largely prohibited or discouraged from participating and leading in public life and decision-making.<sup>11</sup> In some cases, harmful interpretations of religion are also used to reinforce and uphold these discriminatory norms.

“Before the disaster, I was only at home taking care of my children and had never taken part in activities outside the home. Now I’m participating in livelihood activities.” (woman at community level, Palu)

Following the disaster in Central Sulawesi, interviews for this research highlighted a resulting “vacuum in power”. In some cases, this was perceived to be the result of men in the community being displaced as the sole breadwinners for their families following the loss of their livelihood options. Women from the community highlighted that this sense of disenfranchisement, in some instances, contributed to increases in intimate partner violence. Women also pointed to the opportunity this had created for men to step up into leadership roles at a community level. In some instances, these men were understood to be affiliated with fundamentalist and radical religious groups. Women and women-led organisations also highlighted that, as the primary caregivers for their families, and following the loss of their husband’s livelihoods, they were frequently taking on additional responsibilities to bring in money to the household – described by one woman at community level in Palu as “mothers have it double, their work is double”.



Elda, a medical volunteer, checks a newborn baby at the coconut farm that was turned into a shelter following the Indonesian earthquakes last year.  
PHOTO: Andri Tambunan/ActionAid

However, while this vacuum of power was seen to have created new risks, it was also seen to have created new leadership opportunities for women in the community. This research identified many powerful examples of the solidarity, strength and resilience of local women and women-led organisations, coming together to support response efforts, in addition to taking a lead role in their own economic empowerment and livelihood options in the place of their husbands. Early findings indicate that a diverse group of local women and women-led organisations were some of the first actors to mobilise and respond on the ground in Central Sulawesi. These actors leveraged their trusted positions in communities, and existing connections and networks, to move quickly and effectively. They were able to provide key services for the community, including supporting evacuation processes, food and clothes distributions, acting as medical personnel and supporting school reconstruction.

“Women’s leadership in disaster response is very important because women can mutually strengthen each other.” (women-led organisation, Palu)

“When I visited the project sites, I saw that women hold a very vital position in their communities. Without women, those tents feeding people would disappear. Without women, everything here will fall to pieces.” (INGO, Palu)

In addition, local women and women-led organisations have played a critical role in identifying and supporting the specific and diverse needs of women and girls in the community. For example, local women and women-led organisations have played a leading role in setting up and managing safe spaces – including Women Friendly Spaces and Women Friendly Tents, delivering psychosocial services and trauma healing and creating opportunities for women and children to come together and share their experiences and concerns. They have also played a key role in raising the profile of, and advocating on, key concerns with local authorities and implementing agencies. These concerns have included issues faced by women farmers and their need for land for planting after liquefaction, the need for better quality and tailored protection services, and the security and sanitation conditions in their temporary communal shelters.



Ibu, a survivor of the earthquakes, sells homemade snacks made out of peanuts.  
PHOTO: Indira Hapsari/  
Yappika-ActionAid

## Preliminary recommendations

- Humanitarian agencies and donors should recognise the crucial (and often competing) effect of unpaid and paid work on women’s participation and leadership in the response and recovery processes. Actors involved in the recovery work should work in partnership with women to develop and resource practical mechanisms that support a reduction in women’s increased unpaid care burden and ways of addressing this barrier (for example, childcare services, financial support), as well as invest in sustainable livelihood-generating opportunities for women.
- Humanitarian agencies and donors should ensure that the protection of women and girls is prioritised at the onset of each emergency response and in disaster planning and preparedness. Drawing on the principles of a Women-Led Community-Based approach to protection,<sup>12</sup> these actors should work with existing women’s organisations to respond to GBV and other protection threats, supporting the establishment of community-based mechanisms for women to drive their own protection needs, including establishing Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) complaints mechanisms, and expanding existing safe and friendly spaces for women and girls.
- Humanitarian agencies and donors should resource local actors, including women’s organisations to engage in longer-term social norm change programming focused on shifting power relations between men and women, boys and girls. These activities should be integrated as a core part of recovery work and included in future humanitarian programming – rather than seen as a ‘development’ issue given their impact on gender inclusive humanitarian response.

**2. Formal decision-making structures and coordination mechanisms for the Central Sulawesi response continue to be dominated by men. However, local women and women-led organisations have been able to assert influence in local decision-making spaces.**

Despite the multiple ways that local women and women-led organisations have been ‘leading’ in response work, these efforts continue to have little visibility and recognition – many interviewees outside of Palu were unfamiliar with the scope and breadth of women’s leadership in this context. Moreover, as illustrated at the global level, women working in and on the Central Sulawesi response also remain underrepresented within formal humanitarian decision-making structures and coordination mechanisms. Early findings for this research indicate that while most implementing organisations had relatively high numbers of women represented within their staff contingents, they tended to occupy more administrative and low-middle management roles, with only a few women represented within senior management teams.

“Lots of women were volunteers and first responders, but how many were response managers?” (INGO, Jakarta)

“In Palu and Sigi, it’s common for women to have a position in the village. But in Donggala it’s still lacking, and even more so in rural areas. We need to carry out activities to help women believe they have the right to be involved in decision-making.” (INGO, Palu)

In addition, this research identified a limited number of local women and women-led organisations represented within the national disaster management agency (BNPB) and associated government structures. Interviews also exposed the fact that almost no women were visible within the cluster structures during the early stages of the response, and for the small selection of organisations that did attend these meetings – including at the sub-cluster level (on GBV mainly) – several had stopped attending as they felt their inputs were not accommodated or valued. In all cases, interviewees acknowledged this lack of representation as negatively impacting on the extent to which ‘gender concerns’ had been adequately integrated into response planning and programme design.<sup>13</sup>

Despite a lack of visibility within formal decision-making structures, a selection of interviewees did draw attention to the ways in which local women had been given a platform to voice their concerns and suggestions within more localised and informal spaces. One example of this, which was described by several interviewees, referred to the “Musrenbang” at village, sub-district and district level. Broadly the “Musrenbang” is a forum which usually takes place on an annual basis and provides an opportunity for community members to discuss and agree on the planned Development Work Plan (RKP) for the upcoming financial year. Interviews for this research suggested that women had been able to voice their concerns using this platform, including in relation to issues such as the conditions of temporary shelters (“huntara”). However, early findings exposed important geographical differences in this regard, with Palu and Sigi seen to be far more progressive than the Donggala district. While these ‘informal’ spaces were not seen as a substitute for women’s voices being represented within the formal humanitarian architecture, they were acknowledged as important examples of the community supporting women’s leadership potential. However, it is important to note that patriarchal and elite power may still circulate within these spaces, and as such there is a need to ensure – rather than assume – that power is genuinely shifted.



Mama Minuk is a community leader in a village affected by the earthquakes. She is actively involved in farmer groups and encourages other women to participate in them.

PHOTO: Indira Hapsari/  
Yappika-ActionAid

# Preliminary recommendations

- Humanitarian actors responsible for coordination need to fundamentally shift the way they operate and ensure a critical mass of local women's organisations are meaningfully represented across the cluster system. A priority should be to resource their participation and open space for local women leaders to have a powerful voice in these forums and influence decision-making spaces, such as country-based pooled funds advisory boards and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT).
- Humanitarian actors should have progressive plans to achieve gender equity in their preparedness, response and recovery teams, which result in having more women in senior and decision-making bodies in countries and headquarters and more partnerships with women's organisations.
- Humanitarian donors should support the development of women's organisations networks and advocacy, as well as their engagement in national and global representation activities, raising the visibility of women-led organisations and their work during emergencies.

**3.** Local women and women-led organisations have diverse skills, knowledge and networks that are an enormous asset in humanitarian response (and preparedness). Yet, a lack of 'humanitarian expertise' and operational capacity challenges limit their full engagement.

level versus the expertise contained within the global humanitarian operations and policy community. Organisations also highlighted the challenge of many NGOs and INGOs having the same implementation partners, which was seen to have placed significant pressure on local actors and contributed to uptake challenges and blockages.<sup>15</sup>

"My colleagues are overwhelmed. Since the disaster our office has never been closed." (women-led organisation, Palu)

It is increasingly acknowledged that small, local organisations face significant challenges during times of rapid scale-up during humanitarian response in terms of their operational capacity. Interviews for this research echoed these issues; many of the women and women-led organisations interviewed drew attention to the fact that not only had they been directly impacted by the disaster, losing family members, their homes, and their normal livelihoods, they also had no prior experience of working in humanitarian response. Representatives from several women-led organisations also emphasised that in focusing on meeting new 'humanitarian needs', their longer-term women's rights work, including in areas such as conflict resolution and women's land rights, was put on hold to some extent. As new research from the region highlights,<sup>14</sup> there is often a lack of mutual understanding around the complementary and distinct knowledge and skills that exist at a local



Julie is a female activist in Palu who was actively involved in disaster response in Central Sulawesi.  
PHOTO: Clare Grant/ActionAid

Of note, almost all interviewees described a deficit of women's 'confidence' and there was a consensus that capacity-strengthening was needed support and grow the leadership skills and potential of women and women-led organisations. This came directly from local women and women-led organisations on the ground, as well as from INGO, NGO, UN and government representatives at Palu and Jakarta level. Capacity-strengthening was conceptualised as multifaceted and needed at multiple levels, including 'hard' skills around operational, financial and grant management, as well as 'softer' skills around leadership, coordination, negotiation, strategising and alliance-building. Many women working at the

local level talked specifically of a desire to learn from other women managing and leading in more senior positions within organisations and the government, working in other parts of the country and the region.

**“Many of the staff that we initially engaged with are from shops and businesses – they do not have an NGO and humanitarian background. We really need to do capacity-building, which is not easy in a response.” (INGO, Jakarta)**

## Preliminary recommendations

- **Humanitarian actors should collaborate to work with local women and women-led organisations to develop joint and two-way humanitarian capacity-strengthening plans. These plans should be based on local and national organisational capacity self-assessments (such as SHAPE).<sup>16</sup> There is also an opportunity to co-create and implement mentoring and leadership skills training and to create feminist spaces for shared learning and knowledge-exchange at a country, regional and global level – these efforts could be connected to established and fledgling feminist humanitarian networks at both a global and national level.<sup>17</sup>**
- **Donors should set multi-year flexible funding facilities earmarked for local women-led organisations to engage in emergencies, so they can build the capacity, space and core funding to prepare for and respond to disasters and continue their vital long-term social and women's rights work.**
- **Donors should track and report their direct and indirect funding to local women-led organisations in emergencies and seek to provide increased opportunities to direct funding. Donors should specify to international humanitarian agencies that supporting local women-led organisations during emergencies is an indicator of success and request to track and report the funding passed to them.**

4. **The Central government has championed localisation in the Central Sulawesi response. There is also a 'supportive policy environment' for the advancement of women's rights and protection. However, there is a lack of coherence and connection between the two, as well as limited operationalisation at a local level.**

As outlined, the Indonesian government responded quickly to establish its leadership in the Central Sulawesi response efforts, setting restrictions on the nature and scope of assistance required from international organisations. This forced international actors to move from their traditional visible positional roles to less visible support roles – providing remote technical support in most cases. As a disaster-prone context, interviewees for this research highlighted the crucial learning and adaption that had taken place across the Indonesian government, resulting in the development of new legislation and disaster-dedicated government structures such as the BNPB (Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management), which facilitates national-led preparedness and responses. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) was also seen to have played a central role, with OCHA and UN agencies providing complementary support. While there has undoubtedly been a strong rhetorical and policy commitment to localisation at a central level, interviewees emphasised that the coordination between central and local levels of government has been a key barrier in advancing the articulated needs (of women and communities as a whole) at the local level. This was notably discussed in relation to the condition of temporary shelters (“huntara”) whereby

local representatives expressed frustration over the lack of control and decision-making they were given to respond to the demands and requests made by the community (in this case, the central government hold the resource and decision-making, as opposed to the provincial or district-level authorities).

“At the government level there is awareness about issues affecting women, but the difficulty is operationalising this.” (UN agency, Jakarta)

In addition, the government of Indonesia has invested in developing a supportive policy and legislative framework for advancing women’s rights and protection, including guidelines developed by the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection in 2018. However, there has been limited visibility of these commitments within the wider disaster management architecture, as well as limited visibility of gendered considerations within the current Recovery Plan drafting and finalisation process, which interviewees largely attributed to a lack of resourcing for implementation. This also suggests a need for a more systematic approach outside of crisis to ensure the delivery of these commitments.

Despite these challenges, a change in the standard ways of working presents new opportunity and the

potential for more locally connected (and women’s) rights-based programming. For example, for GBV response in IDP contexts, UNFPA functions as a lead of the sub-cluster by default, usually accompanied by an INGO or government body. However, in the case of Central Sulawesi, the government took the primary lead but called on UNFPA for technical support when necessary. Interviewees suggested that the added value of having the (local) government lead this role enabled the forging of stronger connections with the local community with whom relationships were already established, and as such may offer an important model in furthering the localising of response efforts. However, there was consensus across interviewees that there is still a need for technical support from specialist UN agencies and other agencies, particularly in relation to protection, and that beyond a change in process and structure, budget crucially needs to be made available to support this work. The principles of “as local as possible, as international as necessary” should be upheld as part of these efforts – the Indonesian government and local organisations should be enabled to do what they do best, and supported to identify gaps and seek international input as determined by them when necessary.

“The coordination is done by the BNPB, but then is not trickled down at district and provincial level.” (UN agency, Palu)

## Preliminary recommendations

- **To ensure a gender-responsive recovery, national and local authorities must ensure that the recovery plan for Central Sulawesi is based on a strong, intersectional gender analysis, has a strong women’s rights and gender focus, is implemented in collaboration with women and women’s organisations and is sufficiently resourced. Government actors should also have access to capacity-strengthening and technical inputs to help bring a women’s rights and gendered lens and approach to their work.**
- **The Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management (BNPB) should implement and resource the existing policy and legislative framework for advancing women’s rights and protection during future emergencies. The BNPB should encourage and support local women’s organisations to continue longer-term social and gender justice work, aligned with their own priorities as this will be crucial to reducing the increased vulnerabilities faced by women in times of crisis.**
- **BNPB, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) and the Grand Bargain Localisation workstream should start a dialogue on the role of national disaster management agencies and regional organisations in promoting localisation that gives space, voice and funding to women and women-led organisations, alongside other national actors.**

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## Endnotes

1. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit the Secretary General called for humanitarian action to be 'as local as possible, as international as necessary'. As the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) emphasise, "[w]hether referred to as 'localisation', 'local humanitarian action' or 'locally-led humanitarian action', the humanitarian sector is grappling with what actions and reforms are needed to allow a more local humanitarian response" (Barbelet, 2018: 1, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12527.pdf>). ActionAid sees localisation as a transformative process, which puts women and girls at its centre. For ActionAid, localisation encompasses shifting the power from North to South, international to local, and from a male-dominated system to one where women play a more central role.
2. This study refers to the concept of 'women-led localisation', which, for the purpose of this study refers to the vital and multifaceted leadership roles that diverse groups of women and women-led organisations play in responding to disaster and crisis in humanitarian settings – roles, which are so often overlooked and under-resourced. Related terms include 'women responders' – as discussed in a recent CARE report, this is "a global term to refer to women volunteers, leaders, activists, groups, women-led organisations and networks" (Lindley-Jones, 2018: 9, [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE\\_Women-responders-report\\_2018.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Women-responders-report_2018.pdf)). This same report also highlights a lack of consensus on the term 'women-led organisation' – for the purpose of this study, we align with the definition outlined in CARE's report, which states that "a women-led organisation is understood to be an organisation which is led by a woman and/or women make up the majority of leadership positions, and that is working to support the practical and/or strategic needs of women and girls" (ibid.).
3. There is no global reporting system, which tracks how much humanitarian funding goes to local women-led organisations. While there have been increases in tracking funds to local actors, and there is some level of disaggregation across sectors, we do not disaggregate this information systematically – new research finds that in particular women-led organisations working on GBV prevention and response receive minimal direct funding – for example see IRC and VOICE report (Marsh and Blake, 2019: <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/3854/whereisthemoneyfinalfinal.pdf>), and an ActionAid-led study under the GBV AoR (Fletcher-Wood, 2019: <https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/Localised%20Protection%20Funding%20Report%20ActionAid.pdf>)
4. For example, as of February 2019 only 9 out of 27 UN Humanitarian Coordinators (33%) are women – see: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/information\\_products\\_-\\_feb\\_2019\\_-\\_list\\_of\\_current\\_hcs.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/information_products_-_feb_2019_-_list_of_current_hcs.pdf). In addition, local organisations represent 51% of the total GBV sub-cluster membership but currently only 1 sub-cluster (Yemen) is led by an NNGO (Yemen Women Union) – this data is drawn from a baseline study led by the GBV AoR and is available through the GBV AoR on request by emailing: [helpdesk@globalprotectioncluster.org](mailto:helpdesk@globalprotectioncluster.org)
5. See for example, Lindley-Jones, 2018, [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE\\_Women-responders-report\\_2018.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Women-responders-report_2018.pdf); Oxfam Canada, 2018: <https://www.oxfam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/a-feminist-approach-to-localization.pdf>; Latimir, 2018: [https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/actionaid\\_report\\_gender\\_and\\_the\\_grand\\_bargain\\_june\\_2018.pdf](https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/actionaid_report_gender_and_the_grand_bargain_june_2018.pdf).
6. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/10/11/indonesia-restricts-foreign-helpers-in-central-sulawesi-to-avoid-more-work.html> cited in Humanitarian Advisory Group and the Pujiono Centre, 2019
7. Humanitarian Advisory Group and the Pujiono Centre, 2019: [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HH\\_Sulawesi-Practice-Paper-4\\_FINAL\\_electronic\\_200319\\_v1.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HH_Sulawesi-Practice-Paper-4_FINAL_electronic_200319_v1.pdf)
8. YAPPIKA ActionAid, ActionAid UK, and ActionAid International
9. The methodology for this small qualitative study included a desk-based rapid literature review, and key informant interviews and focus group discussions with women at a community level, women-led organisations, civil society organisations, NGOs and INGOS, government stakeholders and academics operating in Palu, Jakarta and those remotely engaging on the Central Sulawesi response. We adopted a feminist and participatory approach, including co-leading the research with our local partners, interrogating structural change and shifting power, and putting women's knowledge, voice and experience at the centre of our work. Full details of our conceptual framework and approach will be published with our final report in August (2019).
10. See also Cole, 2018: <https://reliefweb.int/report/indonesia/care-rapid-gender-analysis-sulawesi-earthquake-and-tsunami-indonesia-version-2-31>
11. Details of ActionAid's Women-Led Community Based Approach to Protection can be found here: [https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/FEMINIST\\_APPROACH\\_TO\\_PROTECTION.v3.pdf](https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/FEMINIST_APPROACH_TO_PROTECTION.v3.pdf)
12. The DEC's Real Time Review (2018) also found limited gender disaggregated data and gender analysis, and a need to scale up protection activities for vulnerable groups – further information can be found here: <https://www.dec.org.uk/article/real-time-response-review-of-the-2018-indonesia-tsunami-appeal>
13. Research led by ActionAid, The Huairou Commission and Monash University, further details here: <https://actionaid.org.au/programs/gender-responsive-alternatives-for-climate-change/>
14. This is also discussed in the DEC's Real Time Review (2018), <https://www.dec.org.uk/article/real-time-response-review-of-the-2018-indonesia-tsunami-appeal>
15. 'Strategic Humanitarian Assessment and Participatory Empowerment' (SHAPE) framework: This framework was developed by the Start Network "Shifting the Power" project based on a model of humanitarian capacity that emphasised the importance of power in the humanitarian system and recognised organisational attributes to not only deliver humanitarian response but also to control and influence the shape of that response.
16. In collaboration with other agencies, ActionAid is a member of the soon to be launched Feminist Humanitarian Network – a global network of women leaders committed to a transformed humanitarian system that promotes a feminist humanitarian agenda: <https://www.feministhumanitariannetwork.org/>. There are also a number of national feminist networking initiatives such as the Women's Environment Network of local women leaders in humanitarian action instigated by PKKK in the Philippines and Women I Tok Tok Tugetha (WITTT Forum) in Vanuatu.

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