



Strengthening the G20 Anti-Corruption Agenda through Civil Society Engagement

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Executive summary

Corruption is a serious issue that inhibits development in both the public and the private sector. At a global level, the seriousness of corruption is also recognised in international forums such as the G20. South Africa's corruption problem runs deep, but the country's vibrant civil society is helping to root it out by systematically exposing corrupt transactions and actors. Civil society should be included in global anti-corruption efforts, and the G20, through its explicit civil society engagement forums, has a unique opportunity to refine and promote such cooperation.

Introduction

As one of the foremost global forums for economic cooperation, the G20 is well-positioned to support and strengthen international anti-corruption efforts. Apart from being a gathering space for the world's most influential economies, the foregrounding of dialogue and deliberation in its processes, its dedicated working groups and the inclusion of leaders make it easier to turn commitments into action.

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The G20 prioritised the fight against corruption by establishing the Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG) in 2010, seven years after the adoption of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). The UNCAC is the only legally binding international treaty covering the criminalisation and prevention of corruption, as well as international cooperation in combatting it. Significantly, the UNCAC recognises that civil society plays an important role in fighting corruption and provides for its inclusion through Articles 13 and 63.¹

The G20, through the ACWG, created 'one of the main instances of international dialogue and coordination on anti-corruption issues'.² It also established a hub for experience sharing and the drafting of agreed-upon values that 'guide the actions of G20 countries

¹ Ben Wheatland, "The UN Convention Against Corruption and the Role of Civil Society", U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, March 15, 2016.

² University of Toronto, "[G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group Action Plan 2025–2027](#)", G20 Information Centre, October 24, 2024.

and invitee countries and to inform the wider international community in their efforts in preventing and combating corruption'.³

The ACWG Action Plan 2025–2027 (adopted in Brazil in 2024) describes corruption as 'a severe impediment to building prosperity and security for our countries and communities and undermines the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'.⁴ Corrupt governments cannot (or will not) hold themselves accountable. Of course, no government can be said to be wholly corrupt, with kleptocracies and authoritarian governments the possible exceptions. Still, where corruption is present, oversight mechanisms and institutions meant to promote accountability are often manipulated or even captured by corrupt forces in power.

International and domestic standards are necessary steps in combatting corruption, but their implementation hinges on political will and robust, well-funded and impartial anti-corruption institutions. The work of the ACWG has evolved to include recognition of civil society's role in anti-corruption efforts. As an independent, bottom-up force for holding power accountable and mobilising for integrity, civil society is a crucial part of overall anti-corruption efforts.

The G20 Anti-Corruption Ministerial Meeting of 2024, under the presidency of Brazil, culminated in a declaration acknowledging the importance of 'a multi-stakeholder approach' that involves civil society. In addition, the declaration recognised the role of civil society in 'anticorruption efforts, including ensuring that the conditions to this end are in place, in line with previous commitments'.⁵

Multi-stakeholder approaches have been applied worldwide in efforts to improve governance, including combatting corruption. The African Peer Review Mechanism, a voluntary governance self-assessment tool, has been used for decades to drive improved governance. It mandates the inclusion of civil society (which includes not just non-governmental organisations but also religious organisations, academia, think tanks and more) in country review processes. This broadens the perspectives offered and widens the platform for implementing recommendations from country reviews. Other examples of multi-stakeholder approaches to fighting corruption include the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which is driving transparency in the energy and mining sectors through cooperation among government, business and civil society, and CoST, the Infrastructure Transparency Initiative.

In an interview with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), EITI Executive Director Mark Robinson explains that this is done primarily by 'generating data and information on all aspects of the value chain' to 'identify and rule out corruption'

3 University of Toronto, "G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group"

4 University of Toronto, "G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group".

5 G20 Brasil 2024, "Ministerial Declaration: Contributing to a Just World and a Sustainable Planet Through Anti-Corruption and Integrity Promotion" (G20 Anti-Corruption Ministerial Meeting, Natal, Brazil, October 24, 2024).

along the way. This stems from the belief that ‘natural resources belong to the citizens of a country and should benefit them’.⁶ CoST relies on a similar approach: bringing together government, the private sector and civil society to promote transparency in the infrastructure sector and prevent corruption and mismanagement from hampering infrastructure and, by extension, economic development.⁷

Under South Africa’s 2025 G20 presidency, commitments to civil society engagement on anti-corruption, initiated under previous presidencies, were also prioritised. This was especially important in the context of a country where corruption has been linked to various economic challenges and has attracted widespread public attention. Consider, for example, international credit rating downgrades and the Financial Action Task Force’s grey listing for suspected money laundering, both of which are influenced by corruption.

As part of its agenda-setting for 2025, the South African G20 presidency tasked the ACWG to ‘Enhance and Mobilise the Inclusive Participation of the Public Sector, Private Sector, Civil Society and Academia to Prevent and Combat Corruption’.⁸ This speaks to the continued recognition of civil society as a key player in efforts to rein in corruption. With South Africa having recently completed its G20 presidency, this policy insight will consider the context in which the country pursued anti-corruption measures in the G20 and elaborate on the G20’s anti-corruption efforts. Finally, by aligning with the G20’s emphasis on the role of civil society, it suggests ways in which civil society can promote anti-corruption efforts as part of the broader G20 taskforce regime.

Contextual background: Corruption in South Africa

Corruption in South Africa builds on the many ways in which some population groups were denied access to various economic activities under apartheid, with the economy remaining ‘highly concentrated’.⁹ Steven Friedman, professor of political studies, argues that, before 1994, both the state and the economy were controlled through corruption. The corruption challenges the country deals with today are linked to this economic exclusion of the majority Black population.¹⁰

6 Friederike Bauer, “Our Mission Is Relevant and Valid: Interview with Mark Robinson, Executive Director of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), an International Organisation and GIZ Partner that Works Against Corruption in a Highly Profitable Sector”, GIZ, April 30, 2024.

7 CoST Infrastructure Transparency Initiative, “About Us”, accessed June 17, 2026, <https://infrastructuretransparency.org/about-us/>

8 G20 South Africa, “Anti-Corruption Working Group”, Sherpa Track Issue Note, December 2024.

9 Steven Friedman, “How Corruption in South Africa Is Deeply Rooted in the Country’s Past and Why That Matters”, *The Conversation*, August 28, 2020.

10 Friedman, “Corruption in South Africa”.

Several other analysts agree that South Africa's experience with corruption is not new.¹¹ In conversation with Corruption Watch on corrupt practices in apartheid South Africa, Dr Sithembile Mbete notes that the system depended on 'the exploitation of working-class people in general and black people in particular. And instead of undoing that system in 1994 they just kept it going ... The reality is that just as it was then, it's not sustainable or possible now.'¹²

There have been various efforts to weed out corruption in the country. These include initiatives such as the Financial Action Task Force, the National Prosecuting Authority Investigating Directorate Against Corruption and the National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council, as well as investigative work by civil society and the independent media. Under the Ramaphosa administration, which began in 2018, such attempts have made international headlines but, as Friedman rightly notes, 'removing a few high-profile people will not change much because the networks will survive'.¹³

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Corruption is part of the reason why many South Africans remain without adequate housing, water and electricity, and why many had to suffer even more during the COVID-19 pandemic, when relief funds were diverted from their intended purpose. President Cyril Ramaphosa described the misappropriation of COVID-19 relief funds for personal gain as 'an unforgivable betrayal to millions of South Africans'.¹⁴ By August 2020, the Special Investigating Unit was investigating over 600 corruption cases tied to \$294 million in COVID procurement tenders.¹⁵

Notorious corruption cases in recent years have involved a sitting president and business moguls, among others. A common theme that emerges from attempts to bring perpetrators to task is the failure to apply the law and ensure accountability. Former president Jacob Zuma, for example, was accused of fraud and money laundering (among other charges) in 2008, but it has taken more than a decade to get the trial process going.¹⁶

11 Janine Erasmus, "Corruption: We Have to Acknowledge Its Centuries-Old Existence", *Corruption Watch*, January 8, 2021; Lesedi Masoko, "[From Then to Now: The Heritage of Corruption](#)", *Corruption Watch*, September 24, 2022.

12 Erasmus, "Corruption: We Have to Acknowledge".

13 Friedman, "Corruption in South Africa".

14 Guy Oliver, "South Africa's COVID Relief Fund Dogged by Delays and Corruption", *The New Humanitarian*, August 27, 2020.

15 Oliver, "South Africa's COVID Relief Fund".

16 Masoko, "The Heritage of Corruption"; Karyn Maughan, "[Judge Won't Budge on Zuma's April Trial Date, Schedules Downer Removal Appeal for February 2025](#)", *News24*, September 11, 2024.

South Africa is often praised for having one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, in part for its mechanisms to promote transparency and accountability. These were exercised in exemplary fashion in the case of public protector Thuli Madonsela's report on state capture.¹⁷ Yet enforcement is lacking, and detection and investigation are cumbersome. The Zondo Commission, meant to expose state corruption and hold officials accountable, did not deliver as the South African public expected and has led to widespread criticism of Ramaphosa. Thus far, there have been few consequences for those named in the report.

Civil society as an active contributor in South Africa

In their work on civil society and countering grand corruption in South Africa, public administration experts Lubita and Webb define civil society as 'any non-governmental and not-for-profit organisation established to address the social, cultural, political, religious, recreational, gender-based, and economic issues affecting members of society'.¹⁸ In addition, in South Africa, investigative journalism has played an important supporting (and often leading) role in bringing corruption to light and pushing for legal action against guilty parties.

Lubita and Webb state that civil society's anti-corruption efforts in South Africa rest on four pillars: advocacy, civil litigation, investigative journalism and widely publicised anti-corruption campaigns.¹⁹ On the point of investigative journalism, not commonly considered to be a function of civil society, but in Lubita and Webb's analysis an important part of its work, some of the most significant contributions in South Africa are made by the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism and *Daily Maverick's* Scorpio investigative unit.²⁰

Civil society in South Africa has played a pivotal role in promoting transparency and accountability in the country's fight against corruption. This has especially been the case during and after the era of state capture (arguably an ongoing state) under Zuma. Zuma's administration became synonymous with the Gupta corruption scandal and an aborted nuclear deal with Russia that could have bankrupted the country.²¹

17 Public Protector of South Africa, *State of Capture: A Report of the Public Protector*, Report no. 6 of 2016/2017 (South African History Online, October 14, 2016).

18 H. Lubita and W.N. Webb, "Civil Society and Corruption Prevention: An Assessment of Antecedent Conditions", *Administratio Publica* 31, no. 4 (December 2023): 98.

19 Lubita and Webb, "Civil Society and Corruption Prevention".

20 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and MISA, "African Media Barometer: The First Home Grown Analysis of the Media Landscape in Africa" (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and MISA, 2018).

21 Victor H. Mlambo, S.P. Zubane and D.N. Mlambo, "Promoting Good Governance in Africa: The Role of the Civil Society as a Watchdog", *Journal of Public Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2020).

Through a combination of investigative journalism, legal action, public advocacy and support for whistleblowers, civil society organisations (CSOs) have been at the forefront of efforts to expose wrongdoing and demand justice.²² The amaBhungane Centre and the Scorpio investigative unit are linked to one of the most significant contributions of civil society to exposing corruption in South Africa: the so-called #GuptaLeaks saga.²³ In addition to uncovering corruption, CSOs pursue strategic litigation to hold public officials and private actors accountable.

The Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) relies on research and monitoring of 'service delivery issues in the health, housing and education sector[s]', using the data it generates to hold government accountable.²⁴ The PSAM has produced several strategic plan evaluations, budget analyses and expenditure-tracking reports.²⁵ Groups such as the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA), Corruption Watch and the Helen Suzman Foundation regularly take government departments and state-owned entities to court over unlawful contracts, irregular appointments and a lack of transparency.²⁶ Civil society also mobilises public opinion against corruption. Movements like #ZumaMustFall and Save South Africa organised nationwide protests, calling for accountability and demanding Zuma's resignation.²⁷ Through these campaigns, civil society built public pressure that eventually contributed to his departure from office in 2018, when he was 'recalled' by the ANC.²⁸

The G20 and anti-corruption

Because it is a general G20 priority, anti-corruption would likely have featured in South Africa's presidency regardless of the challenges it faces with domestic corruption. But under its presidency, anti-corruption was incorporated as a core objective, a strategic move to help reshape its international image after numerous public corruption scandals.

Anti-corruption in the G20 is approached primarily through the lens of economic prosperity and development. The G20 drives its priorities and planned action to combat corruption through the ACWG. At the same time, it has 'a particular responsibility in promoting the implementation of international anti-corruption multilateral instruments',

22 H. Lubita and W.N. Webb, "Civil Society and Corruption Prevention: An Assessment of Antecedent Conditions", *Administratio Publica* 31, no. 4 (December 2023).

23 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and MISA, "African Media Barometer".

24 South African History Archive, Freedom of Information Programme, "Segment 2: Making Power Accountable", accessed June 7, 2026, <https://foip.saha.org.za/static/segment-2-making-power-accountable#:~:text=This%20segment%20uses%20the%20efforts,that%20require%20civil%20society%20intervention.>

25 Public Service Accountability Monitor, "Monitoring and Advocacy", accessed June 17, 2026, <https://psam.org.za/monitoring-advocacy/#:~:text=Various%20social%20accountability%20monitoring%20tools,the%20financial%20year%20under%20review.>

26 Marianne Séverin, "Civil Society and the Fight Against Illicit Financial Flows in Africa: The Case Study of OUTA and the 'State Capture' in South Africa", in *Illicit Financial Flows from South Africa*, ed. Serges Djouyou Kamga (Routledge, 2021).

27 Antje Daniel and Josh Platzky Miller, "'Must Fall' Movements Globally: Transnational Flows of South African Student Activism", *Third World Quarterly* 46 (2025).

28 South African Government News Agency, "[ANC Recalls President Zuma](#)", February 13, 2018.

of which the UNCAC is especially important.²⁹ The ACWG also sets Action Plans, which help in ‘guiding the group’s substantive work, setting priorities and areas of work, and supporting the implementation of existing commitments’.³⁰

The latest of these Action Plans was adopted in Brazil in 2024 and spans 2025–2027. It is intended to ‘focus on identified common priorities’³¹ where the G20 can best add value to global action and outcomes.³² It was also under Brazil’s G20 presidency that a decision was taken to change tack and adopt ‘a more targeted, concise and actionable document, while maintaining the same level of ambition that marked past plans’.³³ The G20 regards corruption as an impediment to development due to its negative impact on domestic resource mobilisation, and a factor that ‘threatens the integrity of markets and undermines fair competition’ and ‘erodes public trust, deepens inequality, and can contribute to conflict’.³⁴

The ACWG values multi-agency cooperation and is a champion of multilateral engagement on anti-corruption

The ACWG values multi-agency cooperation and is a champion of multilateral engagement on anti-corruption. Most recently, this included a joint session with the OECD Working Group on Bribery convened in Brazil in June 2025 to ‘tackle pressing issues surrounding foreign bribery and anti-corruption efforts and share experiences and good practices’.³⁵ It also held a side event with the UNDP during the second ACWG meeting (June 2025) titled ‘Measuring Integrity in Public Procurement: Methodology, Data, and Indicators for Informed Anti-Corruption Action’.³⁶

The Global South presidencies of the past few years (especially India, Brazil and South Africa) have taken a more targeted approach, focused on action and on engaging a wider range of stakeholders. This is reflected in the 2025 anti-corruption Sherpa Track Issue

29 University of Toronto, “G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group”.

30 University of Toronto, “G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group”.

31 These are ‘(1) asset recovery in corruption cases and international cooperation and mutual legal assistance; (2) anti-money laundering and beneficial ownership transparency; (3) countering foreign bribery; (4) public sector transparency, integrity and accountability; and (5) private sector transparency and integrity.’ See South Africa G20 2025, “G20 ACWG 2025: G20 South Africa 2025 Anti-Corruption Working Group Chair’s Statement”, October 30, 2025.

32 University of Toronto, “G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group”.

33 University of Toronto, “G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group”.

34 G20 South Africa, “The Second G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG) Concludes Technical Meeting on Strengthening the Global Fight Against Corruption”, accessed July 14, 2026, <https://www.g20.org.za/g20-media/the-second-g20-anti-corruption-working-group-acwg-concludes-technical-meeting-on-strengthening-the-global-fight-against-corruption/>.

35 Moses Mushi, “G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group and OECD Working Group on Bribery Session: Key Strategic Issues Addressed”, *The Public Servant*, June 11, 2025.

36 Moses Mushi, “UNDP Side Event at G20 ACWG Focuses on Measuring Integrity in Public Procurement”, DPSA, June 10, 2025.

Note, which prioritises inclusive participation and the mobilisation of ‘the public sector, private sector, civil society, and academia to prevent and combat corruption’.³⁷

Corruption becomes society’s problem. It is therefore crucial that society is involved (and involves itself) in addressing it. The authors of the Issue Note acknowledge that ‘a shared commitment from multi-stakeholders, including stronger partnerships between the public sector, private sector, civil society, and academia, consistent with domestic laws, is necessary to effectively combat corruption’.³⁸ The South African G20 presidency identified a set of deliverables under this goal: ‘A compendium of good practices on the role of multi-stakeholders in preventing and combatting corruption’ and a ‘side event on the role of the public sector, private sector, civil society, and academia in preventing and combating corruption’.³⁹

Civil society support for G20 anti-corruption goals

Civil society is already an important player in the G20, but its visibility in and impact on the anti-corruption track can be strengthened. To move beyond performative civil society engagement, as is often the case when civil society is brought into multilateral platforms, the G20 could create a platform for civil society to mobilise around and engage both the anti-corruption working group and other relevant groups. One of the biggest critiques

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of the UNCAC is that, while it mandates civil society inclusion, it does not go beyond the superficial. CSOs are welcome to attend meetings on the margins of the UNCAC Implementation Review Group, but not the Implementation Review Group meeting itself, nor are they involved in the working group meetings of the Conference of States Parties.⁴⁰ Thus, while civil society inclusion is mandated, it does not necessarily translate into empowerment. Nevertheless, the UNCAC remains one of the only anti-corruption treaties to codify civil society inclusion.

³⁷ G20 South Africa, “Anti-Corruption Working Group”, 6.

³⁸ G20 South Africa, “Anti-Corruption Working Group”, 7.

³⁹ G20 South Africa, “Anti-Corruption Working Group”, 7.

⁴⁰ Wheatland, “The UN Convention against Corruption”.

Although not a fix for civil society inclusion in the UNCAC, the G20 can set an example by deepening its engagement with civil society and fostering an enabling environment in which advocacy groups, watchdog organisations and grassroots movements have the capacity and resources to operate freely and effectively. Indeed, as emphasised during South Africa's G20 presidency, a multi-stakeholder approach complements the existing multi-agency focus. Such an approach will foster greater diversity and richness of opinion and could contribute to achieving other desired outcomes, such as better data gathering, wider data sources and innovative methodologies.⁴¹

During the inaugural technical meeting of the ACWG in 2025, participants singled out 'inclusive participation' as a key priority: '[R]ecognising that combating corruption requires a multi-stakeholder approach, the ACWG seeks to enhance participation from public and private sectors, civil society, academia, and youth.' It was further acknowledged that 'engaging diverse groups fosters a comprehensive understanding of corruption's societal impact and encourages collective action'.⁴²

Together, the G20's emphasis on multi-agency and multi-stakeholder cooperation can strengthen its position as an active shaper of the international anti-corruption consensus

Together, the G20's emphasis on multi-agency and multi-stakeholder cooperation can strengthen its position as an active shaper of the international anti-corruption consensus and bolster collective action in implementing anti-corruption measures. G20 countries that are also part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) will be a good place to start.

Under the OGP, each national member has a National Action Plan (NAP). These plans are co-created by governments and civil society, with the official OGP website noting, 'Successful OGP action plans focus on significant domestic open government priorities and ambitious reforms; are relevant to the values of transparency, accountability, and public participation; and contain specific, time-bound, and verifiable commitments.'⁴³ The NAPs of several G20 member states are now up for review after their two- to four-year implementation timelines. The review period can be used to craft actionable anti-corruption objectives in a space where the government is already working with civil society on accountability.

41 Mushi, "UNDP Side Event at G20 ACWG".

42 "Towards a Corruption-Free Future: Insights from the G20 1st ACWG Technical Meeting", *DPSA*, March 6, 2025.

43 Open Government Partnership, "Action Plan", accessed June 7, 2026, <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/glossary/action-plan/#:~:text=Action%20plans%20are%20at%20the,More%2C%20accountability%2C%20and%20public%20participation.>

TABLE 1 G20 MEMBER COUNTRIES THAT ARE ALSO MEMBERS OF THE OGP

G20 member	Member of the Open Government Partnership	
	Yes	No
Argentina	X	
Australia	X	
Brazil	X	
Canada	X	
China		X
France	X	
Germany	X	
India		X
Indonesia	X	
Italy	X	
Japan		X
Mexico	X	
Russia		X
Saudi Arabia		X
South Africa	X	
South Korea	X	
Türkiye		X
UK	X	
US		X
EU	Supranational organisations are not listed in the OGP; only national or local governments are.	
AU		

Source: Compiled by the authors, using the official [OGP Members List](#) and [Status Dashboard](#)

Transnational cooperation among G20 member states can also be enhanced in this way, but rising authoritarianism threatens this potential. Nevertheless, by allowing civil society to share knowledge, experience and insights with G20 representatives, task forces and working groups, a clearer understanding of the many nuances underlying corruption can be gained.

Conclusion

Corruption is a universal phenomenon, cutting across both public and private sectors. Attention is often focused on public sector corruption, particularly given that public procurement is one of the highest-risk areas. Still, it is important to recognise that procurement is only an interface. The private sector is an active party in transactions where integrity can be upheld or undermined. While it is a universal challenge, there are numerous examples of countries that have put in place safeguarding measures to both expose corruption and to change the norms that have enabled it. South Africa is a clear example of how civil society, when allowed an effective platform, can positively change governance and expose wrongdoing.

The opportunities that come with engaging civil society in multilateral forums such as the G20 should not be taken for granted. Decisions are made in such forums that directly impact citizens

The opportunities that come with engaging civil society in multilateral forums such as the G20 should not be taken for granted. Decisions are made in such forums that directly impact citizens. Who better, then, than civil society to represent their interests and share their views? Yet civil society is a self-appointed representative of citizens. Its legitimacy is strengthened when it draws on existing mechanisms to advance its goals or creates new mechanisms that align civil society along a shared goal. The UNCAC Coalition is an example of the latter – a global network spanning 350 CSOs that work together to promote ‘ratification, implementation and monitoring’ of the UNCAC.⁴⁴ Answers to challenging problems, such as corruption, cannot come from a single source. To address persisting issues, therefore, all hands should be on deck. Knowledge sharing and peer learning on anti-corruption among G20 members, with civil society included, can only serve to strengthen resolve.

⁴⁴ UNCAC Civil Society Coalition, “[The UNCAC Coalition: A Global Civil Society Network Supporting the UN Convention Against Corruption](#)”, September 2013.

Recommendations

- Civil society should be engaged beyond Civil20 to become a vital resource for the various task forces and working groups.
- Civil society should harness accountability-tracking tools to take the initiative and approach leaders with concrete proposals and recommendations.
- Lessons can be learnt from more than just the success stories of civil society exposing corruption. The risks to whistleblowers – such as the threat of professional and financial retaliation, psychological pressure or physical threats and murder – should be acknowledged. Measures to mitigate these should be considered part of efforts to strengthen anti-corruption efforts.

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