

# **ECONOMIC RIGHTS, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2008, a severe economic downturn, or recession, throughout the industrialized world became painfully apparent as evidenced by several significant indicators. These indicators included high costs in oil prices, food, health care, transportation, housing, and a substantial credit debacle leading to the bankruptcy of large and well established investment and commercial banks in many nations around the world. Economists argue that the huge increases in commodity prices came as a consequence of extended periods of easily available credit and the primary cause of the downturn was indeed financial collapse since creditors could no longer be compensated. This in turn led to increased unemployment, housing foreclosures, bankruptcy, and other contemporaneous economic downturns in markets around the world. Consequently, economic catastrophe resulted and those hit hardest by this catastrophe were the middleclass and poor. Suffice it to say, economic repair is in order. One suggestion for addressing the adverse impact experienced by the middle class and poor will be to reexamine president Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) "Economic Bill of Rights" program. In order to make economic reform meaningful, a reaffirmation of environmental and welfare policies will be assessed along with an environmental management strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

The global economic recession that is currently being experienced is a symptom of the economic boom from 2003-2007. In many ways it is the result of short-term economic strategies the United States (US) economy has relied on since the 1970s. The current downturn in the economy is related to the success of the economic booms of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2003-2007 periods. The economy (employment, price increases-decreases, GDP growth, exports, imports) is stricken from income earners and firms reevaluating their economic priorities by being forced to live within the limits of their income. What this initiates is a huge and difficult financial contraction because the US economy had become overly dependent on household spending based on growing debt and earnings as a result of “asset price inflation” (Fraad-Wolff, 2009). Overspending provided the conditions of the boom. The debt, financial innovation and risk taking required, created the conditions for a global solvency crisis and painful readjustment exemplified by the present condition.

The intent by the Bush and Obama administrations and representative congresses, of preventing rapid and disorderly economic meltdowns, was the correct course of action regarding public policy. But the prudent course of action that must be recognized is to not rebuild the economic structure that is falling apart here in the US. What should be avoided is a return to massive trade imbalances, huge government deficits, loose monetary policy, debt based consumer spending and rampant speculation. American employees must be paid enough to live and spend to stimulate the economy, as opposed to the usual debit spending through credit cards and easy financing terms. In other words, attempting to rebuild the macro economy that the US has experienced since the

1970s must be jettisoned. In fact, at the current moment the 1970s model still dominates policy planning. If it is implemented, and it appears it will, it will only reconstruct an unsustainable and crisis prone economic structure. The boom-bust cycle will be repeated again. Moreover, the pressure has been to shift the heavy costs of the economic crisis onto the middle- and low-income communities already suffering by unemployment, foreclosures, reduced pay and benefits, and rising job insecurity. In fact, billionaires such as Warren Buffett have argued that during the current economic crisis it would be better to raise the tax share paid by firms and corporations and the wealthiest 5-10% of citizens (Buffett, 2011).

Another challenge in rebuilding the economy is to put in place structural foundations within the US Constitution regarding fundamental economic priorities. One model that would best address this policy direction would be to implement FDR's "Economic Bill of Rights," as an economic safeguard to middle- and low-income communities. In order for this to be effective economically, this new strategy must also focus on environmentally sustainable economic strategies and maintain while also maintaining the integrity of welfare policy for the poorest of citizens. This direction must secure an economic future defined by higher wages, lower deficit spending, increased personal savings, greener lifestyles, and more prudent and judicious targeted government intervention in the US economy. Nevertheless, with President Obama's recent declaration that his administration will seek to cut taxes and spending, it remains to be seen if his administration is committed to secure fundamental economic rights while simultaneously prioritizing the most important of all human resources – the environment.

## ECONOMIC BILL OF RIGHTS

Franklin Delano Roosevelt first started to address the need for economic rights, much like the political rights granted to US citizens in the original Bill of Rights, during his first campaign for president in 1932 (Rosenman, 1950). Throughout his presidency, FDR advocated the need for increased government support through the welfare state. However, it was not until the January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944, State of the Union address to Congress, the FDR referred to a “Second Bill of Rights.” The principle elements of this notion can be divided into two fundamental elements: opportunity and security. FDR argued that individual freedom is inadequate without economic security and that economic deprivation itself threatened social cohesion. With respect to *economic opportunity*, FDR argued for the economic rights to: a useful and remunerative job; a good education; every businessman to conduct their business free from unfair competition and domination by monopolies. Regarding *economic security*, FDR argued for rights to: protection from the economic fears associated with old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment; adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health; decent housing for families; a living wage in order to provide adequate food, clothing, and recreation.

In essence, the Economic Bill of Rights, or “Second Bill of Rights,” as described by Cass Sunstein, has been partially implemented in the US while other industrialized countries have already implemented such rights (Sunstein, 2004; Sunstein, 1997; Reich, 1991; Sunstein, 1990). Though economic rights were not specifically included in the original Constitution and subsequent amendments, scholars such as Sunstein demonstrate that the Founding Fathers (Madison and Jefferson) nevertheless considered the strategic significance of these rights as essential to democracy itself. Madison states, “By withholding

unnecessary opportunities from a few, to increase the inequality of property, by an immoderate, and especially an unmerited accumulation of riches; by the silent operation of laws, which, without violating the laws of property, reduce extreme wealth to a state of mediocrity, and raise indigence toward a state of comfort” (198). Jefferson also argues that, “The consequences of this enormous inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of mankind, legislatures cannot invest too many devices for subdividing property ... Another means of silently lessening the inequality of property is to exempt all from taxation below a certain point, and to tax the higher portions of property in geometrical progression as they rise. Whenever there is in any country, uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right. The earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on” (82).

The idea of economic rights did not attract much attention in the US until FDR was elected president. The current experience of The Great Depression made the need for economic rights quite clear in the minds of a large proportion of US citizens. Sunstein indicates that new “rights” need not take the form of amendments to the US Constitution. They also occur through reinterpretation of the Constitution by courts or when a general consensus develops among large majorities of our citizens as to what constitutes a “right.” Roosevelt’s preferred method for establishing a Second Bill of Rights was that latter, and he accomplished this through more than twelve years of advocating for these rights and putting them into practice through executive orders and pushing Congress to enact legislation. Some of the most concrete results of FDR’s efforts were the Social Security Act of 1935, the creation of several agencies that produced greatly needed jobs, labor protection laws that created the right for workers to organize into unions and a federal minimum wage, antitrust

policies, the GI bill of rights, and to help pay for some of those programs, record tax rates on wealthy corporations and individuals. But perhaps more important than these concrete accomplishments, by the end of FDR's presidency, large segments of the American population accepted many aspects of his Economic Bill of Rights as legitimate rights – for example, the right to an education.

The price of economic rights is no doubt expensive. This has translated into opposition from some Americans, such as conservatives and libertarians in general, because they believe that this entails taking wealth from those who have it in order to give it to those who are in need. Thus they see these rights as involving coercion and theft by government (Machen, 1990). Yet it was FDR who argued that wealthy Americans and corporations could afford to pay more in the form of taxes. FDR demonstrated that wealthy people and corporations are wealthy primarily because of government actions, including: protection of private property, maintenance of contract laws through government legal systems, government charters to operate corporations, use of government infrastructure, government subsidies to corporations, and many others. The point is not to say that the wealthy do not earn their wealth. The point is that their wealth is accumulated and maintained with the active assistance of government. It was FDR who argued that the need to tax that wealth in order to carry out critical government functions, it cannot be automatically assumed that those actions are unjust. In fact, it is frequently those who benefit most from government actions who bitterly complain when government intervenes through progressive taxation to help other people. *But what is needed to make more complete FDR's economic bill of rights would be to add an essential element: environmental rights bases on sustainable development practices.*

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In addition to a more democratic economy based on FDR's economic bill of rights, a complementary environmental policy (or environmental rights) should be implemented, that is, if the interrelatedness of natural resources and economic well-being is to be upheld as a policy priority. This also has strategic significance since market liberalism or co-opted policy-makers do not guarantee the risk-management of natural resources to which the economy and the well-being of citizens depends. Arguably, sustainable development strategies would best fit a democratic economy model (Mula and Tilbury, 2011). Come what may, the ideological hegemony of capitalist economic culture in the US needs to be challenged by the evident disastrous economic outcomes of the past several years. Ideological hegemony refers to the "idea systems" or "social constructions," that ruling classes construct to create willing and pliant citizens in political regimes that lack moral legitimacy. In fact, the argument that individuals are governed as much by what they learn to think and believe, as by any use of force, has profound significance, since the threat to greater social and economic justice would come at the expense of the wealthiest members of society. This is precisely why it is imperative that sustainable development and welfare strategies be assessed, that is, in terms of promoting social and economic justice.

### *Environmental Policy*

Sustainable development is the environmental policy doctrine which argues that natural resource depletion and economic expansion must maintain ecological limits within the broadest sense of the term (Merchant, 1992; 1994; 2007). It was the World Conservation Strategy Report in 1980 and the Brundtland Commission Report in

1987 that originated the popular conception of sustainable development. Though sustainable development is not an entirely new concept, it is nevertheless the latest expression of a longstanding ethic involving the human community's relationship with the environment and the current generation's responsibilities to future ones. The basic understanding of sustainable development, as derived from the Agenda 21 sustainable development policies, which focuses on the notion of greater resource equity which can be divided into two categories: *intergenerational equity* (fairness to posterity), *intragenerational equity* (fairness to contemporary persons). Solow defines both expressions as "an obligation to leave to future generations with the option or capacity to be as well off as the current one, which basically constitutes an injunction on the current generation not to satisfy itself by impoverishing its successors" (Dorfman and Dorfman, 1993: 181).

Sustainable development principles attempt to implement "green policies" in order to promote environmental integrity and justice. This is inextricably bound to principles of economic justice in which the fair distribution of natural resources, wealth, capital assets, and so on, are prioritized in order to promote a relatively more just and humane standard of living for all people. Suffice it to say, the promotion of collective education regarding sustainable development and environmental policies is paramount since knowledge and support of these policies benefit individual communities and societies. What is implied here is the difficult task of inviting stakeholders to reevaluate their principles, attitudes, and consumption patterns. As a consequence, the Earth Summits in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002, (and presumably reaffirm at the Rio Summit 2012) called on local populations, indigenous persons, and international organizations to inform others of the importance of the



long-term benefits of sustainable environmental policies, both domestic and global.

A key concept in the understanding of sustainable development is the notion of carrying capacity (Brown, 2011). While many academics have challenged this term from an empirical perspective, it nevertheless presents an important insight into the dynamics of ecology and the implications for social change (Erlich and Erlich, 1992; Erlich, Erlich, and Daly, 1995). Carrying capacity can be defined as the maximum number of people that a given habitat can sustain for an indefinite period of time (Catton and Dunlap, 1993). This does not exclude common notions that carrying capacity is simply the maximum number of people a particular habitat can support in the short run, or as the point at which human demand exceeds environmental capacity. The significant idea underlying the notion of carrying capacity is that in order for a particular population to be sustained, its carrying capacity must continually draw upon limited resources in order to foster “a given type of social organization that a particular environment can support *indefinitely*” (p. 206).

Sustainable development policy is thus presented with an apparent dilemma between limited resources and the many difficult policy trade-offs which result. This scenario has provoked discussion among scientists, economists, philosophers, and social theorists, regarding the equitable distribution/redistribution of resources to promote generational resource equity. While it may be asserted that sustainable resource distribution can be allocated equitably, given the per-capita consumption, it may nevertheless be impossible to achieve this goal. To slow or stabilize growth and depletion misses the point since the implementation of sustainable growth may never be obtained in the first place. As a result, dependence on basic needs and access to natural resources is predicated upon a finite resource base (Schnailberg and Gould, 1994).

What this means is that if the carrying capacity of the planet – which equals the resource base of 10 Earths – continues at the current rate of “resource overshoot,” then exponential ecological disaster will result. Any attempt at generational resource equity will then be futile (Brown, 1982; Brown 1981). This is precisely why sustainable development policies must be an integral part of economic recovery in the United States since the economic livelihood of the nation and the planet are interdependent. In this sense, sustainable economic development must have strategic priority in economic policy which in turn affects basic human needs related food, clothing, housing, health, and safety. Needless to say, environmental policy and the EPA in the United States do not necessarily guarantee an effective environmental policy. Sustainable development policies do not guarantee this either. However, with sustainable policies implemented into law, environmental policy can be more effective at promoting economic stability and environmental well-being.

### ***Welfare Policy***

Whether the market can provide living-wage sustainable work for welfare recipients, and the labor force at large, appears to be suspect historically, especially with respect to the current economic situation in the US. It also remains a highly debatable point whether or not the market can correct itself so that it will eventually provide living-wage employment as libertarians and conservative argue it will. This is also made more problematic with the increased class alienation taking place in the US, in which the poor and middle class are becoming increasingly marginalized as the rich and super rich become more prosperous financially. Moreover, the market has never indicated that living-wage employment for every person is a historical possibility at the present moment in time. Normally full employment means the approximately 3%-

5% unemployment is an acceptable outcome of market forces creating work. Currently unemployment in the US is at 10%. Therefore the need for some form of welfare support can be agreed upon. So at the current historical moment in the United States, what should welfare policy attempt do in a more democratic economy? Policy theorists, such as Karger, Stoesz, and Johnson, argue that an American welfare policy should be democratically constructed by welfare recipients themselves (1994). This would soften the bureaucratic government approach to administering welfare policy by requiring welfare recipients to be responsible for their own welfare design. This stands in contrast to what some would consider a dehumanizing state model which relegates welfare recipients to the level of clients or objects of government policy.

A democratic, self-governing approach to welfare policy should include the following priorities: (1) self-determination and participation; (2) family and community; (3) social solidarity; (4) productive labor; (5) social choice. Thus welfare policy must prioritize the following normative values: (a) that each person has the right to determine their own destiny and interaction with collective resources as free and responsible persons; (b) that families and communities have the right to be economically supported when the precariousness of the market results in dysfunctions that affect their lives; (c) that solidarity promotes social cohesion in which people and communities, especially the poorest members of society, are respected and valued; (d) that people, families, and communities have the fundamental right to work in order to support themselves; and (e) that a reasonable selection of work related activities are available so that individuals, families, and communities can sustain themselves indefinitely, if and when markets become dysfunctional and fail (Johnson, 1990). The goal here is to provide

individuals with a democratic mechanism in which feedback is solicited by participants in welfare programs so that the welfare state can be administered and managed, in effect, by the very people who are the recipients of the services provided. Here the state plays the role of “facilitator” by simply providing a structure which discourages unnecessary dependency on the state and demands that participants be active in the programs that serve them.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT**

If economic rights are to have a significant impact in the lives of people in the US, then an environmental management strategy should also be considered, that is, to protect those natural resources which are essential to economic security (Hegerl, Karl, Allen, Bindoff, Gillett, Karoly, Zhang, Zwiers, 2006). This would mean protection of the atmosphere, water (oceans and freshwater), land use and agricultural use, At both the local and global scale, and in the broadest sense, sustainability and environmental management involves managing the oceans, freshwater systems, land and atmosphere, and forests according to sustainability principles. Land use change is fundamental to the operations of the biosphere because alterations in the relative proportions of land dedicated to urbanization, agriculture, forest, woodland, grassland and pasture have a marked effect on the global water, carbon and nitrogen biogeochemical cycles (Krebs, 2009). Management of the earth’s atmosphere involves assessment of all aspects of the carbon cycle to identify opportunities to address human-induced climate change. This has become a major focus of scientific research precisely because of the potential catastrophic effects on biodiversity and human communities. Ocean circulation patterns have a strong influence on climate and weather patterns, and in turn, the

food supply of both humans and other organisms which share an organic interdependence for survival.

### *Atmosphere*

In March 2009 at a meeting of the Copenhagen Climate Council, 2,500 climate experts from 80 countries issued a keynote statement that there is now “no excuse” for failing to act on global warming and that without strong carbon reduction targets “abrupt or irreversible” shifts in climate may occur that will be very difficult for contemporary societies to address. Management of the global atmosphere now involves assessment of all aspects of the carbon cycle to identify opportunities to address human induced climate change (Richardson, Steffen, Liverman, 2011; NASA, 2011; NAS, 2011). Other human impacts on the atmosphere include air pollution in cities, the pollutants including toxic chemicals like nitrogen oxides, sulfur oxides, volatile organic compounds and particulate matter that produce photochemical smog and acid rain, and the chlorofluorocarbons that degrade the ozone layer. Anthropogenic particulates, such as, sulfate aerosols in the atmosphere reduce the direct irradiance and reflectance (albedo) of the earth’s surface (Sneider, Rosencranz, Niles, 2002). Known as global dimming, the decrease is estimated to have been about 4% between 1960 and 1990, although the trend has subsequently reversed. Global dimming may have disturbed the global water cycle by reducing evaporation and rainfall in some areas. It also creates a cooling effect and this may have partially masked the effect of greenhouse gases on global warming. This has had a significant impact on all aspects of the earth’s climate and has also produced innumerable policy problems on a global scale. The impact of these perceived problems has implications for human communities with respect to natural resources, food production, and general well-being.

### ***Oceans***

Ocean circulation patterns have a strong influence on climate and weather and, in turn, the food supply of both humans and other organisms. Scientists have warned of the possibility, under the influence of climate change, of a sudden alteration in circulation patterns of ocean currents that could drastically alter the climate in some regions of the globe (Kerr, 2007). Major human environmental impacts occur in the more habitable regions of the ocean fringes, in particular, coastlines, estuaries, and bays. Ten percent of the world's population – about 600 million people – live in low-lying areas vulnerable to sea level rise. Trends of concern that require management include: overfishing (beyond sustainable levels); coral bleaching due to ocean warming and ocean acidification due to increasing levels of dissolved carbon dioxide, and sea level rise due to climate change. Because of their vastness, oceans also act as a convenient dumping ground for human waste. Remedial strategies include the following: improved waste management strategies; statutory control of overfishing by adopting sustainable fishing practices and the use of environmentally sensitive and sustainable aquaculture fish and farming; reduction of fossil fuel emissions and restoration of coastal and other marine habitat (Burgman, Carr, Godden, Gregory, McBride, Flander, Maquire, 2011; Burgman, 2005).

### ***Freshwater***

Water covers 71% of the earth's surface. Of this, 97.5% is the salty water of the oceans and only 2.5% freshwater, most of which is locked up in the Antarctic ice sheet. The remaining freshwater is found in lakes, rivers, wetlands the soil, aquifers and atmosphere. All life depends on the solar-powered global water cycle, the evaporation from the oceans and land to form water vapor that later condenses from clouds as rain, which then

becomes the renewable part of the freshwater supply. Awareness of the global importance of preserving water for ecosystem services has only recently emerged as, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than half the world's wetlands have been lost along with their valuable environmental services. Biodiversity-rich freshwater ecosystems are currently declining faster than marine or land ecosystems making them the world's most vulnerable habitats (Hoekstra, 2006). Increasing urbanization pollutes clean water supplies and much of the world still does not have access to clean, safe water (Clarke and King, 2006). In the industrial world demand, management has slowed absolute usage rates but increasingly water is being transported over vast distances from water-rich natural areas to population-dense urban areas and energy-hungry desalination is becoming more widely used. Greater emphasis is now being placed on the improved management of blue (harvestable) and green (soil water available for plant use) water, and this applies at all scales of water management. In essence, the attempt to maintain clean potable water is critical for human use and the interrelated resources of the planet. This would include the atmosphere and weather patterns which have a significant impact on resources used by societies.

### ***Land Use and Agriculture***

Loss of biodiversity stems from the habitat loss and fragmentation produced by the human appropriation of land for development, forestry and agriculture as natural capital is progressively converted to man-made capital. Land use change is fundamental to the operations of the biosphere because alterations in the relative proportions of land dedicated to urbanization, agriculture, forest, woodland, grassland and pasture have a marked effect on the global water, carbon and nitrogen biogeochemical cycles and this can impact negatively on both natural and human systems

(Gold, 2009). Nevertheless, feeding over 6 billion human beings takes a heavy toll on the earth's resources. This begins with the appropriation of about 38% of the earth's land surface and about 20% of its net primary productivity. When added to this are the resource-hungry activities of industrial agribusiness, this would include everything from the crop need for irrigation water, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides to the resource costs of food and packaging, transport and retail. Suffice it to say, food is essential to life, but the list of environmental costs of food production is a long one: topsoil depletion, erosion, conversion to desert from constant tillage of annual crops, overgrazing, salinization, sodification, waterlogging, high levels of fossil fuel use, reliance on inorganic fertilizers and synthetic organic pesticides, reductions in genetic diversity by the mass use of monocultures, water resource depletion, pollution of waterbodies by run-off and groundwater contamination, social problems including the decline of family farms and weakening of rural communities. All of these environmental problems associated with industrial agriculture and agribusiness are now being addressed through such movements as sustainable agriculture, organic farming, and increased awareness of sustainable business practices.

### *Forests*

Since the Neolithic revolution, human use has reduced the world's forest cover by about 47%. Present-day forests occupy about a quarter of the world's ice-free land with about half of these occurring in the tropics. In temperate and boreal regions forest area is gradually increasing (with the exception of Siberia), but deforestation in the tropics is of major concern. Forests moderate the local climate and the global water cycle through their light reflectance (albedo) and evapotranspiration. They also conserve biodiversity, protect water quality, preserve soil



and soil quality, provide fuel and pharmaceuticals, and purify the air. These free ecosystem services are not given a market value under current economic systems, and so forest conservation has little appeal when compared with the economic benefits of logging and clearance which, through soil degradation and organic decomposition returns carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that about 90% of the carbon stored in land vegetation is locked up in trees and that they sequester about 50% more carbon than is present in the atmosphere. Changes in land use currently contribute about 20% of total global carbon emissions while heavily logged Indonesia and Brazil are major sources of emissions (WRI, 2011). Climate change can be mitigated by sequestering carbon in reforestation schemes, plantations and timber products. Also wood biomass can be utilized as a renewable carbon-neutral fuel. The FAO has suggested that, over the period 2005-2050, effective use of tree planting could absorb about 10-20% of man-made emissions. So monitoring the condition of the world's forests must be part of a global strategy to mitigate emissions and protect ecosystem services. However, climate change may pre-empt this FAO scenario as a study by the International Union of Forest Organizations in 2009 concluded that the stress of a 2.5C (4.5F) temperature rise above pre-industrial levels could result in the release of vast amounts of carbon. Thus the potential of forests to act as carbon "sinks" is at risk of being lost entirely.

## CONCLUSION

What underlies the foundation of democratic economic rights must also include sustainable development practices and an environmental management policy that society as a whole, acting through public and non-profit institutions, has the moral responsibility to support in order

to enhance human dignity and protect human rights (Barth, 1996). This needs attention at both the domestic and international levels. Nevertheless, when focusing on domestic economic and environmental rights, government has the essential responsibility in this area. This does not mean that government has the primary or exclusive role, but it does have a positive moral responsibility in safeguarding human rights and ensuring that the minimum conditions of human dignity are met for all. In a democracy, government is intended to be a rational tool by which collective action takes place to promote the general welfare and common good. This implies that human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community. These rights include not only civil and political rights but also economic and environmental rights. In this sense all people have a fundamental right to life, which translates to fundamental human needs, such as, work, food clothing, shelter, medical care, education, employment, and a healthy natural environment in which to live. Government must ensure that these rights are protected. One clear policy measure to ensure that these basic human rights are guaranteed is to implement a more democratic economy and environmental management strategy. Here it is important to understand the economy and environment need to be understood as a common pool resource and that government's role in this capacity is to monitor risk.

### ACRONYMS

FAO	United Nations Food and
Agriculture Organization	
FDR	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
NAS	National Academy of Science
NASA	National Aeronautics and
	Space Administration

UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO-IHE	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural organization - Institute for Water Education.
US	United States
WRI	World Resources Institute

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