

WORLD IN TRANSITION

Policy

Roundtable 2

Disaster Resilience



5 May
2026

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UNSW
CANBERRA

**World in
Transition**

CRICOS Provider Code 000986

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Policy Roundtable 2: Disaster Resilience

5 May 2026, UNSW Canberra

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This workshop report (and its executive summary) is the sole responsibility of the Convenor and does not necessarily reflect the views of other workshop participants. The workshop was conducted under the Chatham House rule.

Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. Current approaches treat disaster response and recovery as episodic emergencies rather than a national security issue. Concentration on the acute response often neglects upstream and downstream impacts.	5
2. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) remains one of first responders responsible for involvement for disasters, potentially impacting force readiness and community resilience.	7
3. Externally imposed programs for disaster resilience can steamroll local capacity in instances of disasters, while community-led efforts often more effectively reinforce local resilience.	9
4. Australia fails to effectively leverage data to address the ongoing issues of governance, funding continuity and critical-system fragility.	11
Key Recommendations for Transition	13
Recommended Resources	14

Executive Summary

Introduction

Climate change is accelerating the frequency and severity of disasters, reshaping the significance of critical infrastructure and disaster preparedness. Lack of effective disaster preparedness can amplify human suffering, economic disruption, and political instability. Resilience is now a core element of both national and regional security for Australia. These changes provide Australia with challenges and opportunities to connect disaster resilience with broader questions of national resilience, security, and capacity. To prepare for future disasters in an era of increasing strategic competition, Australia must consider how effective approaches to disaster resilience can enhance state capacity, social trust, and regional influence.

The World in Transition (WIT) initiative is a three-year flagship program exploring how geopolitical, strategic and technological shifts are reshaping Australia's external environment and the practice of statecraft in a competitive age. This includes exploring how intersecting economic, technological, and strategic transformations pose new challenges for the nation. Through public lectures, strategic roundtables and collaborative workshops that engage leading Australian and international experts, the WIT initiative aims to bridge the gap between academic insight and national capability.

This second WIT roundtable brought together experts from industry, defence, government, and academia to examine the evolving challenges of disaster resilience at home and abroad through an Australian lens, and the ways forward at home and abroad.

The Strategic Outlook

In the near future, disasters are forecast to be more frequent, complex, and interconnected than ever before. Australia must treat disaster preparedness, response, and recovery as integral to national resilience and security. Failure to do so risks not only missing an opportunity to strengthen communities on the ground, but also weakening Australia's capacity for strategic agility in the future. In an environment of intensifying global strategic competition, Australia must also consider how lessons from its regional aid and development practice can inform its own approach. This is not simply a matter of good neighbourliness or of fulfilling the normative expectations of instruments such as the United Nations Charter; it is also a matter of statecraft.

The strategic outlook facing Australia is one of complexity, uncertainty, and constraint, compounded by the increasingly severe effects of climate change on global systems. These realities create not only risks and challenges, but also opportunities for astute geopolitical actors. Yet growing geostrategic uncertainty and competition may also further weaken international systems designed to address global disasters collectively. Deep cuts

to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have already been accompanied by the United States' withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO). Uncertainty about the trajectory of the next US administration has encouraged a form of 'quiet quitting' among other donors, with some discreetly reducing aid, even as WHO member states have moved to bolster its budget through a second 20 per cent funding increase since 2024.

While the withdrawal of the global hegemon may also create opportunities to spur localisation, taken these dynamics together leave an immediate gap in disaster-related capacity. They also risk reputational damage to Western governments, institutions, and organisations. Australia's approach to disasters, both at home and abroad, must adapt accordingly.

Within Australia's borders, recent experience of disasters shows the need to balance innovation in preparedness with pragmatic approaches to response and recovery. Australia's disaster response paradigm must fundamentally shift to place community resilience at the centre of national strength. This raises important questions about how to prepare for cascading infrastructure failures, what sovereign mission-critical systems are required, what regulatory and funding settings are needed to sustain them, and how to maintain the social licence and public trust underpinning national preparedness and resilience.

Outside Australian borders, disasters across the Indo-Pacific region have left countries confronting the impacts of concurrent disasters in an age of sea-level rise, devastating cyclones, and climate-induced displacement. Many Indo-Pacific states treat disaster preparedness and response as core to their foreign policy. Australia's own approach as a regional power will need to acknowledge and address the connections between climate adaptation, disaster resilience, humanitarian action, as questions of both national security and regional influence.

A focus on disaster preparedness, response and recovery is essential to strengthening Australia's resilience in an uncertain future. This will require better collaboration across sectors, stronger planning, and incentives that go beyond the current recovery-focused system. It also means embedding disaster resilience wholistically into communities while addressing existing dependencies and vulnerabilities. Just as importantly, Australia should build on the substantial body of existing work and prior recommendations rather than repeatedly relearning the same lessons. Real progress will require political will to invest in preparedness and resilience before crises occur. This report aims to support that effort by setting out key themes and cross-cutting recommendations for Australia.

Strategy at a Glance



Rebalance investment toward sustained preparedness and mitigation



Strengthen community capacity and locally sustainable approaches



Effectively Leverage Data

Move toward a data-informed model of disaster resilience



Strengthen Sovereign Capability

Build and support critical systems and reduce dependencies through continuity

Key Recommendations

1. Invest in Preparedness

Prioritise mitigation over response.

3. Harness Better Data

Enable informed, integrated decisions.

2. Empower Communities

Build local resilience and capacity.

4. Strengthen Sovereign Capability

Protect critical systems and continuity.



1. Current approaches treat disaster response and recovery as episodic emergencies rather than a national security issue. Concentration on the acute response often neglects upstream and downstream impacts.

Driven by climate change and increasingly extreme weather patterns, disasters are projected to become more frequent and to have compounding effects within Australia and across the world. Disasters pose a systemic risk to critical, interconnected systems, generating cascading failures across energy, transport, and communications while exposing gaps in readiness. The Australian bushfires of 2019–20 illustrated these effects starkly. Despite this, Australian funding and policy attention often remain concentrated on the immediate response to disasters as discrete events, neglecting both the upstream phases of preparedness and mitigation and the downstream phase of recovery. In the face of forecasts of overlapping and interlocking disaster events, Australian policy remains reactive and episodic.

Australia will need to move from an episodic model of disaster response toward one of national continuity, embedding disaster resilience within broader thinking about Australian national resilience as a pillar of national security. National resilience refers to the capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from systemic shocks such as disasters; national security refers to the strategies, policies, and measures a nation uses to protect itself from external and internal threats.

Where communities are unprepared, disasters can have devastating and destabilising long-term effects, requiring the mobilisation of national resources to restore safety and security. In extreme cases, especially in already fragile states, disasters can also increase the risk of armed conflict or contribute to its onset. Effective efforts to address disasters, both domestically and regionally, therefore cannot be separated from the broader context of strategic competition and uncertainty. Recent disaster trends across the Asia-Pacific underscore the scale of the challenge, and Fiji's experience in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with Category 5 cyclones, illustrates the kind of compounding disruption Australia may face in its region.

Interlocking and overlapping disasters could significantly weaken Australian communities, national resilience, and national power. When environmental extremes can affect power, communications, logistics, and mobility simultaneously, they raise a basic question: what does resilient infrastructure and capability actually require? At present, Australia's risk mapping remains largely reactive. Known weak points, including communications networks and backup systems, continue to fail or remain insufficiently hardened. Transport provides a clear example. Shifting freight from road to rail during a fuel shortage only works if alternative corridors have already been identified and protected, including against the risk of simultaneous flooding.

Governments at all levels have sought to address these issues through investment in industry partners, but many of the organisations that function as de facto responders have commercial and shareholder obligations that shape how they respond. Technological and

information sovereignty is part of the same problem. Australia is dependent on too narrow a range of foreign-owned systems. In a crisis, when response systems are increasingly underpinned by artificial intelligence and software over which there is no sovereign control, that dependence becomes a real vulnerability. By contrast, some European countries have moved deliberately toward more sovereign systems.

Australian policy is often constrained by short-termism reinforced by election cycles. The result is underfunded and underdeveloped infrastructure, weak local and community coordination mechanisms, and inconsistent disaster programming. Moving forward, disaster policy should be driven by genuine need rather than optics.

Resolving these entrenched but ineffective approaches will require a fundamental shift in mindset. Changing climate conditions are increasing both the severity and the frequency of disasters, placing greater strain on national systems and disaster management. These conditions mean that future disasters should be treated as a certainty, not a surprise. That in turn requires recognition of the likelihood of continuous disruption rather than episodic crises, and a rebalancing of policy and resources across the full disaster lifecycle, both within Australia and on its doorstep. Preparedness needs to be proactive, not improvised, because resilience cannot be built in the middle of a crisis. Australia therefore needs to invest now in deeper coordination across sectors and critical systems, alongside stronger public awareness and transparent communication about why particular funding and preparedness efforts are being pursued. While communities may broadly consider themselves ready to act in the face of bushfire, the growing scale and severity of disasters may outstrip existing plans or be underestimated. Preparedness should therefore be rooted in strengthening community action and cooperation.

Recovery should also be used to build long-term strength, rather than simply restoring what was there before. This means rebalancing focus and funding across the disaster lifecycle. It means avoiding the tendency for insurance and recovery settings to restore what was there before and recreate existing vulnerabilities, and instead using recovery to support preparedness. It also means giving greater attention to the longer tail of disaster impacts, including mental health, domestic violence, loss of trust, and wider social disruption.

2. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) remains one of first responders responsible for involvement for disasters, potentially impacting force readiness and community resilience.

The ADF's role in disaster response and recovery highlights a central tension between military capability and public expectations. The National Defence Strategy treats the ADF as a last resort at home, yet it is often treated as the first line of response in domestic crises such as bushfires, floods, or COVID-19. At the same time, it has increasingly been used in the Indo-Pacific to support disaster response and capacity building.

On the one hand, ADF involvement can be seen as beneficial because it draws on high public trust and proven capability. The ADF's demonstrated competence in large disasters may explain why it is called upon so often. Survey evidence¹ indicates that 80 per cent of respondents support ADF involvement in domestic assistance, although support varies by region and is lower in some communities.

On the other hand, the ADF is not primarily designed for disaster response, and there remains a gap between what the public expects of Defence and what it is resourced to do. The ADF already has major commitments beyond disaster response, with an operational history spanning the globe. While the 2026 National Defence Strategy acknowledges the ADF's ongoing role in national preparedness and resilience, including emergency management efforts², much of its disaster work sits within the Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) function domestically and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) abroad rather than its core warfighting role. Treating the ADF as the default first responder during disasters raises the risk of deploying personnel into activities outside their core duties, requiring specific training and resource allocation. It also increases the possibility of the ADF becoming a problematic intervention that overwhelms other actors already responding to the crisis. This dynamic is illustrated by examples such as the Orroral Valley bushfire in 2020, which followed a damaged ADF helicopter and a delayed report to authorities by the crew.

Reliance on the ADF may limit local disaster capability and draw Defence away from its primary role. In a context of constrained resources and the need for careful force posture design, it may be better to shift the ADF's role toward greater regional collaboration rather than a central domestic disaster role. There is a clear distinction between deploying the ADF domestically and its value as a partner across the Indo-Pacific. Outside Australia, a foreign-policy lens recognises the ADF's combined significance in defence, diplomacy, and constabulary functions overseas. Supporting disaster response in the region can also

¹ Dunley, R., Moss, T., Townsend, N., Booth, M., Crawley, R., Hutchison, M., & Richardson, T. Public Attitudes Towards the Australian Defence Force. The University of New South Wales Canberra. 2025.
<https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/unswcanberra/hass/Public%20Attitudes%20Towards%20the%20ADF%20Report%20-V3.pdf>

² Australian Government. (2026). *2026 National Defence Strategy*. Commonwealth of Australia.
<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2026-national-defence-strategy-2026-integrated-investment-program>

strengthen relationships and help shape the foreign policy choices of partner nations. Australia should therefore position the ADF to support capacity development among Pacific partners, noting that stronger regional capability can in turn assist Australia in future. Concrete proposals could include leveraging the recently acquired JP26 medical facility as a lighter model for Pacific Island nations. Australia can also draw lessons from cross-sector civil-military integration in Pacific Island countries. Models such as Black Rock in Fiji offer useful lessons in how governmental and non-governmental actors can be brought together under standard operating procedures. These would be difficult to replicate domestically in Australia given its current reliance on the ADF.

While the ADF has an important role, over-reliance is problematic and disaster response requires clearer responsibilities across government, industry, communities, civil society, and regional partners. This points to the need to strengthen civil-military integration while recognising that the ADF is not the default disaster-response body, and to shape public expectations of military capabilities. A shift away from military-led responses, both within Australia and abroad, will require a significant uplift in civil-military integration and in the role of industry. Civilians may need to backfill military functions rather than operate alongside them. Deep partnerships with industry will be needed to balance commercial obligations with goodwill-based responses. Decisions to build civil-military integration, industry relationships, and supply-chain arrangements will need to be made before a crisis, not during it. Taken together, this transition will need to focus on facilitating capacity-building where appropriate and right-sizing the role of the ADF, both domestically and abroad.

3. Externally imposed programs for disaster resilience can steamroll local capacity in instances of disasters, while community-led efforts often more effectively reinforce local resilience.

Even where militaries are deployed, local communities absorb the initial impact and remain the genuine first responders in any disaster. Despite this, current Australian policy on disaster resilience, preparedness, response, and recovery is driven by a focus on immediate results, relying on external actors and programs to deliver quick wins. When scale exceeds local capacity, uncertainty about whom to call and weak coordination between response elements can become acute. Both within Australia and abroad, externally driven programs and large third-party solutions often prove unsustainable and are eventually abandoned. This raises a recurring question: whose resilience is actually being pursued, and to what end – is the driving concern Australia's strategic interests, or the lived experiences of affected communities at home and abroad?

Complexities and competing pressures also create tension over whether disaster preparedness, response, and recovery should be externalised or localised.

Outside Australia, systemic pressures combine with frequent and severe disasters, leaving countries across the Indo-Pacific less able to absorb and recover from shocks. Disaster resilience is part of Australian international policy. Whether driven by strategic or humanitarian imperatives, Australia's interest in being a strong regional partner does not guarantee host government agreement. Australia can only provide support where the host nation accepts it. If local authorities withhold approval, this can raise questions about why Australia does not remain to help and can create friction within affected communities. Overlapping policy interventions can also have unintended implications for local resilience. For example, remittances from Pacific workers in Australia's seasonal worker programs may be sent home to fund reconstruction after disasters, while simultaneously reducing the presence of labour needed to carry reconstruction out. These overlapping dynamics highlight the need for careful strategic prioritisation in a time of geopolitical complexity and strategic competition.

Within Australia, key factors such as local volunteerism, social cohesion, and institutional trust are under strain, making community ownership and responsibility in disaster settings harder to sustain. Volunteer numbers in disaster-prone areas are declining. Housing costs, commute times, fuel prices, and demographic change are hollowing out local response capacity. Local bushfire units have, in some cases, been disbanded because they no longer have enough members. Calls to renew a national culture of volunteering sit alongside concerns that participation has become over-regulated and difficult to enter.

Social cohesion and institutional trust are also under pressure both domestically and abroad. In instances of disaster, communities can be both a source of safety and a source of harm. People are affected not only by outside pressures, but also by conflict and exploitation within communities. Where trust is weak and institutions deliver little tangible benefit, people are less likely to contribute to collective action. Grievance can become a

barrier to cohesion, and requests for cooperation can be received as hypocritical. Without sustained and transparent national discussion about disaster, neither local communities nor Australia as a whole will be able to build or sustain genuine resilience.

To address these dynamics at home and within the region, Australia will need to move from centralised policy and programs toward approaches to disaster resilience that are place-based, community-led, and community-maintained. Resilience should be understood more broadly as the capacity of local systems to function and adapt. That depends on social cohesion, networks, and preparedness that are often taken for granted but are essential. Given the scale and frequency of future crises, support can no longer mean providing everything from the centre. Australia must instead shift power and budgets to local levels, even though this requires ceding control and resetting public expectations. External resources should only be used when scale-up is unavoidable, and then in ways that support existing networks and local systems. The aim should be to help communities use and strengthen their existing capacity rather than replace it. Effective approaches, in Australia or abroad, will need to avoid treating communities as if they are all the same, and should privilege local knowledge while reducing dependence on external support. Australia's bushfire science and civil-defence collaboration could help build regional capability, provided it does not create dependence or weaken local institutions.

Future efforts must better balance the transition from centralised and externalised responses to locally led approaches, while ensuring that funding and support move with responsibility. Disaster resilience should therefore be judged by whether it strengthens local capability, rather than steamrolls or stymies it.

4. Australia fails to effectively leverage data to address the ongoing issues of governance, funding continuity and critical-system fragility.

Effective disaster preparedness, response, and recovery depend on continuity of governance and funding. This continuity is key to the resilience of critical systems as well as broader national resilience. Current Australian approaches do not use data or scenario modelling in a broad or integrated way to guide funding and resourcing.

Policy and practice are often assembled reactively. Responses are shaped by institutional views of risk, fear of liability, and a reluctance to have open public discussions. Whole-of-government capacity is already stretched thin. Pre-existing crises in areas like public health build up before disasters, while high-profile events absorb disproportionate governmental attention despite their limited scale. Geopolitical crises outside Australia then divert resources further. Agencies responsible for funding and implementation are not always those that understand the barriers on the ground. Treasury, for example, is responsible for sustainable funding mechanisms for community sectors, but the human detail is frequently lost. Recovery is often defined too narrowly around the hazard, overlooking community ties that support responses to the unexpected. At the same time, local government funding is too tight to build sustained local resilience. Departmental structures also shape responses, with agencies managing pre-existing crises such as housing while also being asked to fund risk reduction. Funding delays make this worse, especially as disasters become more frequent. Efforts to address more than the immediate response are, however, undermined by short political horizons, weak coordination where capacity is lacking, and the absence of measures or incentives for agency efficiency.

These problems are reinforced by failures to leverage data and by reliance on weak evidence. The COVID-19 period, for example, showed how important it is to bring together sensitive and disparate data in a crisis. However, data on health, infrastructure, energy, and supply chains remain siloed, unaggregated, and underutilised in Australia. As a result, efforts to build genuine economic and structural resilience lack an evidentiary base. Improved data practice is essential for future prevention, mitigation, and preparedness. Social and institutional memory is also a crucial dimension of the information needed to implement lessons learned and to support robust national resilience. For example, the ACT COVID Surge Centre demonstrated rapid mobilisation when Australian government and industry worked together under clear governance arrangements. However, the key lesson was not simply the speed of delivery, but the value of retaining the knowledge, designs, supplier relationships, and operating procedures so they can become part of Australia's standing capability, rather than something that has to be recreated during the next emergency. In addition, government will need to find ways of reducing the public's social amnesia between systemic shocks and disasters. Ensuring public memory in such instances is foundational to creating the public will necessary to fund and govern national resilience efforts with continuity rather than as a patchwork of reactive, episodic approaches.

What gets measured gets funded. The lack of evidence-driven continuity in governance and funding is reflected in fragile critical systems and limited sovereign capability. More broadly, there is no strong awareness, at the local, state, or federal level, of the industrial base needed to produce the inputs that preparedness and response demand. Reports have already recommended analysis of this base, as well as the creation of a standing National Resilience Institute, but there has been little tangible action. Australia has been left with fragile critical systems in which issues of dependency could affect the delivery of support in times of crisis.

Australia also lacks adequate measurement of social infrastructure, including social connectedness, institutional trust, and the health of the volunteer pipeline, at both domestic and regional levels, making it harder to argue for structural funding. The relationship between health and disaster is compounding and persistent in already fragile systems. Australia's health system is optimised for efficiency rather than shock absorption. Even entrenched pressures such as fuel-price rises can force households to choose between food and health care, weakening local stability and increasing pressure on local services.

Within the Indo-Pacific region, chronic underinvestment intersects with the reality that communities will continue to absorb climate-related shocks regardless of resourcing. Many of the effects of systemic erosion only become visible in a crisis. Redesigning these systems to withstand such shocks would require dedicated investment, but much of the need remains inadequately measured. Appropriate use of scenarios and modelling may help support more rigorous cross-sector planning and data integration, rather than reliance on rough estimates. While no single approach will fit every context, there is value in studying case studies of what has worked rather than dwelling solely on obstacles.

Changing conditions within Australia and internationally also raise questions about the balance between self-reliance and preparedness. There is a risk that sovereign capability is defined too narrowly, as if it were simply a matter of domestic manufacturing or government-owned assets. In practice, sovereign capability is much broader. It includes workforce capacity, project management, digital systems, clinical governance, logistics, supply chains, training, intellectual property, and standing relationships between government and industry. Properly structured Australian industry can be part of Australia's sovereign capability, provided it can be mobilised rapidly, operates under Australian governance, and contributes to national resilience when required. In many cases, the relevant distinction is less between public and private than between assured Australian capability and unmanaged external dependency. Stronger policy and better data practices are required to facilitate the needed changes.

A genuine whole-of-nation response across government, non-government organisations, and industry is complex and can slow action in a crisis, so governance and coordination problems will need to be addressed if future resilience efforts are to be effective. How Australia uses data will be decisive in structuring national resilience effectively.

Key Recommendations for Transition

Recommendation 1

Shift the centre of gravity in disaster policy and rebalance investment toward sustained preparedness and mitigation, rather than only responding to the immediate crisis.

Connect prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, and ensure equitable funding across the spectrum. Funding should follow the logic of prevention. Recovery should aim at building communities back better rather than restoring old vulnerabilities.

Recommendation 2

Strengthen community capacity and locally sustainable approaches to disaster resilience, and build and support the social infrastructure to sustain it.

Resource place-based, community-led capacity and programs, scaling up external help only when community capacity is exceeded. Emphasise local knowledge to reduce dependency. Develop *measures* of social infrastructure so it can be funded. In Australia, prioritise addressing barriers to rebuilding community capacity, such as regulatory barriers, institutional distrust and current funding mechanisms.

Recommendation 3

Move toward a data-informed, integrated model of disaster resilience as part of national continuity.

Aggregate siloed data relevant to disasters and use it as evidence to guide policy and program design. Map responsibilities across government, industry, NGOs, and communities, and establish and test coordination and integration mechanisms before disaster events occur. Clarify the ADF's role within a whole-of-nation approach in light of increasing strategic competition and geostrategic uncertainty.

Recommendation 4

Build sovereign capability and capacity to reduce dependency on external actors and sustain critical systems.

Capability must exist before it can be mobilised. Analyse Australia's industry base and build sovereign capability in technology and services to reduce critical dependencies. Fortify critical systems and infrastructure used in disaster contexts. In the Asia-Pacific, support Pacific capability and coordination to reduce dependency on external actors.

Recommended Resources

Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

<https://www.nema.gov.au/about-us/governance-and-reporting/reviews/independent-review-of-commonwealth-disaster-funding>

Independent Review of National Natural Disaster Arrangements

<https://www.nema.gov.au/about-us/governance-and-reporting/reviews/independent-review-of-national-natural-disaster-governance-arrangements>

Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

<https://www.nema.gov.au/about-us/governance/reviews/royal-commission-into-natural-disaster>

Systemic Disaster Risk Handbook

<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/handbook-systemic-disaster-risk/>

Australian Disaster Risk Index

<https://adri.naturalhazards.com.au/#!/>

National Social Capital and Social Infrastructure Measurement Framework

<https://sociabli.resilientready.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Resilient-Ready-Social-Capital-Sociabli-Framework.pdf>

Whether civil society should be recognised as critical national infrastructure

<https://nationalpreparednesscommission.uk/publications/should-civil-society-be-recognised-as-critical-national-infrastructure/>

Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post Disaster Recovery - Daniel Aldrich, University of Chicago Press (2012).



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CRICOS Provider Code: 00098G | ABN: 57 195 873 179

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