

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE THE LIVING STANDARD IN THAI NGUYEN PROVINCE: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 23/8/2021</p> <p>Revised: 24/11/2021</p> <p>Published: 24/11/2021</p> <p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Living standard</p> <p>Thai Nguyen province</p> <p>Social-economic geography</p> <p>Income</p> <p>Solution</p>	<p>The current living standard is an important criterion to evaluate the development of countries in the world, including Vietnam. Thai Nguyen province is located in the center of the Northern Midland and Mountainous region, bordering Hanoi capital and in the planning of the Capital Region. In the last ten years, the economy has had a positive change and people's living standards are increasing day by day. However, it is a fact that the gap in living standards among population groups is widening, especially for ethnic minorities living in the northern part of the province, the standard of living is not high. The article applied the research method of problem analysis, synthesis and comparison based on the statistical database of Vietnam and Thai Nguyen province to study the current situation of living standards in Thai Nguyen province in the period of 2010-2020 from the perspective of socio-economic geography; analyze the successes and limitations of raising people's living standards in Thai Nguyen province. Thereby, this article focused on proposing socio-economic solutions to improve this index, gradually narrowing the gap in living standards between population groups and regions, contributing to Thai Nguyen province's universal development in the near future.</p>

GIẢI PHÁP NÂNG CAO MỨC SỐNG DÂN CƯ TỈNH THÁI NGUYÊN: TIẾP CẬN DƯỚI GÓC ĐỘ ĐỊA LÝ KINH TẾ - XÃ HỘI

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
<p>Ngày nhận bài: 23/8/2021</p> <p>Ngày hoàn thiện: 24/11/2021</p> <p>Ngày đăng: 24/11/2021</p> <p>TỪ KHÓA</p> <p>Mức sống dân cư</p> <p>Thái Nguyên</p> <p>Địa lý kinh tế - xã hội</p> <p>Thu nhập</p> <p>Giải pháp</p>	<p>Mức sống dân cư hiện nay là tiêu chí quan trọng để đánh giá sự phát triển của các quốc gia trên thế giới, trong đó có Việt Nam. Tỉnh Thái Nguyên nằm ở vị trí trung tâm của vùng Trung du miền núi phía Bắc, tiếp giáp với Thủ đô Hà Nội và là tỉnh nằm trong quy hoạch Vùng Thủ đô, trong khoảng mười năm gần đây nền kinh tế có bước chuyển mình tích cực, mức sống của người dân ngày càng được nâng cao. Tuy nhiên, có một thực tế, khoảng cách về mức sống giữa các nhóm dân cư ngày một mở rộng, đặc biệt đối với bộ phận người dân tộc thiểu số sống tại khu vực phía Bắc của tỉnh có mức sống chưa cao. Bài viết vận dụng phương pháp phân tích vấn đề, tổng hợp, so sánh dựa trên cơ sở dữ liệu thống kê của Việt Nam, tỉnh Thái Nguyên để nghiên cứu thực trạng mức sống dân cư của tỉnh Thái Nguyên trong giai đoạn 2010 - 2020 tiếp cận dưới góc độ Địa lý kinh tế - xã hội; phân tích những thành công và hạn chế của việc nâng cao mức sống dân cư ở tỉnh Thái Nguyên. Qua đó, bài báo tập trung đề xuất các giải pháp từ kinh tế - xã hội nhằm nâng cao chỉ số này, thu hẹp dần khoảng cách về mức sống giữa các nhóm dân cư và các khu vực, góp phần giúp tỉnh Thái Nguyên phát triển toàn diện trên tất cả các mặt trong thời gian tới.</p>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34238/tnu-jst.4922>

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1. Introduction

The differentiation of people's living standards is a common challenge of many countries in the world, especially developing countries. Therefore, it is necessary to establish policies to gradually improve people's living standards. In the world, there have been a number of research projects related to solutions to improve people's living standards such as research works [1], [2]. After 35 years of implementing the "Doi Moi" (reform) policy, Vietnam has made great progress in economic and social development; people's living standards have been improved in many aspects [3] - [5]. These results have been achieved thanks to the solutions that have been adopted by the Party and the State of Vietnam simultaneously in all fields [6], [7].

Thai Nguyen province is located in the center of the Northern Midland and Mountainous region, bordering Hanoi capital and in the planning of the Capital Region, with favorable geographical location, natural, population and social conditions, attracting domestic and international investors, helping Thai Nguyen province develop at a relatively fast rate, and people's living standards are increasingly improved. However, the gap in living standards between population groups is widening more and more, inequality in access to education and health care, etc. is increasing; especially ethnic minorities people living in the northern part of the province have a low standard of living. Currently, there are only a few studies on Thai Nguyen province related to living standards and specific solutions to improve the living standards in Thai Nguyen province, but have not gone into specific indicators of living standards [8], [9]. Therefore, this article aims to study the living standards, the causes of the differentiation of the living standards, and propose solutions to improve the living standards in Thai Nguyen province from the perspective of socio-economic geography which is expected to be meaningful in terms of both theory and practice.

2. Research methods

2.1. Data collection methods

The objective of the research was to analyze the current situation of people's living standards in Thai Nguyen province in the period 2010-2020, approached from the socio-economic geographical perspective; on that basis, to propose solutions to improve the living standards, gradually narrowing the gap in living standards between population groups and regions in the near future.

The author used secondary data, extracted from articles, statistics of the Vietnam Statistical Yearbook, Thai Nguyen Provincial Statistics Office, relevant textbooks, books and references to the research problem.

2.2. Methods of processing and analyzing data

The authors using a combination of several research methods such as analysis and process data, descriptive statistics and field investigation. The author processed, analyzed secondary data from reliable and highly accurate sources and used documents to build appropriate data tables with research objectives. On the basis of collected documents related to the living standards, provided objective and scientific analysis and evaluation on the problem of solutions to improve the living standards of the population in Thai Nguyen province.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Overview

Thai Nguyen is a province in the Northern Midland and Mountainous area, bordering Bac Kan to the North, Lang Son and Bac Giang to the East, Hanoi to the South, and Tuyen Quang and Vinh Phuc to the West. The area of Thai Nguyen province is 3,521.9 km², the smallest area compared to the other provinces of the Northern Midland and Mountainous area (accounting for

1.06% of the national area, ranked 14th out of 14 provinces in the region). Its population in 2020 was 1,307.9 thousand people [10] including 9 administrative units: Thai Nguyen city, Song Cong city, Pho Yen town and 06 districts of Dong Hy, Phu Binh, Dai Tu, Phu Luong, Dinh Hoa and Vo Nhai, including 10 towns, 30 wards and 140 communes.

With a favorable geographical position, bordering Hanoi capital to the south with more than 60 km Hanoi - Thai Nguyen highway; 160 km from Lang Son to the northeast, a province with many international border gates via 1B national highway; a convenient transportation route to Hai Phong - the largest international seaport in the country; Thai Nguyen is a province in the planning of the Capital Region creating a driving force to attract domestic and international investors. The geographical position has given Thai Nguyen province many advantages in exchange, trade, economic cooperation, commodity exchange, market expansion and strengthening spatial linkages, contributing to the socio-economic development of the province. This has been shown through Gross regional domestic product (GRDP) in the period 2015 - 2020 at 11.1%/year. The economic structure changed positively, in 2020, industry and construction at 59.0%, services at 31.0% and agriculture, forestry and fishery at 10%; industrial production value increases on average 16.3% per year. By December 2020 in the province, there were 163 licensed and valid FDI projects with a total registered capital of over \$8,573 million; the GRDP per capita in 2020 reached nearly 90 million VND, the living standard has improved remarkably [10].

3.2. Situation of people's living standards in Thai Nguyen province in the period of 2010 - 2020

In the period 2010 - 2020, the living standards of Thai Nguyen's people have improved significantly. 2020 is the year when the whole country was heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, which greatly affected the lives of all people in Thai Nguyen province. Many economic sectors and fields were severely affected, and unemployment and lack of employment increased, affecting people's lives. However, with the efforts of the people and the provincial government, people's lives have been maintained stably.

3.2.1. Group of economic indicators

In 2020, the scale of total product in Thai Nguyen province at current prices was 116,008.2 billion VND (ranked 2nd out of 14 provinces of Northern Midland and Mountainous region); GRDP/person was 88.7 million VND.

a) Per capita income

One of the most basic indicators of people's living standards is per capita income. This income of Thai Nguyen province is placed in comparison with the whole country, with the Northern Midland and Mountainous region shown in Figure 1..

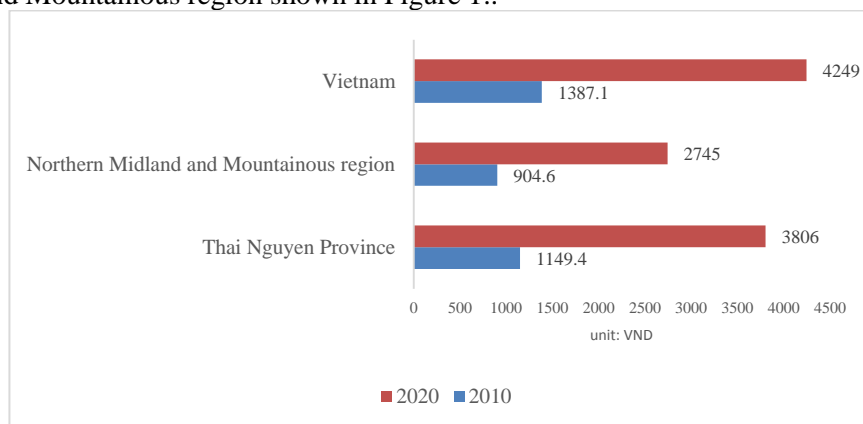


Figure 1. Per capita monthly income in Thai Nguyen province in relation with the Northern Midland and Mountainous region and the whole country in 2010 and 2020 [11]

Figure 1 shows that the income per capita/month of Thai Nguyen province, the Northern Midland and Mountainous region and the whole country increased over the 10-year period. The per capita income/month in 2020 of Thai Nguyen province was even lower than the national average income, but it was still 1.4 times as high as that of the Northern Midland and Mountainous region. In the table of per capita income per month, Thai Nguyen province ranked second (after Bac Giang province), higher than most provinces in the Northern Midland and Mountainous region [11].

b) The gap between the rich and the poor

The average income per capita/month of Thai Nguyen province showed a difference between urban and rural areas. Urban areas had a higher per capita income than rural areas in the period 2010 - 2020 because the income structure in urban areas was diverse and more productive than in rural areas. In 2020, the per capita income/month in urban areas (6,020 thousand VND) was 1.7 times as high as the per capita income per month in rural areas (3,540 thousand VND). However, this difference was stable, only fluctuating between 1.7 and 1.9 times, equivalent to the average level of the whole country and the Northern Midland and Mountainous region [11].

The gap between the rich and the poor in Thai Nguyen province was also the income gap between the top 20% of the population and the bottom 20% of the population as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Income difference between the 20% of the highest and the 20% of the lowest income in the period 2010 – 2020

Year	Income per capita/month in the lowest income group (VND)	Income per capita/month in the highest income group (VND)	Income difference between the highest and the lowest income (times)
2010	357.9	2,682.7	7.5
2012	499.4	3,865.2	7.7
2014	636.0	4,924.5	7.7
2016	890.2	6,854.5	7.7
2018	1,161.1	9,822.0	8.5
2020	1,157.8	7,408.6	6.4

(Source: Summarized by authors from [12])

In the period 2010 - 2020, the per capita income of the population groups in Thai Nguyen province had a quite clear difference in the range of 6-8 times. In the period 2010-2018, the difference increased but by 2020 it decreased to 6.4 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This reflected that the level of income and income sources of the social classes in Thai Nguyen province were uneven and differentiated. And since then, this had certain effects on socio-economic development, especially social security, requiring the authorities at all levels to pay special attention and have specific policies to reduce the disparity of income between these social classes.

c) Percentage of poor households

The number of poor households and the poverty rate of Thai Nguyen province tended to decrease. By 2020, the number of poor households in the province was 9492 households, accounted for 2.82%. Poverty rates varied by territory, administrative units. The group with the lowest number of poor households and poverty rate was Song Cong city (509 households; 1.47%), Thai Nguyen city (1,058 households; 0.68%), Pho Yen town (1,537 households; 1.64%) and the group with the highest number of poor households and poverty rate was Dinh Hoa district (3,792 households; 6.45%) and Vo Nhai district (3,379 households; 9.58%) [12].

3.2.2. Group of education - training indicator

The rate of school attendance at the right age in Thai Nguyen province was higher than the national average and that of the Northern Midland and Mountainous region. In 2010, this rate of

the whole country was 91.9%, 81.3% and 58.2 %; of the Northern Midland and Mountainous region was 90.4%, 77.7% and 51.0% respectively. In general, the rate of school attendance at the right age in 2010 gradually decreased by education levels, with the highest being primary, followed by lower secondary school and upper secondary school, 97.6%, 91.5% and 63.3% respectively. However, by 2020, the rate of school attendance at the right age was relatively equal, reaching almost absolute rates [11].

In fact, the school attendance rate at the right age is always lower than the overall attendance rate of the province. This was due to the fact that some children at school age could not attend school. At the same time, the higher the education level was, the lower the attendance rate was because students dropped out in the middle. Thus, it can be seen that education is an activity that is focused on in Thai Nguyen province. Because people's living standards are improved, families are more interested in the education of their children.

In Thai Nguyen province, there are 33 upper secondary schools, most in Thai Nguyen city (10 schools) and Pho Yen town (4 schools), the remaining cities and districts have an average of 2-3 schools. On the basis of data and documents, the researcher calculated the average distance from the commune center to the nearest upper secondary school that most of the students in commune attended. The communes with the longest average distance from the school to the commune center were communes of Vo Nhai district such as Sang Moc (25.1km), Nghinh Tuong (22.1km), Than Sa (21.8km); Linh Thong commune - Dinh Hoa district (16.8km); Phu Do commune - Phu Luong district (16.8km). The authors directly surveyed the above areas and concluded that Vo Nhai district had a long distance to school and still faced many difficulties, requiring more attention from the local government. The distance affects the travel time, so many students in the above districts had to rent accommodation. However, thanks to investment in infrastructure construction, access to educational institutions had been significantly improved in the above communes.

3.2.3. Group of health care indicators

The total number of medical examination and treatment facilities in the area increased continuously from 539 facilities in 2010 to 818 facilities in 2020. The total number of hospital beds in the area increased from 3,956 beds (2010) to 7,695 beds (2020). The number of health workers in the province in 2020 was 8,987 people, of whom 7,276 people worked in the medical industry and 1,711 people work in the pharmaceutical industry. The rate of children under 1 year who were fully immunized was over 98%; the percentage of children under 5 years who were malnourished in the period 2010 - 2020 decreased significantly from 18.5% in 2010 to 9.8% in 2020 [11]. This demonstrates the local government's interest in the health sector in order to improve the living standards of the population. However, the difference in living standards among population groups also had a certain influence on the ability to access health care of the poor and those who were geographically distant from the central areas. Therefore, Thai Nguyen provincial government needs to continue to implement health policies to support the poor population.

3.2.4. Group of supplementary indicators

The supplementary indicators show that the living standard of Thai Nguyen's population improved significantly in the period 2010 - 2020 through a number of indicators that were quite high such as the percentage of households using electricity from the national grid (99.83% in 2020), percentage of households using hygienic water sources (97.7% in 2020), percentage of households with hygienic latrines (increasing from 76% in 2010 to 86.5% in 2020) [12].

In the period 2010 - 2020, the proportion of households with durable goods compared to the total number of households classified by type of goods in Thai Nguyen province tended to increase rapidly, proving that people's living standards were improved, contributing to raising the standard of living in both physical and spiritual aspects.

3.3. The causes of the differentiation of living standards in Thai Nguyen province

There are many reasons leading to the differentiation of living standards in Thai Nguyen province. Based on field investigation, the authors point out the underlying causes:

- Due to the natural conditions of Thai Nguyen province, most of the terrain is mountainous and complex, with harsh climates, natural disasters, pests and diseases, infertile soil, small arable land, many households have to rent land for farming.
- Due to different infrastructure conditions, especially the unevenly distributed traffic network, economic development is mainly concentrated in the central and southern areas, the influence of the economy on people, unstable prices, and precarious income.
- Scattered investment policies, and policies on education, health care, and employment still overlap. The applied policies are not really flexible, applied mechanically, not suitable for different objects. Infrastructure investment policy has not been completed and synchronized, affecting community activities.
- Policies to encourage production development, job creating, tax, and preferential credits have not been fully effective.
- The group of households lacking education: Difficult economic conditions, large families do not have enough money to pay school contributions, the poor themselves are lazy to go to school.
- The group of medical shortage: people don't really care about their health, reducing their labor force, they are afraid to go to the doctor for the fear that medical examination and treatment will cost a lot of money when medical examination and treatment procedures are complicated, with long waits, and lack of hospital beds.
- The group of housing shortage: because they do not really care about whether the house is permanent. And they lack assets and lack productive land.
- The group of lack of access to information: In many areas, people do not have access to the internet because the households are too far away, without phone signal or people are not interested in accessing information via the internet.

3.4. Solutions to improve people's living standards in Thai Nguyen province

From the analysis and assessment of the current situation of improving the living standards of Thai Nguyen's people in the period 2010-2020, the article proposed some basic solutions to focus on policies and measures on economy, education and health; in which, economic solutions play an important role, but always go with the remaining groups of solutions to improve the living standards of Thai Nguyen's population in all aspects.

3.4.1. Macro solution group

a) Mobilizing and managing capital effectively

It is necessary to continue to effectively implement preferential credit policies in accordance with regulations of the Government and the Prime Minister for poor households, near-poor households, and households that have just escaped poverty to receive loans for production and business, create jobs, improve lives, to get out of poverty; research and propose reforms in application conditions and procedures, creating favorable conditions for people to have access to credit capital; closely combine the loan policy with guiding the production, restructure the industry effectively, in line with the socio-economic development planning of each locality and according to the scale and production of each household [13].

b) Training and improving the quality of human resources

Mountainous districts such as Dinh Hoa district, Vo Nhai district, Phu Luong district are home to many ethnic minorities such as Tay, Nung, San Diu, San Chay, Dao, Mong... in remote areas where economic conditions are difficult, socio-economic development is slow. In addition, these people have low levels of education, less research ability as well as contact with science

and technology. Therefore, it is very difficult to improve the living standards of these people. Hence, it is necessary to have educational policies for these subjects such as opening free training courses exclusively for ethnic minorities in localities so that they can achieve a certain level of knowledge and access to science to change production methods, change viewpoints in business and production.

3.4.2. Specific solution group

a) Implementing synchronous poverty reduction policies quickly and sustainably

The government need to replicate effective poverty reduction models in the communes inside and outside of Program 135, the model of combination in production development, industry development, product processing and consumption between poor, near-poor households, community and businesses; model of poverty reduction associated with national security; creating conditions for the poor to access policies, resources and markets. Anyway, the replication of poverty reduction models related to living suitable to each region, population and beneficiary group, contributes to income improvement, economic development, and helping households escape poverty [14].

People continue to implement Project 2037 *"Socio-economic development, stabilize production and life in villages with special difficulties with a large number of Mong ethnic people in Thai Nguyen province"* in 4 districts of Dong Hy, Phu Luong, Dinh Hoa and Vo Nhai. The project continues to support seeds and fertilizers for hybrid maize cultivation, cattle raising, fruit tree planting and loan interest support for poor and near-poor households to borrow loans from social policy banks. Support poor and difficult households in Boc Nhieu and Dong Thinh communes (Dinh Hoa district). The government develops plans and coordinates activities to provide social work services for the poor to stabilize their lives and integrate into the community.

b) Building a sustainable livelihood model associated with the new rural construction process

The model of community protecting forests and developing livelihoods in 5 communes of Vo Nhai district, Thai Nguyen province helps the community have a fair income from the forests, contributing to poverty reduction and social administration improvement. With the model of community protecting forests and livelihood development, people's lives are better protected and sustainably developed. This solution focuses on promoting local advantages, innovating and completing agricultural planning towards market, flexible in the use of agricultural land to enable people to change the agricultural structure to suit their needs, toward beneficial agricultural production models such as fruit tree growing in La Hien, Dan Tien, Lau Thuong and Phu Thuong communes (Vo Nhai district), expanding goat and cow breeding models to promote the region's strengths; paying attention to the development of medicinal plants: Ba Kich, Dinh Lang, Ha Thu O, ginger, turmeric... which are high yielding plants with high economic efficiency. Dinh Hoa district, in the period 2016-2020, has implemented 118 projects to support production development and 7 poverty reduction models, making an important contribution to improving the lives of people in disadvantaged areas.

c) Improving the ability to apply science and technology to production

The province needs to focus on developing high-tech agricultural models and clean agricultural models, contributing to the production of products certified to meet standards, traceability, participating in product supply links through association with businesses, stores and supermarkets in Thai Nguyen province. In agriculture, it is necessary to improve productivity, added value, being environmentally friendly, contributing to improving income, ensuring social security such as some concentrated vegetable production areas on an area of more than 1,200 hectares in communes: Linh Son, Huong Thuong, Tich Luong (Thai Nguyen city), Nha Long, Dao Xa (Phu Binh district), Dong Dat (Phu Luong district), high-tech agricultural zone in Tien Phong commune (Phu Yen district), high-tech flowers production area in Cam Gia and Gia Sang

wards (Thai Nguyen city), organic melons, Japanese melons and Kim Hoang Hau yellow melons in Cau Da hamlet, Thinh Duc commune. Thai Nguyen city)...

In livestock, the local government should focus on the development of farm models that synchronously apply scientific and technical advances in high-yield breeds, automatic feeding, water, disinfection and environmental treatment, associated with businesses and enterprises to attract capital, techniques and new technology in the production process in order to improve product quality and added value in livestock. People continue to develop free-range chicken raising areas in Phu Binh, Dinh Hoa and Vo Nhai districts; pig raising area in Phu Binh district, Pho Yen town...; provide training and guidance on barn building, raising, disease prevention and treatment, breeding. The development is based on the advantage of large grasslands, low investment costs, and favorable conditions for cow grazing [15].

d) Improve access to education and health services for households

Some supporting policies on domestic water and environmental sanitation include strengthening communication and education activities to improve knowledge and change people's behavior in using domestic water and sanitation; building water supply works to meet people's needs; investing in systems of collection and treatment of waste and rural environmental sanitation and strengthening state management; mobilizing maximum internal resources, strengthening socialization, combining capital sources to effectively implement the supply of daily-life water and rural environmental sanitation.

Solutions to support information and communication to reduce poverty consist of implementing preferential policies for cultural enjoyment, support media according to regulations; supporting the production, editing, distribution and broadcasting of radio and television programs, archives, promotion of media publications; skills and professional training for information and communication staff at the locality and developing communication and information technology infrastructure systems.

Besides, the local government need to continue to implement the policy of legal aid for the poor and ethnic minorities in poor communes and villages with special difficulties in the 2021-2025 period in accordance with the Prime Minister's regulations and the province's regulations; provide direct legal aid to 100% of the poor in the locality in need of legal aid; give priority to the poor who are ethnic minorities in extremely difficult communes and hamlets; support capacity building for legal aid clubs, legal aid providers, commune-level judicial officers, and reconciliation teams [16].

4. Conclusion

Thus, on the basis of analyzing the current situation of living standards of Thai Nguyen's population, there were many positive changes in many aspects. However, there was a clear difference in living standards between urban and rural areas, between income groups, between midland and mountainous areas, and between ethnic groups. In particular, the gap between the rich and the poor has not been narrowed. Ethnic minorities in remote areas and the poor in Thai Nguyen province face many difficulties. Therefore, the synchronous coordination of solutions to improve people's living standards and narrow the gap in living standards between social classes is necessary through specific socio-economic policies, appropriate with the current context. Hence, Thai Nguyen province needs to continue to promote economic development and implement social policies, especially in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, to give more support to the poor and disadvantaged populations, to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor through proactively applying necessary forms of support to the poor, to agricultural production households, strengthening the social security system in a way that is open to all citizens.

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