

Professionalisation of community development in South Africa: Process, issues and achievements



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ABSTRACT

The need for constructive and effective community development in South Africa is recognised as a cornerstone of national development. The debate on implementation – together with the first steps taken structuring community development in South Africa – is informed by the global debate on community development among socially aware democracies. These participating countries, such as South Africa and Ireland, are at various stages of understanding, analysing and utilising the literature, with its definitions of professions, professionalisation and professionalism, as well as relating to how best to characterise and implement community development as a fully fledged profession with its own quality assured standards and code of ethics. The combined individual and participatory nature of community development in practice is a factor requiring careful attention. In South Africa the first steps have been taken in the accreditation process for creating this new professional legal framework, and an organising body, for establishing both the practice of community development and community development practitioners as professionals – into an independent community development professional council. Much has been achieved so far; the route to full success is wide open.

KEYWORDS: professionalisation, professionalism, professionalisation process, professionalisation criteria, community development

1. INTRODUCTION

The global move towards the professionalisation of community development has gained momentum over the past twenty-five years. This is due to democratic governments seeking partnership governance to maximise social-economic development with their progressive social development policies (Geoghegan & Powell 2006, 845). In South Africa and other partnership (participatory) governance countries, such as Ireland, discourses on empowerment are taken up in the development of national policies. This now indicates the transformed role of the state – from a ‘needs satisfying’ state to that of a ‘facilitating state’, that is, based on partnerships between the state and communities, with empowerment and participation strategies towards achieving sustainable community well-being (Meade 2011, 1, 11). This highlights the role of

partnership governance states in shaping and mediating policy for community development and the professionalisation thereof (Miller & Ahmad 1997 269, 275 ; Meade 2011, 3–4).

Community development is highlighted as a unique form of practice, with its intrinsic orientation towards democratic and participatory outcomes of collective change, inclusion and equality. However, it is this very unique form of practice that contributes to the existing global debate regarding community development professionalisation; this impacts strongly on the process towards its professionalisation (Meade 2011, 1). The debate is faced by a theoretical dichotomy, as ‘professional standards’ are much needed on the one hand but, on the other hand, this will link with ‘expert knowledge’ and social closure while community development is founded on the principles of equality and social inclusion.

South Africa aims to follow an accreditation process of community development professionalism that would be licensed by government and/or its proxies. This article looks at concepts relevant to professionalisation, its debate, the process and criteria required for professionalisation and how these shape the process followed in South Africa as well as the issues affecting community development professionalisation.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARITY: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, PROFESSION, AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Embarking on a process of community development professionalisation necessitates clarification of the concepts of ‘profession’, ‘professionalisation’, ‘professionalism’ and professional socialisation, in order to contribute towards conceptualising and clarifying the community development professionalisation process (some form of framework) and, perhaps, even intelligibility in so far as the community development debate goes (Griffin, Green & Medhurst 2005, 5).

2.1. Community Development

Community development is a broad term applied to a variety of disciplines in society, with origins that can be traced back to the 18th century. From its inception, community development has aimed at a better life for all. In 1963 the United Nations defined community development as:

the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of government authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to the national progress. This complex of processes is, therefore made up of two essential elements: the participation of the people themselves in an effort to improve their living, with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative; and the provision of technical and other services in ways which encourage initiative, self help and mutual help and make those more effective. It is expressed in programmes designed to achieve a wide variety of specific improvements (United Nations Report 1963, 4).

The UN definition established the different skills and abilities needed by those who work in the community development sector, as well as the capacities which they need to apply in assisting and empowering communities to take initiative in acquiring a better life for themselves in a more effective and sustainable manner (Hart 2009, 63–64). However, this definition has a public sector focus and does not include the participation and involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), non-profit organisations (NPOs) and communities themselves.

The definition by Meade (2011, 3) on the other hand includes community and individual participation by defining community development as ‘a participatory process that can empower socially excluded individuals and communities’. The reinforcement of participation and dialogue deepens understanding, builds relationships and creates opportunities (social capital). In dealing with social challenges people learn, through social networks of support and knowledge, to survive and exercise agency and resilience.

In terms of human development the White Paper on Population Policy in South Africa makes it clear that sustainable human development is only possible if a balance can be achieved between population, relief from poverty and the environment (Hart 2009, 65). The community development approach by the South African government has the following strengths and potential outputs as it: a) is focused on human development; b) is institutionalised at all levels of government; c) is linked to a full-time and paid employee, the community development practitioner, who facilitates and coordinates the process of community development; d) has the potential to decentralise decision making to the community; e) reinforces both the feeling of involvement and the possibility of dialogue; f) ensures an indigenous knowledge base of how to deal with social challenges; and g) promotes the values and principles enshrined in authoritative international and national policy documents – namely the United Nations Declaration on Social Development, Human Rights conventions and declarations, the Millennium Development Goals and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Hart 2009, 64).

2.2. Professions

Professions were first analysed comprehensively by Carr-Saunders and Wilson in 1933; the results are still regarded as a standard history of professions (Meintjes & Niemann-Struweg 2009, 3). Defining ‘profession’ has been a part of frequent debate involving complicated semantics, resulting in twenty-one different definitions of ‘profession’ and twenty-three different criteria by which to judge whether professionalisation has occurred (CBE Policy Position Paper n.d., 1). Professions have mostly been interpreted as belonging to a distinct and ‘privileged’ occupation – and, as such, a focus of study by sociologists for several decades. Evetts (1999, 119) indicates that this focus is due to disagreement over the distinctions between different professions and not to the interpretation thereof. From 1950 to 1960, sociologists attempted to list sets of attributes by which to indicate commonality and distinctiveness between core professional occupations; during the 1970s this was viewed as an unhelpful diversion.

Since the 1990s professions have been defined as occupations which are linked with knowledge-based higher education and training – currently known as self-regulated occupations in terms of licensing and work practice. This gives professions their dual character of both service provision

and knowledge for economic gain (Evetts 1999, 119–120). It is the ‘professional knowledge linked with economic gains’ motive on which the community development professionalisation debate is founded – a debate which is due to community development outcomes being rather contradictory with regard to the ‘elite’ and individualistic self-gain definitions for professions.

Abbott (cited in the CBE Policy Position Paper n.d., 2) defined an occupation as having the following characteristics:

... possession of specialised knowledge and skills partially or fully acquired by intellectual training ... that others do not possess; creation, organisation and transmission of this knowledge by the profession; provision of services calling for a high degree of integrity ...; acceptance by society of the value of the knowledge possessed and the belief that it can solve problems in society ...

Professions have evolved differently, mainly due to the various historical, political, economic, geographical, demographical and cultural variances existing in different countries. Some professions have evolved more or less independently while others became statutory bodies by law. Controlling institutions in the process of professionalisation have been generally perceived to be associations, states and universities (Evetts 1999, 121 ; Meintjes & Nieman-Struweg 2009, 3). The variations continue to influence an occupation even after its professionalisation.

2.3. Professionalisation

Professionalisation is defined in the CBE Policy Position Paper (n.d., 6) as ‘the means by which an occupation alters its socio-professional situation and becomes a profession by acquiring professional attributes’. Evetts (1999, 120) defines it as ‘the series of diverse and variable, social and historical, processes of development, of how work sometimes becomes an occupation ... and how some occupations achieve various forms of occupational control of work’. The latter definition proves that several processes of professionalisation exist – and that there is no one ‘blue-print’ to follow during the professionalisation of an occupation.

The literature on professionalisation is of value in so far as the lessons learned from several different documented processes over the last few decades are concerned. Professionalisation is also about gaining status while searching for power, money and control over the practice of work, thus indicating the designation and accreditation of a ‘distinctive’ occupation (Fitzsimons 2010, 53; Evetts 1999, 120; Meade 2011, 2). Leung (2011, 3) defines professionalisation as ‘not a simply collective action by a cohesive group, but a complex social process’.

Professionalisation is linked to a need for raising standards of practice by means of a standardised, cohesive and effective movement – thereby indicating a reason for the professionalisation of community development in South Africa (Fitzsimons 2010, 54). Griffin, Green & Medhurst (2005, 5) provide the most appropriate definition of professionalisation relevant to community development in South Africa, by stating that professionalisation means ‘the way in which people are a) acculturated both formally and informally into an academic discipline ...; b) recognised and legitimated as professionals in a given discipline; and c) shape their professional lives to accommodate themselves to the working context in which they operate’.

These authors go further in linking the quoted definition relevancy to the professionalisation of occupations with a multi-disciplinarity and/or inter-disciplinarity character (as is the case with community development). They define multi-disciplinarity as the ‘parallel existence of discrete bodies of knowledge in proximity to each other’ and inter-disciplinarity as the ‘integration of discrete bodies of knowledge with each other to create new knowledge synthesis ... methodologies and concepts’ (Griffin, Green & Medhurst 2005, 6). This all contributes to the informed conceptualisation of the prospective character which the community development professionalisation process is taking in South Africa – as well as the issues affecting professionalism in community development.

2.4. Professionalism

Professionalism is regarded as the most difficult of all the stated concepts to define and explain. Merriam-Webster (sited in Hammer 2000, 455) defines professionalism as a “...set of attitudes and behaviours believed to be appropriate to a particular occupation...”. Evetts (1999, 122) defines it as the

... aspects of the occupational control of work which are in the best interests of ...clients, as well as in the advice-giving, lobbying and... oppositional aspects of the professions’ relations with states, legislative bodies, and regional and local administrative agencies ...

The stated definitions relate to behavioural terms. However, the origins of professionalism in the 1950s and 1960s were based on characteristics (attitudinal attributes) involving a belief to serve the public, a sense of calling to the ‘field’, autonomy to make professional decisions and a belief in self-regulation. Structural attributes include a specialised body of knowledge, professional associations, social prestige, a code of ethics and a unique socialisation of student members (Hammer 2000, 456). Freidson (cited in Evetts 1999, 122, 25) states that professionalism is a desirable way of providing complex services to the public but it does not necessarily provide assurance of quality (Evetts 1999, 123-125). The monitoring of performance standards or outcomes becomes difficult in sectors such as community development, where it mostly involves the ‘facilitation of advice’, which appears as abstract – and thus not so clear-cut a definition in, for example, the medical sectors providing treatments which is perceived as concrete assistance.

The education sector, including universities, has been used to assist with the development and teaching of exit level outcomes, which could contribute to the criteria for licensing requirements of practitioners. This implies that licensing and accreditation arrangements need to be formulated and legislated during the early stages of an emerging occupation or profession (Evetts 1999, 125). Initial training of professionals cannot provide all the skills, knowledge and attributes needed in a professional career, which highlights the need for continued professional development (CPD) and life-long learning; this can only be developed, organised and enforced (as part of the registration requirements) by the professional entities to which professionals subscribe (Evetts 1999, 126).

Clarity about professionalism is further achieved by acknowledging the dual character of professions, namely: a) the provision of a service; and b) the use of knowledge and power for

economic gain and control. Professionalism implies trust which the client must place in the professional who, in turn, should have quality (expert) knowledge relating to a code of ethics; this, at times, also involves client confidentiality. Thus, professionalism represents distinct values and moral obligations which are developed during professional socialisation, when the aspirant professional starts with formal education and training.

2.5. Professional socialisation: the education process

Professional socialisation is broadly defined by Weidman, Twale & Stein (2001, 4) as ‘the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills and disposition that makes them more or less effective members of society’. Higher education is where individuals first start the process of professional socialisation, which implies that education shapes professional socialisation (Griffin, Green & Medhurst 2005, 34; Page 2005, 105).

Professional socialisation comprises attitudinal and behavioural development which, in turn, shapes one’s beliefs. Thus, professional attitude could be defined as ‘a predisposition, feeling, emotion or thought that upholds the ideals of a profession’ (Hammer 2000, 456). Professional behaviour could be defined as behavioural ‘professionalism’ – as discussed previously. The educational process of professional socialisation has both theoretical and practical components, aimed at creating a well-rounded professional experience deriving from both parts of professional socialisation during the formal education and training phase. Individuals are trained in professional behaviour attitudes and values that will guide their own behaviours and define their professional group identity (Page 2005, 105).

Training of a professional group is structured around theoretical knowledge, methods and technology. The intensity level of the training is directly related to the status level of the profession. The status level of a profession, more often than not, determines the professional rewards achievable by a member of that profession. A second important dimension for professional socialisation is the demand for assurance that, through formal education, the young professional has received proper training in order to provide quality expertise to the client-public. The third important dimension that is important for professional socialisation, especially with regard to a ‘new’ profession, such as community development in South Africa, is state legislation, policy and the jurisdiction with which to regulate this profession; licensing to guarantee professional standards and control measures, that ensure professional service to the public by ‘experts’ in the field, are also essential (Page 2005, 105–107; Bartle n.d., 1). These dimensions, together with clarification of the main concepts, issues and challenges faced by community development professionalisation, collectively contribute to the suggested process of community development professionalisation in the remaining part of this article.

3. THE PROCESS AND CRITERIA FOR PROFESSIONALISATION

The process of professionalisation is defined in the CBE Policy Position Paper (n.d., 10) as ‘[a] ... desire to unify and consolidate a qualified occupation; and thereafter to obtain legal recognition, which usually leads to professional title and the protection of work within the profession’s jurisdiction’. The process ultimately aims to legitimise and professionalise practice

by expanding the body of knowledge, improving the ethical standards and reputation and refining the certification processes. Thus, professionalisation assists with building a reputation for authority, credibility and efficiency (Meintjes and Niemann-Struweg 2009, 1).

This process of transformation from an occupation into a profession happens through two primary routes: 1) the traditional route, relating to prestige, title and high pay, often relating to earlier professions – such as the medical and architectural professions; and 2) the non-traditional route, linked to the development of formal qualification, the emergence of a regulatory body, some degree of monopoly rights, and the building of trust over an extended period of time (CBE Policy Position Paper n.d., 10). Globally the non-traditional route typically consists of the following steps: a) development of a full-time occupation by means of a formal/legislated qualification frameworks; b) establishment of provider (training entity) relationships; c) establishment of a professional association – formalised with its own constitution and acting as a ‘body of knowledge’; d) development of policy/legislation for establishment of a professional board and council; e) development and adoption of a formal code of ethics; f) political campaigning for continued public support (e.g. for a predominant stakeholder towards professionalisation); and g) protection of the occupation/profession by law (CBE Policy Position Paper n.d., 11, 47).

Meintjes and Niemann-Struweg (2009, 4) list the following criteria that need to be met by a professional entity: 1) continuous public awareness campaigns to keep people well-informed; 2) application of standardised procedures for registration of members; 3) adherence to the set benchmarks for quality and standards, even in the global arena; 4) ensuring international relations between ‘sister’ entities; 5) encouraging provision of and participation in continued professional development programmes; 6) drafting and enforcing a comprehensive code of ethical standards and procedures; 7) provision of accredited members with a range of benefits; and 8) overseeing the development and provision of accredited professional qualifications.

These criteria are well captured in the draft South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) policy and criteria for recognising a professional body and registering a professional designation. This policy interrelates with the National Qualifications Framework Act of 2008. This draft policy and criteria document indicates, in Clause 28, the following requirements to become recognised as a professional body: a) an entity must be legally constituted with adequate human and financial resources to undertake its functions; b) protect the public interest and associated risks with regard to the services provided by its members; c) ‘develop, award, monitor and revoke its professional designations in terms of its own rules, legislation and/or international conventions’; d) submit a list of members to SAQA; e) set the criteria to promote and monitor the CPD of its members, in order to meet professional designation requirements; and f) publish a code of conduct and ensure a mechanism for investigating members who have contravened their code of conduct (SAQA 2011, 3).

4. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALISATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

4.1. Implementing professionalisation

The process of community development professionalisation in South Africa is taking place via the earlier mentioned non-traditional route as it aims to achieve the development and implementation of a new formal qualification, and the emergence of a new regulatory body. Haski-Leventhal (2009, 3) states that the purpose of a profession is to bring together skills and knowledge, as well as to ensure high standards and ethical behaviour; these have to be based on a body of knowledge, professional standards and ethical guidelines.

The steps in the South African non-traditional route are linked with the following principles that benchmark a profession: a) *accredited professional qualifications*; b) *professional autonomy and authority* relating to professional culture, honour, integrity and autonomy from other professions; c) *skills and knowledge* that are unique, of quality, consisting of theory and practice; d) *a code of ethics* for ethical practice; e) *a statutory body* for licensing, conduct regulation, quality control and CPD; f) *be sanctioned by the community*; and g) *research* into expansion and refinement of knowledge, skills, values and evaluative practice (Smith 2011, 10).

Thus, the South African process of community development professionalisation would require: a) community development professional validation by a ‘specialised’ body of knowledge, in partnership with the SAQA, for the legislated community development qualification frameworks, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education and Training (FET) providers; and b) a state-recognised entity which is central to the development of an ideology and approved characteristics for the basis of membership and level of autonomy directly related to the community development Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) – and to a Standards of Quality document, which follows a pluralist approach to commit community development to solidarity, empowerment, social justice, equality, networking and community participation with and at all levels of society. This document should therefore ensure continuous interlinking between agreed standards and approved qualifications, so as to ultimately achieve standardised knowledge, skills and qualities among the professionals in community development (Fitzsimons 2010, 58–59).

4.2. Progress in South Africa

So far the community development professionalisation process in South Africa has succeeded in ensuring the standardised skills and knowledge required by community development practitioners by means of the development and legislation of the SAQA-accredited community development qualifications frameworks at the different National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 4, 5 and 8. The first stakeholder consultation was aimed at familiarisation with these new qualification frameworks regarding accreditation and registration via the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), QCTO and/or the relevant sector education and training authorities (SETAs). The outcome of the first stakeholder consultation was the establishment of a Community Development Professionalization Steering

Committee (CDPSC) with the overall purpose of ensuring the professionalisation of community development in South Africa via the non-traditional route.

The CDPSC provides supporting, coordinated, accelerated and expanded evidence-based action and response to the professionalisation of community development. Specific objectives of the CDPSC are to: a) promote coordination and harmonisation of policy guidance and stakeholder involvement for professionalisation; b) advocate, promote, support, monitor and evaluate both internally and externally the accelerated implementation of community development qualifications; c) assess, support and promote the development and sharing of technical requirements for community development qualifications delivery; and d) support and broaden networking and collaboration.

These objectives translate into the following action plan: 1) align terminology and nomenclature into an OFO; 2) ensure collaboration, buy-in and partnerships of all relevant role-players and stakeholders; 3) establish a professional body – starting with an association and then progressing towards a professional board and, ultimately, a legislated professional council; and 4) define a community development migration path from past and current qualifications. The latter involves the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as set out in the SAQA framework.

A national recognition of prior learning (RPL) pilot project was developed by the CDPSC with the purpose of integrating the learning so far acquired by persons currently working in the field of community development; their knowledge and skills come from various fields due to the absence of a single community development career pathing/mainstreaming prior to the newly developed qualification frameworks. The outcome of the pilot project would be a model to validate and measure the impact of the community development career path standardisation and professionalisation.

4.3. Public awareness

The CDPSC has also started with raising public awareness about community development professionalisation. This was via a successful national summit meeting held during October 2011 aimed at achieving a resolution to establish an independent community development association for South Africa. At the summit this resolution was agreed upon and the CDPSC immediately started planning a community development professionalisation conference for the second half of 2012. The conference was preceded by several provincial stakeholder buy-in workshops for the purpose of partnership developments between public, private and NGO sectors, HEIs and FETs, as well as the regulatory entities such as SAQA, Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO), the relevant Skills Education Training Authorities (SETAs) and the Council for Higher Education (CHE). A newsletter has also been launched, both for the purpose of creating public awareness and towards the start of capacity building. Announcing relevant documents, procedures and processes to be followed towards the professionalisation of community development are to be included in the newsletter, so as to ultimately establish an independent community development professional council for South Africa.

5. ISSUES AFFECTING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALISATION

Issues affecting the process of community development professionalisation are closely related to the global community development professionalisation debate. There is the belief that communities can only be assisted if they themselves have agreed (linked with ownership) to, and contribute by means of participation with, the community development process. This belief leads to a conundrum about partnerships (participatory) approaches for sustainable community well-being versus the general characteristics of self-regulation and control over execution of tasks by professionals (Meade 2011, 1, 11).

Crucial to the debate is also the extent of inclusion regarding the different ‘qualification levels’ of community development workers as there are those with no formal qualifications, volunteers, with or without formal qualifications as well as those with tertiary and even postgraduate qualifications. Thus, globally, the challenge lies in whether it is possible to professionalise community development in such a manner that it would not discriminate and exclude people based on their ‘qualification level’ or whether they are formally employed or not (Geoghegan & Powell 2006, 851).

The Federation for Community Development Learning (FCDL) lists the following issues and challenges which contribute to the current debate on community development professionalisation: a) not being widely understood even though some countries have community development occupational standards, b) lacking a ‘professional’ profile within its practice and thus not being recognised for its contribution to initiatives and policies of government, c) not been seen as a stand-alone practice/occupation due to the widespread misconception that ‘anyone can do it’, d) complex skills and knowledge requirements are not being recognised as important for its practice, e) being exposed to mainstreaming of its terminology resulting in poor practice that goes on but being referred to as community development even though it is not based on its values and processes, f) being marginalised as an occupation so that its practitioners do not get recognition or terms and conditions of work which other professionals in the humanity professions obtain; and g) practitioners struggling to gain access to good quality training and CPD opportunities (FCDL Annual Conference 2010, 1–2).

Over and above this conundrum, the changing nature of the human services and social professions towards collaborative/integrative working is influencing motivation for the professionalisation of community development as it links with another current professionalisation debate – namely that of ‘inter-professional working’. This is due to integrative working being linked to service provision and assistance to communities being delivered by groups of professionals working together. Inter-professional working demands an emphasis on partnerships which, in turn, requires a focus on the common and conflicting values of, and between, each profession (Barnard 2008, 5). This leads to major challenges for such ‘new’ disciplines, like community development, that are still aspiring towards professional status.

Further challenges experienced during a professionalisation process relate to that of people’s responses to professional associations. Research has shown that most professionals (as much as 90 per cent) do not become members of their professional bodies. This low membership

can sometimes also be due to some professional bodies losing status and/or credibility in the eyes of the public in terms of service excellence (Meintjes & Niemann-Struweg 2009, 3–4). Kruckeberg (cited in Meintjes & Niemann-Struweg 2009, 5) lists the following three challenges to a successful professionalisation process: 1) a general lack of agreement as to the fundamental purpose, scope, functions and responsibilities of the ‘new’/aspiring profession; 2) the aspiring profession not being highly regarded as an area of scientific study; and 3) low recognition within the employment industry about the field of practice.

6. CONCLUSION

South Africa is clear as to the need to provide a better service for its communities, especially those most marginalised and socially excluded. This has led to the move towards community development professionalisation in South Africa, with the purpose of ensuring good quality and appropriate community development practices that are based on a code of ethics. However, this requires professionals to ‘prove their worth with reference to costs, benefits and outcomes, and must demonstrate their willingness to be subjected to audits and review’ (Meade 2011, 14).

Although there is no one ‘blue-print’ to follow for the professionalisation of an occupation, a process can be mapped out that is derived from literature reviews. These literature reviews provide conceptual clarity regarding relevant concepts for professionalisation, the processes followed thus far during professionalisation of other occupations and the different criteria required for such a process. The literature also assists with the identification of issues which could affect the professionalisation of community development.

The first step taken in the process towards professionalisation of community development in South Africa has ensured consideration of exit level outcomes development and legislation by means of the education sector, with the start of the new qualification frameworks roll-out by the education sector. The second step to be taken forms part of ultimately achieving the registration of a professional council. This will start with the upcoming establishment of the Community Development Association, which will then be followed by the registration of an independent professional board and council for community development in South Africa. The global community development professionalisation conundrum must be taken into account during the community development professionalisation process in South Africa, as it affects the process of designing a community development professionalisation model for South Africa. This model must be one that is inclusive, empowering, and one which places communities at its centre for the ‘building of sustainable, equitable and vibrant communities’.

NOTE

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