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Gains of the Unfeasible: Manifestations of 'Leave No One Behind' in the United Nations' Humanitarianism

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Abstract

‘Leave no one behind’ in the context of the United Nations’ humanitarianism poses a noble ideal yet a challenging practice. The concept showcases terminological prevalence particularly in policy, yet unfeasibility against the enormity of humanitarian needs and limited resources to respond. Therefore, this working paper asks the following: If the concept is not a feasible aim, what does it provide? I suggest that the meaning of ‘leave no one behind’ captures three overlapping humanitarian themes at once: humanitarian language, humanitarian donorships and humanitarian diplomacy. Accompanied by interview material with humanitarian practitioners from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), I conclude that ‘leave no one behind’ presents gains for humanitarian action in terms of political and economic support, even though it lacks operational potential for universal implementation.

1 Introduction

The idea of treating human beings as worthy and equal has shaped much of the Western political imagination (Nussbaum 2019). The same imagination has generated ideas such as world citizenship and an ideologically unconditional worth (ibid.), a family of ideas to which ‘leave no one behind’ belongs. ‘Leave no one behind’ embodies the United Nations’ (UN) development and humanitarian action and surfaced in its jargon along with the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Broadly approached in the humanitarian context, ‘leave no one behind’ captures an idea of inalienable human worth.

Despite its noble aims of all-inclusivity for humankind, the concept faces enormous challenges in practical implementation. Based on interviews with current and former staff members for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the respondents interviewed for this working paper recognized that ‘leave no one behind’ is an idea that is “beautiful,” “laudable,” ideally embodying “equal chance,” and is located “within humanitarian ethics.” Yet the majority observed that it lacks a “sense of realism” when it comes to implementation. For example, a humanitarian practitioner reflected this dynamic as follows:

It [leave no one behind] doesn’t mean anything. The question is, why we should leave someone behind. Why are we asking not to leave anyone behind? We are doing it, and thinking or planning to do it.

– former OCHA staff member, female

Humanitarians operate with limited resources, capacity, and access against seemingly ever-growing humanitarian needs. If and when people in humanitarian need are left behind, questions related to terminological prevalence and motive arise: why use the term at all? In this working paper I raise the question of what the ideal of ‘leave no one behind’ can mean when set against the pragmatic enormity of humanitarian needs.

In exploring the utility of its invocation, this working paper discusses ‘leave no one behind’ in the context of the UN’s humanitarian action. Drawing from interview material with current and former staff members of the UN OCHA,¹ I suggest that ‘leave no one behind’ intertwines with larger issues of modern-day humanitarianism.

¹ Throughout this working paper, I refer to 16 interviews with OCHA staff members in which the term ‘leave no one behind’ was discussed. These were conducted in the context of research into OCHA’s humanitarian diplomacy, and they were in-depth, semi-structured, and anonymous. This organization was selected for the study because of OCHA’s central position in the UN’s humanitarian action. It is the UN’s main humanitarian coordination body and is unique in its multisectoral focus on humanitarian issues. OCHA is also inherently invested in the mission of ‘leave no one behind’ as guided by 2030 Agenda (The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2018), although it does not bear sole responsibility for its humanitarian implementation. Out of the 16 interview respondents, eight respondents were women and eight were men. The majority of the respondents were international staff, whereas three had national experience. The respondents’ work experience in OCHA ranged from field level technical staff to high-level management, and locations included headquarters, regional, and country levels. The location-specific experiences took place in Afghanistan, Chad, Colombia, Cook Islands, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Fiji, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Switzerland (Geneva), Syria, Turkey, United States of America (New York City), Vanuatu, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

Broadly approached in the humanitarian context, ‘leave no one behind’ captures an idea of inalienable human worth.

These, I argue, include humanitarian language (section 2), humanitarian donorships (section 3), and humanitarian diplomacy (section 4). Essentially, these themes also overlap as illustrated in this paper. For example, humanitarians need funding for humanitarian action, for which they engage with donors through humanitarian diplomacy, and build consensus for the required political and economic support through humanitarian language.

2 'Leave No One Behind' as Humanitarian Language

Humanitarian language shapes humanitarian ideas and perceptions of, for example, solidarity and community (DeChaine 2002). Expressing global humanitarian solidarity often manifests as 'rhetorical crafting,' which is understood as "the confluence of communication, imagination, and power, the force of which is altering our contemporary social landscape" (ibid.: 356). This rhetorical crafting manifests in a careful choice of words to support humanitarian aims. As examples, 'complex humanitarian emergency,' is used instead of 'armed conflict,' or 'war,' or 'natural disaster in the context of war.' The phrase 'persons detained by reason of events' may be used instead of 'political prisoners' or 'detainees in armed conflict'. 'Areas of civil unrest' is used to mean 'conflict zone' (Pease 2016.) As discussed by Paulmann (2013), the very term 'emergency' also has strong connotations, suggesting that a need arises suddenly and, to some extent, unpredictably, while simultaneously locating the situation to a specific place (ibid.). These terms also contain nuances that at times require a professional understanding of content and meaning. Smith exemplifies these gradations in emphasis, giving the example of "viewing with concern" in conflict context, meaning that a declaration of war is not yet likely, as opposed to viewing an action as "an unfriendly act," wherein a declaration of war is already possible (Smith & Minear 2007: 48).

Albeit not a typical humanitarian buzzword compared with, for example, 'protection of civilians' or 'humanitarian corridors', 'leave no one behind' fits into humanitarian language.

This professional, rhetorical crafting provides a fruitful ground for commonly used phrases, terminology, and buzzwords that constitute and communicate the humanitarian imagination. Buzzwords in particular, as Sandvik (2019) explains, have the ability to draw attention to a specific aspect of a problem and thereby direct related action. Albeit not a typical humanitarian buzzword compared with, for example, 'protection of civilians' or 'humanitarian corridors', 'leave no one behind' fits into humanitarian language. This is mainly because of its versatility and inclusivity: 'leave no one behind' does not pass political judgment and remains passive or abstract enough to allow room for interpretation.

'Leave no one behind' is a means by which the UN can influence its targeted audiences. Among other stakeholders, the UN seeks to influence national elites and their policies, and, further, facilitates consensus with its ideas (Emmerij 2005). 'Leave no one behind' can be seen as one of the major normative ideas for the organization that illustrates what "the world should look like (ibid.: 16). This language is particularly colored by the context of intergovernmental diplomacy. It aims to cater for the interests and aims of UN member states,² donors, national and international civil servants, and beneficiaries. A prerequisite for such language is not to offend, which is challenging when one considers states' sensitivities to criticism and interference in anything that can be considered a domestic issue. The more vague and abstract terms, phrasing, and even commitments are, the more support a particular stance is likely to acquire.

² Interdependency between the UN and its language and its 193 member states cannot be undermined for several reasons: the UN needs granted access to the country where humanitarian needs exists, and it relies on its member states to provide necessary resources for its humanitarian interventions. Also, humanitarian action is not the only kind of intervention that the UN pursues in a given country. Long-standing development programs, intergovernmental political support, and possible resource contributions in cash or in kind are also at stake, which, at times, contrast and compete with humanitarianism.

Goertz (2012) argues for a realist approach to concepts, in which concepts cannot be analyzed separately from their immediate environment and the outside world (ibid.). ‘Leave no one behind’ emerged at the policy level with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, thus it is most appropriately analyzed and understood as a policy concept within the UN’s humanitarianism. As illustrated by the example of the UN OCHA, the culture of intergovernmental diplomacy operates in a different environment from the operationalized humanitarian field level. Despite sharing same organizational goals at different levels, such as headquarters and field offices, the actors within these domains can view and react differently to concepts, such as ‘leave no one behind’. As exemplified by an interviewee:

My operational work has always been at the field level whereas these political discussions, these papers passed by Secretary/Secretaries-General, they become quite a headache that you have to distance yourself from ... So the concept of ‘leave no one behind’, honestly, I would always have put in the same basket as these New York-based policy aspirations, something for them to talk about and leave us alone to do the work at the field level. That’s perhaps a rather extreme position on that, but I’m happy to be challenged on its operational relevance.

– former OCHA staff member, male

Humanitarian language has metaphorical dimensions which underline that the humanitarian space itself is a socially negotiated arena in which ideas of humanitarianism are employed and further negotiated (Hilhorst & Jansen 2010). The humanitarian space calls for active involvement in its creation, and it includes both aid organizations/actors and aid recipients (ibid, Abild 2010).³ Through participation of different actors, the humanitarian space can be understood as inherently political. Often, but not always, it also incorporates Western states, ideologies, and geographic interests. Humanitarian space is conceptually outside or opposed to the territory of a state that has failed to protect and preserve human lives (and thus anti-sovereign) (Clouette & Wise 2017). Active involvement in humanitarian space is, in many ways, communicated through humanitarian language, built with terms such as ‘leave no one behind’, representing ideologies and policies, thus politics. One of the interview respondents reflected the representation of these political ideologies as follows:

[Leave no one behind represents] secular Western democratic values implemented in very conservative, religiously driven societies. There is a recipe for a clash there, which means that people who we consider to be left behind might not be perceived as left behind by others. So the definition of being left behind might differ from actor to actor on the ground. What you and I might consider, [for example,] this eight-year-old girl in this village who was just pulled out of the school after second grade that she is left behind. And in that community they say that there is another place for her in the society and we want to groom her now to become a mother, I suppose, and she is certainly not left behind. So now we are getting into what is the definition of what [does it mean] being left behind or not. And that is where, of course, OCHA has to be very careful in what agenda am I driving and to what degree am I driving it. Is it my role to define X, Y and Z, and to a certain extent it is. Some values are universal and it doesn’t matter [what for example] Taliban in Afghanistan [thinks], they are wrong.

³ As Hilhorst and Jansen note, “aid recipients do not passively hang about until aid arrives, but strategize to reach agencies and become eligible for their services. While agencies derive their legitimacy from their image of being moral actors, recipients derive their legitimacy from the fact that they are in need” (2010: 1122).

In that particular matter they are wrong. So some of these things that are right and wrong are obvious. But as you move down the ladder, you will start to get into a grey zone. Some things that are not that clearly black and white, and that is starting to get into cultural relativism: how do we approach different cultures and traditions and values.

– former OCHA staff member, male

3 Leave No Donor Behind – the Politics of Humanitarianism

Humanitarian language travels to humanitarian donor relations. Funds and resources are essential components in meeting the needs of people who are caught up in the world's humanitarian emergencies, and these needs are communicated through humanitarian language. In attracting funding from potential donors, discursive practices come into play, such as the 'leave no one behind' terminology. These, ultimately, culminate in a construction of humanitarian infrastructure: establishing the relationship between what is understood as the direst of humanitarian needs and the support required to meet those needs.

These relationships follow certain patterns, signaling global inequalities in multiple ways. Humanitarianism has been strongly associated with Western roots throughout its history as it stems from imperialism (Barnett, 2011).⁴ Notably, the vast bulk of humanitarian resources are controlled by Western governments despite an upsurge in non-Western donors (Barnett & Weiss 2011). Some humanitarianism hazards continue to exist in Western hegemonic discourse and Western domination of funding, staffing, and political profile, which risks long-term adversity in the non-West (Barnett & Weiss 2011; O'Hagan & Hirono 2014). Furthermore, De Lauri (2016) discusses humanitarianism as a global business in which the Global North needs to deliver aid, with Western individuals concerned with professional development and compensation that they could not acquire with their skillset in their home countries.

'Leave no one behind' ideology is not immune from global inequalities.

'Leave no one behind' ideology is not immune from global inequalities. Considering donor interests in distributing humanitarian funding, available funds are directed onward based on various logics. Some of these are driven by humanitarian principles, some by other motives: humanitarianism today intersects with foreign, security, and economic interests (Barnett 2009; Olsen, Carstensen, & Høyen 2003; Ticktin 2014). Therefore, humanitarianism can become a vehicle for pursuing aims other than alleviating suffering and saving lives. Regrettably, there has been little research into donor interests in relation to humanitarian crises (Olsen, Carstensen, & Høyen 2003). What can be drawn from the existing research literature is that donors' security and the economic interests play a role in consideration of humanitarian intervention funding (ibid.).

Donors may also disfavor humanitarian disasters that are geographically and culturally distant (Strömberg 2007).⁵ However, this notion varies, and at times donors can be interested in emergencies particularly when accompanied by significant media attention (ibid., Olsen, Carstensen, & Høyen 2003). An example of this is the Indian Ocean tsunami from 2004, where:

[t]he tsunami aftermath saw the most rapidly and generously funded disaster response in history. The global total of \$13.5 billion represent an astonishing \$7,100 for every affected person, as opposed to only \$3 per head actually spent on someone affected by floods in Bangladesh in 2004. (Egeland 2013: 359)

⁴ Yet humanitarianism has taken a variety of shapes over time, and what is understood as 'humanitarian' can be broadly defined. This working paper discusses the Western tradition.

⁵ Interestingly, geographical distance may also play a role in individual citizen donations to charities and humanitarian work. With a focus on American citizens, Tremblay-Boire and Prakash (2017) suggest that individual citizen donors are more likely to donate to locally operating charities rather than charities serving the same cause abroad.

This codependency of humanitarianism, media, and donors can manifest through usage of contemporary avenues, such as disaster relief appeal videos on YouTube (Pantti 2015; Pantti & Tikka 2013). However, the so-called CNN effect might be smaller than expected (Olsen, Carstensen, & Høyen 2003; Strömberg 2007). Whereas a South Sudanese wrote “it may be a blessing to die in front of a camera” (quoted in *ibid.*: 109), donors are not immune from a counter-effect of continuous exposure to media material captured from humanitarian emergencies: so-called compassion fatigue. Debates remain about how much influence today’s non-stop news environment exerts on countries’ decision-makers when considering humanitarian interventions and how far their decisions are based on geopolitical interests (Cottle 2008).

Another funding modality that reflects donors’ political interests is unearmarked versus earmarked funding.⁶ In contrast to giving open-ended, unearmarked multilateral funding (commonly supporting an organization overall), an increase in bilateralism and earmarking for specific causes and contexts is a striking development, and this change is attributed to the emergence of state interests behind funding decisions (Barnett & Weiss 2011). In 1988, out of the total aid given, 45 percent was multilateral, after which “the average dropped to 25 percent by the mid-1990s and continued downward to 11 percent in 2007” (*ibid.*: 91). This trend unavoidably directs the design of interventions, as earmarked funding cannot be used outside its specified cause and geographical focus unless the change is agreed with the donor. In this kind of funding context, ‘leave no one behind’ ideology would be able to be applied only on a given, pre-agreed framework.

However, it would be an overstatement to label all donor funds as strictly political and strategic. At times, causes that are not directly political, such as the designs of funding systems, may limit humanitarian disaster responses in multiple direct and indirect ways (Wakolbinger & Toyasaki 2014). Furthermore, not all funding is desired funding. For example, earmarked funding may become an obstacle for humanitarian organizations, as they may face difficulties in meaningfully implementing aid in a given context (*ibid.*), while simultaneously risking reputation, credibility, and competency which can affect further operations and funding towards desired outcomes.

Such risks are disadvantageous as competition is an inherent element in humanitarian funding. Humanitarian actors can be rivals for resources with one another, and at times can be found collectively in opposition to other competing interests, such as long-term development aid (see, for example, Shannon 2009 and the case study of Afghanistan). Examples of this competition between humanitarian actors include a possible unwillingness to coordinate operations between organizations and the race to be the ‘first’ entity to help in a ‘hot spot’, in order to attract media attention and possible new donors (Stephenson 2005). Moreover, overemphasizing the humanitarian actor’s area of specialty and established location may become a factor, as may the overhyping of existing problems (Powers 2014). Competition applies also among donor countries. In a normative sense, countries measure their role and impact in relation to other countries (Townes 2012). Donor competition can manifest, for example, in the prevention of coordinated efforts between states (Annen & Moers 2017).

4 ‘Leave No One Behind’ as a Manifestation of Humanitarian Diplomacy

As illustrated in the previous sections, ‘leave no one behind’ is fit-for-purpose in humanitarian language, and as such, has the potential of creating humanitarian consensus in the political field between humanitarian actors and donors. By using humanitarian language that often disguises related politics, humanitarian interests may be advanced and resources gathered in support of humanitarian aims. These are overlaps where ‘leave no one behind’ ideology connects with humanitarian diplomacy.

⁶ Unearmarked means flexible allocation of the funds as the organization deems most fitting, and earmarked means the donor country dictates the allocation of funds.

Humanitarian diplomacy can be described as “a category of diplomatic engagement that seeks to advance humanitarian interests and goals” (Turunen, forthcoming). Distinct from other forms of diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy can be seen first and foremost as humanitarian practitioner-led formation (O’Hagan 2016, Turunen 2020). It extends to include all stakeholders that are central to humanitarian interests, both in terms of official and non-official actors (Régnier 2011, Slim 2019).

Multilateral diplomacy often operates through an abstract and non-specified language, including the term ‘leave no one behind’, for multiple, consensus-seeking, and non-offensive purposes.

‘Leave no one behind’ in the context of the UN emerged at multilateral level among UN member states during negotiations on the creation of the 2030 Agenda. This showcased multilateral diplomacy that involved several nations and parties agreeing on supranational issues (Mahbubani 2013). Multilateral diplomacy often operates through an abstract and non-specified language, including the term ‘leave no one behind’, for multiple, consensus-seeking, and non-offensive purposes. Through the term’s integration into the UN’s humanitarian arm, ‘leave no one behind’ has traveled simultaneously into the sphere of humanitarian diplomacy. ‘Leave no one behind’ as a manifestation of humanitarian diplomacy balances the apolitical and political, ideals and pragmatism (Turunen 2020).

Humanitarian diplomacy covers a broad range of activities that enable humanitarian action to take place. These include gaining the necessary support in terms of political will to engage in humanitarian issues, and the required financial, staffing, equipment, and logistical capacity to be able to deliver where humanitarian needs emerge. Funding for humanitarian operations is a central part of humanitarian diplomacy, and, as established, in these fundraising and donation processes humanitarianism takes shape through language. By using rhetoric, persuasion, and pragmatism, the humanitarian language overlaps with diplomatic usage of language and diplomatic practices. These often embody a “deliberate use of language that appears to outsiders to be bland and understated” (Smith in Smith & Minear 2007: 48), such as the term ‘leave no one behind’. But as this working paper argues, there are multiple meanings and aims behind such choice of linguistics. As one interview respondent elaborated:

It has never been a priority not to leave anyone behind. It looks like it is only a few words, but it is so deep, extremely. It is linking operations, values, access and human rights into money and funding.

– former OCHA staff member, female

The linguistic etiquette is integral to establishing diplomatic relationships (Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado, & Henig 2016 citing Beeman 2003). ‘Leave no one behind’ presents an active linguistic strategy to create space for humanitarianism. This can also be understood as a part of humanitarian diplomacy, which “seeks to leverage diplomatic actors and tools” for humanitarian purposes in a manner that is not narrowly tied to state diplomacy and its national interests (Clements 2020: 173–174). O’Hagan states that “at the international level, humanitarian diplomacy can entail lobbying for respect of humanitarian principles and practices, and advocating for their integration into the mechanisms of international governance” (2016: 659). ‘Leave no one behind’ is a manifestation of the integration of humanitarian principles at international level. Through analysis of concepts such as this, it can be seen how humanitarians influence the context within which they work through language (Clements 2020). Ultimately, this is how humanitarians engage in humanitarian diplomacy in diplomatic settings and interactions.

5 Conclusion

In this working paper I have argued that, despite being an unfeasible operational aim, ‘leave no one behind’ presents gains and opportunities for humanitarians in reaching their aims. Situated conceptually in the policy frameworks, the term aids linguistically in building humanitarian consensus when support for humanitarian interventions

are needed politically and financially. As a manifestation of humanitarian language, donorships, and diplomacy, ‘leave no one behind’ serves multiple masters at once.

For humanitarian language, ‘leave no one behind’ blurs the line between individuals with agency and generic objects in its abstractness, which is a typical feature of humanitarian instrumental discourse (Nolan & Mikami 2013). Despite seemingly apolitical claims for the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, humanitarianism as a discourse is not of neutral value (Barnett & Weiss 2011). The language of humanitarianism is a linguistic strategy used to achieve humanitarian aims, or other aims in the guise of humanitarianism.

For humanitarian donorships and despite its apolitical facade, ‘leave no one behind’ becomes political in relation to donor countries and the international humanitarian scene. By definition, involvement in another state’s affairs and territory is not apolitical. Particularly in Western political interventions in armed conflicts and natural disasters, humanitarianism is used as a common justification (Fassin 2007). Moreover, humanitarian actors’ competition for funds often fosters (usually Western) donors’ markets and interests rather than the priorities of the Global South (Chouliaraki 2013). The relationship between humanitarianism and its actors and states is ultimately twofold: the international community and other humanitarian actors can influence state actors by leaning on humanitarian norms, but similarly states can manipulate these norms for national interests and benefits in the guise of humanitarianism (Mills 2005). ‘Leave no one behind’ has the potential to serve its user in both ways, signaling terminological prevalence.

For humanitarian diplomacy, ‘leave no one behind’ with all that it entails has emerged at an interesting juncture in modern-day humanitarianism. A classic conceptualization of humanitarianism to remain “above politics” (Barnett & Weiss 2011: 12) or “beyond politics” (De Waal 2010: 135) is becoming increasingly difficult, as conflicts are prolonged and involvement in addressing the root causes of conflicts necessitates political participation (ibid.). In this context, humanitarian diplomacy has become more prevalent than before. Previously, humanitarianism was understood through its state of temporality, as “the state of emergency” of which “the governmental powers it authorizes are justified as a temporary suspension of a normal order, a state of exception abetted by the urgency of the crisis” (Clouette & Wise 2017: 168). This shift from exception into an enduring state of affairs means that politics related to humanitarianism is disguised less effectively, thus requiring new approaches. *Vis-à-vis* classic humanitarianism, new forms of humanitarianism can be seen to be strictly instrumental in moving toward desired outcomes, such as introducing democracy, advancing human rights, or overthrowing oppressive groups (Fox 2002; Mascarenhas 2017). It remains to be seen what effect these changes have also on humanitarian language—will the seemingly apolitical terminology such as ‘leave no one behind’ become irrelevant against the increasingly visible political climate?

Terms such as ‘leave no one behind’ in humanitarianism invite further analysis. On the one hand, phrases such as these may be used as a rhetorical framework to push humanitarians and humanitarian stakeholders into collective action, as is seemingly done in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. Although humanitarians conceptualize an ever-growing field of actors, ideologies, worldviews, and missions, it tends to be a consensus-driven movement despite its fragmentation. Herein, ‘leave no one behind’ may also serve an unconscious strategy to bring scattered humanitarians together. On the other hand, ‘leave no one behind’ can be a feature of current humanitarianism, which Mascarenhas (2017) observes as extraordinary when compared with previous forms of humanitarian engagement. This is due to the way in which the convergence of financial capital, corporate philanthropy, and social entrepreneurship is not charity, but rather business as usual (ibid.). Mascarenhas continues by stating that today demands for social protection largely involve market solutions, as opposed the past, when protective legislation was called for. ‘Leave no one behind’ presents both aspects—a demand for social protection and a market solution.

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‘Leave no one behind’ in the context of the United Nations’ humanitarianism poses a noble ideal yet a challenging practice. The concept showcases terminological prevalence particularly in policy, yet unfeasibility against the enormity of humanitarian needs and limited resources to respond. Therefore, this working paper asks the following: If the concept is not a feasible aim, what does it provide? I suggest that the meaning of ‘leave no one behind’ captures three overlapping humanitarian themes at once: humanitarian language, humanitarian donorships and humanitarian diplomacy. Accompanied by interview material with humanitarian practitioners from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), I conclude that ‘leave no one behind’ presents gains for humanitarian action in terms of political and economic support, even though it lacks operational potential for universal implementation.

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