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INNOVATING GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND COLLABORATION

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The need for global public policy (GPP) is well-established. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, many essential public goods can no longer be adequately provided without effective transnational cooperation.¹ From global health to sustainable urbanisation, climate change to emerging technologies, the list of unresolved global challenges is long and growing. But while GPP is urgently needed, it is less clear how it can be delivered in times when traditional multilateral policy-making appears to have stalled across a range of issue areas in light of growing multipolarity, fragmentation, diverging interests, and distributive conflicts over relative gains.²

In addition to the practical challenge of galvanising collective action in the face of multilateral gridlock, GPP also raises a number of normative questions. With decision-making increasingly uncoupled from domestic constituencies, current efforts to manage global problems are plagued by serious legitimacy deficits.³ Without losing sight of the problem-solving imperative, GPP scholarship also needs to be more attuned to its own blindspots and take seriously the implications of unequal power, distributive outcome, and a prevalent Western-centric, liberal orientation.⁴

To effectively engage with these issues, academic research needs to be ambitious, imaginative, and unafraid of crossing boundaries. Advancing debate across disciplinary and issue-specific silos will be vital to grasp the full complexity of GPP and the protracted politics of implementation.⁵ The rise in anti-elitist and anti-globalisation sentiments across Europe and elsewhere also prompts us to reflect on the challenges and potential limits of ‘expert’ involvement in GPP and calls for more attention to the experience of those on the receiving end of GPP interventions.

This paper serves as a summary of a workshop on ‘Innovating Global Public Policy: Cross-Disciplinary Research and Collaboration’, convened on 13 June 2018 by the UCL Global Governance Institute (GGI) in collaboration with the UCL Global Engagement Office (GEO) and UCL Public Policy. The workshop brought together colleagues across UCL to map GPP-relevant research agendas, encourage cross-disciplinary exchange, and explore the role of research in spurring GPP innovation, building on UCL’s dual-commitment to academic excellence and public policy impact. This report does not necessarily reflect the views of all workshop participants.

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¹ Kaul, Blondin, and Nahtigal (2016)

² Hale, Held, and Young (2013), Cohen (2018)

³ See, for instance: Held and Koenig-Archibugi (2005), Wouters et al. (2015)

⁴ Hurrell (2017)

⁵ Coen and Pegram (2015)

WHAT IS GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY?

GPP remains theoretically under-conceptualised. This may not be surprising given that a generally accepted definition of public policy on the national level has proven equally elusive. One of the most widely used definitions understands public policy simply as 'whatever governments choose to do or not to do'.⁶ While this definition is very broad and inclusive, it explicitly assumes that national governments are the principle, in fact the only, venue for policy-making. There is also an implicit assumption that the policies governments design primarily affect their own territorially-delineated national communities and that their decisions are not significantly constrained by the actions of other states or transnational actors.

If public policy has traditionally been 'a prisoner of the word "state"', GPP transcends this statist bias.⁷ In fact, GPP is necessary because, in many issue areas, the effects of national policies are not or no longer territorially limited. Soroos (1990) provides a useful distinction of the kinds of problems that GPP may address:

- Transboundary problems that originate in one state but have external effects on others (e.g. migration, pollution, economic policies)
- Conflicts over the use of international commons (e.g. the oceans and sea bed, outer space, the atmosphere, Antarctica)
- Problems that are essentially internal to states but common to many (e.g. rapid urbanisation, illiteracy) or of particular concern to others (e.g. the abuse of human rights, the destruction of important cultural sites).

As policy problems transcending national boundaries have proliferated, so have the actors that attempt to address them. Scholarship on GPP recognises that, alongside states and traditional intergovernmental organisations, a heterogeneous set of actors (e.g. NGOs, professional experts, corporations or sub-state actors) are operating across governance levels to formulate and deliver GPP, often through less formal, less legalised, 'networked' forms of governance.⁸

Much attention has been paid to the growing role of non-state actors in GPP production and delivery. Various forms of private and hybrid authority have been documented across policy domains, from private carbon accounting standards to experiments in social entrepreneurship and multi-stakeholder codes and certification regimes in areas such as labour conditions, food safety, or conflict minerals.⁹ In a few highly 'technical' domains, non-state actors in fact 'supply the dominant global governance structure'.¹⁰ Stone (2013, p. 7) has even suggested to drop the 'public' in 'global public policy' as it is 'as likely to be formulated, funded, implemented and monitored by private entities as it is by states'.¹¹

However, the rise of private authority does not automatically translate into an evaporation of state authority. Rather than a decline of the 'national' and the 'public', many scholars observe the blurring of boundaries between national, sub-national, and supra-national governance levels and the public and the private sphere. It may be more useful to think of states as 'disaggregated' rather than unitary entities, with different domestic institutions and actors – regulators, legislators, and the judiciary – participating in GPP production in various ways.¹² Thus, researchers are now paying increasing attention to the complex ways in which domestic actors are embedded in global networks, documenting, for example, how cities are collaborating to step up climate action or how domestic courts are involved in regulating transnational activity.¹³

⁶ Dye (1987), p. 1

⁷ Stone (2008), p. 19

⁸ See, for instance: Jordan and Schout (2006), Sørensen and Torfing (2007), Kahler (2016)

⁹ See, for instance: Green (2013), Toivonen (2016), Marx et al. (2012), Cutler, Haufler, and Porter (1999)

¹⁰ Drezner (2007), p. 73

¹¹ Importantly, however, the word 'public' does not necessarily refer only to the *makers* of a particular policy. As Coleman (2012, p. 676) argues, when speaking of policy on a global level, the term 'public' is no longer synonymous with 'governmental' but rather refers 'to policies that are directed to the whole of the global polity, however disorganized and difficult the definition of its borders might be'.

¹² Slaughter (1997)

¹³ See, for instance: Amen et al. (2011), Whytock (2009)

There is now growing recognition that none of these actors, whether private or public, will be able to tackle the big systemic problems the world is facing by themselves. Much hope is therefore being placed in transnational partnerships between governments, business, and civil society, a vision that has been prominently endorsed by the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, as Florini (2018) argues, these initiatives suffer from a lack of understanding of how to *do* multistakeholderism and are not currently set up in a way that would allow them to deliver real transformative change. This is mainly due to the fact that the ecosystem for the private sector (in the West) continues to incentivise short-term profit-maximisation over a more purpose-driven social approach to business. Advocates have long warned that the erosion of state sovereignty 'should not be replaced by a new corporate sovereignty, which is unrestricted and unaccountable.'¹⁴ However, GPP scholarship has come late to the party.

PRACTICAL CHALLENGES OF GPP PRODUCTION AND DELIVERY

How can we achieve effective collective action on an unprecedented scale to produce global public goods and curtail global public 'bads' such as global warming, pollution, or the spread of infectious diseases? The question 'What works?' remains the central and pressing focus of research and analysis on GPP.¹⁵ With deepening interdependence, the scope, extensity, and intensity of global problems has expanded.¹⁶ Many of these problems are closely interlinked, presenting strong potential synergies as well as major trade-offs, meaning that siloed approaches are likely to produce conflicting policies. Policy-making always takes place in a context 'in which resources are limited and in which goals and objectives differ and cannot easily be weighed against each other' and this is especially acute on the global level.¹⁷

Evidently, the search for solutions must go beyond multilateral venues. While the past three decades have seen more multilateral activity than ever before, a gap between GPP aspiration and reality has persisted and even widened in many issue areas. This gap stems partly from the fact that global problems have become 'harder,' simply outstripping the capacity and reach of existing governance mechanisms. Yet, as Haufler (2018, p. 114) points out, GPP is often produced in a context of contestation and winners and losers, as opposed to interest-alignment and pareto-optimal outcomes, and 'the absence of governance can be a deliberate choice.' Historically, GPP has been framed as a tool to coordinate and align action around shared interests and a collective purpose, ignoring the deeper implications of power and its different manifestations.¹⁸ To better account for change and to understand barriers to cooperation, research needs to take more seriously the underlying power structures and political economy of GPP production and delivery.¹⁹ Power dynamics and distributional conflicts cannot only help explain the presence or absence of global regulatory regimes but also the emergence of conflicting regulations or 'sham standards.'²⁰

In addition, GPP research has a lot to gain from being more attentive to the domestic, shifting the focus from global decision-making processes to the actual sites of implementation and the complex steps that separate the two. This involves exploring the often indirect and constitutive ways in which international laws, norms, and regulations lead to domestic political change. For example, research on orchestration has conceptualised how GPP institutions may mobilise and enlist domestic intermediaries to achieve globally defined goals.²¹ Fostering transnational coalitions of domestic stakeholders has been identified as an important pathway for policy implementation and accountability across a range of issue areas such as human rights or environmental governance.²² Where local cultures of support are in place, GPP delivery may even be possible if national governments are outright hostile to global norms, as illustrated, for example, by California's continued engagement with the Paris Agreement notwithstanding the federal government's decision to withdraw from the treaty.²³

¹⁴ Howen et al. (2002), p. 10

¹⁵ Coen and Pegram (2018)

¹⁶ Hale and Held (2017)

¹⁷ Simeon (1976), p. 550

¹⁸ Barnett and Duvall (2009)

¹⁹ Coen and Pegram (2015)

²⁰ Drezner (2007)

²¹ Abbott et al. (2015)

²² See, for instance: Keck and Sikkink (1998), Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999), Bernstein and Cashore (2012)

²³ Davenport and Nagourney (2017)

More cross-disciplinary insight is also needed on the politics of local implementation and street-level compliance in GPP. Building on the seminal work of Lipsky (1980), public policy scholars have paid increasing attention to the role of street-level bureaucrats and auditors, recognising that they enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, face a variety of incentives, and often build close personal relationships with the subjects of regulation, increasing the risk of ‘cultural capture.’²⁴ The implications of this for global policy implementation processes, where there are multiple and overlapping levels of hierarchy, are not yet well understood.

Finally, critical evaluation of the successes and failures of particular interventions will be vital to spur further innovation in GPP theory and practice. For example, what can voluntary codes of conduct on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability such as the UN Global Compact actually achieve?²⁵ Can successful global treaties serve as a model for new international agreements in other issue areas? Under which conditions are GPP innovations ‘translatable’ into new contexts?²⁶ And, more generally, why do some GPP mechanisms work in certain issue areas but not in others?

NORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF GPP

GPP ‘uncouples governance from the nation-state and government,’ with important implications for legitimacy.²⁷ Traditionally, the discursive legitimisation of GPP has relied primarily on output-oriented arguments: it is simply *needed* to effectively respond to global challenges such as climate change or global health epidemics.²⁸ This is also reflected in the (earlier) research agenda on GPP and global governance, much of which has been informed by functionalist accounts of enhancing interstate cooperation.²⁹ While there is undoubtedly an urgent need to find solutions, a technocratic ‘problem solving bias’ risks glossing over equally urgent questions of power, domination, and legitimacy.³⁰

With many traditional intergovernmental venues in gridlock, a drop in output legitimacy, whether real or perceived, has also refocused attention on the lack of input legitimacy in GPP formulation. These concerns are sharpened further as more and more global regulatory functions are exercised by non-state actors that are not indirectly legitimated through democratic elections. In response, transparency and stakeholder accountability have become the new watchwords of GPP.³¹ However, ‘how disclosure and openness actually affect the behavior of international organizations, transnational corporations, and nation-states remains theoretically and empirically under specified.’³²

As GPP encounters growing resistance, not least from the new US president, prominent scholars have argued that it can no longer be framed as a neutral, consensual endeavour.³³ Scholars and practitioners need to think not just about how to make GPP delivery more efficient and transparent or how to formulate a better ‘marketing pitch’ for GPP but take seriously questions of exclusion and domination: Who are the winners and who are the losers of global policy-making processes? Who is involved in GPP formulation and who is excluded from the discussion? And what is the response: resistance, disengagement, or the establishment of alternative venues for GPP?

These questions also compel us to confront the inherent Western-centrism of much GPP theory and practice, the politics of identity, and the complexities of mediating between conflicting values.³⁴ In other words: What does the current liberal global governance architecture look like ‘from “below” and from the “outside”’?³⁵ Who gets to make claims about what is legitimate and what is not? And how can the study of GPP be pluralised and ‘decentred’?

²⁴ Kwak (2014), Provost (2016)

²⁵ While some have hailed the Global Compact as a ‘creative answer to ... many unaddressed governance gaps’ (Rasche and Keil, 2010, p. 3) others have criticised it for having failed to induce any meaningful change (Sethi and Schepers, 2014).

²⁶ For example, efforts to replicate low carbon urban transition experiments in cities across the globe have often ignored local context, thus inhibiting successful ‘translation’ (Williams, 2017).

²⁷ Reinicke (1997), p. 132

²⁸ Bexell (2014)

²⁹ Pegram and Acuto (2015)

³⁰ Mayntz (2001)

³¹ Brassett and Tsingou (2011)

³² Hale (2008), p. 73

³³ Zürn (2018a)

³⁴ Hurrell (2017)

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30

Finally, the fact that those in charge of local implementation are typically excluded from the formulation of GPP poses a range of normative challenges, highlighting the importance of ongoing dialogue and negotiation between GPP makers, implementers, and receivers.³⁶ Paying more attention to local level implementation politics is also crucial because GPP interventions can have unintended consequences, empowering certain actors over other, weaker ones. For example, a number of collaborative projects under the so-called Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), established by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, have been linked to human rights violations, including land grabbing or forced displacement, and the repression and marginalisation of local communities.³⁷

GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY AND POLITICS OF SCALE

What constitutes a global problem is often taken for granted. However, determining what exactly is 'global' about GPP – and what is not – is open to dynamic and contending interpretations. Scale plays an important role throughout the global policy-making process, from agenda-setting through to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. To ensure that GPP is informed by local realities, scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers need to pay more attention to the politics of defining and redefining spatial scale, the value structures that effect this process, and the 'selection bias' inherent in GPP priority setting.

Conventionally, the 'global', 'regional', 'national', and 'local' have been conceptualised as relatively static and independent policy spaces. In contrast, contemporary research on GPP across disciplines recognises that these spaces or scales are not naturally defined, discrete units but 'interconnected arenas produced and constructed by social action'.³⁸ Some authors have used the term 'glocalisation' to capture the fluidity of relations between the global and the local, with governance arrangements being constantly rescaled and reconfigured.³⁹

GPP scholars should pay careful attention to how issues 'are created, constructed, regulated and contested between, across and among scales'.⁴⁰ The pre-eminence of the 'global' can obscure the inherent power dimensions of this process. A problem may only be perceived as 'global' once it has been put on the GPP agenda, highlighting the importance of understanding how issues 'become' global, how they are framed, and by whom.

The framing of an issue may significantly affect policy design and delivery. GPP schemes that are largely devised by the Global North tend to ignore or misunderstand the perspectives of marginalised communities in the Global South, often the very people that these schemes seek to support. For example, the global agenda for poverty reduction has conceptualised poverty primarily in terms of material deprivation, ignoring how poverty is lived and experienced locally and drawing 'often irreconcilable lines across this global discourse between North and South'.⁴¹

The scalar framing of an issue also has important implications for how responsibility for GPP is assigned. The notion of 'thinking global' can take agency away from local actors. In development and health, for example, interventions are usually primarily driven by those administering and funding a particular programme rather than its recipients. Many of these programmes also rely on external experts and administrative staff for implementation, thus contributing little to local and long-term capacity building.⁴² At the same time, the notion of the 'local' can also be used to marginalise disadvantaged communities and their demands. For instance, developed countries have sought to frame the issue of climate change loss and damage in terms of domestic responsibilities, thus 'minimizing questions of transboundary harm and attribution'.⁴³

³⁶ Coen and Pegram (2018)

³⁷ Olawuyi (2016), Roht-Arriaza (2010)

³⁸ Haarstad (2014), p. 87

³⁹ Robertson (1992), Swyngedouw (1997, 2004)

⁴⁰ Bulkeley (2005) p. 876

⁴¹ Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo (2014), p. 299

⁴² Khoubesserian (2009)

⁴³ Vanhala and Hestbaek (2016), p. 125

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

The failure to reduce the ‘evidence-practice and policy gap’ has been a long-standing concern across disciplines.⁴⁴ Researchers have an important role to play in drawing attention to pressing GPP concerns, finding pathways through, and critically evaluating the intended and unintended effects of GPP interventions. However, in the social sciences, those seeking to speak truth to power have been ‘continually frustrated at their limited abilities to generate truths, or to find that power wasn’t listening carefully’.⁴⁵ Natural scientists, on the other hand, have often been reluctant to get closely involved in policy debates in the first place, recognising the risks to their scientific integrity.⁴⁶

Given these concerns, researchers should be transparent, honest, and self-reflective about their own role in GPP. Scholars may not be able to speak *the* truth to power but they can expand the scope of policy options and solutions available, support an open and inclusive debate on these options, and encourage civil society to hold policy-makers accountable.⁴⁷ There is now a broad consensus that researchers have a ‘basic responsibility to communicate what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what results they have obtained’, especially if these results have implications for wider society.⁴⁸

However, building effective channels of communication between researchers, policy-makers, and the general public can be challenging, especially where policy-making is a multi-level process and the distinction between ‘policy-maker’ and ‘policy-taker’ is not always clear-cut. The translation of research into practice is also constrained by the different social structures and incentives systems in which researchers and policy-makers operate and the lack of opportunities for meaningful personal exchange.⁴⁹ At present, scholars often find themselves ill-equipped to engage effectively with policy-makers or the general public and, although societal ‘impact’ of research is increasingly encouraged, it is often unclear how it can be demonstrated and rewarded.⁵⁰

When deciding *who* to engage with, researchers should consider the full policy cycle, from agenda-setting to implementation. GPP is not a linear process and offering evidence to policy-makers in national governments or international organisations is not the only available (or even most promising) route to effect real change. Street-level implementers, for example, play an important role in translating international policy agendas into daily tasks and activities and often enjoy considerable room to manoeuvre.⁵¹ Engaging and teaming up with civil society actors offers another opportunity for researchers to push for substantive change in GPP.⁵² Ideally, such engagement should work in both directions, with academic debates reflecting the voices of those on the receiving end of GPP.

Finally, GPP researchers should be mindful of the danger of falling into analytical siloes. Economics, for example, has long been associated with a narrow neoliberal model and policy agenda, something that has greatly contributed to the erosion of public trust in economic expertise.⁵³ Going forward, it will be vital to consider how productive cross-disciplinary exchange and learning on GPP can work in practice and build more permanent collaborative structures for exchange.

⁴⁴ Grimshaw et al. (2012)

⁴⁵ Haas and Haas (2002)

⁴⁶ Rapley et al. (2014)

⁴⁷ Carden (2009)

⁴⁸ Rapley et al. (2014), p. 35

⁴⁹ Clark and Holmes (2010)

⁵⁰ Himmrich (2016)

⁵¹ Mannell (2014)

⁵² Hawkes (2018)

⁵³ Carlin (2018)

THE ROLE OF EXPERTS IN GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY

Experts play an important role in GPP, from agenda-setting through to monitoring and implementation. Their influence is arguably growing as global policy-making mechanisms – and the problems they aim to address – become ever more complex and protracted. Expert-driven governance is clearly vital to address ‘wicked’ transboundary problems, however, the decoupling of GPP from national democratic procedures can blur the lines between expert advice and executive decision-making, with significant consequences for legitimacy. Observers have identified a sense of remoteness from supra-national policy-making procedures as a key driver in the erosion of public confidence in multilateral organisations and expert opinion, with Brexit an often-cited example of how people have ‘fallen out of love with experts’.⁵⁴

A Post-Trust World?

Trust plays a fundamental role in the establishment of ‘socially efficient formal institutions like the rule of law, impartial civil services, and incorrupt public administrations’.⁵⁵ Luhmann (1979) has described trust as a social mechanism that allows for the ‘reduction of complexity’. In a rapidly globalising and digitalising world, reducing complexity has simultaneously become more important and more difficult and, consequently, the question of who should be entrusted to perform this function has come under intense scrutiny.⁵⁶

Leading up to the 2016 UK referendum on leaving the EU, then-Justice Secretary Michael Gove infamously declared that “people in this country have had enough of experts”.⁵⁷ The vote for Brexit appeared to reflect a wide-spread sentiment that academics and other experts were biased, not trustworthy, and had overstepped their remit by overwhelmingly advocating for ‘Remain’. It also echoed a wider populist backlash against globalisation and ‘the form of political power that facilitated it, which is technocratic, multilateral and increasingly divorced from local identities’.⁵⁸ The rise of populism, in turn, has revived some of the perennial doubts about democracy, with some suggesting that voters are simply too incompetent to decide on complex political matters.⁵⁹

A polarised political discourse has deepened this sense of mutual distrust. Populist leaders, both on the left and the right, have cultivated an explicit anti-expert narrative that allows them to brand unwelcome news as ‘fake’. But the underlying story may be deeper and more complex. Restoring trust is not simply about demonstrating that the experts are ‘right’;⁶⁰ we also need to better understand the anti-global dimension of the populist narrative and why so many people feel they “lack control” in a “system [that] is somehow against them”.⁶¹

A More Nuanced View of ‘Expertise’

Virtually all of today’s biggest global challenges require not just political but also scientific, technical, legal, or economic solutions. From climate scientists to central bankers, medical experts to commercial arbitration lawyers, GPP processes involve different kinds of experts in very different functions. Often, however, these processes take place in the ‘background’ of global politics and ‘the nature, limits and contestability of expertise [in GPP] remain obscure’.⁶²

While experts may exert significant influence in defining and framing priorities, identifying solutions and implementing GPP, their involvement is often portrayed as essentially apolitical and technical. Kickbusch (2016, p. 202) has noted that, in global health, some experts have readily

⁵⁴ Katz (2017), Zürn (2004)

⁵⁵ Rothstein (2011), p. 168

⁵⁶ Staiger (2018)

⁵⁷ Qtd. in Mance (2016)

⁵⁸ Davies (2018)

⁵⁹ Brennan (2016)

⁶⁰ Staiger (2018)

⁶¹ Christine Lagarde, qtd. in Khan (2016)

⁶² Kennedy (2004), p. 3

embraced a policy-focused role while others 'consider politics a "dirty" business that they do not want to get to close to'. The problem with this position, she argues, is that the technical and the political cannot be easily separated, in fact 'scientific work can be as interest laden as politics'.⁶³

Zürn (2018b) has identified the overreliance on technocratic and legal legitimization narratives as one of the most fundamental problems facing the global governance system. While the rise in global epistemic authorities appears to have enjoyed widespread public support for a long time, the technocratic bias of GPP institutions is now increasingly being challenged: 'transnational protest movements see these institutions as servants of a global (neo)liberal elite that hides its power with legal expertise and a technocratic knowledge order; right-wing populist parties within national political systems challenge lawyers and technocrats in [international organizations] for being distanced from the people [and] political elites in rising powers criticize global governance institutions as instruments of Western domination'.⁶⁴

Better transparency and accountability mechanisms for all GPP stakeholders, including experts, and more opportunities for civil society participation and knowledge co-production could help restore mutual trust. There is also need for a more nuanced view of what an 'expert' actually is. Expertise is always context-bound and temporal and the often subliminal expectation that experts should 'have an absolute advantage over less accomplished people on all topics' is hardly realistic.⁶⁵ As Levy and Peart (2016) argue, experts are neither driven purely by private motivations nor are they immune from regulatory capture. If we think of experts as 'characterised by a messy bundle of private and other-regarding interests', just like other human beings, we are in a better position to put mechanisms in place to ensure the public gets the best out of experts.⁶⁶

⁶³ Kickbusch (2016), p. 203

⁶⁴ Zürn (2018b), p. 84. As Zürn notes, paradoxically, survey data from Western democracies suggests that, for a long time, global epistemic authorities with limited democratic legitimization enjoyed higher levels of political trust than national political institutions such as parties or parliaments.

⁶⁵ Smith (2007), p. 186

⁶⁶ Levy and Peart (2016), p. 19

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