

From civic engagement to service-learning in higher education: Drivers and barriers to the institutionalization of service-learning at the University of Mbuji mayi in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Del compromiso cívico al aprendizaje-servicio en la educación superior: Impulsores y barreras para la institucionalización del aprendizaje-servicio en la Universidad de Mbuji mayi en la República Democrática del Congo (RDC)

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning (SL) is a pedagogical methodology aimed at integrating academic learning and social commitment. However, in African contexts, a gap persists between university civic engagement and its curricular integration. This study analyzes this relationship at the University of Mbujimayi (Democratic Republic of Congo), examining the civic engagement of students and professors, their knowledge and experience in SL, and the institutional conditions that influence its implementation. Using a quantitative-descriptive cross-sectional design, 89 student surveys and 30 professor surveys were analyzed. The results show high levels of participation in volunteering and community action, but limited knowledge and low implementation of SL. Furthermore, relevant institutional barriers were identified, especially the lack of organizational support, professor training, and resources. The findings show the coexistence of strong university civic capital with weak curricular integration, suggesting that the institutionalization of service-learning in African contexts requires situated pedagogical models that articulate existing community practices with sustainable academic structures.

Keywords. Service-learning, higher education, civic engagement, university social responsibility.

RESUMEN

El aprendizaje-servicio (ApS) es una metodología pedagógica que busca integrar el aprendizaje académico con el compromiso social. Sin embargo, en los contextos africanos todavía existe una brecha entre la participación cívica de la comunidad universitaria y su incorporación al currículo. Este estudio analiza esta relación en la Universidad de Mbujimayi, en la República Democrática del Congo, examinando el compromiso cívico de estudiantes y profesores, sus conocimientos y experiencias en relación con el ApS, así como las condiciones institucionales que influyen en su implementación. Se empleó un diseño cuantitativo-descriptivo de corte transversal y se analizaron 89 cuestionarios cumplimentados por estudiantes y 30 por profesores. Los resultados muestran elevados niveles de participación en actividades de voluntariado y acción comunitaria, pero un conocimiento limitado y una escasa implementación del ApS. Asimismo, se identificaron importantes barreras institucionales, especialmente la falta de apoyo organizativo, formación del profesorado y recursos. Los hallazgos ponen de manifiesto la coexistencia de un fuerte compromiso cívico universitario y una débil integración curricular. Esto sugiere que la institucionalización del aprendizaje-servicio en los contextos africanos requiere modelos pedagógicos adaptados a las características del entorno, capaces de vincular las prácticas comunitarias ya existentes con estructuras académicas sostenibles.

Palabras clave. Aprendizaje-servicio, educación superior, compromiso cívico, responsabilidad social universitaria.

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning (SL) has become established in recent decades as a pedagogical methodology in higher education capable of integrating academic learning with community service, generating simultaneous benefits for students, participating communities, and the universities themselves (Bringle, 1997; Bowie & Cassim, 2016). Through this experience, students apply curricular content in real-world contexts, strengthening both their disciplinary understanding and the development of

essential transversal skills for professional practice, while communities benefit from academic knowledge geared toward solving specific social problems (Furco, 2011; Harrop-Allin, 2017). Similarly, SL fosters the development of sustainable links between universities and society, reinforcing the social function of higher education (Gordon et al., 2022).

From this perspective, service-learning is based on the university's mission to train socially responsible professionals committed to their environment, capable of contributing from their respective disciplines to social development and collective well-being (Furco, 2023). Consequently, the university institution ceases to be conceived solely as a transmitter of knowledge and assumes an active role as an agent of social transformation, integrating experiences of civic engagement linked to social reality into its educational programs (Tejedor et al., 2019).

However, it is necessary to differentiate service-learning from other forms of civic engagement, such as volunteering, community involvement, or social activism. Unlike these practices, service-learning involves explicit integration with the academic curriculum, the definition of learning objectives, and the incorporation of systematic processes of critical reflection that link community experience with disciplinary learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000, 2007; Furco, 2003; Salam et al., 2019). This pedagogical articulation is the distinctive element that transforms social action into a structured educational experience.

In the African context, diverse studies demonstrate high youth participation in community activities, local social networks, religious organizations, and volunteer work, reflecting a strong tradition of solidarity and collective organization. However, the integration of service-learning into universities across the continent remains limited and is concentrated primarily in countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and Nigeria. In many cases, although students exhibit prosocial attitudes and prior community experience, these practices remain disconnected from university training processes, resulting in isolated initiatives lacking curricular integration and systematic academic evaluation (Furco, 2003; Bringle & Hatcher, 2007).

This situation represents a double loss of opportunity: on the one hand, the university misses out on a pedagogical mechanism capable of strengthening meaningful learning and the development of civic competencies; on the other hand, communities do not fully access the transformative potential of university knowledge through sustained and structured projects (Thomson et al., 2011; Varela Candia et al., 2015). Consequently, understanding how to articulate existing civic engagement with formal pedagogical strategies constitutes a significant challenge for African higher education institutions.

Within this framework, Mbujimayi University represents a particularly relevant case study. Situated in a social context characterized by strong community dynamics and social participation, the institution offers a suitable setting to analyze the relationship between university civic engagement and service-learning, as well as the institutional conditions that can facilitate or limit its development.

The present study aims to examine the forms of civic engagement developed by students and professors at Mbujimayi University, evaluate their level of knowledge and experience in service-learning (SL), and analyze the perceptions, institutional conditions, and main limitations that influence the implementation of this methodology, with the purpose of assessing its potential as an educational strategy aimed at strengthening university social responsibility and the comprehensive training of students.

To this end, a cross-sectional, non-experimental design with a descriptive and exploratory quantitative approach was used, based on the analysis of 89 surveys administered to students and 30 surveys administered to professors at the institution. This approach allowed the phenomenon to be addressed from the perspective of both key actors in the implementation of Service-Learning, considering their experiences, perceptions, and levels of civic participation (Hart et al., 2023; Resch, 2023).

This research contributes to the literature on service-learning in a still understudied context such as Africa, providing empirical evidence on the coexistence of high civic engagement in universities with limited curricular integration of these practices. Furthermore, the study identifies institutional opportunities and barriers to incorporating service-learning, highlighting the importance of organizational and pedagogical support in transforming existing civic capital into structured educational experiences (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Bringle & Hatcher, 2007).

Thus, the following main question arises to guide this research: How can the civic engagement of students and professors be integrated with service-learning in an African university like Mbujimayi University, considering its institutional conditions and local social context? To answer this question, the following specific questions are posed:

1. What forms does civic engagement take among students and professors outside the university setting?
2. What is the level of knowledge and perception of service-learning between both groups?
3. What institutional drivers and barriers influence the development of service-learning experiences at Mbujimayi University?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic engagement in higher education: definitions, dimensions and contextual expressions

Civic engagement is often defined as the active participation of individuals in community life in order to address issues of public interest and contribute to collective well-being (Adler & Goggin, 2005). This participation is not limited to concrete actions but involves ethical, cultural, and motivational dispositions that orient the individual toward the common good, beyond individual interests (Prentice, 2007). From an educational perspective, Ehrlich (1997) conceptualizes it as the process of believing that one can—and should—make a difference in improving the community, emphasizing the component of personal responsibility and civic efficacy, particularly relevant for university students (Park, 2025).

In the field of higher education, civic engagement is associated with educational processes aimed at strengthening active citizenship, critical thinking, and the capacity for social intervention, which positions the university as a key space for integrating academic learning and social responsibility (Varela Candia et al., 2015; Tejedor et al., 2019). In line with this, Park (2025) proposes that civic engagement is a multidimensional construct comprising at least four dimensions: (a) cognitive, linked to the analysis and understanding of public affairs; (b) attitudinal, associated with values of social justice; (c) behavioral, expressed in effective participation; and (d) relational, referring to the ability to collaborate and build community ties.

However, the form that civic engagement takes varies according to the historical, institutional, and sociocultural context. In different regions, it can be expressed through formal political participation, civil associations, volunteering, religious networks, social mobilization, or other community initiatives (Machakanja & Manuel, 2020; Nchu, 2024; Koos & Traunmüller, 2025). This diversity is especially relevant in Africa, where civic engagement is often rooted in community structures and local solidarity mechanisms that do not always align with Western categories of civic participation (Machakanja & Manuel, 2020; Bouwman, 2023; Koos & Traunmüller, 2025). In this context, philosophies such as Ubuntu—focused on human interdependence—and Harambee—oriented towards community cooperation and self-help—offer a cultural support that links education, social responsibility and community participation (Machakanja & Manuel, 2020; Kibona & Woldegiorgis, 2023).

In contexts marked by political instability, poverty, and armed conflict, as is the case in several African countries, community participation can intensify as a strategy for resilience, social survival, and rebuilding the community fabric (Koos & Traunmüller, 2025). In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, youth participation can emerge as a response to structural needs, especially

when community networks compensate for state deficits and citizens organize mutual support mechanisms in the face of weak institutions (Eniola-Arigbe & Awodiji, 2025; Machakanja & Manuel, 2020; Bouwman, 2023). However, the literature warns that this civic capital can be underutilized when it is not linked to educational initiatives capable of transforming social action into academic learning and skills development (Varela Candia et al., 2015; Tejedor et al., 2019). Therefore, the need arises for situated approaches that allow the integration of pre-existing civic engagement with the university curriculum, avoiding the fragmentation between community action and academic training (Hart et al., 2023).

Service-learning: foundations, differentiation from volunteering and educational values

Service-learning is defined as a pedagogical methodology that integrates academic learning and community service through intentional curriculum design, a response to real needs, and systematic processes of reflection that connect experience with educational objectives (Furco, 2023). Its theoretical roots lie in the experiential learning tradition, particularly in Dewey, who advocated for an education based on meaningful social experiences, and in Kolb, who emphasized the transformation of experience into knowledge through cycles of action and reflection (Salam et al., 2019; Díaz-Iso et al., 2025). This framework is further articulated with contributions from approaches such as meaningful learning, competency-based education, and critical pedagogy, in which the student is conceived as an active subject capable of understanding and transforming their reality (Deans, 1999; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

In the contemporary debate on university social responsibility, Service-Learning (SL) is linked to the so-called “third mission” of the institution, insofar as it promotes concrete and sustainable contributions to the social environment (Chan et al., 2017; Hart et al., 2023). From this perspective, the university not only trains professionals but also returns social value through educational projects that integrate academic knowledge, community collaboration, and measurable learning outcomes.

A central issue in the literature is differentiating service-learning from other forms of civic engagement, especially volunteering. Although both practices involve community service, volunteering often takes place outside the curriculum, without requiring explicit learning objectives, academic assessment, or systematic critical reflection. In contrast, service-learning demands curricular integration, pedagogical design, and reflection as conditions that transform service into learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000, 2007; Furco, 2003; Salam et al., 2019). This distinction is particularly relevant in contexts with high community participation but little formalized education surrounding these practices (Thomson et al., 2011).

Academic evidence attributes benefits to service-learning (SL) at multiple levels: improved conceptual understanding and knowledge transfer, development of transversal skills (communication, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving), and strengthening of civic competencies such as empathy, social responsibility, and civic efficacy (Tejedor et al., 2019; Monge-Hernández et al., 2020). However, the literature agrees that its sustainability depends on specific institutional conditions: professors training, coordination structures, community partnerships, logistical support, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. In the absence of these conditions, SL tends to be reduced to isolated initiatives sustained by individual motivation and with little continuity (Dube & Hendricks, 2023; Hart et al., 2023; Saidi & Boti, 2023).

Service-learning and civic engagement in Africa: High civic capital and institutionalization gap

Although service-learning originated and became widely established in the United States and Europe, its adoption in Africa has followed specific trajectories. South Africa is the most documented case, where service-learning and community engagement were consolidated in the post-apartheid period as instruments of social and institutional transformation (Dube & Hendricks, 2023; Bouwman, 2023). In other countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, experiences have

been reported aimed at improving employability and reducing the gap between university education and social or labor market demands (Eniola-Arigbe & Awodiji, 2025).

Despite these advances, the literature agrees that the institutionalization of service-learning in Africa remains limited, with recurring obstacles: lack of professor training, excessive workload, absence of institutional policies, scarcity of resources for community coordination, and low availability of evaluation mechanisms (Dube & Hendricks, 2023). In countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, structural challenges are also noted, associated with insufficient institutional infrastructure and the absence of contextualized frameworks that incorporate the sociocultural particularities of the territory (Thomson et al., 2011).

At the same time, the continent presents a reality that constitutes both an opportunity and a challenge: high levels of youth civic engagement in community networks, local associations, religious organizations, and volunteer practices, influenced by cultural frameworks of collective solidarity such as Ubuntu and Harambee (Bouwman, 2023; Machakanja & Manuel, 2020; Kibona & Woldegiorgis, 2023). In this context, the key issue is not the absence of engagement, but rather the ability to transform that engagement into curricular learning, overcoming the fragmentation between community life and academic life (Furco, 2003; Bringle & Hatcher, 2007). Along these same lines, Perold et al. (2012) argue that strengthening civic engagement in Africa requires pedagogical approaches that recognize the socio-community reality of students and integrate it into intentional and evaluable educational processes.

Consequently, recent research suggests the need to move beyond the linear transfer of Western models and toward situated designs, tailored to real institutional conditions, available resources, and local forms of community organization (Bouwman, 2023; Dube & Hendricks, 2023; Saidi & Boti, 2023). This debate supports the relevance of empirical studies that simultaneously analyze: (a) existing civic capital, (b) the actual knowledge and application of Service-Learning, and (c) the institutional conditions for its implementation.

Service-learning at Mbujimayi University: relevance of the case and institutional conditions

The University of Mbujimayi (UM), located in the province of Kasai Oriental (DRC), is a relevant case study for analyzing the gap between civic engagement and curriculum articulation. The institution operates within a social context characterized by structural poverty and strong community dynamics, where social participation and solidarity play a central role in daily life. At the same time, as a public university with material constraints and infrastructure challenges, UM represents a typical scenario for many African institutions where pedagogical innovation faces limited organizational conditions.

Academic structure and teaching conditions directly influence the feasibility of implementing methodologies such as Service-Learning (SL). The literature underscores that the sustainability of service-learning depends on institutional resources, organizational coordination, professor time availability, and specific pedagogical training—factors that condition the capacity to sustain community partnerships and formative assessment processes (Furco & Miller, 2009; Dube & Hendricks, 2023; Hart et al., 2023; Resch, 2023). In this sense, aspects such as professor overload, limited pedagogical autonomy, and the lack of systematic training programs can reduce the implementation of SL to sporadic and discontinuous initiatives (Gill et al., 2023; Schultes et al., 2025).

On the other hand, the country's current higher education regulations stipulate that the theoretical content of courses can only be taught by professors with doctoral degrees, delegating the development of practical training, tutoring, and other administrative functions to professors with lower ranks who do not hold doctoral degrees. Given this situation, the University of Mbujimayi constantly requires the presence of professors with doctoral degrees from other universities in the country, primarily from the cities of Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, and to a lesser extent, from some neighboring African countries as well as some European countries, notably France and Belgium.

The lack of a doctoral program in the city, coupled with the low salaries of professors, prevents them from relocating to other cities to pursue doctoral studies. This hinders their ability to continue their academic development and, consequently, to advance to higher teaching ranks. This situation limits their teaching autonomy, preventing them from more freely undertaking initiatives to improve the teaching and learning process.

Previous experiences of cooperation and participation in inter-university networks can act as potential facilitators for strengthening internal capacities, especially when designed realistically and adapted to the context (Hart et al., 2023; Saidi & Boti, 2023; Schultes et al., 2025). Therefore, analyzing the university allows us to understand not only the level of predisposition and civic capital existing in its university community, but also the institutional conditions that can favor or hinder the transition from informal community practices to structured curricular service-learning experiences.

Despite growing interest in service-learning and civic engagement, empirical studies examining the relationship between pre-existing civic engagement and the institutional conditions necessary for its implementation in Central African universities remain scarce. In particular, the literature is limited regarding experiences of how universities operating in resource-constrained contexts can transform informal civic engagement into structured curricular practices. To address this gap, the present study examines the relationship between civic engagement, knowledge of service-learning, and institutional conditions at Mbujimayi University.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional, non-experimental design with a descriptive-exploratory quantitative approach, suitable for analyzing perceptions, levels of civic participation, and institutional conditions at a specific point in time, particularly in contexts where prior empirical evidence is limited and an initial diagnosis is required to guide future pedagogical interventions (Haro Sarango et al., 2024). In accordance with the research objectives, the design allowed for the simultaneous examination of existing civic engagement among students and professors, their level of knowledge and experience in service-learning (SL), as well as the perceived opportunities and barriers to its implementation at the University of Mbujimayi (UM), Democratic Republic of Congo.

The target population consisted of students and professors from the five faculties of the University of Mbujimayi (UM). A non-probability convenience sampling method was used, conditioned by the access and connectivity limitations inherent to the institutional context. Regarding the student population, the institution had approximately 1,092 students for the 2024/2025 academic year, distributed as follows: Faculty of Law: 47 women and 135 men; Faculty of Medicine: 104 women and 248 men; Faculty of Applied Sciences: 41 women and 223 men; Faculty of Economics and Management: 104 women and 122 men; and Faculty of Humanities: 26 women and 42 men. Thus, the final sample included 89 students, approximately 8% of the student population.

Regarding the professor's population, Table 1 shows the distribution of professors by rank and faculty. Statistics from the University of Mbujimayi (UM) indicate that, of the 131 professors currently employed, only 16 have a doctorate (2 Full professors and 14 Associate professors), 23 only have a master's degree (Work boss professors), and 92 hold only a bachelor's or engineering degree (Assistant professors). The final sample included 30 professors, representing 22% of the professors. The inclusion of both groups was due to the need to analyze the phenomenon from the perspective of the main stakeholders involved in the implementation of Service-Learning.

Table 1. Distribution of professors by category and faculty

LEVEL	CATEGORY	FACULTY					TOTAL
		Law	Medicine	Applied Sciences	Economics and Management	Humanities	
4	Full professors	0	1	0	0	1	2
3	Associate professors	2	5	2	0	5	14
2	Work boss professors	0	5	9	6	3	23
1	Assistant professors	10	36	12	16	18	92
	Total	12	47	23	22	27	131

Source: Own elaboration.

Two structured questionnaires were designed for data collection, one for students (40 items) and the other for professors (43 items), administered via Google Forms. Both instruments had a similar structure, incorporating specific questions based on the participant's role. The questionnaires combined open-ended questions, dichotomous (yes/no) questions, multiple-choice items, and five-point Likert-type rating scales. The dimensions assessed were defined based on the theoretical framework and research questions, and included: prior civic engagement (volunteering, associative, political, and community participation), knowledge and experience in service-learning, perception of the university's social role, institutional conditions for implementing service-learning, and perceived barriers and opportunities.

Prior to implementation, the instruments underwent a pilot test with 10 students and 5 professors to assess the clarity, comprehensibility, and relevance of the items. The feedback provided allowed for adjustments to the wording and improvements to the questionnaire's internal consistency. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the logistical limitations of the context, a full psychometric analysis was not conducted; however, the logical consistency of the responses and the suitability of the scales used for the descriptive purposes of the research were verified.

Data collection took place during the second half of 2024 through the distribution of electronic links in institutional academic groups. The study adhered to the ethical principles applicable to social research. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. The data were used exclusively for academic purposes and treated confidentially.

Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and comparative distributions between students and professors. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the absence of inferential hypotheses, advanced statistical tests were not applied. The initial questionnaire questions gathered basic sociodemographic and academic information: age, sex, faculty and academic year, considering the university's organizational structure and the coexistence of the Bachelor's (BAC) and Licentiate (LIC) degree systems. This allowed for contextualizing the analyzed participation and perception patterns. Table 2 presents the dimensions and distribution of items in both instruments.

Table 2. Dimensions evaluated in the questionnaires applied to students and professors

DIMENSION	ASPECT EVALUATED	NUMBER OF ITEMS		SCALES USED
		Student	Professor	
I. CIVIC COMMITMENT: VOLUNTEERING	Participation and motivation	5-9	5-9	Yes/No, Single-choice questions, Open questions
	Impact	10-11	10-11	Yes/No, Open questions
	Future interest	12-13	12-13	Yes/No, Open questions
I. CIVIC COMMITMENT: PARTICIPATION IN ASSOCIATIONS	Participation	14-16	14-16	Yes/No, Single-choice questions, Open questions
I. CIVIC COMMITMENT: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION	Participation	17-19	17-19	Yes/No, Single-choice questions, Open questions
I. CIVIC COMMITMENT: PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY LIFE	Participation	20-22	20-22	Yes/No, Single-choice questions, Open questions
II. SERVICE-LEARNING	Level of knowledge	23-24	23-24	Yes/No
	Participation and satisfaction	25-27	25-27	Yes/No, Open questions and Questions with 5-level Likert scale
	Importance	28		Yes/No
	Student interest		28	Yes/No
	Institutional support		29-31	Yes/No, Single-choice questions
III. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNIVERSITY	Level of contribution to society	29-32	32-35	Yes/No, Single-choice questions and Questions with 5-level Likert scale
	Professor's level of interest	33	36	Questions with 5-level Likert scale
IV. PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND COMMITMENT TO SOCIETY	Vocational training	34-35	37	Yes/No, Questions with a 5-level Likert scale
	Cross-cutting training	36-37	38-39	Yes/No
	Social awareness	38-40	40-43	Open, Single-choice questions

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS

A total of 119 valid responses were obtained, corresponding to 89 students and 30 professors from Mbujimayi University. Table 3 presents the general characteristics of the sample. Among the students, the 18-25 age group predominates, while the professors is mainly concentrated between 31 and 40 years old. There is a low representation of women in both groups, with 30% of the students and 10% of the professors being female.

Regarding the distribution by faculty, the highest student participation came from Applied Sciences, followed by Medicine and Economics and Management, while Law had the lowest participation. Among faculty members, responses were concentrated mainly in Medicine and Economics and Management. The majority of students surveyed were in the first cycle of the

Bachelor's degree program (BAC 1-3), while the upper levels of the Bachelor's degree corresponded exclusively to the Medicine program.

Table 3. General information of the students and professors surveyed

	STUDENTS	PROFESSORS
AGE		
18 to 21	38	
22 to 25	34	
26 or more	17	
28 to 30		10
31 to 40		15
41 or older		5
SEX		
Women	27	3
Men	62	27
FACULTY		
Law	12	4
Medicine	22	12
Applied Sciences	23	2
Economic and Management Sciences	17	8
Humanities	15	4
ACADEMIC YEAR		
1st year of grade	14	
2nd year of grade	19	
3rd year of grade	20	
1st LIC	9	
2nd LIC	23	
3rd LIC	2	
4th LIC	2	
TOTAL	89	30

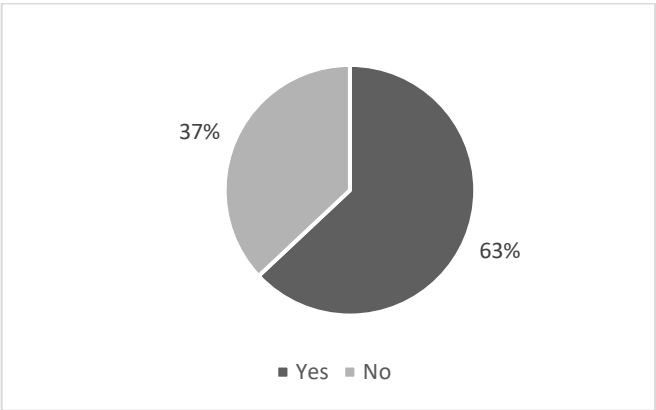
Source: Own elaboration.

Civic engagement outside the university setting

The results show a high level of civic engagement among the participants. 63% of students and 77% of professors reported having participated in volunteer activities (Figures 1 and 2, respectively). At the faculty level, Medicine and Applied Sciences registered the highest levels of student participation, while Law showed the lowest (Figure 3). For faculty, the highest participation was observed in Economics and Management and Medicine, while Applied Sciences registered the lowest proportion (Figure 4).

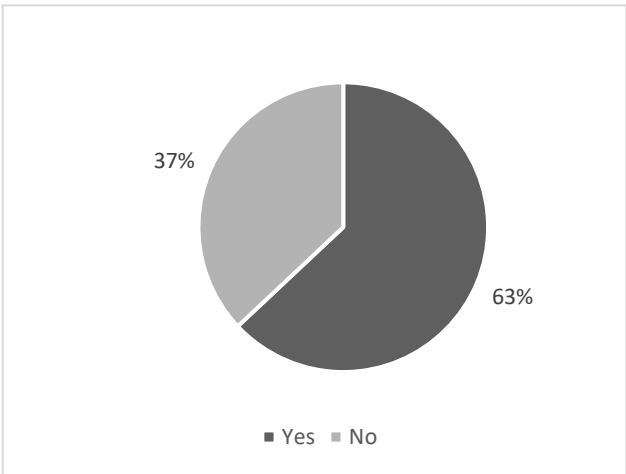
The open-ended responses revealed a wide variety of activities undertaken, including health awareness campaigns, vaccination programs, community education activities, support for vulnerable populations, environmental initiatives, and training in basic skills and entrepreneurship. Both students and professors overwhelmingly cited the desire to help others and contribute to community development as their primary motivation for participating. Furthermore, among those not currently involved in volunteering, almost all expressed interest in doing so in the future.

Figure 1. Level of student participation in volunteer activities



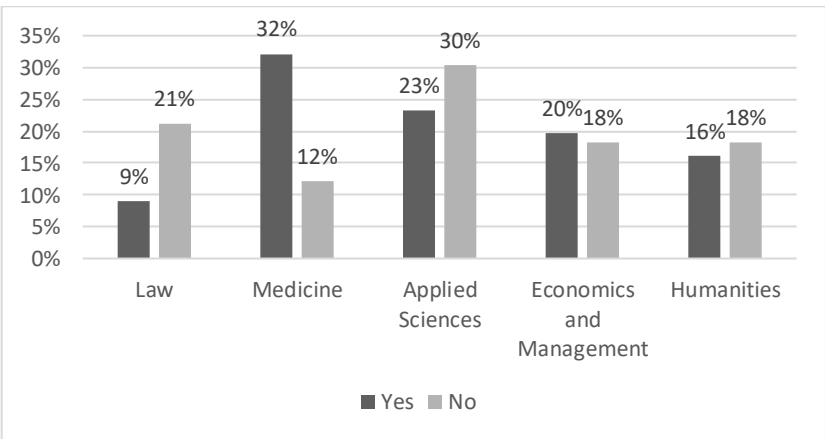
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Level of professors' participation in volunteer activities



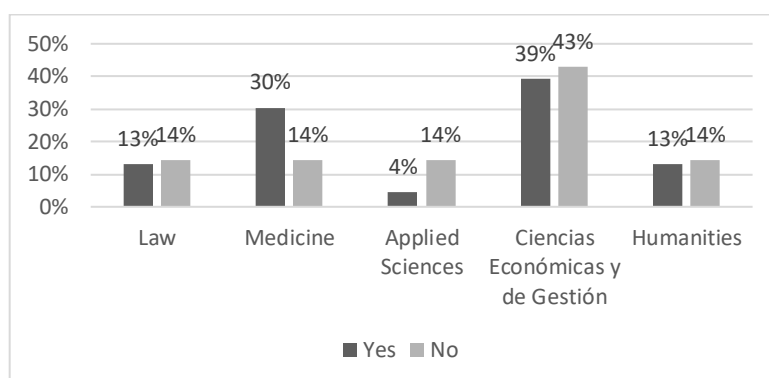
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3. Level of student participation in volunteer activities by faculty



Source: Own elaboration.

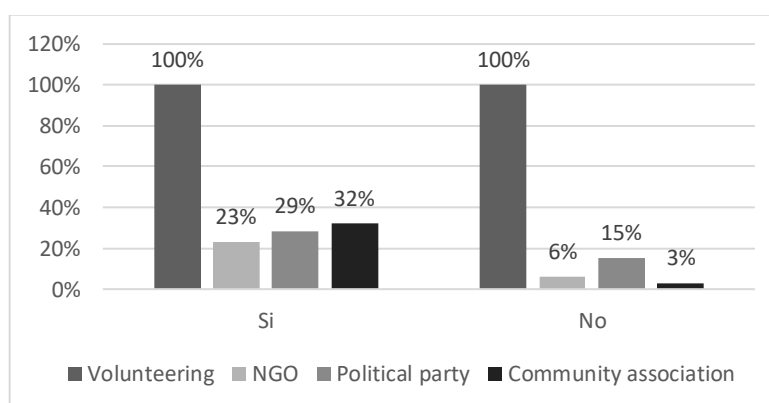
Figure 4. Level of participation of professors in volunteer activities by faculty



Source: Own elaboration.

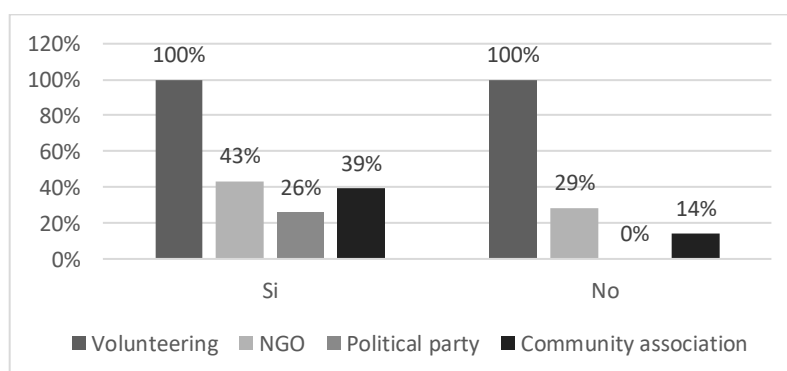
The comparative analysis between volunteering and other forms of civic participation shows that those who participate in volunteer activities also tend to be involved in community associations or social organizations, while those who do not volunteer have lower overall levels of civic participation (Figures 5 and 6). However, student participation in political associations is significantly lower compared to professors' participation.

Figure 5. Level of participation of students who volunteer in other expressions of civic engagement



Source: Own elaboration.

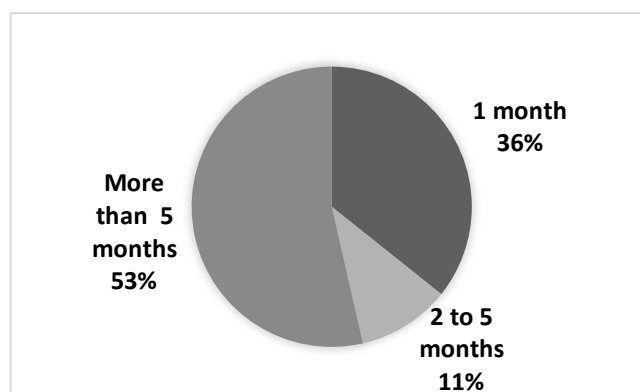
Figure 6. Level of participation of professors who volunteer in other expressions of civic engagement



Source: Own elaboration.

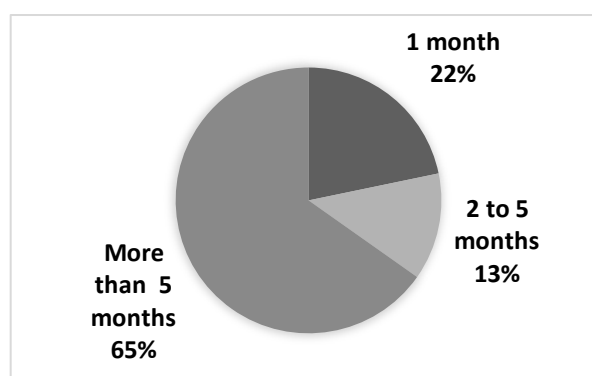
Regarding the intensity of commitment, the analysis of the duration of the activities indicates that 53% of the students and 65% of the professors have participated in volunteer actions for more than five months (Graphs 7 and 8), which shows a sustained level of community involvement. The results show high levels of participation in volunteer activities among students and professors.

Figure 7. Duration of student participation in volunteer activities



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 8. Duration of professors' participation in volunteer activities



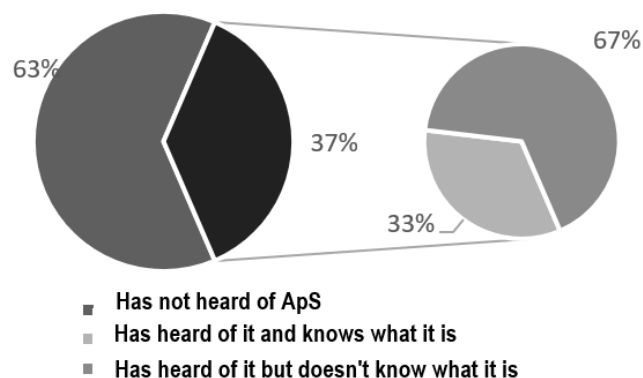
Source: Own elaboration.

In general, both students and professors actively and continuously participate in diverse volunteer and community engagement activities, citing as their main motivation the desire to help others and work for the well-being of their community. This aligns with Harpela-Kenisel (2024), who increasingly highlights the presence of a new type of citizen who serves their nation with a clear awareness of their role in collective development and prosperity. In the case of students at Mbujimayi University, the high level of civic engagement expressed demonstrates sustained participation in community activities.

Level of knowledge and experience in service-learning

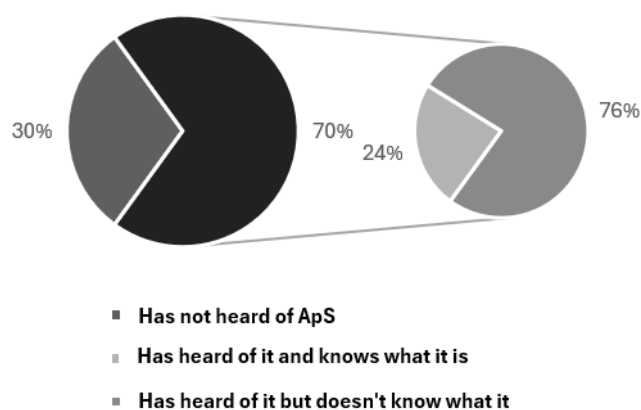
Despite the high level of civic engagement observed, knowledge of service-learning is limited, especially among students. 63% of students indicated they had not previously heard the term service-learning, while 37% stated they were familiar with it; within this latter group, 33% reported having only a superficial understanding (Figure 9). Among professors, the level of knowledge is higher: 70% reported having heard of service-learning and, within this group, 76% stated that they had a relatively clear understanding of the methodology (Figure 10).

Figure 9. Students' level of knowledge about service-learning



Source: Own elaboration.

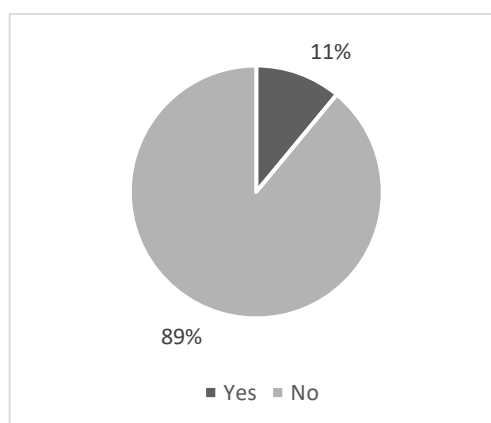
Figure 10. Professors' level of knowledge about service-learning



Source: Own elaboration.

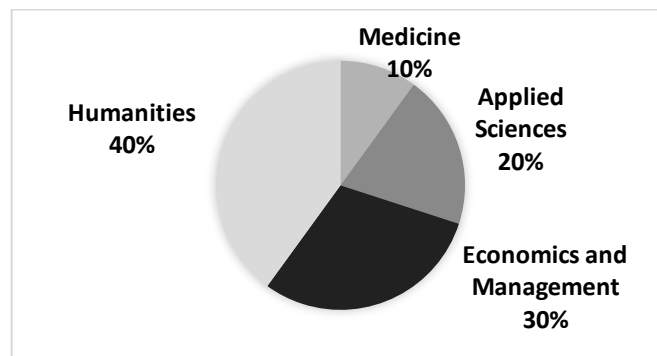
Regarding participation in service-learning experiences, only 11% of students reported having participated in any such activity (Figure 11). These experiences were concentrated mainly in the Faculties of Humanities, Applied Sciences, and Economics and Management, while Medicine showed minimal levels and Law did not register any reported experiences (Figure 12).

Figure 11. Student participation in service-learning experiences



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 12. Student participation in service-learning experiences by faculty

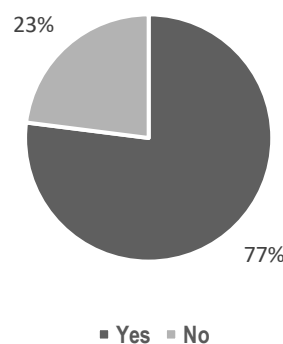


Source: Own elaboration.

From a teaching perspective, 33% indicated having developed service-learning activities in their subjects (Graph 13). The highest proportions were observed in Law, Applied Sciences and Humanities, while Medicine and Economics and Management showed lower implementation (Graph 14).

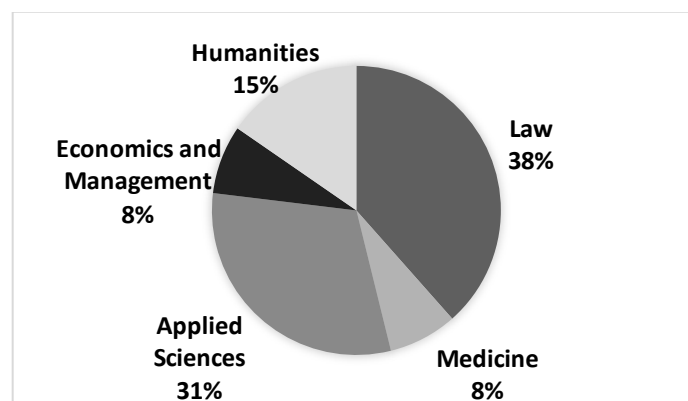
The experiences described by the students included local development projects, community diagnostics, public health awareness campaigns, community communication initiatives, and the development of technological solutions for local organizations.

Figure 13. Professors' participation in service-learning experiences



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 14. Participation of professors in service-learning experiences by faculty



Source: Own elaboration.

These results confirm the low implementation of this methodology at MbujiMayi University, making more active institutional support necessary to promote the incorporation of these pedagogical experiences within the curriculum design due to their valuable contribution to the comprehensive education of students (Furco, 2003, Rovira, 2009) .

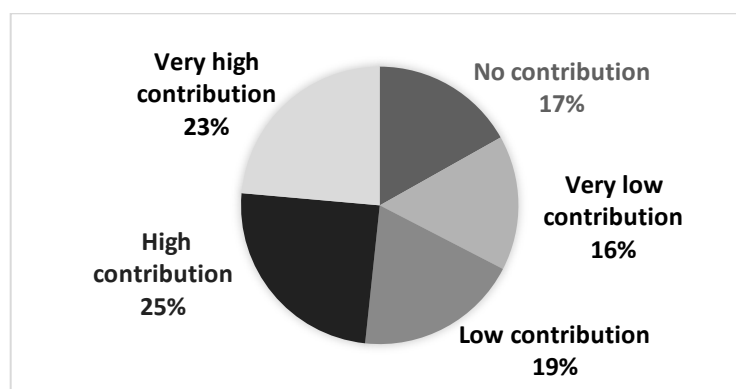
Institutional perceptions and conditions for the development of service-learning

Regarding institutional social responsibility, significant differences are observed between students and professors. While 63% of students consider the university's current social contribution to be high or very high, 60% of professors rate it as low or very low (Figures 15 and 16). This data is important because it allows us to identify the obstacles and limitations the institution faces in implementing Service-Learning (SL).

The effective incorporation of SL requires institutional conditions, professors training, administrative organization, coordination with community partners, and evaluation mechanisms, without which the methodology tends to depend on individual initiatives and remain limited in scale and impact (Furco & Miller, 2009).

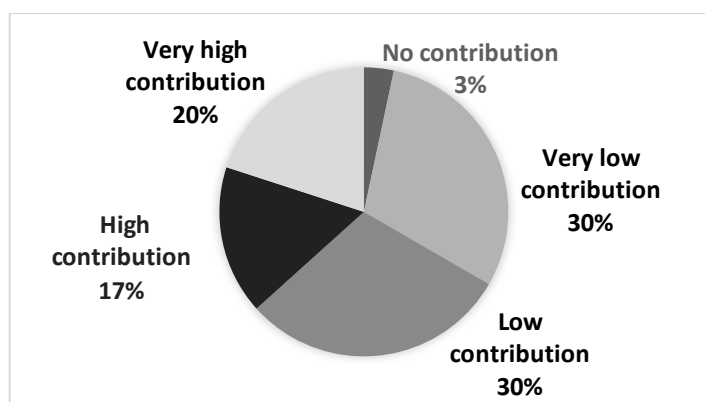
Hence the need for the University of MbujiMayi (UM) to foster a climate of trust within the university community, especially among professors, clearly demonstrating its commitment to the holistic development of students and the local development of the region.

Figure 15. Students' perception of the UM's social contribution to the community



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 16. Professors' perception of the UM's social contribution to the community

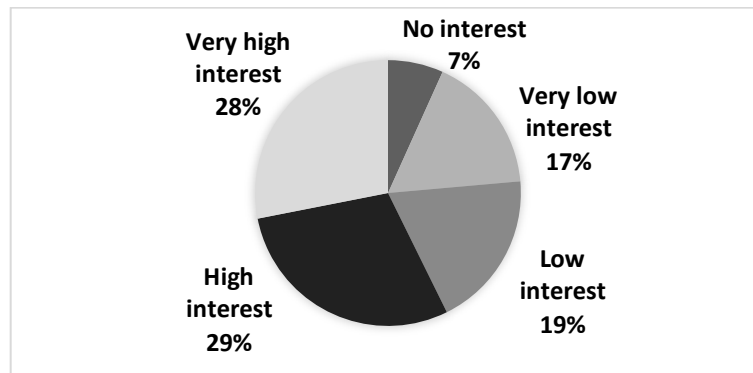


Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the willingness to participate in service-learning experiences, perceptions among both groups are largely positive. 73% of students believe their professors show a high level of

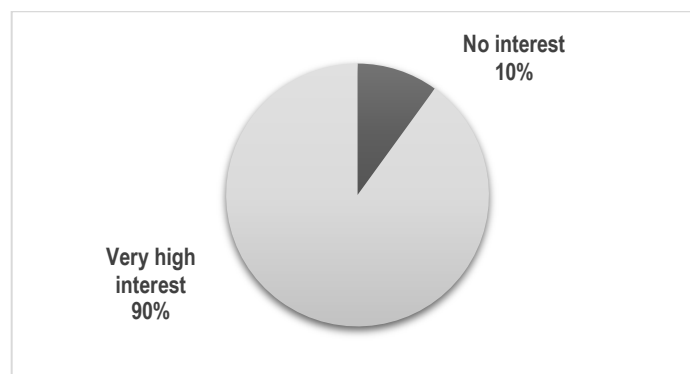
interest in developing these types of activities, while 90% of professors believe students would be willing to participate actively (Figures 17 and 18).

Figure 17. Students' perception of professors' willingness to develop service-learning experiences



Source: Own elaboration.

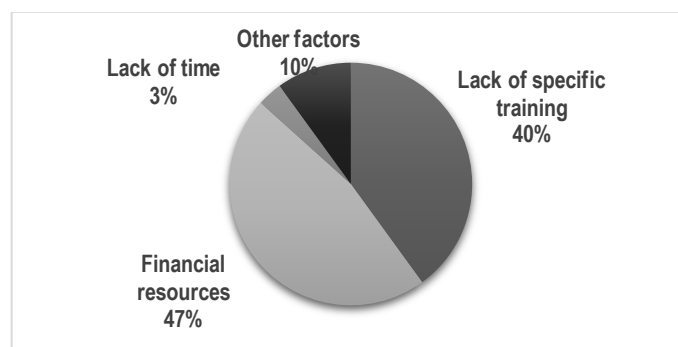
Figure 18. Professors' perception of students' willingness to participate in service-learning experiences



Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, the open-ended responses from the teaching staff indicate a widespread perception of a lack of institutional support for implementing service-learning. The main difficulties identified were a lack of financial resources (47%), a lack of specific training (40%), a lack of time (3%), and other organizational factors (10%) (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Difficulties in the development of service-learning experiences



Source: Own elaboration.

Overall, the results reveal the coexistence of high levels of civic engagement alongside limited curricular integration of service-learning and perceived institutional limitations that affect its implementation.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study identify several factors that may favor the implementation of service-learning (SL) at Mbujimayi University. First, the high level of civic engagement demonstrated by both students and professors stands out, reflected in their high participation in volunteer activities and other forms of community involvement. Furthermore, both groups express positive perceptions regarding their mutual interest in participating in SL experiences, suggesting a favorable disposition toward the development of this type of educational initiative. However, the results also reveal significant limitations, particularly the lack of institutional support perceived by the professors, the limited specific training in the methodology, and the critical assessment that professors make of the level of institutional social responsibility, elements that constitute significant barriers to its systematic implementation.

Taken together, the findings allow us to identify three main trends: (1) the existence of a high prior civic engagement among students and professors; (2) a weak articulation between these social practices and the formal university curriculum; and (3) the presence of institutional obstacles that hinder the adoption and sustainability of service-learning at Mbujimayi University (UM).

The widespread participation in volunteer activities, characterized by prolonged involvement, suggests that students and professors possess prior experiences of community interaction that can serve as social and pedagogical capital for incorporating service-learning. In this sense, existing engagement practices can constitute a “bridge” to the institutionalization of service-learning by providing prosocial motivations and favorable dispositions that facilitate its adoption (Astin et al., 2000). This finding is particularly relevant considering that the main motivation expressed by the participants was the desire to contribute to the well-being of the community, which reinforces the coherence between personal values and the pedagogical principles of service-learning.

From a sociocultural perspective, these results can also be interpreted considering African community traditions that emphasize solidarity and collective responsibility, such as the philosophies of Ubuntu and Harambee, which link education with social engagement and community development (Machakanja & Manuel, 2020; Kibona & Woldegiorgis, 2023). In this context, service-learning would not represent a completely external innovation, but rather a pedagogical formalization of social practices already presents in the cultural environment.

However, the results show a clear gap between high levels of informal civic engagement and its integration into university educational processes. Despite active participation in volunteering, knowledge about service-learning is limited, especially among students, and the proportion of educational experiences based on this methodology remains low for both students and professors. This disconnect demonstrates that community activities are mostly carried out outside the curriculum, which limits their educational potential and academic impact. In this sense, service-learning emerges as a pedagogical mechanism capable of linking academic learning with real social needs, contributing to the development of professional and civic competencies, particularly relevant in African contexts characterized by significant social and development challenges (Bouwman, 2023).

Furthermore, the divergent perceptions between students and professors regarding the university's current social contribution reveal institutional tensions that may influence the implementation of service-learning. While students value the institution's social role positively, professors express a more critical assessment, primarily associated with a lack of resources, training, and organizational support. These results align with the literature indicating that the institutionalization of service-learning requires specific structural conditions, professors training,

administrative support, and institutional recognition, without which initiatives tend to rely on isolated individual efforts.

Although Mbujimayi University faces significant challenges, particularly related to economic and organizational limitations, the high level of civic engagement identified presents a strategic opportunity for designing an institutional service-learning model adapted to the local context. The pedagogical integration of existing community practices could transform scattered volunteer activities into structured learning experiences, simultaneously strengthening professional development and the university's social impact.

Regarding the study's limitations, it should be noted that non-probability sampling was used, which restricts the generalizability of the results to the entire university population. Furthermore, the predominance of quantitative instruments limited the in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and meanings attributed by participants to their civic engagement and service-learning practices.

Future research could focus on comparative studies among African universities to identify regional patterns and successful service-learning implementation models. Longitudinal studies would also allow for the evaluation of this methodology's impact on the development of transversal skills, civic engagement, and university-community partnerships. These approaches would contribute to a more contextualized understanding of service-learning in Africa and to the design of sustainable and culturally relevant pedagogical models.

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