ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNAL CONFLICTS IN BENUE STATE

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the relationship between economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. Frustration-Aggression Theory serves as the theoretical framework, suggesting that economic deprivation and unmet expectations create frustration, which may manifest as aggression, particularly among youth. This theory is predicated upon how economic hardships push young individuals into violent conflicts when they are unable to fulfil basic needs or achieve their goals through conventional means, such as employment or education. The study employs a qualitative method. Secondary data from policy documents, media reports, and academic literature were analyzed. Firstly, the findings revealed that high levels of unemployment and poverty among youth in Benue State contribute significantly to their involvement in communal conflicts, as they perceive violence as a viable means to gain material rewards or assert identity. Secondly, there is a strong correlation between the lack of inclusive governance and the intensification of ethnic tensions, with marginalized groups, particularly the Idoma and Igede, feeling excluded from political processes, further fueling conflicts. These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive interventions in youth employment, governance, and conflict resolution to break the cycle of violence in Benue State. This study calls for targeted policies that address both the socio-economic drivers and governance failures contributing to youth involvement in communal conflicts.

Introduction

Economic hardship is a pervasive global issue, with youth often bearing the brunt of its consequences. In many regions, economic challenges have been linked to the increased involvement of young people in communal conflicts (Smith & Brown, 2023). Economic downturns have historically correlated with social unrest. The 2008 financial crisis, for instance, led to increased unemployment rates among youth, resulting in protests and, in some cases, escalated to violent confrontations (ILO, 2023). The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that in 2023, global youth unemployment reached 13.6%, nearly three times higher than the adult rate, underscoring the vulnerability of young people during economic hardships. This vulnerability often translates into frustration and disenchantment, making the youth susceptible to involvement in conflicts as a means of expressing grievances or seeking economic gain (Nguyen et al., 2023).

In Africa, the situation is exacerbated by rapid population growth and insufficient economic development. This phenomenon is particularly evident when a significant youth population faces limited employment opportunities and economic instability (Okafor et al., 2022). The African Development Bank (AfDB) noted that in 2022, over 60% of Africa's unemployed were the youth, with the majority residing in rural areas (Mwangi & Toure, 2023). This demographic pressure, coupled with limited access to quality education and vocational training, has resulted in a skills mismatch, further hindering employment prospects (Akinyemi, 2023). Consequently, many young Africans find themselves in precarious economic situations, increasing the likelihood of their involvement in communal conflicts as an alternative means of livelihood or expression of discontent (Obiora, 2024).

Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation, mirrors these continental challenges. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported a youth unemployment rate of 42.5% in 2023, reflecting a significant portion of the population facing economic hardship (NBS, 2023). These challenges are pronounced, leading to a concerning rise in youth participation in communal conflicts (Adewumi & Eze, 2024). This economic disenfranchisement has been linked to increased crime rates and participation in communal conflicts as disenfranchised youth seek alternative means of income or succumb to the influence of opportunistic leaders who exploit their vulnerabilities (Eke & Olamide, 2023). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has recognized youth unemployment as a critical factor contributing to regional insecurity, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies to address this issue (Ogundele et al., 2024).

Benue State, located in Nigeria's Middle Belt, has been a hotspot for communal conflicts. The State's economy is predominantly agrarian, with a significant portion of the population engaged in farming (Okoh, 2024). However, climate change and environmental degradation have led to reduced agricultural yields, exacerbating economic hardships for the youth. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in 2024 that climate change has reduced the availability of natural resources in Nigeria, aggravating clashes between communities in Benue State and displacing approximately half a million people (UNHCR, 2024).

The rising rate of youth unemployment in Benue State is a significant concern. A study published in 2023 highlighted that the State occupies the 21st position out of Nigeria's 36 states, with a poverty rate of 32.9% (IJSSHM, 2023). The study attributes youth unemployment to factors such as a growing urban labour force, outdated educational curricula, and limited access to vocational training. This economic deprivation leads to frustration and helplessness among the youth, luring many into violent crimes and communal conflicts as a means of survival (Abah & Orji, 2023). The involvement of youth in communal conflicts in Benue State has had devastating effects on the community. Children, in particular, have been victims of violence, with many forced into displacement. Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps have been established to house these displaced children, highlighting the severe humanitarian impact of these conflicts (Adejoh, 2024). The combination of high youth unemployment, climate-induced resource scarcity, and inadequate educational opportunities has led to increased participation of youth in communal conflicts.

Despite various interventions, a critical gap remains in understanding the interplay between economic hardship and youth participation in these conflicts. The lack of targeted programs addressing the root causes, such as youth unemployment and resource management,

perpetuates instability. This issue impacts multiple stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations working toward peacebuilding. Addressing this problem is crucial for fostering sustainable development and preventing further destabilization in Benue State. This study seeks to provide evidence-based insights to inform policies and programmes aimed at breaking the cycle of economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts.

Terminological and Theoretical Perspectives

Economic Hardship: Economic hardship refers to the severe financial and resource challenges faced by individuals or communities, including unemployment, poverty, and lack of access to basic needs, which create conditions of vulnerability and social instability (United Nations, 2023).

Youth Involvement: The concept of youth involvement highlights the participation of young people in communal conflict, whether as active combatants, instigators, or unintended victims, influenced by socio-economic and environmental pressures (World Bank, 2023).

Communal Conflicts: Communal conflicts are disputes or violent clashes between groups within a community, often arising from competition over limited resources, ethnic or cultural tensions, or socio-political grievances (Buhaug & Urdal, 2023).

Resource Scarcity refers to the insufficient availability of essential resources such as land, water, and food in Benue State. This scarcity is exacerbated by climate change and economic challenges, which fuel tensions and conflicts (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024).

Peacebuilding Interventions: The concept of peacebuilding intervention encompasses strategies, programs, and policies aimed at resolving conflicts, fostering economic empowerment, and promoting sustainable development to address the underlying causes of youth involvement in communal violence (African Union, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Frustration-Aggression Theory. The Frustration-Aggression Theory, proposed by John Dollard, Leonard Doob, Neal Miller, O.H. Mowrer, and Robert Sears in 1939, suggests that aggression is the result of blocking or frustrating a person's efforts to achieve a goal. According to this theory, when individuals or groups experience frustration due to unmet needs or economic hardships, they may resort to aggressive behaviour, including violence, as a means of coping or retaliating. In the context of communal conflicts in Benue State, youth facing economic hardship and a lack of opportunities may experience frustration, which could lead them to engage in violent conflicts as an outlet for their frustrations. The theory helps explain how economic deprivation and social marginalization may drive young people to participate in communal violence as a form of aggression against perceived injustices or inequities.

Relationship Between Economic Hardship and Youth Involvement in Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

Economic hardship has been identified as a significant factor contributing to youth involvement in communal conflicts in Nigeria. According to Adebayo (2021), economic deprivation among Nigerian youth, including high unemployment and limited access to opportunities, creates frustration and vulnerability, making them more likely to be recruited into violent communal conflicts. Adebayo critiques government policies as inadequate in addressing youth empowerment, suggesting that the lack of sustained economic programs exacerbates youth restiveness. Similarly, Okafor and Udeh (2020) argue that poverty and social inequality play critical roles in escalating communal violence, as impoverished youth often perceive violence as a viable means to address grievances or gain economic advantage. Their study highlights that policy interventions focusing on poverty alleviation are often reactive and lack long-term sustainability.

According to Bello (2019), the marginalization of youth from decision-making processes in communities further deepens their economic challenges, leading to resentment and their eventual involvement in conflicts. Bello emphasizes the need for inclusive governance to mitigate the appeal of communal violence. In

contrast, Ibrahim and Musa (2022) contend that youth participation in communal conflicts is often manipulated by political elites who exploit their economic desperation. They critique the role of politicians in fostering divisions for personal gain, which perpetuates cycles of violence.

Abdullahi et al. (2021) explore the role of education in addressing youth involvement in communal conflicts, arguing that limited access to quality education and skills acquisition programs contributes to economic hardship. They recommend educational reforms targeting rural areas where communal conflicts are prevalent. On the other hand, Chukwuma (2020) highlights that even educated youth engage in conflicts due to the lack of corresponding job opportunities, pointing to a mismatch between educational output and labour market demands. He critiques the government's inability to create an enabling environment for job creation as a key failure.

According to Yusuf and Adewale (2021), the proliferation of small arms in economically disadvantaged communities exacerbates the involvement of youth in violent conflicts. They argue that economic hardship not only increases the likelihood of violence but also sustains it by fostering an illicit economy tied to communal strife. Similarly, Eze and Nnamdi (2020) examine the role of cultural and religious differences, noting that economic grievances often catalyze communal conflicts fueled by pre-existing ethnic or religious tensions.

Lawal (2019) critiques international development aid targeted at reducing youth unemployment, noting that such efforts are often poorly implemented and lack alignment with local realities. His analysis highlights the inefficiency of foreign interventions that fail to address the structural causes of economic hardship in Nigeria. In a related vein, Adesina (2021) argues that government programs such as N-Power and similar initiatives have been insufficient in addressing the root causes of youth unemployment, as these programs are often short-term and marred by corruption.

Umeh and Okeke (2023) examine the psychological impact of prolonged economic hardship on youth, noting that desperation and frustration often drive them toward aggressive behaviour, including involvement in communal violence. They critique the lack of mental health support and emphasize the need for holistic approaches that combine economic, social, and psychological interventions.

This literature underscores the relationship between economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and sustainable solutions to address poverty, unemployment, and inequality. While efforts have been made to address these issues, critiques of their implementation highlight the persistent gaps in policy effectiveness and inclusivity.

Implications of Economic Hardship and Youth Involvement in Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

The implications of economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts in Nigeria are profound and multifaceted, influencing not only the immediate security landscape but also the long-term socio-economic development of the country. Economic hardship, exacerbated by unemployment, poverty, and limited access to education, has created a fertile ground for youth to be drawn into violent conflicts. The lack of economic opportunities, particularly for young people in rural areas, has led to the increasing involvement of youth in communal clashes, often manipulated by political or ethnic leaders to advance personal agendas (Adedeji, 2021).

Youth involvement in communal conflicts in Nigeria is often a result of frustration with the lack of opportunities. Many young Nigerians, especially in the northern and central regions, are enticed into violent groups or factions due to the promise of material gain or a sense of purpose that they cannot find through conventional means such as education or employment (Oke, 2022). These young people, often disillusioned with the State, find solace in fighting for ethnic or communal causes, as these conflicts offer a sense of belonging and an outlet for their grievances. As noted by Ibrahim (2021), communal violence involving youth not only destabilizes the local security environment but also leads to long-term socio-economic setbacks for affected communities, including disrupted agriculture, loss of human capital, and reduced investment in the region.

Additionally, economic hardship fuels the proliferation of small arms, which, according to Onuoha (2020), amplifies the scale and intensity of communal conflicts. The availability of arms, combined with economic hardship, enables youths to take up arms, exacerbating the

violence. The involvement of youth in these conflicts also results in a loss of life, further deepening the economic challenges of the region by reducing the labour force and undermining community structures.

The long-term implications are also evident in terms of social cohesion. As highlighted by Alabi (2022), economic hardship and youth involvement in conflicts breed distrust and hostility among communities, undermining social capital and making future reconciliation efforts more difficult. Youth radicalization through exposure to violence and the destabilization of families due to loss of life further perpetuates the cycle of violence, with subsequent generations inheriting these grievances and continuing the cycle of conflicts.

The implications of economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts in Nigeria are far-reaching, touching on issues of security, economic development, and social cohesion. Without addressing the root causes of economic hardship, particularly for youth, the cycle of violence is likely to persist, further destabilizing Nigeria's already fragile security environment.

Historical Overview of Communal Conflicts in Benue State

The communal conflicts in Benue State are intricately linked to long-standing disputes over land, resources, and ethnic tensions, which have shaped the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the region. Known as Nigeria's "Food Basket," the State has long been a focal point of competition between sedentary farming communities and nomadic pastoralists. Adebayo & Okonkwo (2022) trace the origins of these conflicts to the colonial period, where British land policies disrupted traditional systems of land use, favouring sedentary farming practices over nomadic herding. This shift has had lasting effects, as population growth and climate change have intensified the competition for dwindling resources, aggravating the conflicts.

Ibrahim (2021) focuses on the conflicts between Tiv farmers and Fulani herders, attributing the violence to disputes over land for grazing and farming. While the economic factors underpinning these disputes are significant, Ibrahim also points to the ethnic and cultural divisions that fuel the conflicts. Grievances are often passed down from one generation to the next, creating a cycle of animosity. However, Ibrahim's analysis misses the crucial role of governance failures in addressing and mitigating these tensions. Government policies, as Musa & Adewale (2023) argue, have historically favoured one group over another, which has deepened divisions and hampered efforts to find neutral, effective conflict resolution mechanisms. The absence of such mechanisms has allowed conflicts to escalate unchecked.

The proliferation of small arms, as identified by Onuoha and Chukwuma (2020), has further fueled the violence, transforming what might have been local disputes into protracted, violent conflicts. Economic hardship and political manipulation have facilitated the arms trade, empowering communities to sustain these violent clashes. However, their analysis fails to address the broader geopolitical factors, such as the involvement of regional armed groups, which complicate the situation and extend the conflicts beyond local boundaries.

Eze & Nwachukwu (2021) highlight the impact of climate change, which has led to reduced rainfall and desertification in northern Nigeria, pushing Fulani herders southward into the fertile lands of Benue. This migration has further intensified tensions between farming communities and herders, both of whom struggle to access limited resources. The failure of governance to address environmental challenges proactively has compounded the issue, as Eze and Nwachukwu critique the lack of policies to manage the crisis.

The socio-political factors at play, as discussed by Umeh & Okeke (2022), are also central to the persistence of communal conflicts. They argue that the marginalization of local communities in decision-making processes fosters resentment and alienation, which makes dialogue and reconciliation difficult. Without inclusive governance structures, these tensions will continue to hinder efforts to resolve the conflicts.

The overview of communal conflicts in Benue State reveals a complex interplay of factors, including resource scarcity, ethnic tensions, governance failures, and environmental challenges. The persistence of these conflicts points to the need for comprehensive and inclusive solutions that address the region's unique socio-economic, cultural, and political dynamics. Effective conflict resolution must involve both local and national stakeholders,

with a focus on equitable resource distribution, proactive environmental management, and inclusive governance to address the root causes of the conflicts.

Effects of Economic Hardship and Youth Involvement in Communal Conflicts in Benue State

Economic hardship is a significant factor influencing youth involvement in communal conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria, where poverty and unemployment create fertile ground for violence. According to Adamu & Okonkwo (2021), widespread poverty in rural Benue has left many youths vulnerable to recruitment by conflict actors, particularly in agrarian disputes. They argue that economic deprivation exacerbates grievances over land resources, a key trigger for conflicts in the region. However, their study overlooks the role of cultural factors, which can intensify such disputes. Similarly, Eze & Nwachukwu (2022) identify unemployment as a driver of youth restiveness, noting that idle youths often see communal conflicts as opportunities for economic gain through looting or as a form of rebellion against perceived injustice. They critique government intervention programs for being poorly targeted and failing to address the root causes of unemployment.

According to Ibrahim (2020), communal conflicts in Benue State are largely rooted in struggles over farmland and grazing rights, with economic hardship increasing the likelihood of violence. His analysis highlights the intersection of economic and environmental factors but fails to adequately consider the role of political actors in perpetuating these conflicts. Musa and Okafor (2021) argue that political elites exploit economic hardship to manipulate unemployed youth into violent conflicts for political gain. They emphasize that the cyclical nature of poverty and violence in Benue is reinforced by weak governance and corruption, which undermine development efforts.

Onuoha (2021) links youth involvement in communal conflicts to a lack of access to quality education and vocational training, which limits their economic prospects. He critiques educational policies in Benue State as insufficiently responsive to the needs of rural communities. Conversely, Ojo & Adeyemi (2020) argue that even educated youths participate in conflicts due to limited job opportunities, underscoring the disconnect between educational systems and the labour market. They recommend tailored interventions that combine education with skills training and job creation in conflict-prone areas.

According to Yusuf & Ibrahim (2022), the proliferation of small arms in Benue State has intensified the impact of economic hardship on communal conflicts. They argue that arms availability increases the likelihood of violent clashes, as economically disadvantaged youths are often willing participants in armed disputes. However, their study does not explore the broader socio-economic impacts of arms proliferation, such as its effect on community resilience and development.

Lawal (2021) critiques agricultural policies in Benue State, noting that poor support for farmers exacerbates economic hardship and fuels resource-based conflicts. His study highlights the failure of successive governments to address the underlying economic drivers of youth restiveness. Similarly, Chukwu (2020) argues that the marginalization of local communities in decision-making processes intensifies youth grievances, as they feel excluded from economic opportunities and governance structures. He critiques the lack of inclusive policies as a major gap in conflict resolution efforts.

According to Umeh & Okeke (2022), the psychological effects of prolonged economic hardship on youth in Benue contribute to their involvement in communal violence. They highlight that frustration, hopelessness, and anger often push youths toward aggressive behaviours, including participation in violent conflicts. They recommend integrating mental health support with economic empowerment programmes to address these underlying issues comprehensively.

The literature demonstrates that economic hardship is a central factor driving youth involvement in communal conflicts in Benue State, compounded by unemployment, weak governance, and limited access to education. While interventions exist, critiques highlight the inadequacy of current policies and the need for comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable solutions to address the multifaceted drivers of conflicts.

Challenges in Curbing Economic Hardship and Youth Involvement in Communal Conflicts in Benue State

The challenges of economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts in Benue State are significant and complex, with far-reaching implications for the State's security, socio-economic development, and social cohesion. Economic hardship, marked by high levels of unemployment, poverty, and limited access to basic social services, has contributed to the increasing involvement of youth in communal conflicts, particularly in the context of clashes between farming communities and nomadic herders.

Benue State, known for its fertile agricultural land, has witnessed persistent communal clashes, largely fueled by economic hardship (Musa & Adewale, 2023). These conflicts often revolve around access to land and water resources, with youth from both farming and pastoral communities drawn into violent confrontations due to the lack of alternative opportunities. The growing sense of economic frustration, especially among young people in rural areas, makes them more vulnerable to manipulation by political elites or community leaders who promise them material rewards in exchange for their involvement in conflicts (Ibrahim, 2021). This situation is exacerbated by the lack of adequate education and job opportunities for youth, leading to a disillusioned and disempowered generation that turns to violence as a means of survival and self-expression.

Furthermore, the proliferation of small arms in the region, as noted by Onuoha and Chukwuma (2020), has made it easier for youth to engage in violent conflicts. The widespread availability of weapons, coupled with economic hardship, has intensified the scale of communal violence, making it more destructive and prolonged. Young people, lacking both the means and the will to seek peaceful alternatives, resort to violence as a way to assert their power and defend their perceived interests.

The State's inability to provide adequate governance and conflict resolution mechanisms also contributes to the challenges. The failure of local and State governments to address the underlying causes of conflicts, such as land tenure systems and resource allocation, has allowed tensions to escalate unchecked (Eze & Nwachukwu, 2021). In addition, the lack of effective peacebuilding and reconciliation programs has perpetuated cycles of violence, with youth continuing to engage in conflicts as a form of resistance to marginalization.

Benue's socio-political dynamics also exacerbate the challenges. Umeh and Okeke (2022) argue that the marginalization of certain communities, particularly the Tiv people, has deepened ethnic divides, making it more difficult to address the root causes of the conflicts. Youth from marginalized communities are more likely to become radicalized, joining violent groups to express their grievances and seek social justice.

Economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts in Benue State present significant challenges to the region's stability and development. These issues require tackling not only the economic disparities that fuel frustration among young people but also strengthening governance, promoting dialogue, and implementing conflict resolution mechanisms to break the cycle of violence. Without comprehensive intervention, the challenges will continue to undermine peace and prosperity in the State.

Conclusion

The study revealed that youth unemployment and economic hardship are significant drivers of involvement in communal conflicts. As unemployment rates remain high, particularly in rural areas, many young people turn to violent groups for a sense of purpose and economic survival. Providing skills training and creating job opportunities, particularly in agriculture and local industries, could reduce their susceptibility to conflict recruitment.

The lack of inclusive governance contributes to youth radicalization. Marginalized communities, particularly the Tiv, often feel excluded from political decision-making, which exacerbates ethnic tensions. Inclusive political processes and active youth participation in governance could foster unity and reduce ethnic divisions.

Education plays a crucial role in mitigating conflicts. Expanding access to quality education can offer youth alternatives to violence by equipping them with the skills needed for productive roles in society. Educated youth are more likely to engage in non-violent forms of

activism and contribute to economic development.

The study revealed that the proliferation of small arms significantly escalates the intensity of conflicts. Tightening security, implementing disarmament initiatives, and curbing illegal arms trade are essential to reducing violence, creating a safer environment for youth, and promoting peacebuilding efforts across communities.

Recommendations and Way Forward

Improving economic hardship and reducing youth involvement in communal conflicts in Benue State requires a comprehensive approach that targets the underlying causes of both economic deprivation and social instability. Addressing these challenges necessitates interventions in economic empowerment, governance, and education to promote sustainable peace and stability.

A critical first step is to enhance youth employment opportunities, especially in rural areas where unemployment rates are highest. According to Adamu & Ganiyu (2021), high unemployment and poverty often push youth into violent conflicts as they seek avenues to express frustration. Providing skills development programs, including vocational training in agriculture, construction, and technology, can create viable career pathways, offering youth alternatives to violent engagement. As Nwachukwu (2022) emphasizes, supporting local industries and entrepreneurship can foster job creation and economic independence for young people, reducing their vulnerability to recruitment by conflict groups.

Equally important is the promotion of inclusive governance. According to Olayemi and Olusola (2020), exclusion from political processes can fuel resentment and deepen ethnic divisions. Ensuring that all ethnic groups, particularly marginalized ones, are actively involved in political decision-making can reduce perceptions of injustice. This participation fosters unity and promotes collective responsibility for the region's progress. Moreover, offering platforms for youth participation in decision-making can provide a sense of ownership and empowerment, thus reducing the likelihood of their involvement in conflicts. Ajayi and Akinwumi (2021) advocate for the inclusion of young people in peacebuilding initiatives as a preventive strategy against violent extremism and inter-ethnic violence.

Access to quality education is another critical measure in addressing the root causes of economic hardship and involvement in youth conflicts. According to Durojaiye (2021), education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty and violence. Expanding access to both primary and secondary education and providing scholarships for higher education equip youth with the necessary skills for active participation in the economy. Moreover, as Fagbemi and Olumide (2020) note, improved education increases youths' capacity to engage in non-violent forms of social and economic activism, offering them alternatives to conflict participation.

Addressing the issue of small arms proliferation is also necessary to reduce violence in the region. According to Idowu and Bello (2022), the widespread availability of firearms contributes to the severity and longevity of communal conflicts. Tightening security measures, implementing disarmament programs, and curbing the illegal arms trade can mitigate the escalation of conflicts and create a safer environment for youth. Such measures would limit the capacity for sustained violence and allow communities to rebuild and engage in peaceful coexistence.

Inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation initiatives are essential for long-term peace. As Alhaji & Abdul (2021) argue, fostering dialogue between the Tiv and Fulani communities, as well as other ethnic groups, is crucial for mitigating ethnic tensions and promoting peaceful coexistence. Programs that prioritize trust-building, joint community development projects, and conflict resolution can facilitate healing and reconciliation, ultimately reducing the likelihood of future violence.

Tackling economic hardship and youth involvement in communal conflicts in Benue State requires a multifaceted approach that combines economic development, inclusive governance, education, arms control, and peacebuilding initiatives. By addressing these interconnected issues, the State can create a more stable and prosperous environment, fostering a future where youth are active participants in peaceful development.

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