Disability and Sustainable Development in Tunisia: An Examination of the Contemporary Reality

Dr. Rania Ghouaiel
Lecturer
Assistant Professor of Higher Education, specialized in Sociology, University of Tunis

Corresponding author:
Dr. Rania Ghouaiel

Email:
 ghouaielrania88@gmail.com

Aabstract

The study examined the theme of disability and sustainable development using symbolic interactionism and qualitative methods through observation and semi-structured interviews with research samples of people with disabilities. We sought to scientifically investigate the issue of disability by examining micro-level living factors through field work we conducted in 2024 while exploring the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their contribution to the empowerment of people with disabilities in terms of inclusion.

The findings demonstrate the Tunisian government's lack of political will to bring its laws into compliance with international obligations as stated by the UN in regular treaty body assessments. To improve the status of individuals with disabilities, it appears important to coordinate Tunisian laws with international standards. Although funding for programs aimed at people with disabilities has grown in response to their expanding demands, a major obstacle still exists in the form of a comprehensive social policy that would enable them to take an active role in development. However, many have continued to make significant contributions in fields like sports and education.

It is therefore essential to recognize that the effective social inclusion of people with disabilities is intricately linked to accessibility, enabling everyone with a disability to take part in various activities in society, depending on the type and degree of their disability.

Keywords: Disability. Sustainable development. Access. Social integration. Coexistence.

الاعاقة والتنمية المستدامة في تونس: دراسة في الواقع المعيشي

الدكتورة رانية الغويل
جامعة تونس

المستخلص:

تناول هذا البحث موضوع الإعاقة والتنمية باعتماد التفاعلية الرمزية والطريقة الكيفية عبر الملاحظة والمقابلة نصف الموجّهة لنماذج بحث لأشخاص من ذوي الإعاقة. حاولنا الإلمام بطريقة علميّة بإشكاليّة الإعاقة من خلال دراسة العوامل المعيشيّة الدقيقة عبر عمل ميداني قمنا به سنة ٢٠٢٤ مع الكشف عن أهداف التنمية المستدامة لـ ٢٠٣٠ ومدى مساهمتها في تمكين ذوي الإعاقة من الاندماج.

بيّن الواقع غياب إرادة الحكومة التونسية للعمل على مواءمة تشريعاتها مع التزاماتها الدولية وخاصة بعد توصيات الأمم المتحدة خلال المراجعات الدورية المتعلقة بهيئات المعاهدات. وتبدو مواءمة القوانين التونسية ضروريّة، لأنّ التنسيق مع الاتفاقيات قادر على تحسين وضعيّة ذوي الإعاقة إلى الأفضل، خاصّة أنّ الميزانيّة المرصودة للبرامج الموجّهة إلى هذه الفئة في تصاعد لارتفاع حاجياتهم وغياب سياسة اجتماعيّة تساعد المعوق على أن يكون فاعلا في التنمية، لكنّ ذلك لم يمنع العديد من المعوقين من المساهمة في إثبات وجودهم عبر التعليم والتشغيل والرياضة... فلا يمكن الحديث عن تنمية دون تفعيل الحقّ في الولوج، فالإدماج الاجتماعي الفاعل للأشخاص المعاقين متّصل بوسائل الولوجيّات، حتّي يشارك كلّ معوق حسب نوع إعاقته ودرجتها في مختلف أنشطة المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الاعاقة, التنمية المستدامة, الولوج, الاندماج الإجتماعى, العيش المشترك

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Introduction

Due to their largely disparate physical and mental capacities, people with disabilities find it challenging to carry out their social and personal responsibilities. As a result, people who are commonly spotted on the street are either market hawkers or peddlers who prowl around public areas offering a variety of items, such as plastic bags and Quranic cards. Because they are unproductive and do not belong to a fully functional economic system -where production meets consumption, most society views people with disabilities as being like the beggars on the street, unable to participate in economic activities. Conversely, some people accept their impairment and work to overcome it through education or employment.

In Tunisia, based on the Washington Group [1] definition of disability, the number of people with disabilities in 2014 amounted to about 1,34% What is more is that according to the Ministry of Social Affairs , the number reached 4.3% in 2023.

Tunisia has adopted a social welfare policy for people with disabilities to improve their situation and include them in development plans through a set of programs and mechanisms, as well as the ratification of international conventions, such as the 2006 International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. When addressing the issue of protecting the rights of people with disabilities, the Tunisian legislature adopted two plans: The first aims to prevent disability and the second aims to protect the rights of this community. However, the present reality of people with disabilities still poses many challenges. We will endeavor to scientifically understand the issue of disability by examining microeconomic factors. Additionally, we will explore the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and how they contribute to the inclusion of people with disabilities.

What is the status of persons with disabilities in Tunisian state policy? How can development be achieved through material and cognitive access for persons with disabilities?

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[1] The Washington Group on World Disability Statistics (WGWDS) is essentially a set of performance-focused survey, with the primary goal of providing needed baseline information on disability that can be compared across the globe. The Washington Group's report addresses the development of a set of brief disability questionnaire related to functioning.

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Research Methodology and Mechanisms

The research does not stop at describing the behavior of individuals with disabilities but rather seeks to explain and interpret it. This theoretical framework enables us to understand the behaviors the descriptive analytical approach and attitudes of individuals within society based on the basic premise of interaction.

Symbolic interactionism has its roots in the pragmatic philosophy that emerged in the United States in the early 1930s, developed by George Herbert Mead. The theory of symbolic interactionism begins at the level of "micro" units (David Lebreton, 2004, p. 46) as a starting point for understanding macro-level phenomena. Mead described his approach as a social behavioral approach and argued that humans, unlike animals, do not respond passively to environmental stimuli but actively participate in shaping their social world (John Scott, 2009, p. 211).

Within the framework of symbolic interactionism, Kaufman focuses on the social actor's relationship with their social environment, emphasizing his interactions, attitudes, desires, and response traits. These elements are considered sources for the individual's development of experiences and expertise, contributing to broadening his network of social interactions. This research is then grounded in the principles of symbolic interactionism to investigate the extent to which individuals with disabilities engage in social interactions and how these interactions contribute to their personal development.

This study adopted the qualitative approach and research methods of observation and interview, thus enabling us to employ the content analysis technique. Observation is a key step in data collection, which allows us to fully integrate and get in closer contact with the respondents, participate in their activities, and learn about their daily difficulties.

 Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with people with physical, visual, and auditory disabilities in Greater Tunis. This technique was used to provide an open ground for dialog and communication, revealing their experienced reality and tough situation that led to their exclusion and marginalization.

Disability and Development as a research theme

According to Article 2 of the Directive Law No. 83 of 2005, "any person with a permanent impairment of physical, mental or sensory abilities and capacities born or acquired after birth, have their ability to perform one or more of the basic activities of daily personal or social life limited and their opportunities for inclusion in society reduced" (Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs, 2009, p. 14).

Much research in the field has found that few countries use the same concepts when collecting disability-related data. Some focus on people's impairments such as: amputation, paralysis... Others base their classification on limitations in functionality. The number of people with disabilities in the world is estimated to be around one billion "about 15% of the world's population" (World Health Organization, 2014). For instance, the disability rate in Latin America is estimated to reach 12.4%, 9% in Spain (Fatima Lamrini Wahabi and Mohamed Hamadi Bakouchi, 2014, p. 18), and 9.5% in France (Rauvaut J.F, p. 1064). Meanwhile, the disability rate in Tunisia is estimated by the Washington Group for Statistics at 1.34% for 2014, the World Health Organization at 13%, and the Ministry of Social Affairs at 4.2% for the year 2023. Together, the SDGs and the CRPD recognize that social and economic inclusion of people with disability is essential to eradicate poverty, achieve equality and ensure sustainable development for all. Therefore, countries must address the needs of all to access education, healthcare and employment.

Those with disabilities must be empowered to live with dignity and engage as full and equal members of society. "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, with inclusion being one of its key features. As soon as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed upon, work began on developing a set of relevant indicators, which was an important milestone in the international commitment to track and review progress towards achieving the 17 goals (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2018, p. 9 .(

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are closely connected, in terms of gender equality, accessibility, education, health care, work, employment, standard of living, and engagement in political and public life, among other aspects .

I.   The Social Problem and the Failure of Development Policies in Tunisia

The 80's were a decisive period in the course of national social history. Hence, that decade was characterized by political, economic, and social crises which resulted in protest movements that were reduced to riots and violence to be suppressed.

However, the frustration of the low and middle classes with the "promises of development" can only be understood in relation to the erosion of their ideologies based on achieving "social welfare for all." The state is now shirking its responsibilities after it had built its legitimacy on the primacy of the social cause.

1. The inclusion of people with disabilities in State Policy

The concept of politics in Tunisia was associated with the British concept of politics, which was founded by the scientist "Richard Titmuss." It includes a broad framework of social issues that deals with the relationships between individuals, groups, and communities and contributes, from that perspective, to defining social roles and controlling resource allocation among members of a given society (Ahmed Abdel Fattah Nagy, 2017, p. 15).

Since the 1980s, social policy in the field of disability in Tunisia has focused on five main dimensions: social rights, disability prevention, preventive measures within the environment, social protection, and social inclusion.

"Around the world, social policies in favor of people with disabilities have become a reality, giving legitimacy to the ever-increasing budgets allocated to the measures set for them and the ever-growing costs of social and medical services addressing them. However, it can be said that there is a return on investment, since part of this cost has been compensated by the participation of disabled people in economic life, and thanks to integration, they have become customers and thus participate in compensation" (Fatima Lamrini Al-Wahabi and Mohamed Hamadi Al-Bakoushi, 2014, p. 47).

After independence, the Tunisian state encouraged the establishment of national organizations that cater to people with disabilities, including the National Union for the Blind, the Tunisian Union for the Deaf, and the Tunisian Union for the Physically Handicapped. These organizations were classified as social charities and were described as "takiyas," where people with disabilities were housed, trained professionally, and educated without scientific, cognitive, or legal

oversight. These organizations also served as tributaries of the ruling party. This social policy was based on benevolent care and had no connection to human rights.

Despite the efforts made since the 1990s in the field of disability, there remains an absence of a consistent and comprehensive social policy for truly embracing disability. Disability has always been considered, within the family context, as a heavy burden that demands significant effort.

Although the Tunisian Constitution, Directive Law No. 83 of 2005, and the international convention ratified in 2008 guarantee a set of rights allowing people with disabilities to live with dignity, these legislations do not stipulate mechanisms for implementation, enforcement, or penalties for violations. Consequently, they remain neither effective nor efficient in empowering people with disabilities in education, health, and employment.

Accordingly, we cannot discuss sustainable development in the presence of the exclusion and discrimination of people with disabilities. The marginalization of disabled individuals poses a significant challenge to the newly emerging democratic vision in Tunisia. Addressing social inclusion is a key prerequisite for enabling poor, disabled, and marginalized groups to participate in the democratic project, which requires building sustainable development models rooted in social justice.

2. Employment of people with disabilities and a subsistence economy

Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates the right of people with disabilities to work and to be employed on an equal footing with others, and Article 7 of Law No. 83 of 2005 addresses their right to employment. Thus, the Tunisian legislator adopted the law on the employment of 1% of individuals with disabilities in the public and private sectors for each institution with more than 100 employees, as stipulated in Article 30, which affirms that "each public or private institution that normally employs 100 or more workers must allocate at least 1% of work positions to the Handicapped" (Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs, 2005, p. 24).Yet, when it comes to practice, this right has been violated in Tunisia. Moreover, the contemporary reality reflects the violation of this right by discriminating against disabled people and excluding them from the labor market. Most companies in Tunisia do not employ more than 100 workers. Moreover, the lack of statistics and information remains

the main obstacle to assessing the legal reality and seeking real changes that promote the right of people with disabilities to work on the basis of equal and non-discriminatory opportunities. And although the 2% quota was updated in 2016, the employment rate of people with disabilities remains low compared to the overall population. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 aims to "Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, ensure equal pay for work of equal value and achieve productive decent employment for all women and men, including youth and people with disabilities." (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2018, p. 30).

Many people with disabilities have exploited their impairments to beg. As such, their bodies have become a source of income and financial capital. They often start this activity out of sheer poverty, but once they begin to earn some money, their entire perception and self-awareness change dramatically. They come to understand that their disability is the "capital" they may use to increase their financial position and earn their daily sustenance. As a result, their mindset shifts. They feel bound to exhibit the handicap they have rather than hide it because they know that the more obvious or severe their impairment is, the greater the revenue it could bring.

II. Digitalization Leveraging Development

The effective social inclusion of people with disabilities is closely tied to accessibility, ensuring that every individual with a disability can fully contribute to the various activities of society, depending on the type and degree of their disability. However, accessibility entails more than just taking down physical obstacles; it also entails making all required adjustments to make public areas and services more accessible. People with impairments may engage in ordinary sensory experiences, communicate, obtain information, and comprehend their surroundings by virtue of accessibility. Everyone's quality of life is enhanced, including the minority of people with disabilities.

1. **The Right to Physical and Intellectual Access**
   Social policy in Tunisia has emphasized the right of people with disabilities to free or reduced transportation fares , yeti t has not adequately addressed their need for specialized transportation facilities to overcome the barriers present on Tunisian streets.

We observed that many handicapped individuals use public transportation for various reasons, one of which is that it is free of charge. However, they are in dire need of assistance, particularly due to the lack of accessible roads. Consequently, the challenges faced by people living with disabilities are related to their ability to master motor skills such as balancing, sitting, and moving. They are often at risk of potholes, road accidents, unsafe construction sites and delays in reaching workplaces. As a result, for individuals to get around smoothly and swiftly, they must be extremely cautious and they have to rely on a good memory of both spatial and temporal aspects.

At such, an infrastructure that is compatible with the capacities and mobility needs of individuals with disabilities is one of their fundamental requirements since they are in a dire need of their mobility independence to be able to reach their ambitions despite being at risk of road accidents caused by the inadequate infrastructure and the presence of cars on sidewalks, which makes them more prone to physical injuries. Hence, the Tunisian street observer realizes that sidewalks are becoming reserved for cars, and citizens who are unable to move around are more subject to accidents, while "the institutions and services in developed countries are adapted to the needs of people with disabilities and their type of impairment, making them accessible" (Valérie Lochen, 2013, p. 199).

Considering the present Tunisian reality, there is a lack of adapted pathways in health, education, and cultural facilities, especially in rural areas, resulting in the dependency of disabled individuals on others. Moreover, the lack of accessibility is more noticeable for people with sensory impairments, as the absence of Braille texts, sign language interpreters, and even audio texts pose major hurdles in disabled individuals' daily life, limiting their participation and increasing their isolation. Fortunately, people with disabilities always aspire to improve their everyday life by ensuring accessibility to all spaces, as this would place them in the sphere of development actors.

The Sustainable Development Goal 11 states: "To make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, provide access for all to safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport facilities, improve road safety, and pay particular attention to the needs of vulnerable populations, including women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly" (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2018, p. 29).

In the past few years, intercultural interaction has increased as a result of globalization and the free movement of technology across the world, carrying its own distinctive cultural imprint and character (Alain Blanc, 2015, p. 59), within a network of virtual relationships and exchanges that develop opportunities for social inclusion in a virtual, immaterial sense. Thus, "individuals and groups using technology can develop their knowledge, skills, and information to facilitate their interaction with others, integrate, and socially prosper ." (Moez Al-Triki, 2008, p. 88). Such inclusion mechanism works through the ability of people with disabilities, on the one hand, and society, on the other, to deal with disability in a positive way that enables integration. This includes all actions and behaviors intended to reduce the margins of discrimination within the social environment. "This is a challenge to the discriminatory social perception of persons with disabilities and a positive message to society."

The situation of disabled women is precarious due to the gender-specific challenges associated with disability; being disabled and a woman frequently leads to double discrimination, if not double exclusion. Women with disabilities are denied access to essential rights such as healthcare, employment, and the ability to start a family, despite their vibrancy and drive to succeed. "Achieve gender equality, empower all females, and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere" is the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2018, p. 29).

In contrast to women, men with disabilities have the option to marry a woman without a disability, but women with impairments are frequently forced to wait and, for the most part, do not get married. It's crucial to remember that discrimination against women with disabilities is worse in Tunisia. While a disabled woman may not be able to marry, even if she has a mild impairment, a disabled man can marry despite having an intellectual disability. Because of the patriarchal nature of our society, disabled women still experience discrimination and difficult conditions. They are frequently expected to look out for others, serve themselves, and meet their own needs. Their prospects of marriage are lower than those of women without disabilities. Their husbands also have the legal right to divorce them whenever they are injured in an accident or develop a disability, but if they become disabled, they are supposed to remain with them and take care of them. According to statistics collected by the National Institute of Statistics in a

gender-specific comparison (National Institute of Statistics, 2014, pp. 124-125), the gaps in the 3–5-year age group were centered on people with visual impairments who suffer from problems with focus and information retention. Hence, the schooling rate among girls was 27.7% and 11.1%, compared to 45.8% and 28.6% among boys.

The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is estimated at 17.4%, with women with disabilities being less integrated into the labor market than men, having an unemployment rate of 26%, compared to 16.3% for men.

As such, women with disabilities are more excluded from employment initiatives than men with disabilities. This exclusion stems from discrimination in the fields of education and training. Nevertheless, women actively contribute to the well-being of their families by performing household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and participating in traditional crafts like embroidery and rug weaving. However, their contributions remain overlooked. Discrimination against women with disabilities occurs in all settings, both inside and outside the home. "Social exclusion is both internal and external" (Marc-Henry Soulet, 2004, p. 24).

2. Institutional intermediation and financing mechanisms for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

Formal intermediation institutions in Tunisia are represented by an extensive network of employment offices or agencies, training institutions, and employment support programs and mechanisms. The issue of financing microenterprises is one of the most important difficulties faced by entrepreneurs at the beginning of the project, as the financing process allows them to provide the necessary cash flow to manage their projects, whether in terms of supply, marketing or purchasing equipment.

Vocational rehabilitation for people with disabilities is one of the main objectives of many associations and centers to help many people with disabilities exploit and develop their potential. It is a process in which the disabled individual undergoes an assessment of their capacities and works to develop them in several areas, such as leather, media, office, electronics, jewelry making, woodworking, copper and silver engraving, mosaics, sewing, and embroidery. When we visited the Life Accidents Center in Manouba, we interviewed Raja, who said, "I love sewing. I received a high-quality training, and I will work on starting my business after finishing the training at the center." However, the high needs of such

projects for financing, together with the low economic and social levels of people with special needs , makes them rejected by banks and other financial institutions. To avoid such situations and in response to the extreme needs of this group of micro-entrepreneurs, microcredit programs emerged as one of the effective solutions to help them.

The Disability Empowerment Program, established in 1987, has contributed to enhancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities by providing financial support for the initiation of special projects in the fields of agriculture, handicrafts, and small businesses. In 2014, the funds were estimated at $2,100,000 (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2014) for 900 beneficiaries (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2014).

3. Disability and Coexistence

The well-being of societies and sustainable development is fundamentally linked to "living together" to reach a common realization of our common origin and identity as human beings.

"Minorities are social groups, objectively observable and recognizable communities, whose existence is manifested through their different characteristics and determinants" (Joseph Yacoub, 1998, p. 33). The issue of recognizing minorities and all components of society in our country as part of the social fabric remains, unfortunately, a difficult issue. The presence of minorities in the societal landscape calls for a profound review of the social systems that deal with the access of people with disabilities and other minorities in the public sphere, sometimes indifferently, sometimes denying their existence, and sometimes even resorting to violence of all kinds .

People with disabilities experience exclusion and marginalization in Tunisian society, as one respondent put it, "They say to me, 'You are retarded, you are an inch and a half...'" They are excluded from contributing to the enrichment of public life, such as the economic, social, and political spheres. It is impossible to address social exclusion without looking at the level of "social inequality" (Raymond Boudon, François Bourricaud, 2004, p.310) as a key concept to investigate the situations of exclusion in all fields. However, the circumstances that generate social inequality remain complex and, until now, incompletely understood.

Hence, the relationship between persons with disabilities and their surroundings is determined by the representations they hold of each other, which moves the representations from an abstract concept as a mere image built in the mind to a dynamic and practical understanding applied from one situation to another.

Our representations of disability and individuals with disabilities affect the extent of their inclusion in social and professional life since social representations "govern our relationship with the world and other systems and guide the process of social communication" (Denise Jodelet, 1989, p36).

Behind this debate is a limited understanding of the meaning of citizenship and democracy. Development and progress cannot be achieved for a people or a nation without a genuine recognition of human rights since the unity of humanity is linked to the unity of diversity and the diversity of unity.

Moreover, respect for minorities is an indicator of peoples' and nations' progress and maturity in accepting diversity and building a common "social project" in which everyone has civic roles, rights, and duties. As such, adopting a truly progressive approach to organizing society in Tunisia is one of the necessities for the course of human growth and development. I believe that changing and ratifying laws will not be sufficient if it is not accompanied by a deep change in the culture of society to achieve harmony and unity in diversity, and here lies the role of education on the values of coexistence as a societal responsibility starting from the family. for me, a change in culture can only be achieved through education.

Findings and Recommendations

We cannot talk about development without activating the right to access. Effective social integration of persons with disabilities is linked to accessibility measures, so that each person with a disability can participate, depending on the type and degree of their disability, in various community activities.

Accessibility is not only about eliminating physical barriers, but also about adapting to all necessary means to facilitate access to service and public spaces. Accessibility also means access to understanding the environment, communication, information, and every day sensory reality for people with disabilities. It improves the quality of life for all citizens, including the disabled minority. Achieving the well-being of societies and sustainable development is

fundamentally linked to "living together" to reach a shared understanding of our origin and our common human identity.

Behind this debate lies a limited understanding of the meaning of citizenship and democracy. Development and progress cannot be achieved for a people or nation without a genuine recognition of human rights. The unity of humanity is linked to the unity of diversity, and diversity to unity.

Recommendations include:

- At the legislative level: Refining terminology to distinguish between the concepts of people with disabilities and people with special needs, and revising national legal texts to align them with international legislation.

- At the statistical level: Developing a national map across all ministries and classifying people with disabilities according to their nature and characteristics.

- At the awareness level: Intensify community awareness campaigns to raise awareness of the reality of people with disabilities and the need to empower them to exercise their right to integration, while adopting a gender-sensitive approach that mitigates existing disparities, particularly those related to women in general and rural women in particular.

- At the level of infrastructure and equipment: Ensure the compatibility of infrastructure with the specificities of various disabilities.

Conclusion
The state's policies in the field of disability are based on prevention and care without assessing the level of their progress. Besides, this fact reflects the significant disparity between the promises made and the contemporary reality experienced by people with disabilities in all areas. Another issue is the lack of will on the part of the Tunisian government to align its legislation with global obligations, especially after the recommendations of the United Nations during the periodic reviews of the treaty bodies. As we emphasized earlier, reviewing Tunisian laws remains necessary because alignment with international conventions can significantly improve the situation of people with disabilities. In fact, these individuals have made significant contributions to national development because they are determined to overcome the environmental and behavioral barriers which prevent them from accessing employment and

educational opportunities. This underscores the need to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as an integrated package to ensure that all disabled children and youth have equal access to education and employment opportunities.

However, the quality of life for people with disabilities still requires further scientific research to achieve greater efficiency in the mechanisms and methods.

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