



Received: 17-08-2026
Accepted: 27-09-2026

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Climate Adaptation Strategies for Vulnerable Coastal and Island Communities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria: A Synthesis of Risks, Indigenous Responses, and Policy Pathways

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Abstract

Bayelsa State, situated at the seaward apex of Nigeria's Niger Delta, is one of the most climate-exposed sub-national jurisdictions in West Africa. Roughly two-thirds to nine-tenths of its landmass is water, and its low-lying, mangrove-fringed coastline and riverine settlements are simultaneously threatened by fluvial flooding from the Niger-Benue river system, pluvial flooding from intensifying rainfall, and coastal flooding driven by tidal surges and long-term sea-level rise. This paper synthesises peer-reviewed literature, government flood outlooks, and humanitarian and media reporting to characterise the climate risk profile of Bayelsa's coastal and island communities and to classify the adaptation strategies currently in use. Adopting a narrative-synthesis methodology, the paper organises adaptation responses into four categories: autonomous/indigenous strategies (e.g., raised housing, cropping calendar shifts, canoe-based mobility), planned/institutional strategies

(early-warning systems, canal desilting, camp-based relief), structural/engineering strategies (dykes, sea walls, embankments), and ecosystem-based strategies (mangrove restoration, wetland conservation). The evidence shows that household-level adaptation is extensive but resource-constrained, that institutional response remains largely reactive rather than anticipatory, and that shoreline protection infrastructure lags substantially behind exposure. The paper proposes a multi-level policy framework linking community knowledge systems to state and federal disaster-risk-reduction architecture and recommends priority investments in early warning, nature-based coastal defence, and climate-resilient land-use planning. The findings are intended to inform Bayelsa State's climate adaptation planning, the Niger Delta Development Commission's environmental programming, and future empirical research on the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Climate Adaptation, Coastal Vulnerability, Niger Delta, Bayelsa State, Flood Risk, Ecosystem-Based Adaptation, Disaster Risk Management

1. Introduction

Coastal and deltaic communities across the Global South face a compounding set of climate hazards — sea-level rise, storm surge, saline intrusion, and intensifying river flooding — that erode livelihoods, damage infrastructure, and displace populations at a pace that consistently outstrips adaptive capacity. Nigeria's Niger Delta, home to an estimated 30 million people across nine coastal states, exemplifies this dynamic: it hosts Africa's largest mangrove forest ecosystem, sustains the country's oil and gas economy, and is nevertheless left chronically exposed to recurring, worsening flood disasters.

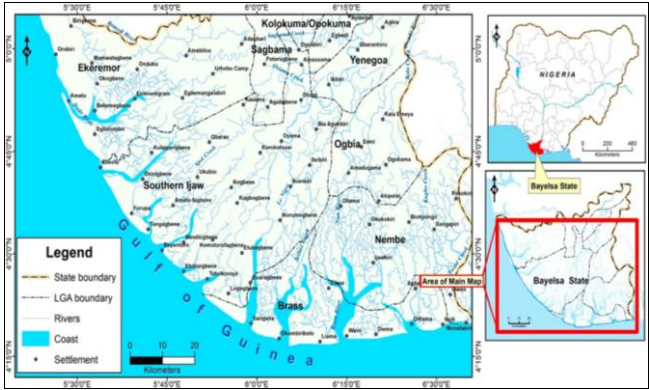
Bayelsa State occupies the seaward core of this delta. Carved out of the former Rivers State in 1996, it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the south and west, by the Niger and Forçados Rivers to the north, and consists of eight local government areas (LGAs) — Ekeremor, Kolokuma/Opokuma, Yenagoa, Nembe, Ogbia, Sagbama, Brass, and Southern Ijaw. The state's riverine and estuarine terrain, with water bodies covering an estimated seventy to ninety percent of its surface, constrains road infrastructure and concentrates settlement along creeks, canals, and tidal channels.

This paper addresses a persistent gap between the scale of documented flood and coastal-erosion impacts in Bayelsa State and the systematic synthesis of the adaptation strategies communities and institutions have deployed in response. It asks three questions: (i) what is the climate risk profile of Bayelsa's coastal and island communities; (ii) what adaptation strategies —

autonomous, institutional, structural, and ecosystem-based — are currently in evidence; and (iii) what policy pathways would strengthen adaptive capacity at community, state, and federal levels. The paper is structured as a narrative synthesis rather than a primary field study, drawing on peer-reviewed research on Niger Delta climate adaptation, official flood outlooks, and verified news and humanitarian reporting.

2. Study Area

Bayelsa State lies between approximately latitudes 4°15' and 5°23' N and longitudes 5°15' and 6°45' E, bounded to the north by Delta State, to the east by Rivers State, and to the south and west by the Atlantic Ocean. State government sources place its area at approximately 21,100 km², while other estimates place it closer to 9,000–10,800 km²; the discrepancy reflects differing treatments of tidal wetland and open water in area calculations, itself a symptom of the state's amphibious geography. The 2006 national census recorded a population of 1,704,515, making Bayelsa the least populous Nigerian state; by 2024 the estimated population had risen to approximately 3.7 million (Fig 3), intensifying pressure on flood-exposed settlement land.



Map of Bayelsa showing study Area

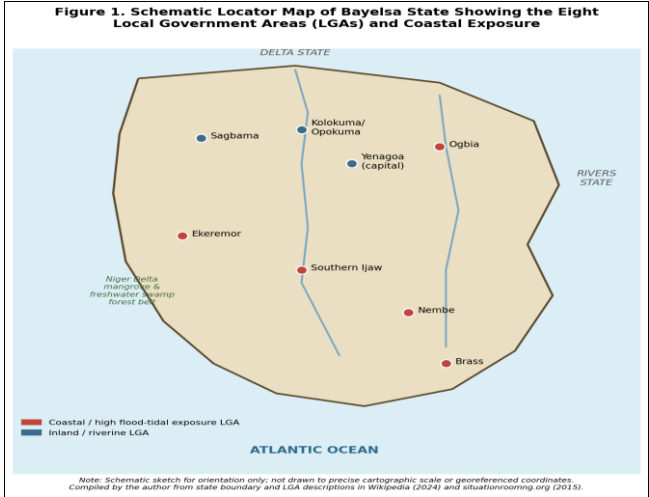


Fig 1: Schematic locator map of Bayelsa State's eight local government areas, distinguishing coastal/tidal-exposed LGAs (Ekeremor, Southern Ijaw, Nembe, Brass, and parts of Ogbia) from more inland riverine LGAs (Sagbama, Kolokuma/Opokuma, Yenagoa). The sketch is illustrative and not georeferenced

Table 1 summarises the exposure profile of the eight LGAs as characterised in the reviewed literature and flood-response reporting.

Table 1: Summarises the exposure profile of the eight LGAs as characterised in the reviewed literature and flood-response reporting

LGA	Setting	Documented climate exposure	Illustrative reported impacts
Ekeremor	Western coastal/riverine	Coastal flooding, tidal surge, shoreline erosion	Recurrent annual flooding; among the five LGAs flagged as most flood-prone
Southern Ijaw	Large riverine/coastal LGA	Fluvial + tidal flooding, prolonged inundation	Hundreds displaced in the 2012 national flood disaster
Sagbama	Inland riverine	Seasonal river-level rise, landslide risk on banks	Communities (e.g., Tungbo, Sagbama Town) inundated in 2024/2025 flooding
Kolokuma/Opokuma	Inland riverine	Seasonal river flooding	Odi and Kaiama communities flooded; gubernatorial relief visits reported
Yenagoa (capital)	Central, low-lying	Urban pluvial + fluvial flooding; poor drainage	Igbogene, Azikoro, Famgbe and other capital-city neighbourhoods flooded in 2022
Ogbia	Coastal/inland mix	Flooding compounded by oil-sector infrastructure	Otuoke community flood losses to farmland, livelihoods, and health reported
Nembe	Coastal/estuarine	Tidal surge, coastal erosion	Longstanding coastal defence concerns raised by local environmentalists
Brass	Coastal, Atlantic-facing	Tidal surge, storm-driven flooding	Odioma and Sangana communities: 200+ houses destroyed by tidal-surge flooding, March 2024

Sources: Wikipedia (2024); Dailytrust.com.ng (n.d.); NewsCentralTV (n.d.) [9]; PIND Foundation, as reported via ndlink.org (2024) [7].

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) definition of adaptation as the process of adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects, undertaken to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. Vulnerability is treated, following Adger (2006) [1], as a function of exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity, with the latter shaped by access to assets, information, and institutions rather than by climate exposure alone. Because Bayelsa's flood risk originates from multiple, overlapping pathways — upstream river discharge, local rainfall, and coastal/tidal dynamics consistent with global patterns of sea-level rise documented by Nicholls and Cazenave (2010) [10]

— the state's adaptation challenge is best understood as a nested, multi-level governance problem. Ostrom's (2010) ^[17] polycentric governance framework is used here to justify treating community-level indigenous adaptation, state-level infrastructure and planning, and federal/international disaster-risk-reduction instruments as complementary rather than substitutable layers of response.

4. Methodology

This is a desk-based narrative synthesis rather than a primary empirical study. Evidence was drawn from three source streams: (i) peer-reviewed and grey-literature research specific to Bayelsa State and the wider Niger Delta on climate perception and adaptation (e.g., Elum & Snijder, 2023; Nzeadibe *et al.*, 2011, 2012; Ojile *et al.*, 2017) ^[4, 12, 13, 15]; (ii) official and quasi-official flood-risk outlooks, including the Nigeria Hydrological Services Agency's (NIHSA) annual flood outlook as disseminated for Bayelsa State; and (iii) verified news, humanitarian, and NGO reporting documenting specific flood events, displacement, and institutional response between 2012 and 2026. Sources were triangulated for consistency (for example, the concentration of flood exposure in Ekeremor, Southern Ijaw, Sagbama, Kolokuma/Opokuma, and Yenagoa is corroborated independently by both the Wikipedia state entry and Daily Trust reporting) and organised thematically using an adaptation-typology coding frame (autonomous/indigenous, planned/institutional, structural/engineering, ecosystem-based), adapted from the broader coastal-adaptation typology literature (e.g., the coastal-community adaptation studies compiled in Filho *et al.*, 2018). The approach is appropriate for an emerging-evidence context such as Bayelsa, where fragmented reporting is more readily available than harmonised panel data, but it also means the synthesis inherits the limitations of its sources, discussed in Section 8.

5. Climate Risk Profile of Bayelsa State's Coastal and Island Communities

5.1 Flood hazard pathways

Bayelsa's flood exposure arises from three overlapping pathways. First, fluvial flooding: as the Niger and Benue rivers converge and fan into the delta's creek network, rainfall accumulated across northern and central Nigeria eventually discharges through Bayelsa on its way to the Atlantic, producing a recession-flood peak that typically arrives in October–November, after the state's own rains have already receded. Second, pluvial flooding: heavy and increasingly intense local rainfall exceeds soil infiltration and overwhelms the state's largely informal drainage network, particularly in the capital, Yenagoa. Third, coastal/tidal flooding: storm surge and high tides push Atlantic seawater inland along the state's Atlantic-facing LGAs (Ekeremor, Southern Ijaw, Nembe, and Brass), a mechanism state officials and environmentalists have specifically identified as a cause of annual flooding, alongside inadequate shoreline protection.

These pathways combine with the state's extremely low elevation — much of Bayelsa sits barely above sea level — so that once water arrives it has limited capacity to drain, and inundation can persist for weeks or months rather than days.

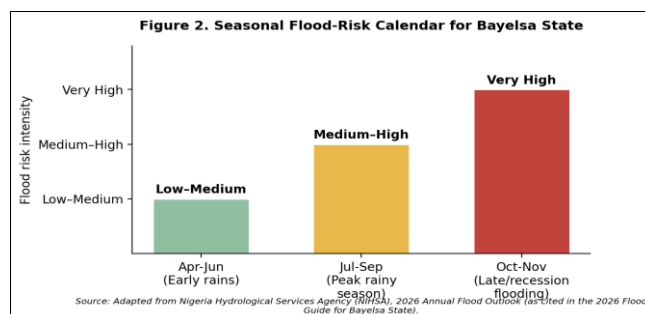


Fig 2: Seasonal flood-risk calendar for Bayelsa State. Risk intensifies through the rainy season and peaks during the October–November recession-flood period, when upstream discharge from the Niger–Benue basin arrives in the delta

5.2 Documented flood events, 2012–2026

Bayelsa was among the states worst affected by Nigeria's benchmark 2012 flood disaster — described at the time as the country's worst flooding in more than 40 years — with hundreds of persons displaced in Southern Ijaw LGA and consequent disruption of social and cultural life. Flooding recurred with increasing severity through the 2020s: in August 2022, flooding displaced an estimated 1.3 million people statewide and destroyed livestock and property, with the state capital's own neighbourhoods (Igbogene, Azikoro, Famgbe, Ogbogoro, Akenfa, Agudama, Ogu, and Onopa) inundated. In March 2024, tidal-surge flooding in the Brass LGA communities of Odioma and Sangana destroyed more than 200 houses and displaced residents, illustrating that coastal (tidal) flooding, distinct from riverine flooding, is an independent and worsening hazard. Regionally, flood disasters across the wider Niger Delta caused more than 120 recorded fatalities between January 2020 and April 2024. Looking forward, Nigeria's national flood outlook has repeatedly placed Bayelsa among the ten states at highest flood risk, and the 2026 outlook again flags the state for early-, peak-, and late-season flood risk (Fig 2).

5.3 Population exposure and long-run coastal erosion

Population growth compounds exposure: Bayelsa's population nearly doubled between 2006 and 2024, from roughly 1.7 million to an estimated 3.7 million (Fig 3), with settlement continuing to concentrate along creeks and canals that are also the state's primary flood pathways. At the same time, researchers assessing environmental degradation across the wider Niger Delta have projected that, absent intervention, many creek-side villages face submersion within the coming decades, driven by the combined effect of coastal erosion, subsidence, and sea-level rise consistent with global trends documented by Nicholls and Cazenave (2010) ^[10].

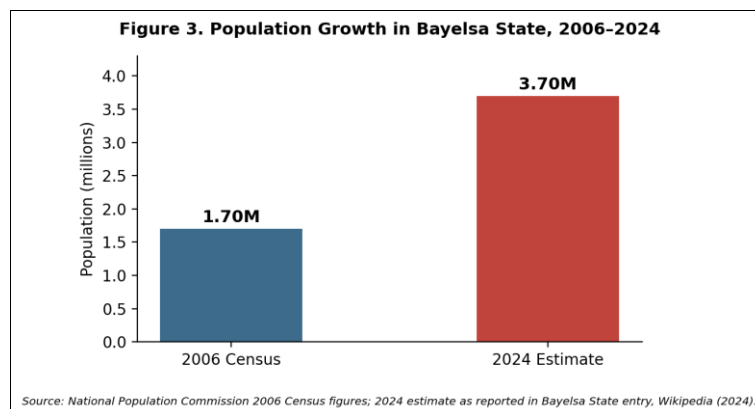


Fig 3: Population growth in Bayelsa State, 2006–2024, based on national census and subsequent estimates. Growth has concentrated in flood-exposed riverine and coastal settlement areas

Table 2: Organises the adaptation strategies documented in the reviewed literature and reporting into four categories, following the typology introduced in Section 3

Category	Description	Documented examples in Bayelsa/Niger Delta	Key source(s)
Autonomous / indigenous	Household- and community-level adjustments made without external support, often drawing on generations of local ecological knowledge	Raising building floors/stilts; shifting cropping calendars and crop choice (e.g., flood-tolerant cassava varieties); canoe-based mobility; temporary relocation to higher ground; processing crops early to reduce post-harvest flood losses	Nzeadibe <i>et al.</i> (2012) ^[13] ; Elum & Snijder (2023) ^[4]
Planned / institutional	Government- or agency-led measures, typically reactive to forecast or unfolding flood events	NiMet/NIHSA seasonal flood forecasting and early warning; state government desilting of canals and creeks ahead of the rainy season; IDP camp establishment and relief material distribution; NDDC–UNITAR technology partnership for flood-risk mapping	Daily Trust (n.d.) ^[3] ; ndlink.org/PIND Foundation (2024) ^[7]
Structural / engineering	Physical infrastructure intended to exclude or control floodwater	Localised embankments and dikes (where constructed); calls for sea walls and shoreline protection in Atlantic-facing LGAs; drainage improvement in Yenagoa	Down To Earth (n.d.); Daily Trust (n.d.) ^[3]
Ecosystem-based / nature-based	Conservation or restoration of natural buffers that reduce flood and erosion exposure	Mangrove forest conservation (Niger Delta hosts Africa's largest mangrove ecosystem); wetland/swamp-forest retention as a buffer against surge and erosion	Down To Earth (n.d.); regional Niger Delta ecosystem literature

6. Climate Adaptation Strategies in Evidence

Table 2 organises the adaptation strategies documented in the reviewed literature and reporting into four categories, following the typology introduced in Section 3.

6.1 Autonomous and indigenous adaptation

Household-level adaptation in the Niger Delta is extensive and long-standing. Surveys of farming households across Niger Delta states found roughly nine in ten respondents aware of climate change and its impacts, with farmers reporting a range of self-devised responses — altering planting dates, diversifying crops, increasing weeding frequency, and processing harvests earlier to reduce losses — that reflect accumulated local knowledge rather than externally introduced technology. In Bayelsa specifically, coastal farmers interviewed through participatory photovoice methods described rising salinity of freshwater sources, persistent flooding, and rising temperatures as the dominant manifestations of climate change affecting their livelihoods, and described adjusting both farming practices and household routines in response. These indigenous strategies are valuable — they are low-cost, locally legitimate, and already embedded in community practice — but they are also fundamentally limited: they cushion rather than remove exposure, and their effectiveness has visibly declined as flood duration has lengthened. One Ayakoro community farmer's account illustrates the trend directly: floods that once passed within days now persist for roughly five months beginning in June, overwhelming adaptive

practices calibrated to shorter, historical flood durations.

6.2 Planned and institutional adaptation

Institutional response has historically been reactive: relief materials, camp establishment, and canal desilting typically follow rather than precede flood onset, a sequencing communities themselves have criticised, with local leaders urging that relief be distributed proactively rather than 'when the flood is almost over.' More anticipatory measures are emerging, however. NIHSA's annual flood outlook now provides month-by-month risk classification specific to Bayelsa (Fig 2), giving communities and local government a lead-time window, at least in principle, to evacuate movable assets and livestock. The Niger Delta Development Commission's 2024 partnership with the UN Institute for Training and Research's satellite-mapping unit (UNOSAT) signals a shift toward remote-sensing-based flood-risk mapping as a regional public good. Whether these instruments translate into pre-emptive local action depends heavily on last-mile communication and on local government capacity to act on forecasts, both of which remain uneven across the state's eight LGAs.

6.3 Structural and engineering adaptation

Structural adaptation — dikes, sea walls, and embankments — remains the weakest link in Bayelsa's adaptation portfolio. Local environmentalists have specifically identified the absence of serious shoreline-protection investment as a driver of erosion and flood risk in the state's

coastal communities, and community leaders have repeatedly called for dike and sea-wall construction as a primary demand of post-flood advocacy. Poor town planning, cited independently by multiple sources as a contributing cause of urban flooding in Yenagoa, compounds the absence of hard infrastructure by allowing settlement to encroach on natural drainage channels.

6.4 Ecosystem-based adaptation

The Niger Delta's mangrove forest — the largest in Africa — provides a natural buffer against tidal surge and coastal erosion, but it is under sustained pressure from oil-sector pollution, land conversion, and fuelwood extraction, an environmental degradation pattern researchers link to accelerating coastal vulnerability. Ecosystem-based adaptation (mangrove restoration and wetland conservation) is well established in the international coastal-adaptation literature as a comparatively low-cost, co-beneficial alternative or complement to hard engineering, but it remains under-resourced in Bayelsa relative to its potential contribution to shoreline stabilisation.

7. Institutional and Policy Landscape

Multiple institutions hold overlapping mandates relevant to Bayelsa's climate adaptation: the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) leads disaster response; NIHSA issues the annual flood outlook; the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) funds regional infrastructure and, increasingly, environmental-technology partnerships; and the Bayelsa State Government undertakes canal desilting and local relief coordination. Nigeria's National Climate Change Policy and National Adaptation Plan process provide the federal framework within which state-level action nominally sits, but implementation capacity, financing, and inter-agency coordination at the state level remain the binding constraints identified across the reviewed sources, rather than any absence of national-level policy architecture.

8. Barriers, Gaps, and Limitations

Three structural barriers recur across the literature. First, a chronic sequencing problem: institutional response is triggered by flood onset rather than by forecast, despite the existence of seasonal outlooks with meaningful lead time. Second, an infrastructure deficit: shoreline protection, drainage, and embankment construction lag far behind documented exposure, particularly in the state's most Atlantic-exposed LGAs. Third, a knowledge-policy gap: indigenous adaptation practices, though widespread and well documented by researchers, have not been systematically incorporated into formal agricultural, land-use, or disaster-risk-reduction policy, a shortfall noted explicitly in Niger Delta climate-policy literature.

This synthesis has its own limitations. It is based on secondary sources — peer-reviewed studies, an official flood outlook, and news/NGO reporting — rather than new household or community survey data, and it therefore cannot quantify adaptation effectiveness or adaptive-capacity differentials across the eight LGAs with statistical precision. Reported figures on population, land area, and displacement vary across sources (for example, land-area estimates for the state range from roughly 9,000 to 21,100 km²), reflecting differences in survey method and reporting date rather than a single authoritative figure. The map presented in Fig 1 is

schematic and intended for orientation rather than precise spatial analysis. Future research combining remote-sensing-derived exposure data (of the kind the NDDC–UNOSAT partnership is beginning to generate) with household-level adaptive-capacity surveys would substantially strengthen the evidence base this paper has synthesised.

9. Policy Recommendations

Table 3 sets out recommendations organised by responsible level of governance, reflecting the polycentric framing adopted in Section 3.

Table 3: Sets out recommendations organised by responsible level of governance, reflecting the polycentric framing adopted in Section 3

Level	Recommended action	Rationale
Community	Formalise and resource indigenous early-action practices (crop timing shifts, elevated storage, community flood watch)	Builds on existing, locally legitimate knowledge rather than introducing unfamiliar systems (Nzeadibe <i>et al.</i> , 2012) ^[13]
Local government	Establish LGA-level flood-liaison desks that translate NIHSA outlooks into pre-flood household advisories, timed to the seasonal calendar in Fig 2	Closes the forecast-to-action gap identified as a key institutional weakness
State government	Prioritise shoreline protection (sea walls/embankments) in Ekeremor, Southern Ijaw, Nembe, and Brass, and complete pre-season canal desilting before, not during, the rainy season	Addresses the specific structural-adaptation deficit raised by local environmentalists
State government	Integrate mangrove and wetland conservation into coastal-defence and land-use planning as a nature-based complement to hard infrastructure	Leverages an already-present regional ecosystem asset at lower capital cost than engineering alone
Federal / NDDC	Extend satellite-based flood-risk mapping (per the 2024 NDDC–UNITAR/UNOSAT partnership) to produce LGA-resolution hazard maps for land-use and evacuation planning	Builds on an initiative already underway and fills the spatial-data gap noted in Section 8
Federal / development partners	Fund a dedicated Niger Delta coastal-adaptation financing window under the National Adaptation Plan, prioritising Bayelsa's Atlantic-facing LGAs	Matches financing to the states carrying the highest documented long-run submersion risk

10. Conclusion

Bayelsa State's coastal and island communities sit at the intersection of three converging climate hazard pathways upstream river flooding, intensifying local rainfall, and rising coastal/tidal surge — on some of the lowest-lying, most water-dominated terrain in West Africa. Communities have responded with substantial, long-standing indigenous adaptation, but these autonomous measures are increasingly outmatched by flood events that now last months rather than days. Institutional response remains largely reactive, and structural shoreline protection lags far behind exposure, even as the state's population has more than doubled since

2006. Strengthening adaptive capacity will require treating community knowledge, state infrastructure investment, ecosystem conservation, and federal/international disaster-risk financing as complementary layers of a single polycentric response, rather than as substitutes for one another. Absent such an integrated approach, the submersion risk already flagged by researchers studying the wider Niger Delta will continue to advance faster than the region's capacity to adapt.

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