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# University social responsibility in times of crisis (COVID-19): lessons from public universities of an underdeveloped country

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**ABSTRACT**

As only little is known regarding University Social Responsibility (USR) in times of crisis from underdeveloped economies, this study explored the initiatives of four public universities in an underdeveloped country context to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis by way of USR. A total of 70 interviews were conducted with the stakeholders of the universities. The study found out that the universities, indeed, managed to perform USR to their major stakeholders – employees (e.g., protected wages and salaries; and provided flexible work schedules), students (e.g., monitoring social distancing; and free transportation of students to their hometowns due to the lockdown), and local community (e.g., provided meals and sanitizers for disadvantaged members; and offered quarantine facilities). Yet, the concerns/challenges encountered were not only numerous, but they were also alarming; ranging from poor infrastructure to a focus on PR (visibility) as well as to engaging in unnecessary competition among the universities and repetitive interventions. Thus, the universities might need to reinforce and hone their USR practices in times of crisis, and beyond by being agile, innovative, and cooperative. In addition to extending USR studies to less explored territories; this study provides empirical evidence regarding USR in times of crisis (in light of COVID-19) byexhibiting lessons from public universities in an underdeveloped country context.

## Introduction

In addition to being a matter of sustainable development (Al-Hadi et al., 2019; Magaya & Nhavira, 2016; Robins, 2008), discharging social responsibilities serves as a buffer against unfavorable events, making it a crucial instrument for addressing social and economic distress during times of crisis (Ducassy, 2013; Harkiolakis, 2015; Zaharia & Grundey, 2011). Hence, it is expected of enterprises across all industries, including academia, to engage in diverse socially responsible activities with a constant focus on the well-being of their stakeholders (Argandoña & von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009; Pedersen & Jeppesen, 2015; Sprinkle & Maines, 2010). That is, according to the stakeholder theory, organizations must promote responsiveness to both internal and external stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2006; Serafeim, 2013).

In other words, in both, good times as well as harsh times, modern organizations are expected to embark on socially responsible activities to meet (stakeholders') societal expectations (Bondy et al., 2012). This is also the responsibility of universities; 'a university is a special type of organization which needs to adopt a social responsibility strategy just like the other organizations, to meet the expectations of the stakeholders' (Vasilescu et al., 2010, p. 4177). So, universities are expected to be active responders to address societal distress in times of crisis through university social responsibility (USR) (MuijenHeidi, 2004; Müller et al., 2021; Singkun et al., 2020; Souto, 2009). USR is a university mission designed to bring the institution closer to its communities (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2023). Fauzi et al. (2024) stated that,

besides knowledge production and dissemination, in light of the concept of USR, universities are expected to expand into other disciplines to portray their contribution to the community (stakeholders); and the expected social responsibility is that universities, as social entities, should contribute to people's quality of life as a stimulator for social improvement.

This paper represents the first systematic study in Ethiopia to explore the endeavors of public universities in an underdeveloped country context (Ethiopia) to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis by way of USR. Besides, the study unearthed the concerns (challenges) that were encountered in implementing USR in the fight against COVID-19. Four public universities in Ethiopia - Addis Ababa University (AAU), Adama Science and Technology University (ASTU), Debre Birhan University (DBU), and Ambo University (AU) were part of this study. These universities were selected due to their proximity to Addis Ababa University, where the research is initiated, and due to the mobility scare that was in place (mobility lockdown) to farther places as a result of COVID-19.

## Research gap (motivation) of the study

The novel coronavirus ('COVID-19') has harshly affected the workplace, and institutional activities, and shattered communities (Shan & Tang, 2020). And that kind of extraordinary time (crisis time) requires organizations to intensify their social responsibility practices (Karaibrahimoglu, 2010; Siano et al., 2017; Tao & Song, 2020; Zaharia & Grundey, 2011). The pandemic (COVID-19) was an unprecedented (first-time) experience in our generation; and like many other institutions, it is imaginable that the public universities in Ethiopia have not yet honed their USR interventions to effectively meet the challenges brought forth by the crisis. And yet, there is a dearth of studies regarding how universities from underdeveloped economies utilized their USR to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis (Awoyemi et al., 2022; Mgbere et al., 2023). Thus, this study provides empirical evidence regarding USR in times of crisis (in light of COVID-19) by exhibiting lessons from Public Universities in an underdeveloped country context.

Stated differently, this study will add to theory and practice (action) during difficult times. Its theoretical contribution will be to broaden the study's scope to less explored regions (the underdeveloped world), where similar studies are very scant. Speaking of practical contributions, it will be crucial to look into the concerns of the public university stakeholders in the study setting to understand these concerns and appropriately assess the USR interventions and actions during periods of social unrest such as the one caused by COVID-19. The research drew on the stakeholder theory, which states that organizations have responsibilities to their stakeholders (both internal and external), in exploring the subject of the study.

Stakeholder theory emerged in the 1980s as a response to the growing dynamism and complexity of the environment in which organizations operate, and in this approach, all the individuals or groups that have a stake in the organization are considered in the strategic management (Langrafe et al., 2020). In other words, stakeholder theory has always been a core theory in studies that relate to the social responsibility of organizations (Crane et al., 2008), and it is helpful to identify and respond accordingly to the different constituents of an organization (Alsos et al., 2011). An organization has to manage properly its relationships with key groups, such as employees, suppliers, communities, politicians, owners, and others, that can affect its ability to reach its goals (Freeman, 2001; Ihlen, 2008). Scholars indicate the following as the main stakeholders of universities - students, administrators of universities, teaching staff, researchers, and administrative employees (teaching, research, and administrative staff); local community, NGOs, state entities, national government, and state financing agencies, professional bodies (orders), businesses, and former students (Klemeshev et al., 2019; Mainardes et al., 2010).

And universities' social responsibility activities should be designed to meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Ali et al., 2021; Vasilescu et al.,2010). As stated earlier, it is essential to note that while the focus of CSR is to seek to create and exploit win-win situations for enterprises and for society at large; university social responsibility is about the need to strengthen civic commitment and active citizenship; it is about volunteering, about an ethical approach, developing a sense of civil citizenship by encouraging the students, the academic staff to provide social services to their local community or to promote ecological, environmental commitment for local and global sustainable development (see, Vasilescu et al., 2010). Accordingly, the major objective of this study was to explore how public universities in an

underdeveloped country (Ethiopia) deployed USR to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis; and this will represent a useful lesson for similar contexts.

More so, speaking of the research objective (s) of the study, based on the notion that the nature of social responsibility interventions of an organization (including universities) depends upon the nature of imminent societal problems (concerns) happening in the areas (social context) where it operates (Burlea et al., 2017; Frynas, 2006; Zaharia & Grundey, 2011), the objectives of this study include:

- demonstrating the specific USR practices that the participating universities have undertaken to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis (COVID-19 era USR practices of the universities)
- depicting the challenges that the universities faced while implementing USR
- exhibiting the concerns of the universities' stakeholders as triggered by COVID-19, and
- highlight how USR actions be better reinforced in crisis time, taking lessons from COVID-19 (conclusions and way forward).

## Literature review

### Theoretical review

According to Hamid (2020), social responsibility is an ethical framework for contributing to the welfare of the community. In times of crisis, like as a pandemic, the demand for social responsibility action is heightened. COVID-19 has had a significant negative impact on the workplace, company operations, and communities (Shan & Tang, 2020). It also poses a threat to lives, livelihoods, and civic institutions (Kachanoff et al., 2020). In these situations, universities and all other industries must take social responsibility measures to address the challenge. '- According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2010), "all sectors of society" ought to contribute to maintaining societal welfare'.

Stated differently, the dangers associated with COVID-19 are diverse and may disproportionately impact people who are already at risk for various acute and chronic health issues. To halt the epidemic, governments, organizations, and healthcare facilities must all take steps and implement policies that respect the people who live in vulnerable places. Response efforts will be severely hampered if vulnerable groups' demands are not respected, since we all have social and ethical obligations to identify and reduce risks for those who are so frequently left behind (Berger et al., 2020; Elifneh, 2017).

Social services (social responsibilities) represent an important function of universities (Wang & Zha, 2018). As such Wang et al. (2020) suggest that providing support for outbreak control is both a university function and a responsibility, and confronted with the new type of coronavirus, universities are expected to respond quickly. The authors identified the following as social responsibility interventions of universities to combat COVID-19: making use of alumni resources and raising medical supplies, gathering medical experts for emergency research, providing psychological assistance to help social stability, controlling personnel flow (students and staff), and innovative teaching, and emergency research and sustainable collaborative research network.

Similarly, Bavel et al. (2020) noted that swift intervention is needed from various disciplines. The authors noted that an effective response to COVID-19 or another pandemic requires contributions from across the sciences. Accordingly, the authors indicated that the central scientific contributions to a pandemic are medical and biological: the need to understand the virus' properties, identify effective treatments, and develop and test a vaccine. They added that epidemiologists, policy analysts, public health scholars, engineers, computer scientists, and network researchers can also help, for example in effectively modeling the virus' spread, coordinating responders, and designing and producing materials needed for effective treatment.

### University social responsibility (USR)

University Social Responsibility (USR) refers to the ethical, social, and environmental obligations and commitments of higher education institutions towards their stakeholders and society at large (Pactwa et al., 2024; Pham, 2023). It encompasses the proactive engagement of universities in addressing pressing

societal challenges, promoting sustainable development, and advancing the public good (Chi & Trung, 2023; Palacio & Sadehvandi, 2022). USR extends the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to the unique context and functions of universities, recognizing their pivotal role as generators and disseminators of knowledge, innovation, and cultural enrichment (Makki, 2023). Key dimensions of USR include community engagement, research and innovation, education and capacity building, and ethical governance (Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020; Sasaki & Horng, 2023; Sharma & Sharma, 2019). Overall, USR reflects a commitment by universities to contribute positively to society by leveraging their resources, expertise, and influence to address complex social, economic, and environmental issues (El-Kassar et al., 2023; Ouragini & Ben Hassine Louzir, 2024).

## Dimensions of USR

### Community engagement

Community engagement is a cornerstone of University Social Responsibility (USR), representing the proactive involvement of higher education institutions with local communities to address their needs and foster collaborative partnerships (Abdel-Hameid & Badri, 2016; Almeida, 2021; Makki, 2023). This dimension encompasses a range of initiatives, including community service programs, outreach activities, and partnerships with local organizations, aimed at promoting social inclusion and addressing pressing societal challenges (Koekkoek et al., 2021; Meikle, 2023). By actively engaging with diverse stakeholders and co-creating knowledge and solutions, universities can strengthen their ties with communities, enhance social cohesion, and contribute to sustainable development at the local level (Oliveira et al., 2024; Trencher et al., 2017).

### Research and innovation

Research and innovation play a vital role in fulfilling the social responsibility of universities by generating knowledge and solutions to address societal challenges (Bayuo et al., 2020; Yatsenko, 2023). Within the context of USR, this dimension encompasses research projects, innovation hubs, technology transfer initiatives, and interdisciplinary collaborations focused on societal impact (Ali et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2021; Terán-Bustamante & Torres-Vargas, 2020). By prioritizing research that addresses pressing social, economic, and environmental issues, universities can harness their intellectual capital and innovation capacity to drive positive change and contribute to sustainable development goals (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024; Ouragini & Ben Hassine Louzir, 2024).

### Education and capacity building

Education and capacity building are fundamental components of University Social Responsibility (USR), encompassing efforts to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to contribute to society and address complex challenges (Górska, 2024; Rosilawati et al., 2023; Sengupta et al., 2020). This dimension includes academic programs, professional development opportunities, lifelong learning initiatives, and support services for students from diverse backgrounds (Sengupta et al., 2020; Shek et al., 2017). By providing quality education and fostering a culture of lifelong learning, universities can empower individuals to become responsible citizens, leaders, and change agents capable of driving social progress and innovation (Rojas Valdés et al., 2020; Rycroft et al., 2020).

### Ethical governance

Ethical governance is a critical dimension of University Social Responsibility (USR), reflecting the principles, policies, and practices that guide the ethical conduct and decision-making processes of universities (Castilla et al., 2022; Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020). This dimension encompasses ethical codes of conduct, governance structures, compliance mechanisms, and mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and feedback (Kappo-Abidemi & Ogujiuba, 2020). By upholding principles of transparency, accountability, and integrity in their operations, universities can earn the trust of stakeholders, mitigate risks, and enhance their reputation as responsible institutions committed to serving the public good (Makki, 2023; McMickell, 2021; Michalos, 2022).

### University social responsibility in times of crisis (COVID-19)

In times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) takes on heightened significance as higher education institutions face unprecedented challenges and opportunities to serve their communities and society at large (Adel et al., 2022; Makki, 2023; McMickell, 2021). First and foremost, USR necessitates a swift and adaptive response from universities to address the immediate needs of stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, and the broader community [Ramish & Ehsan, 2024; Rosilawati et al., 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2020]. This entails ensuring the continuity of education through innovative online teaching methods, providing support services for students facing financial or emotional hardships, and leveraging research expertise to contribute to the pandemic response efforts, such as developing vaccines or advising policymakers on public health strategies (Mukherjee & Hasan, 2020; Regehr & McCahan, 2020). Moreover, USR requires universities to go beyond their traditional roles and actively engage with local communities and vulnerable populations to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the crisis, offering resources, expertise, and solidarity to address pressing needs and foster resilience (Bakr, 2023; Lazareva, 2021; Rosilawati et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis underscores the importance of ethical governance and transparent communication in guiding universities' responses to the pandemic and upholding their social responsibility commitments (Górska, 2024). Clear and timely communication with stakeholders is paramount, fostering trust and collaboration in navigating uncertain times (Calonge et al., 2021; Górska, 2024; Liu et al., 2021). Additionally, the pandemic presents an opportunity for universities to reevaluate their priorities, strategies, and partnerships through a USR lens, emphasizing resilience, sustainability, and community-centered approaches in planning for future crises (Leal Filho et al., 2021). By embracing their social responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities can not only fulfill their obligations to society but also emerge as resilient and adaptive institutions ready to tackle future challenges with compassion, integrity, and innovation (Rababah et al., 2021).

### Empirical review

This empirical review aims to fill this gap by examining lessons learned from public universities in underdeveloped countries, with a focus on Africa, regarding their response to the COVID-19 crisis and their implementation of USR initiatives.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has presented unparalleled challenges to higher education institutions, triggering a reassessment of their role in addressing societal needs during times of crisis (Beasy et al., 2024; Qureshi et al., 2024). While a plethora of studies have delved into the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) within developed countries (Adel et al., 2022; Coelho & Menezes, 2022; Lemos Lourenço et al., 2022; Leniwati et al., 2022; McMickell, 2021; Mukherjee & Karjigi, 2022; Rababah et al., 2021; Ramirez Lozano et al., 2024; Rosilawati et al., 2023), there exists an apparent disparity in research focusing on developing countries, particularly in Africa (Awoyemi et al., 2022; Manna et al., 2023; Mgbere et al., 2023; Moyo & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024).

Existing literature predominantly highlights the experiences and practices of universities in developed countries in managing crises and fulfilling their social responsibility obligations. Studies from the USA and Europe underscore the importance of proactive engagement with stakeholders, flexible academic policies, and robust communication strategies in navigating crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Górska, 2024; Khan, 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2022). Similarly, research from Asia emphasizes the role of technology adoption, community partnerships, and student support services in ensuring continuity of education and promoting social well-being during emergencies (Liu et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Karjigi, 2022; Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Rosilawati et al., 2023).

However, the dearth of comprehensive empirical research on the response of public universities in underdeveloped countries, notably in Africa, to the COVID-19 crisis and their implementation of University Social Responsibility (USR) initiatives is striking (Awoyemi et al., 2022; Mgbere et al., 2023). Despite anecdotal evidence pointing to the challenges faced by African universities, including limited infrastructure, financial constraints, and unequal access to technology and resources, systematic studies assessing the

effectiveness of their response strategies are notably absent (Cudjoe, 2023; Lateef & Akinsulore, 2021; Okech et al., 2020). The scarcity of empirical research hinders a thorough understanding of crisis management approaches and the integration of University Social Responsibility (USR) principles into institutional practices, particularly within African universities, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While USR is increasingly acknowledged as pivotal in guiding institutional behavior towards societal well-being, limited exploration exists regarding how African universities implement USR principles during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, including decision-making processes and resource allocations. This gap underscores the critical necessity for more empirical studies focusing on underdeveloped countries, notably in Africa, to glean lessons and evidence from the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by public universities during the pandemic. Emphasizing the importance of evidence-based approaches, this study aims to shed light on the experiences of universities in underrepresented regions, specifically in Ethiopian universities by offering insights into effective USR strategies amidst adversity, thereby informing policy and practice to foster national and international collaboration and promoting equitable and sustainable development in higher education.

## Methods

### Research design

A qualitative, multiple case studies approach was utilized, which has 'a long history and tradition within organization and management research' (Cassell & Symon, 2006, p. 4). Evidence from multiple case studies is usually considered more compelling and robust (Yin, 2003b). Generally, case studies are appropriate research designs to examine a contextually contemporary phenomenon and gain deep insight into the study context as this allows applying a holistic approach (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Elifneh, 2017; Yin, 2003a).

### Data collection instrument and participants

Interviews were the major data-capturing instrument. Interviews represent a classic qualitative research method that is directly interactive; and in studying the cases, in a holistic approach, interviews help achieve thick, rich data; and also permit greater flexibility (Briggs, 1986; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Savenye & Robinson, 2013; Turner, 2010). Thus, guided interviews (See Table 1) were used to gather data from the major stakeholders of the universities; both internal stakeholders including employees, management, and students, and external stakeholders including the local community, NGOs, government ministries, and professional, and business (industry) associations. These are normally considered the major stakeholders of universities (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023; Popadynets et al., 2020; Radko et al., 2023). And,

**Table 1.** Interview guide (schedule).

| Research questions (RQs) | Interview guide issues – probing items | Respondents |
|---|---|---|
| RQ1 What are the specific social responsibility practices of the selected public universities that are currently underway in this time of crisis to combat COVID-19? | 1. What are the social services (social responsibility) actions taken by the university in line with combating COVID-19?<br>2. What are the challenges that the universities faced in implementing their crisis-time social interventions? | University administration (all items) + (triangulate with) stakeholders (all items) |
| RQ2 What are the emerging expectations (concerns) of the universities' stakeholders in line with COVID-19? | 1. What are the emerging needs (concerns or needs) of stakeholders that arise due to COVID-19?<br>2. What are the most acute needs now?<br>3. What are the universities doing to address these emerging needs? | University administration (all items) + stakeholders (all items) |
| RQ3 How could the university's COVID-19-related social responsibility actions be better reinforced in light of the concerns (emerging expectations) of stakeholders? | 1. What do you suggest with regard to improvement in line with the social responsibilities of a university in times of crisis (pandemic)?<br>2. What should be done by our universities to reinforce their social responsibility interventions?<br>3. What do you expect from the universities?<br>4. What do you think the universities must do for the future in terms of social responsibility actions in times of crisis? | |

the population of the study comprises the various stakeholders of the universities in the study setting. In this qualitative study, participants (respondents) with specific knowledge about the subject (social responsibility of an organization or university social responsibility), and/or those who are affected by university practices positively or negatively, were considered. Moreover, respondents' willingness to participate in the study was also one of the criteria. This is in line with the very notion of stakeholder theory that organizations have obligations (social responsibility) to their internal and external stakeholders (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Smith, 2003). Besides, this specific technique of collecting data from respondents who meet the well-defined criteria as stated earlier makes the data collection method a purposive one, which is a typical method in qualitative study (Jennings, 2001; Obilor, 2023). Besides, ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board Committee of the College of Business and Economics of Addis Ababa University was obtained for the study. Verbal agreements were obtained from all participants after informing them that their responses would solely be used for academic research and that their personal information would remain confidential.

Further, as data were collected from diverse stakeholder groups employees (teaching and administrative staff), university management, students, local community, NGOs, government ministries, professional, and business (industry) associations; this enabled triangulation of data sources. In turn, this has contributed to enhancing the reliability of the study (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In qualitative studies like this one, 'triangulation provides a more compelling argument regarding the reliability of findings' (Coleman, 2022, p. 2043). In addition, qualitative research is not a sampling research (Tellis, 1997). In other words, as guidelines for determining number of participants (respondents) are virtually nonexistent for qualitative studies, the number of respondents typically relies on the concept of 'saturation', or 'the point at which no new information is observed in the data' (Guest et al., 2006, p. 1). Besides, in this study, the interview responses were audio recorded. Speaking of the issue of validity in qualitative study, although no method or procedure can guarantee validity, it entails being able to get 'rich' data such as by way of mechanical (audio) recording that can provide a deeper and more revealing picture (Coleman, 2022; Mears et al., 2017).

In other words, a wide group of respondents were interviewed from diverse backgrounds. The interviews were conducted by the researcher and trained research assistants at various locations that were most convenient for the respondents, either at their workplace, out in the fields, or in public places. The transcriptions of the interviews were done by the interviewers themselves. Accordingly, a total of 70 interviews were conducted - 4 interviews with Community service Officials of the four universities; 16 academic staff; 12 administrative staff; 20 university students (undergraduate and graduate); 12 local community members (elders); 1 senior researcher from a business (industry) association; and 1director from HERQA (Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency, Ethiopia); 1 expert from Federal Ministry of Health (National Emergency Operation Center, taskforce member); 3 NGO experts (three different NGOs); 1 senior consultant from a professional association. Table 1 presents the interview guide.

## Analysis approach

The study applied qualitative inductive, data-driven thematic analysis with a narrative presentation. Thematic analysis is understood as an approach for detecting, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves analytic practices, such as sorting and sifting through the data set to find comparable words and/or links, which has been described as a practice shared by other qualitative research approaches (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, the themes are presented in a narrative form - a narrative presentation of results, which is often described as a rich and diverse enterprise as several typologies of narrative analysis exist (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Riessman, 2005). A narrative approach (a narrative form of organization studies), is a common approach in case studies research (Czarniawska, 1997). According to Gillham (2000), 'the basic way of presenting a case study report is a narrative, and the case study researcher, who is seeking to recreate the context and sequence of evidence in a way that enables the reader to see and understand the meaning of what is recounted, has to use a more overtly narrative format'. This is also in line with (Braun & Clarke, 2006) viewpoint that narrative analysis can also be applied in thematic analysis, in which narratives are grouped into a similar thematic category based on the data-driven results, which will eventually contribute to demonstrating empirical findings of

contemporary issues like USR in times of crisis (COVID-19) era in diverse contexts; such as from a developing country context.

In other words, as Strauss and Corbin (1990) 'qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis have gained popularity over the years'. This method permits to collection of rich information about relatively few research units rather than limited information for a large number of research units (Jennings, 2001). The analysis described individual experiences, described the variation, and described and explained relationships (Creswell, 2007). That is the analysis takes the form of the multiple version of the classic single case, whereby the multiple case report contains multiple narratives (Yin, 2003b). And yet, the prime goal of the analysis was to produce answers to the research questions raised in the study. In performing the comparative (cross-case) analysis of the case studies, textual data was presented in a uniform approach, which is considered a convenient way to display the text from across the entire dataset (Gibbs, 2008; Yin, 2003b).

The data were coded manually. Coding data manually by writing notes on the interview texts being analyzed is a common approach in qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). The first author (lead) researcher, who has relatively better experience in qualitative research, had read repeatedly the interview transcripts very carefully and immersed in them to get familiar with the data to identify respondents' expressions that particularly explain the ongoing social responsibility practices of the universities to combat COVID-19; concerns (challenges) that the universities faced in implementing social responsibility actions; and concerns expressed by the universities' internal and external stakeholders due to COVID -19. In other words, the data were coded manually by reading the hard copies of transcripts using highlighters. Butterfield et al. (2009, p. 273) assert that 'the minimum participation rate needed to form a viable category is whether 25% of participants identified incidents that fit into a particular category'. In doing so, the theoretical saturation signified iteration between data, concepts, and themes ended (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Further, in applying this analysis procedure, it is usually necessary to present instances of the storyline (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This is also in line with Braun and Clarke (2006) viewpoint that it is important to exhibit how the analysis is done. And doing so enhances 'the objectivity of coding processes' (Hannah & Lautsch, 2011, p. 17). Table 2 shows particular examples of what the researcher did in coding the data in light of the objectives (research questions) of the study.

## Results - presentation and interpretation of the findings

The present study attempted to provide empirical evidence by way of addressing the following objectives:

- demonstrating the specific USR practices that the participating universities have undertaken to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis (COVID-19 era USR practices of the universities)
- depicting the challenges that the universities faced while implementing USR
- exhibiting the concerns of the universities' stakeholders as triggered by COVID-19, and
- highlight how USR actions be better reinforced in crisis time, taking lessons from COVID-19 (conclusions and way forward).

**Table 2.** Illustration of the data coding process.

| Interviewer question (example) | Participant's response | Coding |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *What are the social services (social responsibility) actions taken by the university in line with combating COVID-19?* | There are different types of social responsibility practices that the university is undertaking right now. Some of them distribute sanitizers and other protective equipment to students and staff | Distribution of sanitizers and other protective equipment |
| *What are the emerging needs of stakeholders that arise due to COVID-19?* | There are acute needs that the universities may need to address. For example, there is a lack of support (financial, psychological, and in-kind) to vulnerable students and staff members | Lack of support for vulnerable members |
| *What do you think the universities must do for the future in terms of social responsibility actions in times of crisis?* | Universities should stop being competitive for PR consumption, they rather have to cooperate to address real problems | Interuniversity Cooperation |

## COVID-19 era USR practices of the universities

The study found that there have been several USR practices performed by the universities to combat COVID-19. More precisely, the interview responses from the authorities of the universities assert that the existing COVID-19 era USR practices target students, employees (staff) of the universities, and other external stakeholders (e.g. local communities).

The most common social responsibility practices towards students while the students were still on campuses (before the campuses were in lockdown) included protecting the students when the outbreak started in the country. The universities tried to make sure that their students would not be exposed to the virus. Towards this goal, campus gates were closed and no one was allowed to go in and out of all campuses. Besides, students were provided cleaning materials (soaps, towels, and sanitizers). Volunteers were organized to maintain social distancing inside campuses (dining rooms, cafeteria, etc). These activities were done by all the universities that have been part of this study. Later on, when the students were sent out of campuses due to the lockdown, free transportation services were provided to students to move them to their hometowns. In addition, once the students are disbanded, all the universities have been trying to deliver courses electronically using e-mails, especially to their postgraduate students.

With regards to the USR to employees (academic and administrative staff) of the universities, the universities managed to protect the salaries (wages) of their employees despite the lockdown; permitted their staff to stay at home, and encouraged their staff to engage in research activities that will help fight the disease. For example, Addis Ababa University (AAU) allocated a budget worth ten million birr (~ $225, 000) for emergency research funds and its academic staff utilized the budget to conduct emergency research that focused on COVID-19 themes. Similarly, the other universities have also made research calls, and their academic staff conducted research in the area of COVID-19. Besides, the universities have also arranged shifts and flexible approaches to work for their administrative staff. They have also given extended leave to their administrative employees who have health issues. Further, ASTU, DBU, and AU have also distributed sanitizers to their staff that were manufactured by their respective chemical engineering departments.

Regarding the USR engagement with external stakeholders, the universities were committed to supporting local communities in various forms. The next sections provide descriptions of the social responsibility efforts of each university to their external stakeholders.

At Addis Ababa Science and Technology University (ASTU), its chemical engineering department has manufactured sanitizers and distributed them to vulnerable members of the community – police, prison halls, media, and poor community members. In addition, as face masks were so scarce, in the early phases of the pandemic, ASTU manufactured thousands of face masks in collaboration with a garment factory to distribute the face masks to the local communities. Moreover, the university has extended support to impoverished members of the community by way of distributing meals, and potable water in areas with water shortages, organizing campaigns to create awareness about the pandemic, setting up information desks (centers) in different parts of the town to help support awareness creation and behavioral change efforts (such as adherence to COVID-19 protocol –wearing face masks and social distancing; and the university also financed research project on medicinal plant.

Ambo University (AU) organized awareness creation campaigns to educate the public in several places within and surrounding Ambo town, which is located 80 miles west of the capital, Addis Ababa. Besides, in collaboration with the local health bureau, the university produced sanitizers and distributed them to the local community and its staff. A committee from the staff of the university was formed to perform the distribution of the sanitizers to the local community including farmers in the surrounding places. Further, the university made an emergency research call and its staff participated in emergency research.

Debre Brehan University (DBU), on the other hand, is serving as a quarantine center and it has also manufactured and distributed hand sanitizers to the local community, health institutions (centers), and other government organizations. The university has also organized awareness creation campaigns in collaboration with the town's administration office. More so, the university has also provided support to the elderly by distributing food items in collaboration with a local NGO and has also donated money to the national COVID-19 taskforce, and participated in the maintenance of mechanical ventilators in a local hospital.

At Addis Ababa University (AAU), several activities have been undertaken to combat COVID-19. Currently, the university serves as a quarantine center and spends a considerable amount of money to sustain the quarantine service and provide meals and sanitation to the people in the quarantine. Besides, its medical school provides Tele-medicine to out-patients; it has distributed thousands of bottles of sanitizer to government organizations (e.g. Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation) and regional governments; conducted webinar on research outputs on COVID-19 research; it provided support (meals and dormitories) to doctors and related professionals (police) working in the quarantine centers of the university; many institutions (e.g. Ethiopian Ministry of Peace, and the police) are freely using the university's resources and facilities; most of its staff are working from home and flexibly in shifts; transport services are arranged for essential employees, and postgraduate programs were successfully underway.

### Challenges that the universities face in implementing social responsibility actions

There were certain challenges that the universities dealt with in executing their social responsibility efforts. The most notable ones were a lack of awareness and poor levels of behavioral change in society. Study results revealed that the lack of behavioral change was the most serious concern, which is also marked as an evident emerging need. Additional challenges were also unearthed in the study: law enforcement was too weak to enforce behavioral change. Besides, there were dire shortages of prevention and protection equipment (materials) such as face masks and sanitizers. More so, the emerging demands and needs for support from various stakeholder groups were enormous and diverse (complex) due to the already impoverished state of the population in the country. Furthermore, some staff members were purposely avoiding responsibility due to fear of getting infected if they went to their workplace, and this posed a serious challenge to the day-to-day activities (operation) of the universities. Besides, it was found out that the universities were not running their programs (especially, the undergraduate programs) effectively as it was difficult to reach out to students who are scattered all over the country; where there is a lack of the needed infrastructure (e.g. internet connections).

The study also found several other challenges and concerns. Respondents indicated that there exists fragmentation of efforts, and there is a lack of coordination of efforts among the universities and relevant stakeholders. It is maintained by respondents that the universities should work together, and universities and local administration (municipalities) and other concerned parties must work together to channel efforts towards fighting COVID-19. Moreover, (organizational) cultural clashes of the various multi-stakeholder institutions involved in the effort to combat COVID-19 were indicated as a challenging experience. While universities have no flexible and agile bureaucracy coupled with disorganization, ministerial offices (that are working closely with the universities such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Peace of Ethiopia) have more flexible and organized patterns. This caused a cultural clash and misunderstanding. At the organizational (university) level, the specific challenges, which relate to dysfunctional bureaucracy, arise from the finance units and purchasing units of the universities that lack an understanding of the urgency of COVID-19.

One respondent mentioned the following

> We are engaged in multi-stakeholder engagement as a university with other governmental organizations. This is a new experience in itself, and we have also witnessed a cultural clash between two different forms of establishments – one with archaic and disorganized bureaucracy (universities) and another with a flexible and well-organized system such as the Ministry of Peace and Ministry of Health. It seems as If we came from two different worlds (University COVID-19 Task force leader)

### Concerns of the universities' stakeholders (employees, students, local community, and other stakeholders)

### Concerns of employees

Many concerns were also shared by the employees. The concerns relate to the difficulty in accessing infrastructure, financial insecurity due to the inadequate salary scale, lack of concern for internal stakeholders, lack of participation as employees, focus on PR, staff is not used and mobilized, dysfunctional

bureaucracy, interventions are repetitive and redundant, and lack of strong institutional policy to reinforce protection (prevention) measures inside universities premises.

### Concerns of students

All the students who participated in the study appreciated the university's decision to close classes and send them back home to minimize the risk of exposure. However, the students indicate that there is more to be done. The following are their concerns (emerging needs): lack of organized effort to ensure the continuity of their study (worried about the interruption of their studies); lack of access to internet (so, the students could not attend lectures remotely using online platforms); lack of support to vulnerable students in this difficult times (no adequate attention was given to students with disabilities and other health conditions; and those who are the poorest of the poor were highly affected with the lockdown of the universities as they deepened on the university's dormitory and catering services for their survival); lack of students involvement in the fight against the disease (students feel neglected and not given the opportunity to take part in the fight against COVID-19); lack of farsightedness and coordination from the part of the universities (students felt that their universities were short sighted and focused only on disbanding them and they never thought about the way forward); lack of using popular media (students shared that universities and their staff need to use the media that is popular among students such as telegram, which the students prefer as it is more convenient for them; lack of inter-university coordination and collaboration (lack of cooperation and coordination among universities in the country); and difficulty to get needed data to complete senior essay and thesis works (mobility restrictions and lockdowns made circumstances difficult for graduating students to gather data for their research works).

### Concerns of the local community

In this section, the assessment of the local communities' views on the social responsibility efforts of the universities and their demands (concerns) will be presented. Diverse people (community elders and members of the community) from the towns and neighborhoods where the universities are located were interviewed. Most of the respondents stated that the universities are expected to engage in robust social responsibility practices to address the needs of local communities. Their views hold that there are broad and specific emerging needs in the communities due to the pandemic.

Accordingly, this study unearthed the specific emerging needs that the communities are faced with. The first one was utter carelessness among the vast majority of community members to protect themselves from the pandemic due to a lack of awareness and behavioral change. And, respondents shared that universities should take a role in educating the public to create awareness and achieve behavioral change in the fight against COVID-19. The second emerging issue that community members shared was that grade schools (primary and high schools) are some of the worst affected institutions due to the pandemic and coupled with their financial constraints, most schools are unable to reach out to their students, and thus universities might help in this by printing and copying teaching materials schools. The third issue brought up was the lack of tailored surveys and studies that relate to the pandemic in the country; and as such it is upheld that universities need to conduct assessment studies, which investigate the level of awareness among communities about the pandemic. The fourth concern (emerging need) relates to the issue of voluntarism. Most respondents stated that there is a lack of volunteerism on the part of the universities (and their scholars), i.e. the respondents mentioned that the universities should engage in well-organized awareness creation programs (campaigns) by deploying their staff as volunteers. The fifth emerging need that community members mentioned related to the lack of protective materials. Respondents stated that the universities are not effectively using their research centers and laboratories to produce needed materials for prevention and protection. And now, the community members expect universities to engage their scientists and facilities to produce needed materials. The last concern from the community members is that universities are not reaching out to the poor (or the poorest of the poor) in their community, who barely have enough to eat in these difficult times; and respondents suggested that the universities can redirect their budget that would otherwise be used to provide meals and accommodations to students (students are already sent out of university campuses due to the lockdown) to assist poor families.

### Concerns of other stakeholders

This section presents the perspectives of other external stakeholders that were drawn from government bureaus (regulatory agencies), Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency of Ethiopia (HERQA), NGOs, professional associations, and business (industry) associations.

Concerning the continuity of the teaching and learning process, the interview response from HERQA indicates that universities are given guidelines regarding how to run both undergraduate and postgraduate programs during this pandemic time. They assess that the universities are abiding by the guidelines in running the postgraduate programs electronically, whereas with regards to the undergraduate programs universities are advised to make sure that they keep communicating with their students only so that the students do not feel detached. In other words, undergraduate courses are not offered as the majority of the students do not have access to electronic means. The postgraduate students, however, are students who have access to the infrastructure and have better economic means and live in and around the towns of the universities so that they can access the courses electronically and process the information they get through this platform. Besides, it is indicated that universities should build their technological capacity to enable them to conduct classes remotely whenever the need arises.

Concerning the ongoing social responsibility efforts of universities in the country to combat COVID-19, most respondents from the external stakeholders category stated that the universities are engaged in redundant and insufficient tasks of producing sanitizers. One NGO expert put it as follows:

> The NGO sector and the general public are not that familiar with the COVID-19-related social responsibility intervention of the universities. Either they are not communicating it properly or not much is done from the universities except news of producing a small amount of sanitizers (JHS, Health Promotion Expert).

The respondents indicated that universities are expected to engage in robust social responsibility efforts at this time to ward off the impact of COVID-19. They indicated that cases are increasing by the day and there is a need for case identification, and they noted that universities may need to participate in case identification efforts in collaboration with local health bureaus. Respondents suggested that universities might deploy their students from the fields of health sciences to engage in case identification tasks through internships and/or volunteerism. In addition, respondents shared that universities might need to engage their staff to conduct quick and extensive assessment studies regarding the disease, level of awareness, and why behavior change could not be attained. One respondent mentioned the following

> University presidents need to address society and must send messages using mass media to strengthen the awareness creation effort. Universities should also set up call centers (preferably with free lines) to reach out to their students. Moreover, older and larger universities need to work closely with newer ones in terms of experience sharing and capacity building (Federal Ministry of Health, National Emergency Operation Center, task force member)

Further, related to the business sector, a research expert from the Chamber of Commerce and Sectorial Association of Ethiopia indicated that the business sector of the country is already adversely affected by COVID-19 and many businesses are losing income, their employees are not working the way they have to and businesses are struggling to pay salaries. Transport, hotel, tourism, import-export, and others are negatively affected by the disease. These businesses are financially weakened, and sales are lost. The respondent indicated that the government is trying to support severely affected businesses, but it is said that other stakeholders such as universities also could play certain roles to support the business sector from collapsing by way of (a) educating and training businesses, virtually about crisis management. These will be helpful to help businesses manage risk properly and get through the crisis and survive; (b) educate workers and professionals of the business sector and other sectors on how to perform tasks at home, sharing best practices in this regard will be beneficial; (c) universities may also need to incorporate crisis management courses in their curriculum, especially for those specializing in management and business fields.

Moreover, a senior consultant from the Ethiopian Management Institute has also indicated that universities are expected to model the magnitude and trend of the spread of COVID-19 within the country make projections (forecasts), and avail this data (information) to the concerned government organs to

assist the prevention efforts at national level. The respondent noted that university scientists from various fields may need to collaborate in this to develop a sound model that will be helpful for decision-making.

Finally, there is also additional concern shared by most respondents - other health issues are neglected (e.g. maternity health issues); lack of achieving needed behavioral change in implementing COVID protocol; COVID-19 campaigns are scant and diminished so quickly; supply chain interruption due to restriction on transportation; the large community has fear of interacting with agricultural, pastoral, and health extension workers; screening and quarantine practices target only returnees from outside the country, and there is no screening of migrant workers returning to home towns from bigger cities in the country.

## Discussions

The study unearthed that USR was applied by the participating universities as part of the national efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis by way of USR in this underdeveloped country context (Ethiopia). This is in line with the perspective that implementing social responsibility practices could be used as a buffer to lessen unfavorable events during times of crisis (Ducassy, 2013; Ellouze, 2020; Harkiolakis, 2015). And, the USR initiatives of the participating universities targeted their major stakeholders including students, employees (academic and administrative), and the local community. The USR practices for the students included monitoring social distancing and protection activities to protect students from being exposed to the virus while they were still on campus; and free transportation services to move them to their hometowns due to the lockdown order, and (limited) attempts to deliver courses electronically using e-mails. The notable USR practices to the employees of the universities included protecting salaries and wages; allowing employees to stay at home; providing flexible work schedules and extended leaves. The USR activities to local communities included manufacturing and distributing sanitizers and face masks for vulnerable communities (sanitizers and face masks were so scarce during the pandemic); conducting COVID-19 awareness creation campaigns to educate the public; providing meals for disadvantaged members of communities; and provided facilities for quarantines. Thus, these engagements of the universities in terms of USR to alleviate the consequences of COVID-19 align with the notion that universities are expected to be active responders in times of crisis through USR to protect their stakeholders from societal distress (García-Sánchez & García-Sánchez, 2020; Müller et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020). Besides, these findings also contribute to our knowledge and understanding of USR in times of crisis in the underdeveloped part of the world, where there is a dearth of comprehensive empirical research on the response of public universities in underdeveloped countries, notably in Africa (Cudjoe, 2023; Lateef & Akinsulore; Mgbere et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of the USR activities by the universities was not far from concerns (challenges). There have been a wide range of concerns. For example, for the university management (administration), the notable challenges (concerns) included law enforcement was not strong enough to help achieve needed behavioral change; lack of inter-universities coordination and collaboration; dysfunctional bureaucracy within universities; cultural clashes between universities and other multi-stakeholder institutions; and inability to remotely reach (undergraduate) students; and tendency of some staff purposely avoiding responsibility.

Likewise, there were concerns shared by the employees of the universities - lack of needed infrastructure (e.g. access to the internet); financial insecurity; lack of support to vulnerable staff; lack of employees' involvement in the USR to combat COVID-19; focus on PR (visibility) by the universities; unnecessary competition rather than collaboration among universities; and repetitive interventions by the universities; poor mobilization students; dysfunctional university bureaucracies; and lack of strong institutional policy to reinforce prevention measures – lack of uniformity to adhere to safety measures.

Similarly, the students' concerns included a lack of organized effort from the part of the universities to allow them to continue their study remotely; lack of access to internet infrastructure; worries over interruption of study; lack of support to vulnerable students; lack of students' involvement in the fight against COVID- 19 (feeling neglected); lack of farsightedness and weak coordination from the part of the universities; lack of using popular media for communication; lack of inter-university coordination and collaboration; and difficulty to get needed data to complete thesis work.

Besides, local communities raised the following grave concerns: utter carelessness among members of communities; lack of awareness and behavioral change; lack of support for grade schools; lack of tailored surveys; lack of volunteerism; lack of provision of protection materials; and lack of redirecting budget (for example, meals and dormitory budgets of disbanded students due to the lockdown) to help the poor.

More so, other stakeholders such as NGOs, professional associations and trade associations shared the following concerns - universities should build their technological capacity to enable themselves conduct classes remotely whenever the need arises; universities and their scientists should cooperate in modeling the magnitude and distribution of the disease in the country to assist in better decision making; increase in cases is still an outstanding concern; lack of crisis management knowledge and skills among the business sectors and other sectors (integrate crisis management course in the curricula); other health issues and patients (maternity, blood pressure, diabetes) have been given less attention; widespread lack of awareness; lack of achieving the needed behavioral change; lack of communication in different languages; campaign has diminished quickly; water shortage in numerous areas; value chain interruption affecting farmers, poor communities; and lack screening for migrant workers returning to rural areas from bigger cities and towns.

Further, the challenges (concerns) were numerous and alarming. This is a typical scenario in underdeveloped countries, where socio-economic problems and crises are widespread (Bromideh, 2011; Elifneh, 2017; Visser, 2008). But, several of the concerns could have been mitigated by the individual universities themselves such as by way of addressing the needs of their vulnerable staff and by participating and empowering staff to actively engage in the fight against the pandemic. Such can be achieved by consolidating and integrating rigorous and inclusive USR principles and practices by universities (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017). But, other concerns such as lack of collaboration, competitiveness, and focus on PR could be mitigated by way of cooperation among universities rather than working in isolation. That is why scholars advocate the importance of having an increased partnership among universities in executing their USR (e.g. King & Persily, 2020; Symaco & Tee, 2019). Yet, other concerns such as lack of law enforcement and gross negligence among the population could have been mitigated if the universities had worked on such issues in collaboration and partnership with the relevant government organs and sought support from the government as government support could at times be desirable for the universities to effectively implement their social responsibility engagements (Ji & Miao, 2020).

## Conclusions

As discussed in the previous sections, this study discovered that the participating universities have executed USR towards their major stakeholders (students, employees, & the local community) during the pandemic time in order to help alleviate the adverse effects of COVID-19 in this underdeveloped economy context (Ethiopia). This proves that universities in such contexts as well could embark on USR in times of crisis and be part of the broader national and/or regional and global efforts to reduce the impact of a crisis. The typical USR initiatives that the participating universities executed targeted their three major stakeholders: employees (protected wages and salaries; and provided flexible work schedules; and extended leaves), students (protecting from the virus; and free transportation of students to their hometowns due to the lockdown), and local community (COVID-19 awareness campaigns; provided meals and sanitizers for disadvantaged members; and offered quarantine facilities). In addition, there were numerous concerns(challenges) that the universities had to deal with while implementing the crisis-time USR. Among others, these included inadequate collaboration among universities; dysfunctional university bureaucracies; lack of needed infrastructure (e.g. poor internet facility); poor mobilization (and involvement) of staff and students; inadequate support for vulnerable people; focus on PR (visibility); unnecessary competition among the universities; repetitive interventions; limited volunteerism; lack of developed capability to conduct class remotely; and poor law enforcement to achieve the needed behavioral change.

The challenges (concerns) were enormous but the universities still managed to conduct their USR. And this has also brought about important lessons for universities in the study setting that USR could be undertaken even in crisis times and in an underdeveloped economy context. And doing so could help mitigate the adverse consequences of a crisis. In addition, lessons could be taken from the

setbacks experienced while undertaking USR in the crisis time. And the lessons could help reinforce and hone their USR practices in times of crisis, and beyond.

In other words, universities in the study setting and similar contexts could improve their USR practices in times of crisis and beyond, if they focus on mobilizing (participating) their staff and students to engage in USR; change (improve) their archaic bureaucratic procedures and develop flexible and agile systems; prioritize inter-universities collaboration rather than working in isolation in a competitive manner; build their technological capability to be able to conduct classes remotely whenever the need arises; focus on achieving a positive impact on the lives of communities rather than just being obsessed with PR (visibility); revisiting and revising their curricula to integrate crisis management course (s) in their curricula; and assisting sectors that are hard hit by the pandemic in crisis through professional training and consultany to deal with a crisis.

All told, in addition to extending USR studies to less explored territories; this study provides empirical evidence regarding USR in times of crisis (in light of COVID-19) by exhibiting lessons from public universities in an underdeveloped country context. Besides, the study has managerial and practical implications as it provides useful insight for university administrators, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders in the study context to reinforce and hone the social responsibilities of universities in times of crisis, and beyond by being agile, creative, cooperative, and innovative. This will eventually help the universities to build their capabilities and render better USR to their stakeholders in both good and bad times.

## Authors' contributions

'YWE', is involved in the conception and design, and, analysis and interpretation of the data, 'TAW', is involved in the drafting and revision, and editing, data analysis, and final revision, 'YAA', is involved in analysis, reviewing, and final cross-checking. The authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

## Consent to participate

Verbal informed consent for participation in the study has been obtained. Due care was taken to avoid plagiarism for ethical reasons. The respondent's information was handled confidentially.

## Consent for publication

The authors transfer the copyright of this article to the journal to process it on behalf of the author.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study will be provided upon reasonable request by the corresponding author, Temesgen Abebaw Wonda.

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