



# How can we achieve lifelong learning opportunities for all in Ethiopia?

Making a case for intergenerational approaches to literacy and learning



## Policy Brief

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UEA UNESCO Chair in  
Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation  
at Bahir Dar University



# Introduction

The Africa Union's Agenda 2063 emphasizes the importance of education for sustainable development in the continent, while the Education 2030 Framework for Action (Sustainable Development Goal 4) commits to quality lifelong learning opportunities for individuals of all ages and at all levels of education. The Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities (UIL 2014) also promotes sustainable development and lifelong learning by establishing learning cities/regions/communities. In particular, it mentions the vital role that learning plays in families and communities and promotes family literacy (Warkineh et al., 2021).

In Ethiopia, the family traditionally has been a unit of indigenous learning and practices of intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills. However, very few policy documents include some traces of family literacy and learning trying to make use of the potential of learning families. Many development programmes, despite their crucial contribution to intergenerational learning, fail to provide the necessary attention to family learning and family literacy.

This policy brief draws on the findings of a study conducted by a research team of Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia on "Family Literacy, Indigenous Learning and Sustainable Development".

The study is a part of bigger project, which was a collaboration of teams from Ethiopia, Malawi, Nepal and the Philippines in the framework of the UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation. It aimed to explore indigenous and intergenerational learning activities of families in Ethiopia and to propose ways to initiate development strategies and programmes based on such indigenous and local knowledge and practices (Warkineh et al., 2021).

Based on the findings of the study, this policy brief makes a case for intergenerational approaches to family literacy and learning. It is directed at stakeholders of institutions and organisations such as Federal ministries like the Ministry of Education, regional Education Bureaus, higher education institutions, civil society organizations, local and international non-governmental and international organizations.

Since the concept of family/intergenerational literacy and learning is relatively new in Ethiopia, the first part of this policy brief provides a conceptual clarifications to lay the ground for a better understanding of the findings, recommendations and action points. The second part of this policy brief summarises the results of the review of policy documents, which embody some elements of family/intergenerational literacy and learning in Ethiopia. The third part includes the key issues identified through the literature review and the fieldwork. The fourth part summarizes the policy recommendations and action points resulting from these key issues along with possible responsible entities who could engage in the implementation of the recommendations and action points.

# Conceptual Clarifications

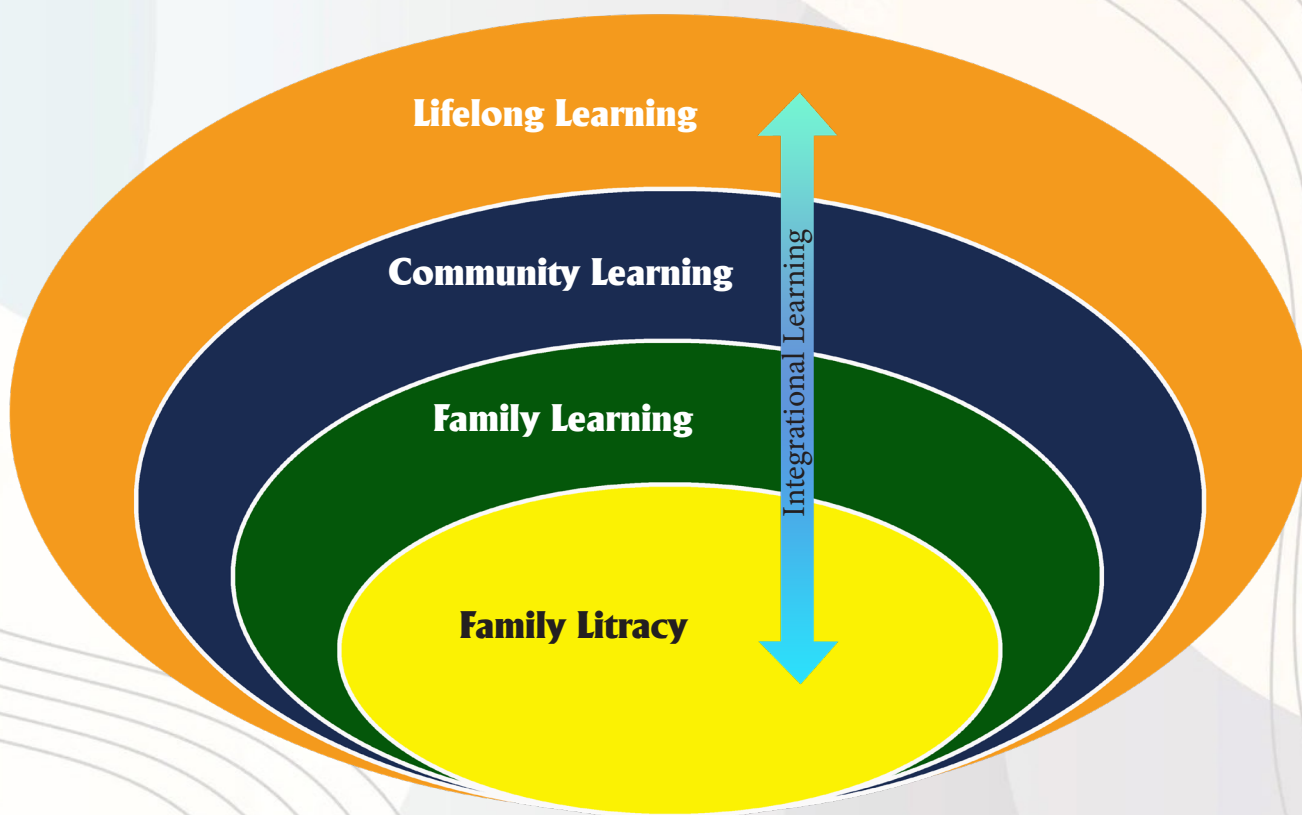
In the 1960s, **literacy** was defined as a set of skills (of being able to read, write and carry out simple mathematical calculations). Therefore, there was a divide between oral and literate societies. Nevertheless, in the 1980s and 90s, this traditional approach to literacy, founded on a **deficit** view of illiteracy (lack of literacy skills) was criticized and suggested that the divide between orality and literacy could alternatively be seen as a continuum (Street, 1993 cited in Robinson-Pant, 2001). The term “**multiple literacies**” refers to a concept calling for a broader view of literacy, also referred to as ‘new literacies’ or ‘multiliteracies’. It is based on the assumption that individuals ‘read’ the world and make sense of information by means of other than traditional reading and writing. These multiliteracies include linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, and gestural ways of meaning-making. Central to the concept of multiple literacies is the belief that individuals in a modern society need to learn how to construct knowledge from multiple sources and modes of representation (UNESCO International Bureau of Education). Thus when looked in a broader perspective, the concept of ‘**literacy**’ is not limited to just the acquisition of reading and writing as well as numeracy skills. It is also embracing the acquisition of language, culture and orality. Literacy is a basic learning need that comprises knowledge, information skills like computer skills, values and attitudes necessary for personal, family and community awareness and development” (Mnjagila, 2011). It involves social interaction that is developed between people in different contexts as a continuous process (Hanemann, 2015). In any case, literacy needs to be understood in specific socio-cultural, political and historical contexts. Thus, an understanding of literacy depends on an exploration of the social context to see what functions writing has (Oxenham, 1980 cited in Robinson-Pant, 2001).

The **social practices approach to literacy** is an approach, which views literacy as a diverse set of social practices embedded in particular cultural contexts as well as by critical and social change approaches to education (Crooks 2017).

The term ‘**family**’ describes a relationship of care and support between different generations. It includes diverse views about family, such as the nuclear family, the extended family, neighbourhood or community, according to the cultural context in which they are embedded. Families include children, adolescents and the people who look after them, such as parents, step-parents, guardians, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, cousins and community members” (Hanemann, et. al., 2017). For generations, it has been society’s most durable link and the most effective way in which the distinguishing characteristics of a people’s culture have been maintained and transmitted (UNESCO, 1989). In the Ethiopian context, the notion of family (or household, as some refer to it) may also include other non-relatives who live together to get the benefits of being a family through the contribution of labour for instance housemaids and other non-relative servants in households.

**Family literacy** refers to the development of the literacy, numeracy and language skills of both children and adults. It enables caregivers whose own education has been limited for various reasons to help their children with learning through intergenerational interactions and relationships. Family literacy programmes address the learning needs of an entire family rather than individuals in isolation. Family literacy should be a core element of all intergenerational learning. ‘**Family learning**’ implies extensive learning activities beyond, but including, literacy. It refers to any activity of learning that contributes to a culture of learning involving members of a family (children and adults) and in which learning outcomes are intended for both (NIACE, 2013, cited in Hanemann, et. al., 2017).

Whereas, the term **“Family literacy and learning”** refers to an approach to learning that focuses on intergenerational interactions within the family and community, which promote the development of literacy and related life skills (Hanemann, 2015).



**Figure 1.** Intergenerational learning cutting across family literacy, family learning, community and life long learning (from Hanemann et.al, 2017:13).

**“Lifelong learning”** denotes a more comprehensive concept which embraces formal, non-formal and informal learning extending throughout the lifespan of an individual to help attain all rounded development. It includes learning that occurs not only at school but also at home, community, workplace, and through media and other situations and structures for acquiring and enhancing knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

**“Intergenerational approaches to literacy and learning”** reflect the spirit of lifelong learning, and is a key principle of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2015, cited in Hanemann, et. al., 2017). It integrates learning activities for people in diverse age groups in different life and cultural milieu through different modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) so as to meet the various learning needs in their day to day lives (Hanemann, et. al., 2017).

## Which elements of family literacy and learning can be found in Ethiopia's policies?

Although the concept of 'family/intergenerational literacy and learning' is not explicitly used in Ethiopia's education system (except in a pilot project supported by UNESCO), some policy documents embody related elements as illustrated the follow examples:

The **School Improvement Programme** states that the presence of active parent-school communication and parental support are essential for students to learn at home. Moreover, students and teachers in formal education are expected to facilitate literacy classes in which parents are enrolled (MoE, 2011).

The **Early Childhood Care and Education Policy** aims to build service delivery on four pillars: Parental education, Health and Early Stimulation, community-based kindergartens, and Community-based Non-formal school readiness (MoE, 2010). All these pillars call for a family literacy and learning approach.

The **National Adult Education Strategy and Integrated Functional Adult Literacy (IFAL) Framework** aims to enhance the development of literacy and numeracy skills of adults (MoE, 2008). The IFAL curriculum framework states that participants can use readily accessible materials at home and in the community.

The **Agricultural Extension Programme** seeks to attain food and nutrition security by delivering extension services (MoA, 2017). Four out of nine pillars imply family/intergenerational literacy and learning as an approach. Rather than targeting family heads only, the programme offers "inclusive extension services" considering "the whole family and community".

The **Health Extension Programme** intends to improve equitable access to preventive health through community-based health services. The health extension service targets families, particularly women or mothers (MoH, 2005).

To conclude, although the family/intergenerational literacy and learning approach has not been directly addressed in the Ethiopian policy documents, elements of such approach can be identified. Not only in policies of the education sector are such elements of family/intergenerational literacy and learning found but also in the health and agriculture sector. Overall, this review reveals that most of the analysed policy documents in Ethiopia tend to build on an approach of intergenerational literacy and learning that focuses on the development of children's reading (and writing) skills while assigning instrumental roles to their parents (with indirect change for parents themselves) (Hanemann, et. al., 2017).

# Key Findings

An ethnographic style research involved that our team stayed with participant families in Bahir Dar city, Awramba, and Awi zone to explore what indigenous and intergenerational learning and practices they were engaged in, how and in what contexts they learn and transfer these knowledge and practices in the research sites. In addition to the fieldwork, the team organized a dissemination workshop for different stakeholders from different regions of the country, which helped to gather suggestions for the recommendations. The main findings from the fieldwork, literature review and feedback from the workshop participants are pointed out as follows.

Literatures reviewed indicate that in Ethiopia individuals who went to formal schools even those with just few years of schooling tend to think they are literate compared to others who didn't get the chance to attend schools and who often think themselves as 'illiterate' and perceived by others as such. Accordingly, the meaning of literacy can be broadened or narrowed depending on its planners and providers as well as perceptions of participants in different literacy programmes which vary from place to place. (Shenkut, 2005). This shows that the concept of literacy is understood as the acquisition of reading, writing and numeracy skills.

Based on this conception of literacy, the country made different efforts through providing basic literacy programmes with the intention of making the people literate for years in the past. As these basic literacy programmes were only accessible for small proportion of the population hence brought about divides between people who can read and write and those who can't.

With the feeling of being left out and disadvantaged, people who were not able to read and write assumed they were inferior to those who can read and write as well as they were ashamed of themselves though these people are well knowledgeable and functioning well within their own society and participating in different aspects of life. (Warkineh et.al. 2021

Findings of the study reveal that families are actively engaged in learning and transferring various indigenous and intergenerational knowledge and skills. For instance, we found that handicrafts such as weaving, bamboo and horn crafting as well as flywhisk making were among the commonly practiced indigenous/ (inter) generational knowledge and skills in the research sites. These skills as revealed by the study, are transferred through observation, collaborative learning, traditional apprenticeship style of learning, and even learned through accidental experiences. Members of the observed families did not go to school to learn these knowledge and skills; they were and are still learning and transferring the skills at home, market places, and working places which exist in their local environments. In these places families learn and transfer indigenous knowledge and skills from other members of the family, friends, or others in the neighbourhood. In communities like Awramba, they facilitate the establishment of new spaces like family meetings, community libraries and ICT centres for family and intergenerational learning. From these findings it is inferred that if informally learned knowledge and skills were recognized, people could benefit by accessing different opportunities. On the other hand with the absence of such link people would miss opportunities they could get.

The study also reveals that literacy and numeracy are embedded in families' day-to-day lives while performing varied livelihood activities. For instance, families we met in Awi Zone, Injibara town engaged in flywhisk making and explained how literacy is transforming their lives and work. They mentioned that they can make customized flywhisks with the name or birthdate of the customer written on the handle. They further explained that this practice made their product more valuable and helped them earn more money than they used to. During the fieldwork, we have also observed the use of digital skills as these flywhisk makers use their cell phones, social media apps such as telegram to receive orders and advertise their works and improve their sales. The flywhisk makers reflected that they learned all these from their friends and family members at home or at their workplaces.

Similarly, during the dissemination workshop<sup>1</sup> we learned that few of the participant NGOs are aware about the relevance of family and intergenerational approach to learning. Based on their reflection, they use a full household approach in their project initiatives which encourages children to teach literacy and numeracy skills to parents at home and parents teach indigenous knowledge and livelihood skills to children, and children, in turn, share this with their classmates at school. Participants further reported that such approach was effective. Hence, they expressed that there is a need for more of such development and educational programmes.

The findings of the study also reveal that there are several factors that enable families to learn and transfer indigenous as well as new knowledge and skills. For example, indigenous values and practices, as well as the collective culture, which people share living in the same area, have closer ties and elders are expected to provide assistance or advice to the younger generation, create a range of opportunities to learn and transfer knowledge and skills. As people mostly rely on indigenous values and practices, they easily engage in learning even in new learning spaces.

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<sup>1</sup>Dissemination workshop on the 'Family Literacy, Indigenous Learning and Sustainable Development' project held in Bahir Dar in February 2022.

Key Issues	Policy Recommendations and Action Points	Responsible Entity
<p>1. In the national education system, literacy is often understood in narrow ways. It is mainly related to completing certain grade levels (schooling) and certifying the ability to read and write. People who have not acquired literacy skills through formal schooling are often categorized as “illiterate” (or even ignorant). Adult literacy programmes are based on a “deficit” approach instead of building on their existing knowledge, skills and experiences.</p>	<p>Promote a broader understanding of the literacy concept as a social practice among all relevant stakeholders. Take into account new and traditional forms of literacy practices in formal and non-formal education that people value and need in their everyday lives.</p> <p>(a) Adopt a new and broader definition of the literacy concept at all levels.</p> <p>(b) Discuss the broad vision of literacy, from a lifelong learning perspective, with (future) teachers and educators in pre- and in-service training activities.</p> <p>(c) Integrate a multiple literacies approach in education and development policies, strategies, and programmes at all levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Policymakers (in particular in adult education, ECCE, and the curriculum and teacher development sections) at the federal, regional and district levels</li> <li>■ Universities (Adult Education Departments) and research institutions</li> </ul>
<p>2. Ethiopia is a country with traditions of close ties between members of families and communities which gives family and community members opportunities for learning and transferring knowledge. However, the potential of family/intergenerational learning is not exploited in education and other sectors as it could be. This is mainly due to the absence of policy and strategies for family/ intergenerational literacy and learning in Ethiopia. Even if some policies in education, agriculture and health sectors mention elements of family/ intergenerational learning, this intention has not been translated into practice.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Give emphasis to intergenerational approaches to learning as a concrete way of realizing the lifelong learning principle in the education system.</li> <li>•Establish policies, strategies and programmes/initiatives using family/ Intergenerational approaches to literacy and learning in Ethiopia.</li> </ul> <p>(a) Adopt family/intergenerational literacy and learning policies and strategies backed by the appropriate legal frameworks and institutional collaborations of different actors (both governmental and non-governmental).</p> <p>(b) Initiate family/intergenerational literacy and learning programmes that are informed by the social practice approach and help parents to transfer their (traditional) knowledge and skills to their children.</p> <p>(c) Organise a study visit for interested governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to the Awramba community to learn from their family learning experience and document this for others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Policymakers (in particular in adult education, ECCE, and the curriculum and teacher development sections) at the federal, regional and district levels</li> <li>■ Stakeholders from civil society organisations at the national and international levels; (potential donors/sponsors; the women federation)</li> <li>■ Local, national and international NGOs who work in education and development;</li> <li>■ Universities (Adult Education Departments) and research institutions</li> </ul>



Key Issues	Policy Recommendations and Action Points	Responsible Entity
	(d) Identify, document and disseminate promising family/intergenerational learning initiatives in the country.	
	(e) Work collaboratively in supporting CLCs in every district and locality, as much as possible. The establishment and successful functioning of Community Learning Centres (CLCs) will enhance and facilitate family/intergenerational learning initiatives.	
<p>3. Findings from the research sites show that intergenerational learning takes place in ample local spaces (home, market place, church...) and in various ways. These ways of learning and knowledge and skills transfer are embedded in people's day-to-day activities and happen naturally. However, the limited understanding about literacy prevailing in the society cause too much focus on formal classroom settings, facilitators training and creation of artificial learning situations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise awareness among policymakers, curriculum and teacher development specialists, and educators on collective and intergenerational learning that takes place in the family home, open markets, workplaces, religious spaces, coffee ceremony places and a variety of other local spaces.</li> <li>• Use existing education spaces such as Integrated Functional Adult Literacy (IFAL) Centres, Farmer Training Centres (FTCs), CLCs, schools, public libraries, and computer and/or ICT centres for intergenerational learning activities.</li> </ul> <p>(a) Develop a practical guideline for teachers with examples of how they can link their educational work to different community learning spaces.</p> <p>(b) Promote different indigenous and/or local learning spaces (e.g. homes, open markets, workplaces, religious spaces, coffee ceremony, etc.) for different learning activities. Also take advantage of the existing indigenous values in the culture which nurture learning in families and communities</p> <p>(c) Work towards the establishment and/or expansion of new learning spaces such as public libraries, computer/ICT centres, public parks, museums, archives, etc. in different districts and localities.</p> <p>(d) Expand the use of already existing learning spaces such as Integrated Functional Adult Literacy (IFAL) Centres, Farmer Training Centres (FTCs), CLCs, and schools to incorporate family/intergenerational literacy and learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Policymakers (in particular in adult education, ECCE, the curriculum and teacher development sections) at the federal, regional and district levels</li> <li>■ Experts of adult education, and ECCE at federal, regional and district level</li> <li>■ IFAL coordinators;</li> <li>■ Stakeholders from universities (Adult Education Departments) and research institutions;</li> <li>■ local, national and international NGOs who work in education and development;</li> </ul>

Key Issues	Policy Recommendations and Action Points	Responsible Entity
<p>4. The country is rich in traditional knowledge, skills, values and practices. However, the education system's focus is elsewhere. As these traditional knowledge skills and practices are not sufficiently recognised, they are not sufficiently used in educational and development programmes. While a few NGOs make use of some traditional learning spaces and target families as units of intervention, they only focus on very few aspects of these traditional spaces and practices. This is mainly due to the lack of awareness as well as a failure to recognize traditional knowledge, skills and practices already existing in people's day to day experiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take into account the existing indigenous knowledge instead of borrowing from somewhere else when adult education programmes are designed or improved, even if learning from other countries experiences can be helpful.</li> <li>• Consider incorporating learning components that involve all members of a family when developing and implementing education and development initiatives such as a family/intergenerational literacy and learning system in Ethiopia.</li> </ul> <p>(a) The current initiative of establishing a system of recognition, validation and accreditation of prior learning (i.e. Timihirt Biriha) needs to become more comprehensive by including the outcomes of informal and non-formal learning in different areas.</p> <p>(b) Incorporate learning components that involve all members of a family and thereby paving the way towards the establishment and running of a family/intergenerational literacy and learning system and initiatives in Ethiopia.</p> <p>(c) Establish a network or learning community among NGOs who are interested to develop and pilot a family/intergenerational learning programme.</p> <p>(d) The governmental education sector takes a leadership role in working with partners to introduce and implement family/intergenerational literacy and learning programmes and initiatives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Policymakers and/or Experts (in particular in adult education, ECCE, the curriculum and teacher development sections) at the federal, regional and district levels</li> <li>■ IFAL coordinators;</li> <li>■ Stakeholders from universities (Adult Education Departments) and research institutions;</li> <li>■ Stakeholders from civil society organisations at national and international levels (potential donors/sponsors; the women federation);</li> <li>■ local, national and international NGOs; and international organizations who work in education and development</li> </ul>

Key Issues	Policy Recommendations and Action Points	Responsible Entity
<p>5., Universities as well as other higher education institutions have not yet fully integrated the family/intergenerational literacy and learning approach in their teaching and learning, research and community outreach activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote and Make family/intergenerational literacy and learning agenda for research, teaching-learning, and practice/community engagement activities in universities.</li> <li>• Make indigenous knowledge the subject of research, teaching-learning, and community engagement activities in universities.</li> <li>• Discuss the translation of the results of this research into programme and teacher development with the competent policymakers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Universities (Adult Education Departments) and research institutions</li> <li>■ Stakeholders from civil society organisations at national and international levels (potential donors/sponsors; the women federation);</li> <li>■ International organizations, local, national and international NGOs who work in education and development</li> </ul>
	<p>(a) Use the courses in the BA degree in the adult education and community development programme as a way of introducing indigenous knowledge in the community (nearer to the university) including Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Development; TVET and Lifelong Learning; Workplace Learning and Development; Literacy Types and Approaches; and Service Learning in LLCD Programmes.</p>	
	<p>(b) Use the background and experience that students bring to the university classes to investigate, understand and put localized initiatives of family/ intergenerational literacy and learning and indigenous learning on spotlight.</p>	
	<p>(c) Train and support university instructors to conduct qualitative (ethnographic-style) research on indigenous and/or traditional knowledge, skills and practices that exist in the community they work and serve (learn from the community) and to translate these research results into (project-oriented) learning activities.</p>	
	<p>(d) Support projects of qualitative (ethnographic) research to explore practices of family/intergenerational learning and transfer of knowledge and practices in selected communities.</p>	
	<p>(e) Undertake different types of community service activities in the areas of family/intergenerational literacy and learning and indigenous learning in the district/locality (nearer to the university).</p>	

<sup>2</sup>Warkineh, T.Z., et al. (2021). Family literacy, indigenous learning and sustainable development in Ethiopia.

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