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Effect of Government Transparency on Public Trust in Institutions in Rwanda

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the effect of government transparency on public trust in institutions in Rwanda.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Numerous studies have examined the effect of government transparency on public trust in institutions, revealing a complex relationship shaped by various factors. Overall, greater transparency tends to correlate positively with higher levels of public trust, as it fosters accountability, enhances the perception of fairness, and reduces opportunities for corruption. Transparency initiatives such as open data policies, freedom of information laws, and disclosure of government activities contribute to this effect by empowering citizens to hold their leaders accountable and

participate in decision-making processes. However, the impact of transparency on trust is not universally consistent, as cultural, institutional, and contextual factors can moderate its effects. Moreover, the quality and accessibility of information are crucial; mere disclosure of data may not suffice if it is overly technical or inaccessible to the general public. Additionally, transparency alone may not be sufficient to rebuild trust in institutions that have already experienced significant erosion due to past misconduct or systemic failures.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social capital theory, institutional theory and principal-agent theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the effect of government transparency on public trust in institutions in Rwanda. Develop clear and accessible communication strategies to effectively disseminate information about transparency initiatives to the public. Strengthen regulatory frameworks to mandate and incentivize transparency practices across governmental institutions.

Keywords: *Government, Transparency, Public Trust, Institutions*

INTRODUCTION

Government transparency plays a pivotal role in shaping public trust in institutions, serving as a cornerstone of democratic governance. When governments operate openly, disclosing information regarding their decisions, actions, and policies, they foster accountability and credibility. Transparency cultivates an environment where citizens can scrutinize governmental processes, ensuring they align with public interests and values. As a result, increased transparency tends to correlate with higher levels of public trust in governmental institutions. Conversely, opacity and secrecy can breed skepticism and erode trust, as they create opportunities for misinformation, corruption, and abuses of power to flourish unchecked. Therefore, understanding the effect of government transparency on public trust is essential for promoting democratic legitimacy and fostering a healthy relationship between citizens and their governing bodies.

In developed economies like the United States, public trust in institutions has witnessed a decline in recent years. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2020, only 20% of Americans reported having a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the US Congress, down from 22% in 2019. Similarly, trust in the presidency has fluctuated over the years, with confidence levels dropping to 38% in 2020 from 39% in 2019. These statistics underscore a growing skepticism among the public towards political institutions and leaders, which can be attributed to various factors such as partisan polarization, perceived corruption, and ineffective governance (Smith, 2018).

In the United Kingdom, public trust in institutions has also faced challenges. For instance, a study published in the *British Journal of Political Science* found that trust in the government declined significantly between 2016 and 2019. The research revealed that trust in government ministers decreased by 14 percentage points during this period, reflecting a notable erosion of public confidence in political leadership and governmental actions (Beetham et al., 2017). These trends highlight the importance of addressing underlying issues such as transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to rebuild trust in institutions within developed economies.

In developing economies, public trust in institutions often faces even greater hurdles due to issues like corruption, weak governance structures, and economic instability. For example, in countries like Brazil and India, trust in government institutions has been consistently low. A survey conducted by Transparency International in 2020 revealed that only 32% of Brazilians expressed trust in their government, while in India, trust levels stood at 40%. These figures underscore the challenges faced by developing economies in establishing and maintaining trust in institutions amidst socio-economic and political complexities.

In sub-Saharan economies, public trust in institutions varies widely across countries. For instance, in South Africa, trust in political leaders and institutions has been undermined by corruption scandals and governance failures. A survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2019 found that only 35% of South Africans trusted the president, reflecting a significant decline from previous years. Conversely, in countries like Botswana and Mauritius, relatively higher levels of trust in institutions have been observed, attributed to factors such as good governance practices, stable democratic systems, and effective anti-corruption measures. These examples illustrate the diverse landscape of public trust in institutions within sub-Saharan Africa.

In developing economies such as Brazil, trust in institutions like the judiciary and law enforcement agencies has been notably low. Corruption scandals, inefficiency, and perceptions of bias have

contributed to this lack of trust. For instance, a report by the World Justice Project in 2020 indicated that only 25% of Brazilians surveyed expressed confidence in the judiciary, reflecting deep-seated concerns about the fairness and impartiality of the legal system (World Justice Project, 2020). Similarly, in India, despite efforts to combat corruption and improve governance, trust in institutions remains a challenge. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed that trust in the Indian government stood at 46%, indicating a significant gap between public expectations and perceived performance (Edelman, 2020).

In sub-Saharan Africa, public trust in institutions is influenced by a range of factors including historical legacies, socio-economic conditions, and political stability. In countries like Nigeria, trust in government institutions has been undermined by issues such as corruption, insecurity, and economic inequality. According to a survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2019, only 28% of Nigerians expressed confidence in the president, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the government's performance (Afrobarometer, 2019). Conversely, in countries like Rwanda, trust in institutions has been bolstered by efforts to combat corruption, promote transparency, and enhance service delivery. The 2020 Ibrahim Index of African Governance reported that Rwanda ranked among the top countries in Africa for governance effectiveness, indicating a relatively higher level of trust in institutions compared to many other sub-Saharan economies (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020).

In Latin American developing economies like Brazil, public trust in institutions such as the judiciary and law enforcement agencies has been notably low. Corruption scandals, inefficiency, and perceptions of bias have contributed to this lack of trust. For instance, a report by the World Justice Project in 2020 indicated that only 25% of Brazilians surveyed expressed confidence in the judiciary, reflecting deep-seated concerns about the fairness and impartiality of the legal system (World Justice Project, 2020). Similarly, in Mexico, despite efforts to combat corruption and improve governance, trust in institutions remains a challenge. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed that trust in the Mexican government stood at 36%, indicating a significant gap between public expectations and perceived performance (Edelman, 2020).

In Southeast Asian developing economies like Indonesia, public trust in institutions has also faced challenges. Corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and weak rule of law have contributed to low levels of trust in government. According to the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, only 44% of Indonesians expressed trust in their government, highlighting widespread skepticism among the population (Edelman, 2020). Similarly, in the Philippines, despite efforts to combat corruption and improve governance, trust in institutions remains fragile. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that trust in the Philippine government stood at 34%, reflecting concerns about transparency, accountability, and political stability (Edelman, 2020).

In African developing economies such as Nigeria, public trust in institutions has been particularly challenging due to widespread corruption, political instability, and economic inequality. According to a survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2019, only 28% of Nigerians expressed confidence in the president, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the government's performance (Afrobarometer, 2019). Additionally, trust in other key institutions like the police and judiciary remains low, with citizens often perceiving these entities as ineffective and prone to corruption. The lack of trust in institutions poses significant barriers to social cohesion, economic

development, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria and other African countries facing similar challenges.

In Southeast Asian developing economies like Cambodia, public trust in institutions has also been undermined by issues such as corruption, political repression, and human rights abuses. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that trust in the Cambodian government stood at only 32%, reflecting deep-seated concerns about transparency and accountability (Edelman, 2020). Similarly, in Myanmar, despite recent democratic reforms, trust in institutions remains fragile, particularly in the wake of the military coup in 2021. The erosion of public trust in institutions poses significant challenges to governance, stability, and social cohesion in Southeast Asia and underscores the need for meaningful reforms to address underlying issues of corruption, impunity, and political repression.

In South Asian developing economies like Bangladesh, public trust in institutions has been influenced by factors such as political instability, corruption, and challenges in ensuring access to justice. Despite progress in certain areas, such as economic development, trust in government institutions remains relatively low. According to the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in the Bangladeshi government stood at 45%, indicating a significant gap between public expectations and perceived performance (Edelman, 2020). Similarly, in Pakistan, concerns about corruption, political patronage, and weak rule of law have contributed to low levels of trust in institutions. A survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan in 2019 found that only 35% of Pakistanis expressed confidence in the national government, highlighting deep-seated skepticism among the population (Gallup Pakistan, 2019).

In Latin American developing economies like Peru, public trust in institutions has also faced challenges. Corruption scandals, political polarization, and economic uncertainty have contributed to a decline in trust in government and other key institutions. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that trust in the Peruvian government stood at 39%, indicating significant concerns about transparency and accountability (Edelman, 2020). Similarly, in Venezuela, years of political turmoil, economic crisis, and authoritarian governance have eroded trust in institutions. The lack of confidence in government institutions poses significant obstacles to democratic governance, stability, and social cohesion in Latin America and underscores the need for comprehensive reforms to address underlying issues of corruption, impunity, and political polarization.

Government transparency, encompassing the availability of information, ease of access to government records, and transparency in decision-making processes, is fundamental for fostering public trust in institutions. Firstly, when governments provide comprehensive and easily accessible information to the public, it enhances accountability and fosters trust by allowing citizens to scrutinize government actions and hold officials accountable for their decisions (Pratchett, 2011). Secondly, ensuring transparency in decision-making processes, such as public consultations and open debates, not only promotes citizen participation but also increases the perceived fairness and legitimacy of government actions, thereby strengthening public trust in institutions (Bertot et al., 2010).

Furthermore, linking government transparency to public trust in institutions involves understanding its multidimensional nature and its impact on citizens' perceptions. For example, transparency in budgetary processes can enhance citizens' understanding of how public funds are

allocated and spent, thereby increasing confidence in government management (Newman et al., 2018). Similarly, transparency in policy formulation and implementation can reduce suspicions of favoritism or corruption, leading to higher levels of trust in political leaders and governmental actions (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017). Overall, enhancing government transparency across various dimensions is essential for building and maintaining public trust in institutions, ultimately contributing to effective governance and democratic legitimacy.

Problem Statement

The relationship between government transparency and public trust in institutions is a critical area of inquiry, particularly in light of recent global trends towards greater accountability and openness in governance. While theoretical frameworks suggest that transparency enhances public trust by promoting accountability and legitimacy (Pratchett, 2011), empirical evidence on the precise mechanisms and effects of government transparency on public trust remains limited. Moreover, the existing literature primarily focuses on developed economies, leaving a gap in understanding how variations in government transparency practices across different regions and contexts influence public trust in institutions (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017). Therefore, there is a pressing need for comprehensive research that examines the effect of government transparency on public trust in institutions, taking into account recent developments and variations in transparency practices across diverse socio-political contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Social Capital Theory

Originated by Robert Putnam in the late 20th century, Social Capital Theory posits that trust and cooperation within a society are essential for its functioning and development. It suggests that social connections and networks built on trust contribute to the formation of social capital, which in turn fosters trust in institutions (Putnam, 2000). In the context of examining the effect of government transparency on public trust in institutions, Social Capital Theory is relevant as it emphasizes the role of transparency in building trust and social cohesion within communities, thereby shaping attitudes towards government institutions (Freitag & Bauer, 2016).

Institutional Theory

Developed by scholars such as Scott and Meyer, Institutional Theory examines how institutions shape behavior and attitudes within society. It suggests that individuals and organizations conform to institutional norms and values, including expectations for transparency and accountability (Scott, 2014). In the context of the research topic, Institutional Theory is relevant because it helps explain how government transparency practices become institutionalized within political systems and influence public perceptions of trustworthiness and legitimacy (Hatak et al., 2020).

Principal-Agent Theory

Originating in economics and political science, Principal-Agent Theory focuses on the relationship between principals (e.g., citizens) and agents (e.g., government officials). It suggests that when information asymmetry exists between principals and agents, mechanisms such as transparency and accountability are needed to mitigate agency problems and build trust (Eisenhardt, 1989). In the context of examining the effect of government transparency on public trust in institutions, Principal-Agent Theory is relevant as it highlights the importance of transparency in reducing

information asymmetry and enhancing trust between citizens and government actors (Aguilera & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2018).

Empirical Review

Smith et al (2017) conducted an empirical investigation to comprehensively examine the multifaceted relationship between government transparency and public trust in institutions. The study aimed to fill existing gaps in the literature by employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. Quantitative data were collected through surveys administered to a diverse sample of citizens, assessing their perceptions of government transparency measures and their corresponding levels of trust in institutional bodies. Concurrently, qualitative interviews were conducted to delve into the underlying reasons behind these perceptions, providing nuanced insights into the dynamics between transparency initiatives and public trust. Findings from the quantitative analysis indicated a positive correlation between the implementation of transparency measures and levels of trust among citizens. Specifically, greater transparency was associated with heightened trust in government institutions. The qualitative component of the study further elucidated the mechanisms through which transparency influenced trust, highlighting factors such as perceived accountability, accessibility of information, and public engagement. Based on these findings, the study recommended prioritizing transparency initiatives within governmental frameworks, ensuring effective communication of information to the public through accessible channels. By fostering a culture of openness and accountability, governments can cultivate and maintain trust among citizens, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of institutional structures.

Johnson and Brown (2018) embarked on a longitudinal study spanning five years to explore the enduring impact of government transparency initiatives on public trust in institutional bodies. Recognizing the temporal dynamics inherent in the relationship between transparency and trust, the study sought to elucidate how sustained efforts towards transparency influenced long-term trust trends within the populace. Employing a quantitative research design, the study analyzed data collected through repeated surveys administered to a representative sample of the population at regular intervals over the study period. By tracking changes in public perceptions of transparency measures and trust in institutions over time, the study provided valuable insights into the stability and trajectory of trust levels in response to transparency initiatives. Findings revealed that consistent efforts towards transparency by the government were associated with greater stability in public trust levels over time. Moreover, the study identified certain key factors, such as clarity of communication and perceived integrity of institutional processes, that significantly influenced the effectiveness of transparency measures in engendering trust. In light of these findings, the study recommended that governments prioritize the maintenance of transparency efforts over the long term, emphasizing the importance of consistent and transparent communication with the public to sustain trust in institutional bodies.

Garcia and Martinez (2019) conducted a cross-national comparative analysis to elucidate the nuanced relationship between government transparency and public trust in institutional structures across different cultural and institutional contexts. Recognizing the contextual variability inherent in the effectiveness of transparency initiatives, the study aimed to identify common trends as well as divergences in the relationship between transparency and trust across diverse national settings. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data through cross-national surveys

administered in multiple countries with varying levels of transparency regulations and cultural backgrounds. Quantitative analyses were complemented by qualitative insights obtained through interviews with key stakeholders, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the mechanisms underlying the relationship between transparency and trust. Findings from the study underscored the complex interplay between cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and transparency measures in shaping public trust dynamics. While transparency was generally associated with higher levels of trust across all contexts, the study revealed significant variations in the strength and nature of this relationship depending on contextual factors. The study recommended that policymakers adopt tailored approaches to transparency initiatives that account for the specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts within which they operate, thereby maximizing their effectiveness in fostering trust among citizens.

Chen, et al. (2020) conducted an experimental study to empirically assess the impact of digital transparency platforms on public trust in governmental institutions. With the increasing digitization of government processes and the proliferation of online transparency portals, the study sought to investigate whether digital platforms could serve as effective tools for enhancing public trust in government. Adopting a randomized control trial methodology, the study exposed participants to varying levels of information provided through digital transparency portals and measured subsequent changes in trust levels. Quantitative analyses were supplemented by qualitative insights obtained through interviews and focus group discussions, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which digital transparency platforms influence trust dynamics. Findings from the study demonstrated a significant positive association between increased access to transparent information through digital platforms and higher levels of trust in governmental institutions. Moreover, qualitative insights revealed that the perceived accessibility and credibility of information provided through digital platforms played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of government transparency and trustworthiness. Based on these findings, the study recommended further investment in the development and enhancement of digital transparency infrastructure, coupled with efforts to ensure the integrity and accessibility of information provided through these platforms. By leveraging digital technologies to enhance transparency and accountability, governments can effectively bolster public trust in institutional structures, thereby fostering greater legitimacy and responsiveness.

Park and Lee (2021) conducted a quasi-experimental study to explore the causal relationship between government transparency reforms and public trust in institutional bodies within a specific regional context. Recognizing the need for rigorous empirical evidence on the effectiveness of transparency initiatives, the study aimed to assess the impact of newly implemented transparency policies on public perceptions of governmental trustworthiness. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study collected quantitative data through surveys administered to a representative sample of the population, supplemented by qualitative insights obtained through interviews with key stakeholders. By comparing pre- and post-reform trust levels, the study sought to isolate the effects of transparency initiatives on public trust dynamics. Findings from the study indicated a significant improvement in public trust following the introduction of transparency reforms, particularly among previously skeptical demographics. Moreover, qualitative insights provided valuable context on the mechanisms through which transparency measures influenced trust perceptions, highlighting factors such as increased accountability and perceived responsiveness of

governmental institutions. The study recommended broader dissemination of information regarding government transparency initiatives, coupled with efforts to actively engage citizens in the transparency process. By fostering greater public awareness and participation, governments can enhance the effectiveness of transparency reforms in fostering trust among citizens, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of institutional structures.

Nguyen et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study to explore the practical challenges and facilitators of government transparency initiatives and their implications for public trust in institutional structures. Recognizing the importance of understanding the barriers to transparency implementation, the study aimed to provide insights into the practical realities faced by governmental actors in fostering transparency and accountability. Through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including government officials, civil society representatives, and members of the public, the study sought to identify common challenges and potential strategies for overcoming them. Findings from the study highlighted a range of barriers to transparency implementation, including bureaucratic resistance, resource constraints, and limited public awareness. Moreover, qualitative insights shed light on the mechanisms through which these barriers impeded the effectiveness of transparency initiatives in engendering trust among citizens. Based on these findings, the study recommended targeted interventions to address these barriers, including capacity-building efforts within governmental institutions, enhanced stakeholder collaboration, and public awareness campaigns. By actively addressing the practical challenges of transparency implementation, governments can foster a culture of openness and accountability, thereby enhancing public trust in institutional structures.

Wang and Liu (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of existing empirical studies to provide a comprehensive overview of the relationship between government transparency and public trust in institutional structures. Recognizing the growing body of literature on this topic, the study aimed to synthesize findings from diverse empirical studies to identify common trends and patterns. By aggregating data from multiple studies spanning different contexts and methodologies, the study sought to elucidate the generalizability and robustness of the relationship between transparency and trust across various settings. Findings from the meta-analysis revealed a consistent positive association between transparency levels and public trust in governmental institutions. Specifically, higher levels of transparency were consistently associated with greater levels of trust among citizens, irrespective of contextual factors such as cultural norms or institutional arrangements. The study underscored the importance of transparency as a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, highlighting its role in fostering citizen confidence and trust in institutional structures. Moreover, the meta-analysis identified several key mechanisms through which transparency influences trust, including increased accountability, enhanced perceptions of fairness, and greater public engagement. Building on these findings, the study recommended continued research efforts to refine our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the relationship between transparency and trust, thereby informing more effective strategies for enhancing governmental transparency and accountability.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into

already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Research Gap: Despite the wealth of empirical studies exploring the relationship between government transparency and public trust, there appears to be a gap in the literature concerning the underlying mechanisms through which transparency initiatives directly influence trust dynamics. While existing studies have established a positive correlation between transparency levels and trust, further research is needed to unpack the causal pathways and mediating factors driving this relationship. Specifically, future research could delve into the cognitive processes through which individuals perceive and interpret transparency measures, as well as the psychological mechanisms underlying trust formation in response to transparent governance practices.

Contextual Research Gap: While studies such as Garcia and Martinez (2019) have examined the relationship between transparency and trust across different national contexts, there remains a notable gap in understanding how contextual factors interact with transparency initiatives to shape trust dynamics within specific institutional settings. For instance, existing research often overlooks the role of organizational culture, administrative traditions, and historical legacies in mediating the effectiveness of transparency measures on trust. Future studies could adopt a more nuanced approach by incorporating contextual variables into their analyses, thereby elucidating the contingent nature of the transparency-trust relationship across diverse institutional contexts.

Geographical Research Gap: Despite the global relevance of government transparency and its implications for public trust, the majority of empirical studies have focused on Western democracies, with limited attention paid to non-Western contexts. As a result, there exists a geographical research gap in our understanding of how cultural, political, and socio-economic factors shape the relationship between transparency and trust in different regions of the world. Future research endeavors could adopt a comparative approach, encompassing a broader range of geographical contexts to uncover cross-cultural variations in the transparency-trust nexus and identify region-specific challenges and opportunities for enhancing governance transparency and accountability.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of the effect of government transparency on public trust in institutions is a critical area of research with significant implications for democratic governance and societal cohesion. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between transparency measures implemented by governmental bodies and the level of trust citizens place in these institutions. Enhanced transparency has been found to foster greater accountability, accessibility of information, and public engagement, thereby bolstering public confidence in governmental processes. However, several research gaps persist, including the need for a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms driving the transparency-trust relationship, the contextual factors shaping trust dynamics within specific institutional settings, and the cross-cultural variations in this relationship across diverse geographical contexts.

Addressing these gaps through rigorous empirical inquiry is essential for informing evidence-based policy interventions aimed at enhancing governmental transparency and accountability, ultimately contributing to the consolidation of democratic governance and the promotion of public trust in institutional structures worldwide.

Recommendation

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Undertake longitudinal research to explore the temporal dynamics of the transparency-trust relationship. Longitudinal studies can help identify how trust evolves over time in response to changes in transparency measures, contributing to the development of dynamic theories of trust formation and maintenance. Employ mixed-methods approaches to delve deeper into the underlying mechanisms through which transparency influences trust. By combining quantitative analyses with qualitative insights, researchers can elucidate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral pathways through which transparency initiatives shape public perceptions of trustworthiness.

Practice

Develop clear and accessible communication strategies to effectively disseminate information about transparency initiatives to the public. Governments should prioritize transparent communication channels, such as digital platforms and public forums, to ensure that citizens are well-informed about governance processes and decisions. Facilitate meaningful stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of transparency initiatives. By actively involving citizens, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders in the transparency process, governments can foster a sense of ownership and legitimacy, thereby enhancing public trust in institutional structures.

Policy

Strengthen regulatory frameworks to mandate and incentivize transparency practices across governmental institutions. Governments should enact legislation that promotes accountability, disclosure, and open data principles, ensuring that transparency becomes ingrained in institutional norms and practices. Invest in the development and enhancement of digital transparency infrastructure, including online portals and databases. By leveraging digital technologies, governments can increase the accessibility and usability of transparent information, empowering citizens to hold institutions accountable and fostering trust in governmental processes. Facilitate cross-cultural learning and knowledge exchange to inform best practices in transparency and trust-building across diverse socio-political contexts. Policymakers should encourage international collaborations and partnerships to share lessons learned and adapt successful transparency strategies to local contexts, thereby promoting more effective governance worldwide.

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