

Evolving Themes in Rural Development 1950s-2000s

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This article provides a brief overview of the major switches in rural development thinking that have occurred over the past half-century or so. Dominant and subsidiary themes are identified, as well as the co-existence of different narratives running in parallel. The continuing success of the long-running 'small-farm efficiency' paradigm is highlighted. The article concludes by asking whether sustainable livelihoods approaches can be interpreted as providing a new or different way forward for rural development in the future. The answer is a cautious 'yes', since these approaches potentially permit the cross-sectoral and multi-occupational character of contemporary rural livelihoods in low-income countries to be placed centre-stage in efforts to reduce rural poverty.

Introduction

Any attempt to portray evolving ideas in rural development over the past half-century risks oversimplification. While it is superficially neat to characterise the 1960s as modernisation, the 1970s as state intervention, the 1980s as market liberalisation, and the 1990s as participation and empowerment, popular ideas and their practical effects on rural policies did not, indeed, undergo these transitions in such an uncluttered manner. Understanding about sets of rural development ideas across different disciplines, centres of learning, influential think-tanks, international agencies and national governments is very uneven. There are leads and lags in the transmission of new ideas across space and time.

The interpretation that follows is mindful of this complexity, but nevertheless seeks to identify dominant and subsidiary themes that have had major impacts on rural development practice since the 1950s. It also seeks to identify critical areas of divergence between rural development narratives that have co-existed but moved in opposing directions, and it examines whether current events, ideas, and policy proposals are converging towards some sort of consensus about rural livelihoods.¹

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1. This review is oriented more towards 'production' aspects of rural development than towards education, health and social services. The case for integrated rural development was made persuasively by Johnston and Clark (1982), but has proved elusive in practice, although re-emerging in recent times in a sustainable livelihoods guise (Carney, 1998).

A rural development timeline

Figure 1 uses the device of a timeline to list a great number of theories, themes and policy thrusts that have been influential in rural development thinking since the 1950s. It is not intended here to advance a definitive account of these strands of thought and their historical influence upon each other, but rather to highlight mainstream rural development narratives and to explore the turning points between them.

It is immediately evident from Figure 1 that predominant or popular rural development ideas are not trapped in time capsules conveniently organised in decades. Ideas that first appear in one decade often gain strength in the following decade, and only begin to affect rural development practice in a widespread way ten or fifteen years after they were first put forward. This is true, for example, of the sustainable livelihoods approach (Carney, 1998), which is listed as an idea of the current decade because this is the period when it is being widely deployed as a guiding principle for rural development practice. But this approach originates from strands of livelihoods ideas developed through the 1980s and 1990s (Chambers, 1983; Chambers and Conway, 1992; Bernstein et al., 1992), and from famine analysis of the 1980s (Sen, 1981; Swift, 1989).

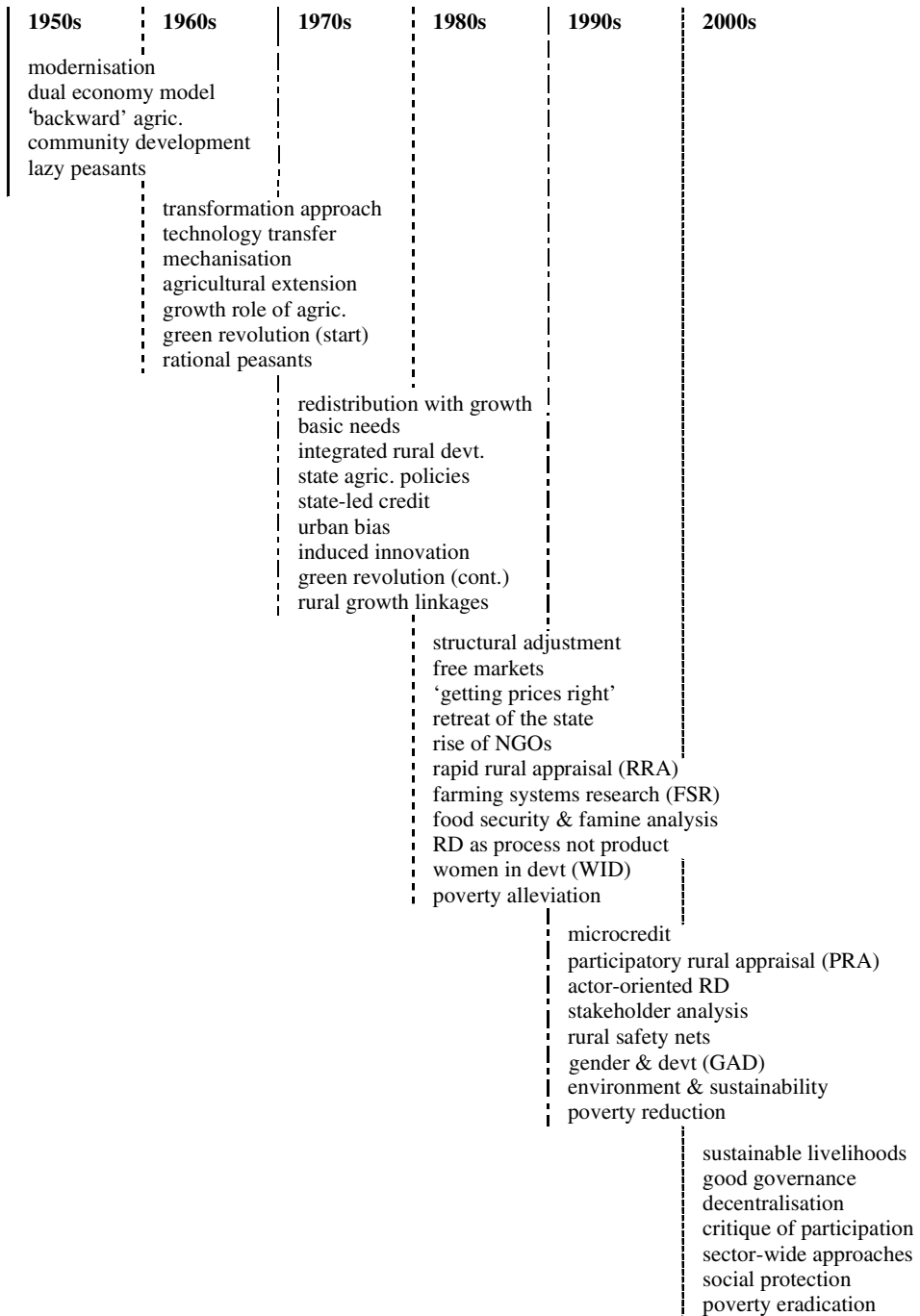
In piloting a route through the ideas depicted in Figure 1, it is useful to distinguish substantive theories or bodies of thought from trivial or transient ones, majority discourses from minority ones, and general development themes from specifically rural sector ones. In addition, some themes can be characterised as development ‘spin’ whereby ways of mobilising the development lobby in rich countries are phrased in different ways over time. The rallying calls of ‘poverty alleviation’ (1980s), ‘poverty reduction’ (1990s) and ‘poverty eradication’ (2000s) perhaps fall into this category.

By removing from the sequential list given in Figure 1 general development themes, transient ideas, and minority discourses, the identification of the key approaches to rural development of the past half-century is facilitated (Figure 2). Structural adjustment and its adjuncts in the form of trade and market liberalisation (1980s) are multi-sectoral in intent, as also are their downstream extensions in the areas of state-market relations and good governance (1990s and 2000s). To be sure, these macro policy processes take on particular variations when played out in rural and agricultural settings, but there is nothing intrinsically rural or agricultural about them at root. Similarly, both gender and the environment as development policy themes have specific rural manifestations, but they are society- or economy-wide in their overall scope.

The flirtation in the 1970s with ideas of ‘basic needs’ and ‘redistribution with growth’ was also economy- or society-wide in scope. And to the extent that they may have contributed to the pursuit of specifically rural policies and programmes (e.g. integrated rural development projects), this was more to do with the identification of ‘rural’ with ‘poverty’ than with anything specifically rural or agricultural in their formulation as development ideas or theories.

An important continuing minority discourse of rural development that manifested itself especially strongly in debates of the 1970s, is the ‘political economy of agrarian change’ strand of thinking inspired largely by Marxist or neo-Marxist social science approaches and methods. The well-known collection by Harriss (1982) exemplifies rural development debates within this discourse. The emphases here were (and still are)

Figure 1: Rural development ideas timeline



on class, power, inequality, and social differentiation in agrarian settings driven by the large-scale forces and tendencies of development under capitalism. This branch of the rural development literature has tended to be critical of the mainstream rural development orthodoxy discussed below, principally on the grounds of the latter's neglect of divisions in rural society in its pursuit of small-farm policies.

Key strands and switches in rural development thinking

Small-farm focus

In retrospect, it is evident that one major body of thought, albeit with plenty of side-excursions and add-ons, has dominated the landscape of rural development thinking throughout the last half-century. This is the 'agricultural growth based on small-farm efficiency' paradigm. It is convenient to use the shorthand 'small-farm first' to describe this discourse or narrative. Probably the decisive contribution resulting in the widespread acceptance of this narrative was the publication in 1964 of Schultz's *Transforming Traditional Agriculture*, in which the rational allocation of resources by 'traditional' small farmers was a central proposition. However, leading members of the US academic community interested in the contribution of agriculture to economic development were already at that time engaging with similar ideas, an emphasis on the benefits of agricultural growth not just restricted to the commercial sector appearing in early contributions by John Mellor and Bruce Johnston (Johnston and Mellor, 1961; Mellor, 1966).

The idea that the great bulk of what were then called 'traditional' or 'subsistence' agriculturalists in low-income countries could form the basis of agriculture-led processes of economic development was a significant break from the received wisdom of the 1950s, embodied in the dual-economy theories of development (Lewis, 1954; Fei and Ranis, 1964). According to these theories, the subsistence sector possessed negligible prospects for rising productivity or growth, and therefore could play only a passive role in the process of economic development, supplying resources to the modern sector of the economy until the latter eventually expanded to take its place. This modern sector was envisaged as containing large-scale 'modern' agriculture (plantations, estates, commercial farms and ranches) in addition to manufacturing industry. Important underlying propositions included the existence of economies of scale in agriculture, i.e. that large farms could make more efficient use of resources and modern technologies than small farms. This proposition was, incidentally, also important for socialist strategies of agricultural development as practised in the Soviet Union and in low-income developing countries that had socialist-leaning governments in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, a first 'paradigm shift' in rural development occurred in the early to mid-1960s period, when small-farm agriculture switched to being considered the very engine of growth and development. However, as illustrated in Figure 2, the accomplishment of a serious change in intellectual direction does not result in the immediate demise of the set of ideas which is being replaced. There was life left in the idea that large-scale farming using mechanised technology was more efficient than the 'peasant sector' well into the 1970s. Indeed, the same ideas continue to crop up, often in whispered asides at rural development workshops, right up to the present time.

The small-farm-first narrative begins with the proposition that agriculture plays a key role in overall economic growth, by providing labour, capital, food, foreign exchange, and a market in consumer goods for the nascent industrial sector in a low-income country. In the words of one of its most enthusiastic proponents, John Mellor, 'the faster agriculture grows, the faster its relative size declines' (Mellor, 1966). This occurs because rising agricultural productivity stimulates demand for non-farm input services to agriculture, as well as creating an internal consumer market for industrial goods. As already indicated, it was not any old agriculture, but small-farm agriculture in particular, that should form the central focus of an agriculture-centred development strategy. The overall narrative is composed of many interlocking components, some of the principal ones being as follows (Ellis, 2000: 22):

- small farmers are rational economic agents making efficient farm decisions (Schultz, 1964);
- small farmers are just as capable as big farmers of taking advantage of high-yielding crop varieties because the input combinations (seed, fertiliser, water) required for successful cultivation are 'neutral to scale' (Lipton and Longhurst, 1989);
- the substitution of labour for scarce land involved in small-farm HYV cultivation is an 'induced innovation' that accurately reflects relative resource scarcities and factor prices in labour-abundant agrarian economies (Hayami and Ruttan, 1971);
- there exists an 'inverse relationship' between farm size and economic efficiency, such that small farmers are more efficient than large farmers because of the intensity of their use of abundant labour in combination with small land holdings and low requirements for scarce capital (Berry and Cline, 1979);
- these factors lead in the direction of a 'unimodal' agricultural strategy favouring small family farms rather than a 'bimodal' strategy that bets on the strength of a modern farm sector composed of large farms and estates (Johnston and Kilby, 1975: Ch.4);
- rising agricultural output in the small-farm sector results in 'rural growth linkages' that spur the growth of labour-intensive non-farm activities in rural areas, and these are higher than for large farms (Johnston and Kilby, 1975; Mellor, 1976).

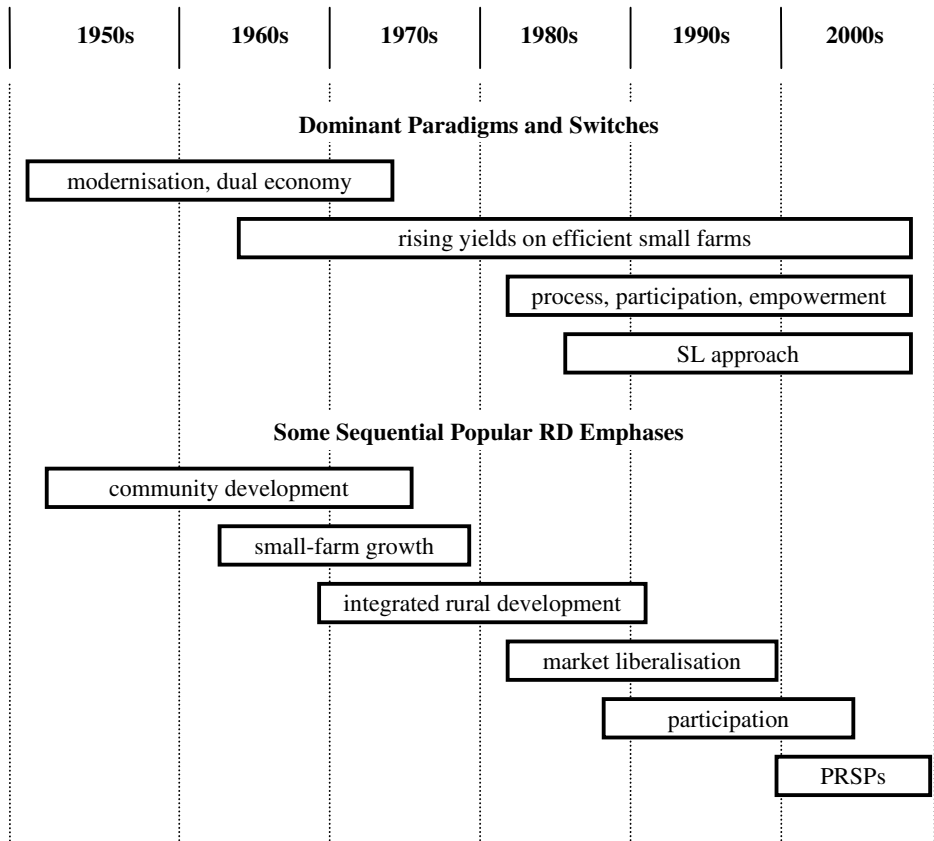
Amongst these ideas, the notion of 'rural growth linkages' has proved particularly pervasive and durable (see e.g. Delgado et al., 1998; IFAD, 2001), even though the methods used to substantiate the significance of such linkages are somewhat debatable (Harriss, 1987; Hart, 1989; 1993). In the words of one authority, 'the growth of the non-farm economy depends on the vitality of the farm economy; without agricultural growth in rural areas, redressing poverty is an impossible task' (Singh, 1990: xix).

A crucial attribute of the narrative is that both growth and equity goals appear to be satisfied simultaneously via the emphasis on small-farm agriculture: its enduring success owes much to this felicitous conjunction of outcomes. Much rests on the rural poor being poor small farmers. This has always been open to the criticism that the poor in rural areas are often poor because they are landless. However, the small-farm

paradigm counters such doubts by stating that even the landless poor gain by being employed in a buoyant labour-intensive small-farm sector. Whether this remains an acceptable premise in the light of emerging evidence that the rural poor tend to depend on non-farm (and often non-rural) sources of income in order to sustain their livelihoods is a key issue that might contribute to a re-appraisal of the validity of the small-farm-first orthodoxy (Ellis, 1998).

Returning to the timeline, various so far unexplained entries can be interpreted as excursions around or non-economic bolt-ons to the core small-farm-first engine. The urban bias theory advanced by Michael Lipton in the 1970s, for example, may be interpreted as a particular detour and advocacy around the imperative of a small-farm-centred strategy (Lipton, 1977). Similarly, the sequence of debates in agricultural research policy that resulted in the 1980s' promotion of farming systems research (FSR) as an improved process for raising small-farm productivity were entirely consistent with the small-farm orthodoxy.

Figure 2: Dominant and sequential themes in rural development



Process approaches to rural development

The second 'paradigm shift' was the switch occurring during the 1980s and 1990s from the top-down or 'blueprint' approach to rural development, characterised by external technologies and national-level policies, to the bottom-up, grassroots, or 'process' approach (Rondinelli, 1983; Mosse et al., 1998). This envisages rural development as a participatory process that empowers rural dwellers to take control of their own priorities for change. Some key strands in this period were:

- the advent of farming systems research (FSR), and the growing argument that the Green Revolution in monocrop farming systems (rice and wheat), mainly in Asia, might not necessarily work for raising incomes in diverse, risk-prone and resource-poor environments (e.g. Chambers et al., 1989);
- a growing acknowledgement of the validity of indigenous technical knowledge (ITK), and of the ability of the poor themselves to contribute to solutions to the problems they confront (Richards, 1985);
- the rise of the participatory method, originating in rapid rural appraisal (RRA) techniques in the 1980s and evolving into participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and participatory learning and action (PLA) during the 1990s (Chambers, 1994; 1997);
- the advent of an 'actor-oriented' perspective on rural policies, emphasising that participants in rural development, including the poor themselves, are actors with differing understandings of the processes of change in which they are involved (Long and Long, 1992);
- structural adjustment and market liberalisation beginning in the early 1980s, leading to the withdrawal of governments from previous large-scale 'management' of the agricultural sector;
- disenchantment with the performance of governments in the delivery of rural services, leading donors to look for other partners;
- the rise of NGOs as agents for rural development, occurring at the same time as, and benefitting from, the decline in enthusiasm for big government;
- the rejection of overarching theories as a useful guide to action, arising in part from post-modern intellectual ideas emphasising the uniqueness of local and individual experience (for an overview see Booth, 1994);
- the rise of gender as a concern in rural development, emphasising the different experience of women from men, and the need to consider closely the differing impacts of rural politics on women and men.

Note that these strands are interlocking and not readily separable one from another in real time, even if they emerge from different directions. While advocates of grassroots approaches to development may like to think that they have nothing in common with World Bank market liberalisers, nevertheless the spaces in which grassroots action flourished from the mid-1980s onwards were created in some measure by the backing off by big government from heavy-handed involvement in the rural economy. A growing disenchantment with the performance of state rural development agencies was an important shared agenda across a number of divergent rural development actors. Nor did the retreat of the state occur voluntarily, but resulted from much arm-twisting by the

external financial institutions under structural adjustment programmes. In addition, the World Bank has subsequently adopted, at least in principle if not always in practice, many of the ideas associated with bottom-up rural development approaches, as manifested in the Vision to Action statement (World Bank, 1997) and in the energetic pursuit of participatory poverty assessments, leading to the publication of *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan et al., 2000).

Phases in rural development practice

While economic and agricultural development theories have exerted a powerful influence on rural development policies throughout the past half-century, the practices of donors and governments have also been influenced by broader thinking about social, non-agricultural and national development. This is manifested in sequential phases in rural development practice in low-income countries, occurring as a series of overlapping transitions as portrayed in the bottom half of Figure 2:

- (a) from community development (1950s) to the emphasis on small-farm growth (1960s);
- (b) continuing small-farm growth within integrated rural development (1970s);
- (c) from state-led rural development (1970s) to market liberalisation (1980s);
- (d) process, participation, empowerment and actor approaches (1980s and 1990s);
- (e) emergence of sustainable livelihoods as an integrating framework (1990s);
- (f) mainstreaming rural development in poverty reduction strategy papers (2000s).

This rendering has the merit of highlighting the various banners, for example 'community development' (Holdcroft, 1978) or 'integrated rural development' (World Bank, 1975; 1988), under which donors set their priorities for development assistance in rural areas over particular periods of historical time. However, the underlying pre-eminence of the small-farm efficiency paradigm is to some degree obscured in so doing, as also is the paradoxical interweaving of the market liberalisation and participatory strands that featured so strongly towards the end of the twentieth century.

The livelihoods approach: A challenge to farming first?

It has already been pointed out above that the switch from top-down to bottom-up thinking about rural development occurs in a separate plane from economic theories about the role of agriculture in growth and poverty reduction, where the primacy of small-scale agriculture appears to roll on without serious challenge. For a recent restatement of the orthodoxy, including a vigorous reassertion of the primacy of new technology in small-farm food production, and rural growth linkages as purportedly powerful mechanisms of rural poverty reduction, see the IFAD *Rural Poverty Report 2001* (IFAD, 2001).

It is possible that the so-called sustainable livelihoods (SL) approach (Carney, 1998; Scoones, 1998) could provide a challenge to the small-farm orthodoxy, while at the same time being entirely compatible with progress made in bottom-up rural development. This approach has significant economic antecedents in another branch of literature that crops up in Figure 1, namely, the food-security and famine analysis

originating in the publication of Amartya Sen's (1981) seminal work on famines. The 'asset vulnerability framework' which is at the centre of the SL approach arises from this literature, and engages with the factors that make rural families vulnerable to shocks, and the policies and processes that can improve their resilience in the face of disaster. The livelihoods approach also draws on other antecedents connected with the multiple realities of rural poverty (Chambers, 1983).

This is not the place to expound the livelihoods approach (see Ellis, 2000). In the current context, what is interesting is that it embodies no prior requirement for the poor rural individual or family to be a 'small farmer'. The livelihoods concept takes an open-ended view of the combination of assets and activities that turn out to constitute a viable livelihood strategy for the rural family. Empirical research suggests that, in reality, farming activities, on average, tend to correspond to only 40-60% of the livelihood 'package' put together by rural households in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (see, for example, Reardon, 1997). Nor do rural growth linkages explain the patterns of activity and income sources that correspond to the non-farm components of rural livelihoods. On the contrary, remittances and transfers are always important, as are wages and salaries in activities that have little or nothing to do with agricultural linkages.

The starting point of the livelihoods approach – the assets and diverse strategies of a poor household – is therefore fundamentally different from the principles underlying 'small-farm first' thinking, and can lead analysis in new directions. The evidence for sub-Saharan Africa points to the gathering momentum of livelihood strategies based on part-time farming supplemented by other activities and income sources (Bryceson and Jamal, 1997). One reason that this occurs is the continued sub-division of land at inheritance, resulting in declining farm size, and this is especially prevalent in areas of high agricultural potential. However, the implications of such rural livelihood strategies for poverty-reduction policies are hitherto poorly assimilated, resulting potentially in policy drift with no clear sense of direction (Bryceson and Bank, 2001).

Conclusion

Currently few developing country governments, and few donors, take a sufficiently cross- or multi-sectoral view of the possibilities of rural poverty reduction. Notwithstanding energetic assertions about the underfunding of agriculture (e.g. IFAD, 2001), the reality on the ground is that agriculture is preferred in the public funding of services to rural productive activity (via research, extension, credit, seeds and so on) to, say, providing an enabling environment for start-up non-farm activities, or removing barriers to trade and mobility, or reducing licensing requirements for small businesses, or a host of other potential means by which the options and opportunities of the rural poor can be expanded in their non-farm variety and range.

If a new paradigm of rural development is to emerge, it will be one in which agriculture takes its place along with a host of other actual and potential rural and non-rural activities that are important to the construction of viable rural livelihoods, without undue preference being given to farming as the unique solution to rural poverty. It is in this sense that the cross-sectoral and multi-occupational diversity of rural livelihoods may need to become the cornerstone of rural development policy if efforts to reduce rural poverty are to be effective in the future.

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