

Global policy agendas and the Education Sustainable Development Goal: Perspectives from sub-Saharan African research and researchers

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Abstract

African education research is often 'overlooked and undervalued' in global policy debates (Maclure 2006). This paper reports on a project to catalogue education research from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) for the purpose of raising its visibility and strengthening the evidence base for national, regional and global policy and practice. The paper combines large-scale bibliometric analysis of education research outputs from 48 countries in SSA with a qualitative study of the priorities of African researchers. The study highlights the perspectives of African research and researchers with respect to informing the Education Sustainable Development Goal. Attention is given to areas of convergence and tension between global policy agendas and African researchers' priorities for knowledge production.

The quantitative analysis draws from structured searches of academic and grey literature databases, together with a process of expert consultation. The search sought to identify social science research outputs with implications for education policy and practice conducted by researchers in SSA over the period 2007-2017. Patterns and trends are identified regarding publication type, thematic foci, research methods, funding, and citations. The qualitative component derives from semi-structured interviews with African researchers and a range of non-academic stakeholders, including representatives of government agencies and NGOs. Thematic analysis was informed by previous studies of evidence use in education policy-making (Brown 2014).

The paper considers lessons for the identification of research topics, research design and dissemination to enhance the visibility of African research in national and global policy debates. It further aims to support future research partnerships to inform the SDGs which are grounded in African knowledge and expertise.

What is known about African education research?

‘overlooked and undervalued’ (Maclure 2006)

- Research is dispersed across a wide range of outlets
- Many studies exist only in hard copy with limited circulation
- Barriers to publishing in international peer-reviewed journals
- Vicious circle of low readership & engagement
- Local knowledge and expertise is neglected in favour of research & researchers from elsewhere

Sources: Bonini et al. 2015, Fricker 2007, Fussy 2018, Thomas 2017

The African Education Research Database project

Objectives

- Catalogue the work of SSA researchers to produce database
- Review literature to identify key findings & gaps
- Identify priorities & partners for future research



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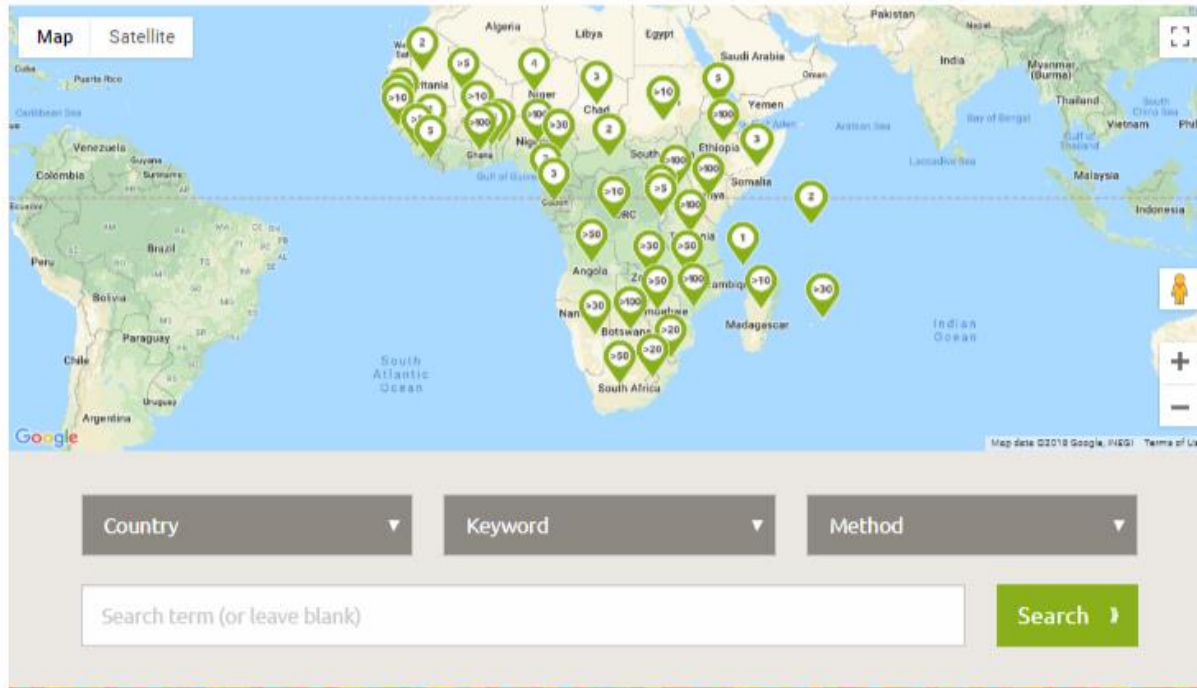
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Approach to cataloguing

- Systematic literature search based on protocol: academic databases, expert consultation
- For each study, info on: citation, country of focus, research methods, thematic foci (up to 8 keywords), author (gender, institutional affiliation, email), etc.
- Search conducted in specialist Portuguese databases
- Search of specialist French language databases pending

AFRICAN EDUCATION RESEARCH DATABASE

SEARCH DATABASE



<http://essa-africa.org/AERD>



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Key informant interviews

Interviews conducted with SSA-based researchers on:

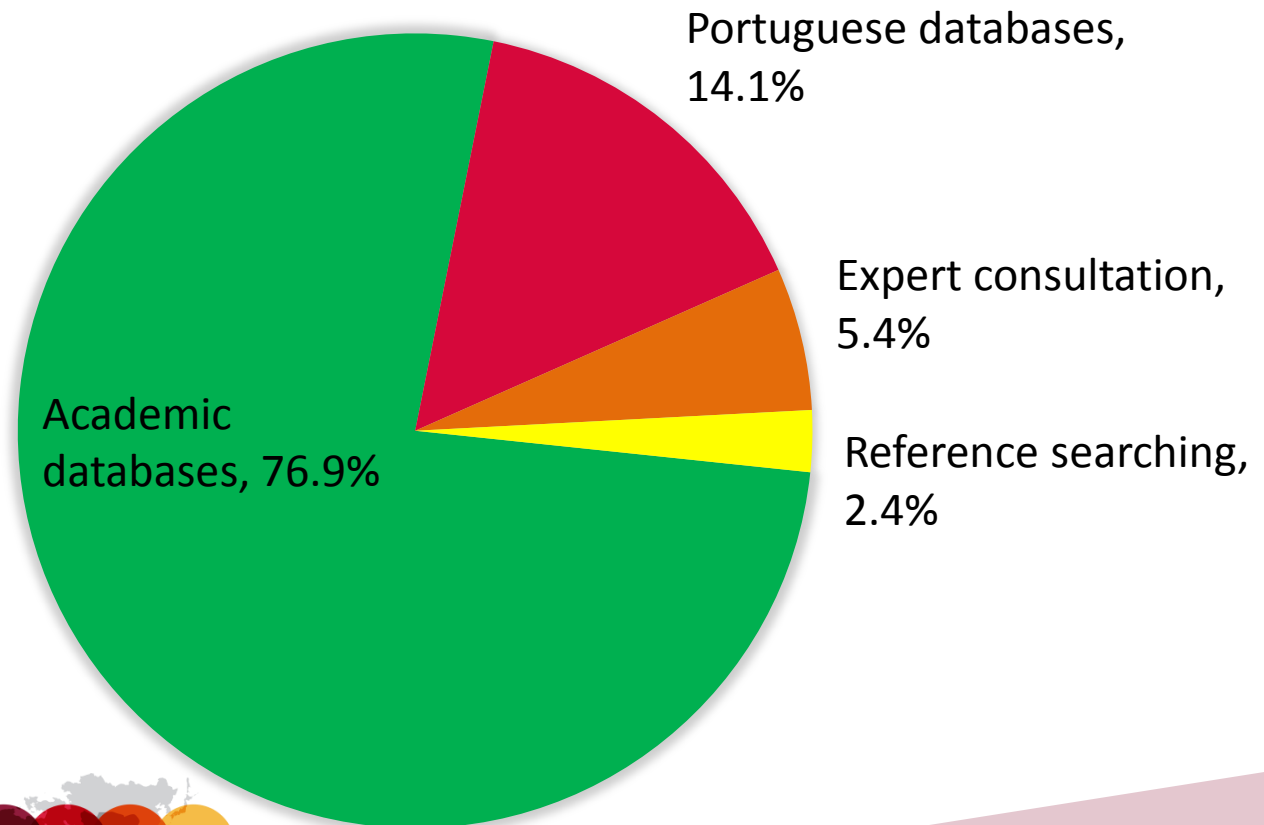
- priorities for research
- research impact
- experiences of funding, partnerships & collaboration

Presentation draws from interviews with 4 female & 10 male researchers (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal)

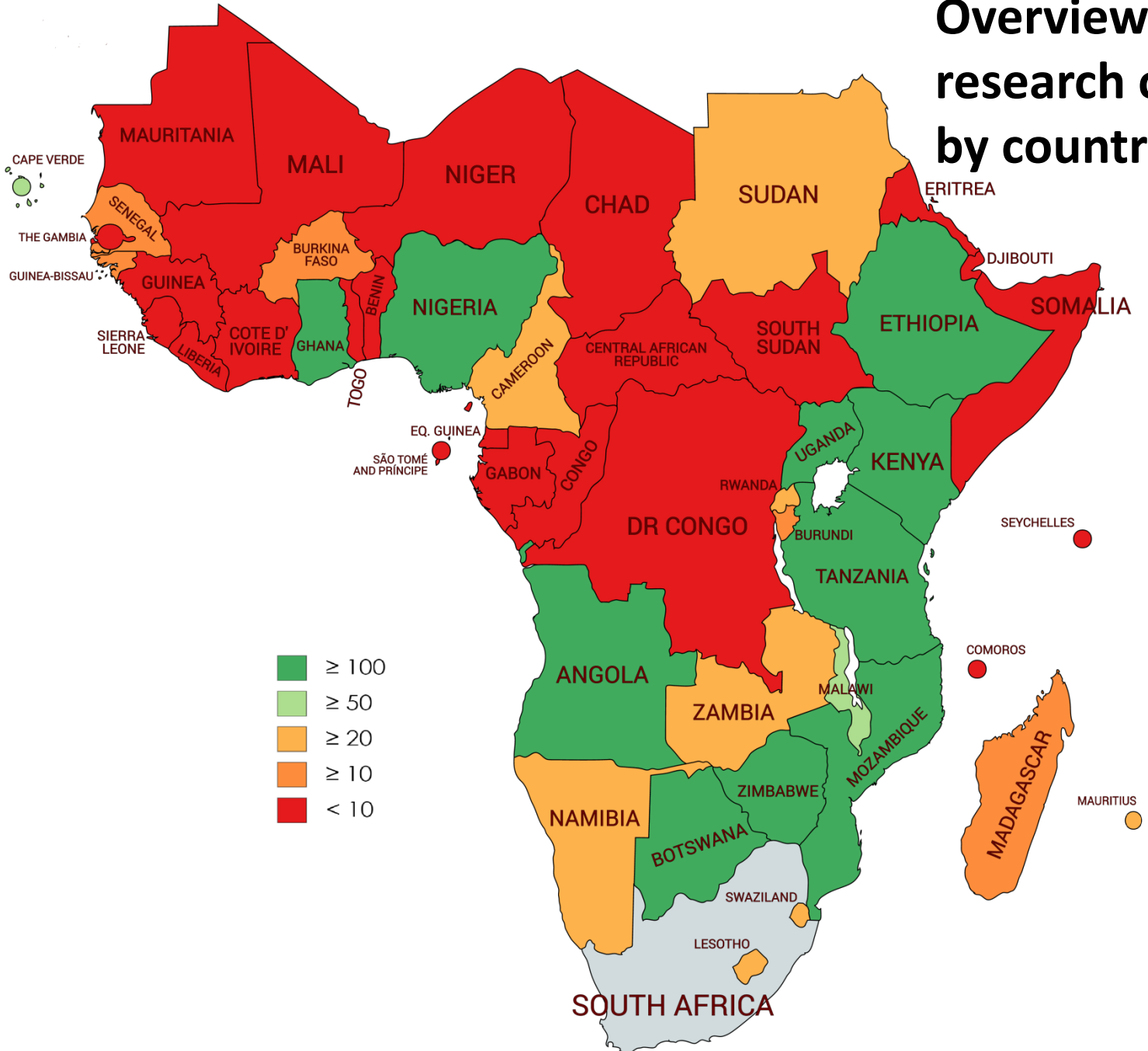


Bibliometric analysis of the African Education Research Database

2811 studies catalogued to date (August 2018)



Overview of research outputs by country



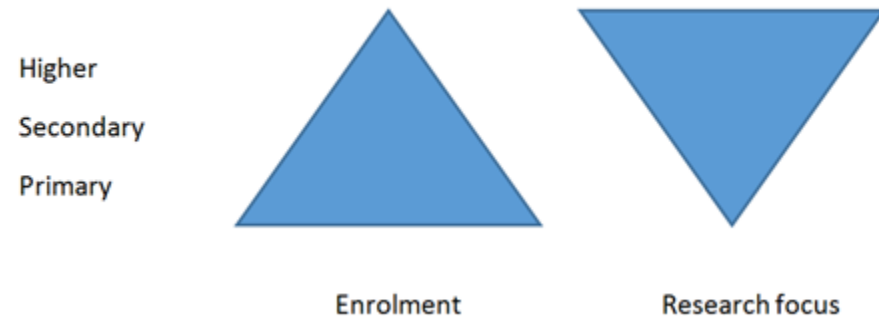
Research by educational level

	# of studies (n = 2811)	% of studies in AERD
Early childhood education	83	3%
Primary education	524	18.6%
Secondary education	717	25.5%
Higher education	860	30.6%
(Other)	627	22.3%

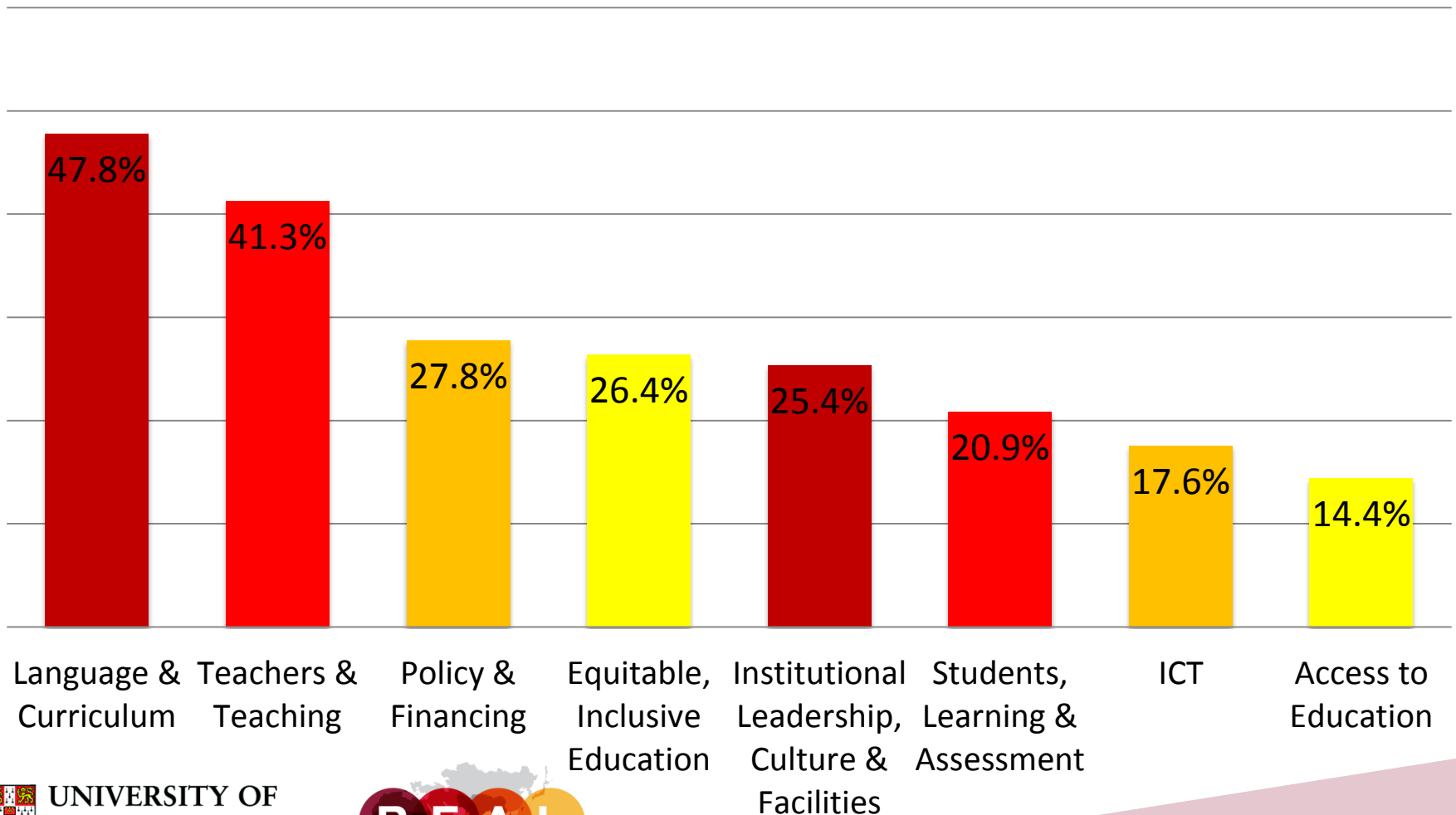
Enrolment by level as % of total student enrolment

	Primary	Secondary	Higher
Avg.	73.5%	24.7%	1.9%

Based on data from 28 countries in SSA (Ilie & Rose 2017)



% of studies by thematic area



Global agendas: a common view

Maclure (2006) notes:

“the parameters of inquiry are defined by the contracting organizations, most of which are foreign to Africa. ...It is thus **difficult for many otherwise well-trained researchers to establish their own independent research programs when they are drawn to opportunity structures that offer attractive facilities and salaries...**[As a result,] **African educational research has been dislocated from national contexts.**” (p.82)



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Does funding affect the focus of research?

290 out of 2811 studies (10.3%) indicated they had received research funding.

	Unfunded (n = 2521)		Funded (n = 290)		Difference
	# of studies	%	# of studies	%	
Early childhood education	75	3%	8	2.8%	-0.2
Primary education	421	16.7%	103	35.5%	+18.8
Secondary education	649	25.7%	68	23.4%	-2.3
Higher education	807	32%	53	18.3%	-13.7
(Other)	569	22.6%	59	20.3	-2.3

Funded research is **twice as likely to focus on primary education**, and **half as likely to focus on higher education**

Foreign vs local research agendas: evidence from interviews

What emerges from interviews is a picture of agential actors motivated by their own interests and priorities:

- You start with your idea, so...it's your agenda – you are only looking for funding. You develop a proposal not based on what [funders] dictated, but... your priority area. So we have several proposals that we tried – that we submitted but we didn't get funding...[They did] not influence us, because this is our initiation. (*Male researcher 1, Ethiopia*)
- We have in most cases...disappointed individuals that have come here and said “*Look here, we have this money. We want to do A B C D.*” and we have said...“*No, it's not in our interest. If you want to work with us, here are the areas that are of interest to us.*” (*Male researcher, Malawi*)



Desire for local relevance

An abiding concern of the researchers interviewed was *the desire for local relevance*: encouraging positive changes in policy and practice through work with teachers, principals and other institutional stakeholders, or else by informing policy actors and decision-making processes at regional and national levels.

*This resonates with IDRC's **Research Quality Plus (RQ+)** (Offir et al. 2016; Lebel & McLean 2018) which values research in terms of contextual relevance.*



Engaging with policy actors: challenges and strategies

Challenges	Strategies
Suspicion of research / researchers	Understanding the concerns and preferences of policy actors
Adequacy of the evidence base	Framing research using Government narratives
	Developing trust in the research process
	Persistence



Conclusion

- Overview of the landscape of education research in SSA
- Room for greater alignment between African education research and global, regional & national priorities
- Challenges common view which casts SSA-based researchers as subject to foreign agendas
- Desire for local relevance is an abiding concern for researchers

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