Community networks, women's inclusion and anti-racism:

how to build technologies for the transformations we want?

What are "Community Networks"?
They are local Internet, mobile or radio networks that can connect people and equipment from the same community. Designed from the local realities and perspectives, they can be a solution for communication and connection within a territory, and in many cases community networks also help reduce a lack of internet access in certain regions. In general, the construction and installation of a community network infrastructure takes place through a collective process and its management is shared by the members of the community, the equipment as well as the knowledge and work.
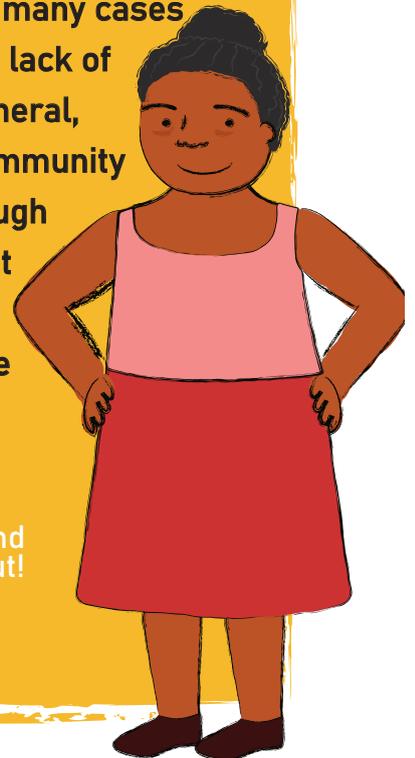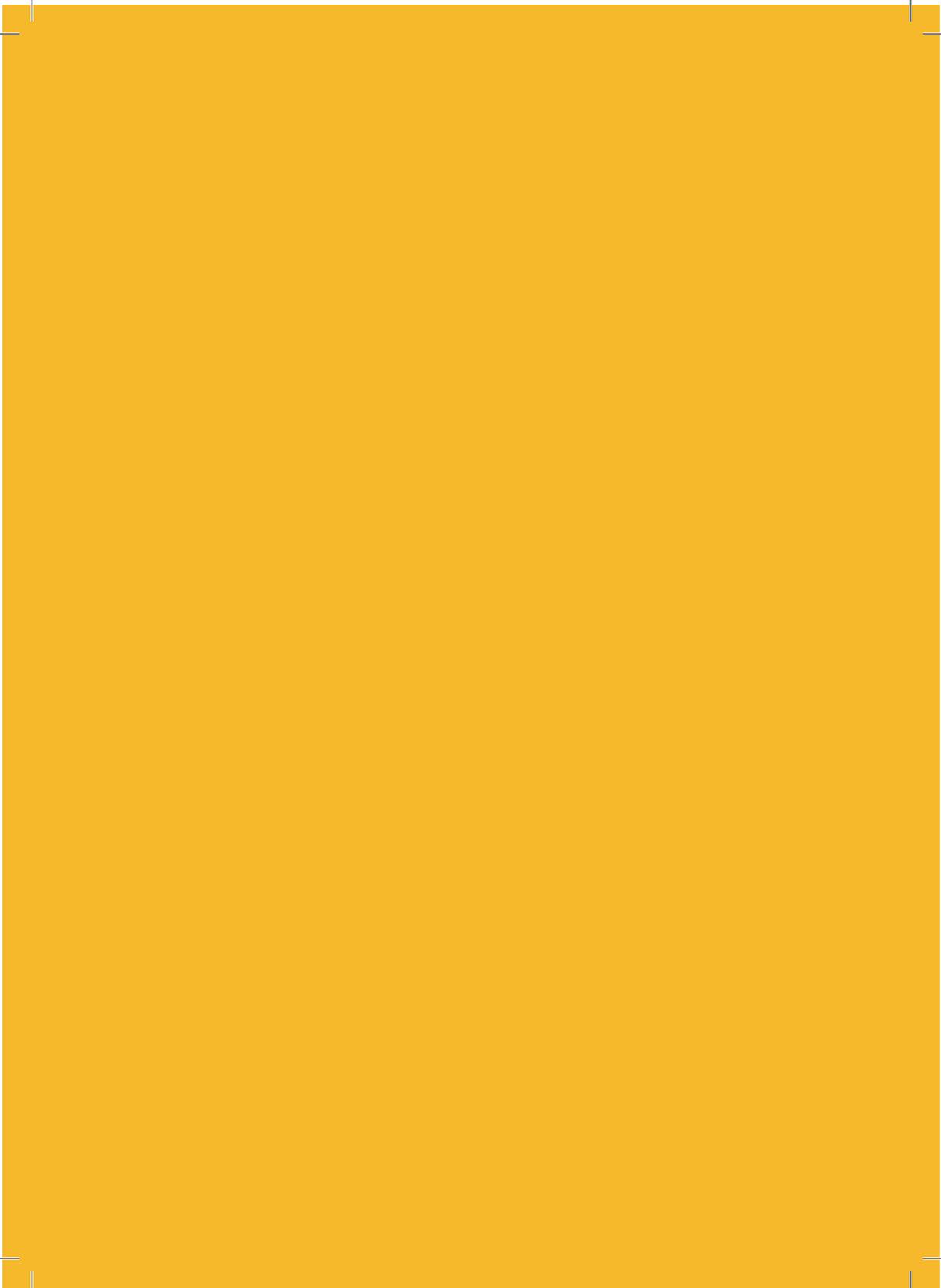
What elements constitute a Community network?

People and technology

Community networks are composed of a combination of different equipments which vary according to the network model adopted, such as routers, antennas or transmitters. But alone these equipments form only a part of the network. The human network, that is, the people involved in the construction of the network, and its maintenance, are indispensable. It is the integration of people + technology that will ensure a living and active community network.

Behind what may seem like only cables, routers, antennas, electronic devices and connected digital devices, there is also the opportunity to build a collective process, which involves the participation of all those interested in putting a network to work and, especially in maintaining it and for a use that improves life in the territory.

In practice, the construction of a community network requires multiple technological and analog knowledge. A healthy community network gathers in its nodes (in a network each node is an equipment that is part of this network) diverse knowledge, life stories, community technologies, and various skills and experiences. Each one who participates enriches the process, and has the opportunity to learn and teach through practice and as a result the whole community is strengthened when the process is participatory.

In the case of Quilombo Terra Seca, the network was built in a participatory process that involved SOF, the group of women who work with community networks, from São Paulo, who helped in the workshops, the residents of the region and the women of RAMA. It was from this meeting between people who added their experiences and diverse knowledge that the network developed.

To facilitate workshops and moments of exchange in this process in the most collective and participatory way possible, we rely on popular education and intersectional feminism. Want to know more about it? Keep on reading.

Popular education

Popular education has been a strong ally in the process of building and implementing community networks in Brazil. Through its theories and practices it helps transform this construction into a participatory and transformative process for everyone involved.

Spaces such as workshops and conversation groups are elements of this construction process that allow exchanges and sharing of knowledge and learning, not only about networks, technologies, digital infrastructures, but includes themes of local interest, such as autonomy, caring for nature, education, communication, memory, traditional technologies and as many subjects that can be as diverse as the realities experienced in Brazil and in the world. Through methodologies based on popular education and participatory spaces and processes, these workshops and groups become places for encounter and exchange.

Opening to the unexpected

Focusing on the process, as well as on the final result, the construction of a participator community network needs to be open to the challenges and unexpected events, which only happen when we are together and together in the territory. Experiences that welcome mistakes, deviations, attempts and make these opportunities another enriching element of learning, which involve this whole process, tend to be positive and lasting experiences.

Maintaining a listening posture and having plans kept open to developments that only practice in the territories can allow is fundamental for truly participatory processes. And to ensure the interest and involvement of the maximum number of people, even at different levels of engagement, it is important that the community understands that the network belongs to all of them. These are key elements in the continuity of community networks and guarantee its future, because they were built in a way which makes sense in that territory and for those people.

What debates can be going around building a community network?

In countries marked by many inequalities, such as Brazil, the absence of many basic rights is faced by many communities. Among these rights denied we also see the absence of connectivity, such as the lack of Internet access. This context impacts more severely women's rights, especially if combined with other inequalities, such as class, race, age, among others.

Therefore, it is essential that the process of building a community network happens with what we can call **access intersectionality**. Without a careful look at **gender, race, class inequalities**, connectivity can come as a tool that doesn't benefit everyone in the same way. In the world of digital technologies as a whole, we see how mainly white cis men are privileged and dominate many decision spaces, reinforcing processes of exclusion of many diverse people.

Cis and trans?

Cis and trans are abbreviations of the terms cisgender and trans–gender. Both terms refer to what we know as gender identity or expression, which simply means the way a person expresses themselves in the world, and has to do with behavior - characteristics socially associated with genders. In the very popular term LGBTQIA+ the letter T refers precisely to transgender people.

It is important not to confuse gender expression with sexual orientation, here we are not talking about attraction between people but of how they express their way of being.

In a very summarized way, people who recognize themselves as cisgender are people who identify with their birth sex and the gender determined by that sex, which is generally expressed.

For example, a woman born with the female sex identifies with the way in which the female gender expresses itself is a cis woman and this has nothing to do with whether this woman has a straight or homosexual orientation.

The term transgender refers to all people who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth, being able to identify with the opposite gender, for example, and decide to express themselves with characteristics of the gender with which they identify. This is also not directly related to sexual orientation, and there may be transgender people with homo or heterosexual orientation. There are trans men and trans women, as well as cis men and cis women.

Gender expression should never be a cause of prejudice, exclusion or disrespect and this is very serious. Since April 2016, Decree No. 8,727 has recognized that transvestite and transsexual people have their gender identity guaranteed and are to be treated by their social name in any space they are in.

It is very important that in case of doubt, or need, about how to refer to a person in relation to their gender expression, especially trans people, how that person wants and feels comfortable when being treated, whether by "he" or "she", ask. Asking does not offend and can avoid uncomfortable situations. :D

Did you know that?

Intersectionality is a term created to address the overlap of discrimination systems in people and social groups. When we talk about intersectionality, in feminism we are dealing with how injustice and social inequality can happen by bringing together not only one, but several conditions of oppression that can happen at the same time, as a cross-breeding of various forms of discrimination that harm women or communities.

For example, all women have suffered from sexism, but black women suffer from sexism and also racism, while black gay women suffer from sexism, racism and homophobia. The most common oppressions within society are racism, sexism, classism, capacitism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia.

Do you know what each of these LGBTQIA+ letters means?

L Lesbians: women attracted to women, cis or trans.

G Gays: people attracted by same-sex partners, most used for men, cis or trans

B Bisexuals: someone attracted to people of their gender and others, cis or trans

T Transgender: broad term for people whose gender identity or expression differs from biological sex

Q Queer: those who do not see in the female/male binomial and exhibit characteristics of one, both or none

I Intersex: person with biological sexual characteristics not traditionally associated with female or male bodies

A Assexuais: people who do not feel sexual attraction, either by the opposite sex or by the same sex — which does not mean that they cannot develop loving and affective feelings for other people, cis or trans

All bodies welcome!
All bodies present!
Because the more multiple, the better!

When a technological infrastructure is designed to meet the reality of a community, the constant effort to involve everyone, women and men, the young and older, diverse people, is central. All voices must be heard. And that's what the **intersectional feminist perspective** believes and advocates.

But what is intersectional feminist perspective?

It is a proposal that seeks to make experiences, such as the construction of community networks, welcoming to different groups and people, including women and their diversities. Feminist doesn't mean made just by women. So, what does that mean?

To be a feminist can have different meanings. For us, in the encounter with the world of technologies, it means a permanent search for more balanced relationships and create spaces in which everyone and everyone feels welcomed – regardless of gender, race, class, age. This is not to say that there will be no conflicts or tensions, but that there is a commitment to ensure that processes are safe and welcoming for different people. And that conflicts and tensions that may arise are seen as experiences for learning and a collective journey.

A feminist proposal, whether for the construction of technological infrastructure or for the construction of worlds, seeks to avoid the naturalization of inequalities, values differences to gather and welcome, listen and integrate everyone and everyone, and also in the production of technologies and knowledge, avoiding prejudice and discrimination.

Feminist projects are opportunities to break the silence or invisibility around certain norms.

By bringing people from a community together around the construction of community networks we create opportunities to strengthen political agendas. After all, the search for autonomy, whether food or communication, goes through disputes and power relations.

In practice, when the technologies of community networks also reach women and traditional populations, they can become an important tool for their activity in society. The greater the reach of these groups, the more articulations and more important steps can be taken in the defense of rights, territories and diverse ways of living.
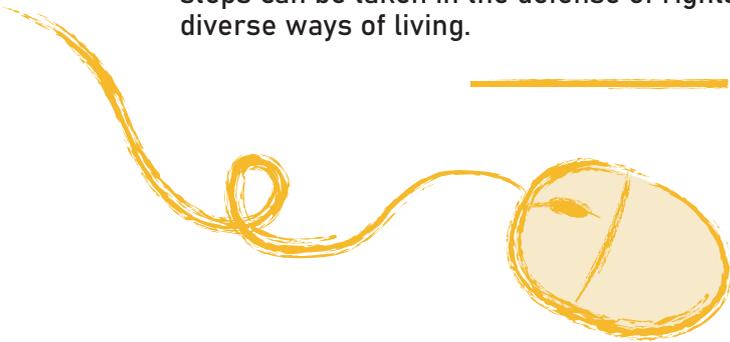
No more male predominance in technology

Even when it comes to community networks, male predominance still needs to be highlighted. We know that the reality of women often keeps them away from opportunities for contact with technologies. Through community networks, by measuring the participation of more and more women in its construction and maintenance, it is possible to explore alternative and more inclusive models. With tools in hand and together, it is possible to break with this cycle and ensure that diverse people are recognized for producing knowledge and technologies from different ways of living.

Other ways of living and knowing, other models of development

Therefore, community networks carry with them the potential to recognize, value and strengthen other ways of living and knowing, other models of development that respond to different realities and needs. We do not need to limit ourselves to the uses and interests imposed by those in power or by large companies. Tools such as community networks can to act and let us strengthen both physical and digital spaces.

Community networks can be major allies in social justice processes.

To reflect:

With the pandemic, what do our rights look like? The pandemic has highlighted the need for internet connection. At a time when essential activities, such as school and access to emergency and financial services, are dependent on access to online environments, community networks with internet access are great allies in facing this enormous challenge, especially experienced by women. They can also be a way to keep our voices present in the political debates that now take place online.

Race is an issue for everyone!

In the same way that we deal with male predominance, when it comes to technology in Brazil, the predominance of white people in these spaces is also a reality and brings us two important questions:

How much are white people, who are the majority also in the field of technology in Brazil, think about racism and the space they occupy? and the privileges they enjoy?

And because of that,

How collective is the installation and management of autonomous and community networks throughout the country?

Unfortunately, discussions about race are not yet seen as central in many spaces and this silence on such an important issue may represent the echo of Brazilian structural racism. This silence must be broken!

The issue of race must be addressed in the processes of building community networks and digital infrastructure and technologies in general, and increasingly, in more depth.

And if we are talking about feminist processes, which aim at the inclusion and participation of diverse people, this diversity also passes through the white bodies involved in this process, so one cannot avoid a reflection on whiteness.

Do you know or have you ever heard that term, "whiteness"?

Whiteness is a term that was created by some researchers in order to draw attention to the role of white people in understanding their own race and their role in confronting racism and racial inequalities. Many white people live their lives without thinking, recognizing and criticizing this place full of symbolic and material privileges they enjoy. They think racism is a problem for black people and do not see how much their very existence is sustained by so many inequalities and violence. The term whiteness, then, arises to point out this unjust and unequal place, which our society carries since the colonial and imperialist periods, calling on white people to assume their responsibility in confronting racism from the place they occupy.

The power of encounters

To bring debates about whiteness to collective spaces, and bring together different profiles of people, can be important to positively shake-up white people who are engaged in these actions. This is because it is very common that in processes of construction of community networks, for example, there is a meeting between different social groups, such as activist groups in the field of technology, universities and representatives of the public authorities with communities, often traditional, indigenous, quilombola or marginalized regions of urban centers. This jolt serves to help white people to understand their place and engagement in such processes, breaking common ideas and senses that end up reinforcing racism and prejudice, even when coming from those who have the intention to collaborate.

In the case of the experience of building the community network in the quilombo Terra Seca, which gave rise to this material, we saw the meeting between the local community with feminist activist organizations and groups, also linked to technology and composed mostly of white women. From this meeting, important reflections emerged on the need to discuss whiteness. From these reflections, we think of our actions and engagements in a way that does not continue to reproduce silences. And with this experience, we understand how important it is to provide this reflection and broaden this debate within the activist field, especially focused around technology.

Acknowledgements

Community networks are the union of digital technologies with human knowledge and actions. Popular education and intersectional feminism have been important partners in building the technologies we want. We believe that technology can be another tool for strengthening political struggles, gaining and guaranteeing rights, but alone can be just reproducing and strengthening oppressions. We want to collectively build technologies that carry our will to build a better and fairer world. And that it values people in their diversity, making sense of the many ways of living and relating.

But all this would not have been possible without the involvement of the women of RAMA, SOF and the workshop leaders of the FIRN project (From The Feminist Internet Research Network) of APC. That's why we want to thank everyone who has been involved in this process with us, whether by going to one of the workshops or participating and helping to build the network both hands on as well as by sharing ideas and dreams. But also and most fundamentally, all the people who helped us by cooking wonderful meals, going up and down the hills with us, opening their homes for us, taking care of the children so that the people concerned could participate and maintaining a clean and pleasant space for our meetings. We have learnt a lot from the landworkers through seeing and hearing about the love of the land and its roots and we are very proud to have been welcomed by all to accomplish this project! Thank you so much.

This material is a short take on the reflections made between 2019 and 2021 by a group composed exclusively of women, who proposed to set up a community network in the Quilombo Ribeirão Grande/ Terra Seca, while conducting a participatory research process on information and communication technologies, more specifically community networks, under an intersectional feminist lens. With the COVID–19 pandemic and the impossibility of returning more often to the territory to share our thoughts, in particular at the close of the research process, we have gathered in this zine our main reflections to be able to share them in some way. Through this journey with SOF, RAMA and the Quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca, we were able to learn and rethink technologies and the inclusion of women, the confrontation with racism, including white people, and shaping technologies to meet local wishes and needs. The zine has become a tool to return to the community in times of social isolation. A preliminary version of it was presented and revised along with residents of the Quilombo Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca on July, 2021, incorporating these contributions.
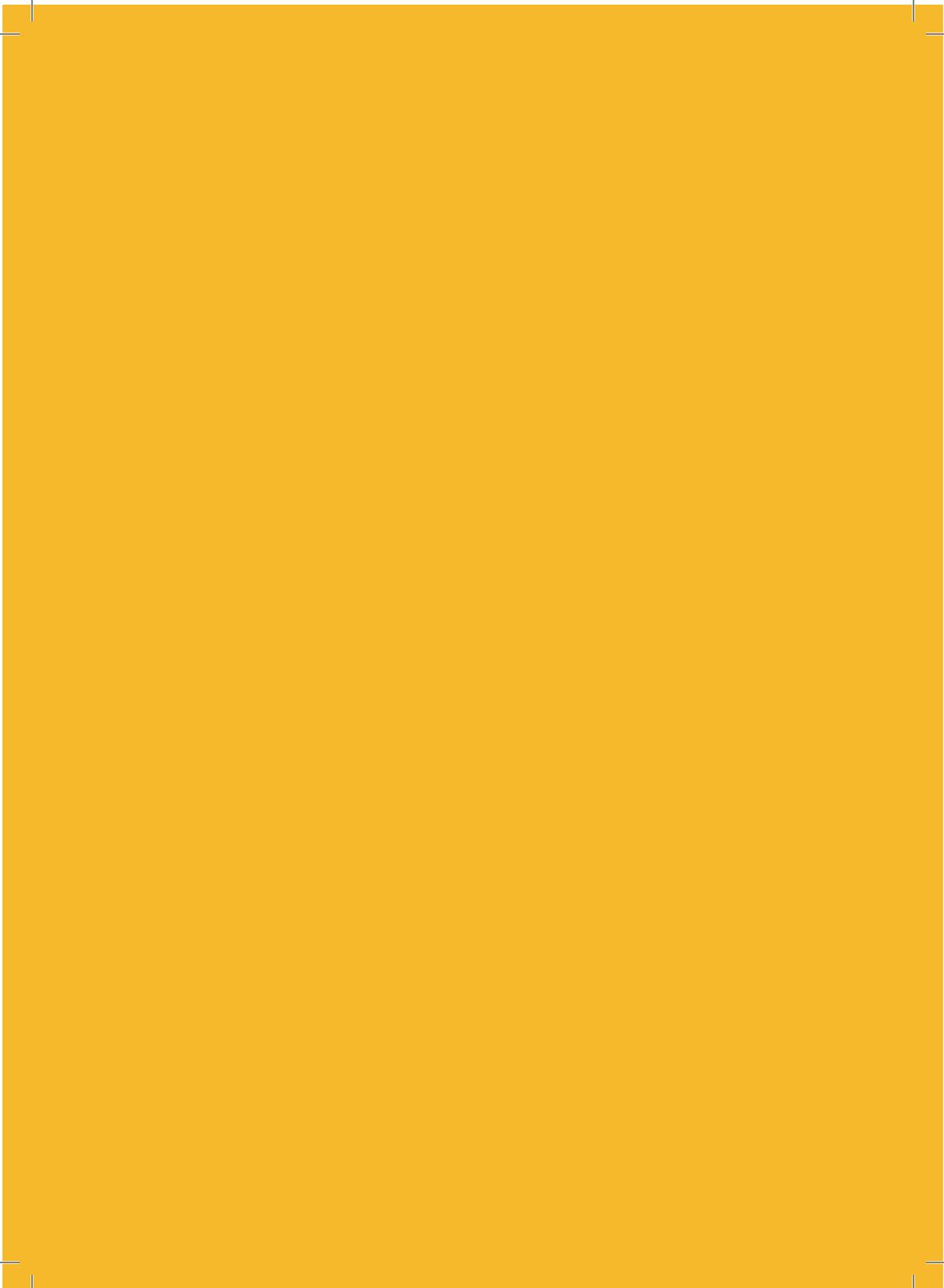
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