



W-Power



Transnational Learning Programme for Women Entrepreneurs

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W-Power project (Empowering women entrepreneurs in sparsely populated communities) is co-funded by the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme 2014-2020. It has supported the implementation of key EU and national policies related to empowerment of women entrepreneurs. The project has also considered the Arctic Dimension and horizontal principles.

The project has been coordinated by Karelia University of Applied Sciences and has been implemented in years 2018-2021. For further questions, you may contact the project manager and co-author of this publication, Ms. Helena Puhakka-Tarvainen, helena.puhakka-tarvainen@karelia.fi. All project outputs can be found from the website <https://w-power.interreg-npa.eu/>.



1. Background and goals

W-Power (Empowering women entrepreneurs in sparsely populated communities) has been a transnational project co-funded by Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme 2014–2020. Project partners from Finland, Sweden, Scotland, Shetland, Ireland, Iceland and Canada have combined their forces to empower women entrepreneurs through a transnational learning programme. Dozens of on-site and on-line learning occasions have taken place during years 2018–2021 both in smaller and larger groups of women entrepreneurs.

The programme was piloted in the sparsely populated Northern Periphery and Arctic region. However, it is also applicable in the places confronting similar challenges such as sparse population, long distances and low economy in any region in the EU or globally. As the participating regions have variation and dissimilarities, independent approaches have been piloted in different regions. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the project team to be innovative in terms of facilitating the learning and reaching the target groups.

In the beginning of the project, a pre-survey of training needs was circulated across the project region with the result of nearly 200 responses from women entrepreneurs. On the basis of the pre-survey it could be stated that the key needs for upskilling included digital marketing skills, business financing and calculation knowhow, product development competences, time management skills and networking opportunities. Thus, the transnational learning programme implementation was targeted to meet those needs. The results of the survey are available in more detail in *Capacity Building Needs for Female Entrepreneurs in the Northern Periphery and Arctic* by Holmbom and Hägglund 2019.

2. Different forms of learning piloted

The W-Power learning programme for women entrepreneurs consists of a common training concept and elements, but the implementation has varied in every region based on the local needs. Joint efforts have been e.g. regional stakeholder forums, transnational thematic weeks, a joint **peer-to-peer mentoring scheme** and a gender-sensitive coaching concept. The transnational learning opportunities were targeted at both aspiring and current women entrepreneurs as well as business advisors. The elements of the transnational learning programme have included upskilling in multicultural teams and networking events across sectoral borders. The model and visualization of the transnational learning programme presents the different forms of learning (Table 1, on page 5).

Training type  	Target group(s)	Competences to develop	Training methodology	Way(s) to implement	Key elements
WEBINARS  	Women entrepreneurs, students, other professionals	Generic entrepreneurial skills, specific sectoral skills (e.g. sustainability in business, communication in crisis, change management, risk management, blog writing, productization)	Tailored online trainings by professionals for a group of participants, open to everyone	Organized both regionally with local languages and transnationally in English	Public recordings following the accessibility rules
TRAININGS & WORKSHOPS  	Women entrepreneurs, students, other professionals	Generic entrepreneurial skills, specific sectoral skills (e.g. environmental management, marketing tools, pitching and presentation skills, time management and wellbeing, brand creation)	Tailored onsite trainings and workshops by guest speakers /professionals for a group of participants, open to everyone	One-time events, usually 2–4 hours with some meal /snacks. Regional events organized in local languages, transnational workshops in English.	Training topics are based on the needs of the beneficiaries (pre-survey, feedback surveys). More fruitful outcome is achieved if the participants have similar knowledge level.
LONGER WORKSHOPS 	Women entrepreneurs, students, other professionals	Generic entrepreneurial skills (e.g. set-up of an online store, FB- & Google marketing, how to make an online course, storytelling, entrepreneur's wellbeing, LEAN)	Tailored trainings for registered groups of participants, who engage to participate the whole series of trainings. Professional trainers.	Onsite or online events, e.g. 2–4 x 2–4 hours, regionally or nationally. Local languages used.	Training topics are based on the needs of the beneficiaries (pre-survey, feedback surveys)
GROUP COACHING BY A TAILORED GENDER-SENSITIVE PROCESS 	Women entrepreneurs or start-ups	Entrepreneurial skills, how to set-up a successful business (e.g. financial management, productization, marketing, self-management, well-being)	Tailored trainings for a targeted group, based on registration or other criteria. Professional coaches.	Onsite, online or hybrid events. Coaching for a certain group consisting of a series of 3–5 meetings (2–4 h /each) following a tailored agenda.	Coaching are implemented by following gender-sensitivity tools
INDIVIDUAL SPARRING 	Women entrepreneurs or start-ups	Entrepreneurial skills, how to set-up a successful business (e.g. financial management, productization, marketing, self-management, well-being)	Individual coaching /sparring sessions for a certain company member by a professional.	Onsite, online or hybrid events, 1–1.5 hours each with business wisely tailored agenda. Company specific business development needs are discussed.	Deepens the content of the group coaching or an online training. Under the de minimis support (EU State Aid rules).

5 TABLE 1. THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF REGIONAL  AND TRANSNATIONAL  LEARNING.

Training type T R	Target group(s)	Competences to develop	Training methodology	Way(s) to implement	Key elements
PEER-LEARNING T R	Women entrepreneurs, business advisors, project staff members	Finding similarities and differences across the project regions in relation to the entrepreneurial ecosystem or individual company level. Peer-support and sharing best practices.	Site visits, joint online learning (including formulated learning plans)	Gathering together transnationally either onsite or online to learn together from peers. Varied topics.	Pairwise peer-to-peer mentoring programme as a speciality
BENCHMARK T R	Project personnel, women entrepreneurs, business advisors, other key stakeholders	Learning from others, sharing best practices across the regions. Benchmark topics follow the project themes, e.g. gender-sensitive coaching.	On-site visits to other regions or countries, enabled by the project funding. Also, regional approach possible, thus entrepreneurs visiting and learning from others.	Selected site visits alongside the project Thematic Weeks. Regionally, group site visits to selected woman-led SMEs.	Each project partner has selected suitable benchmark themes and engaged the relevant stakeholders to join. Regionally, suitable SMEs selected based on the interest of the participating group of woman entrepreneurs.
LEARNING FROM OTHER PROJECTS T R	Project personnel, partner organizations.	Benchmark of other projects related to similar topics, both regionally, nationally and transnationally.	Regular meetings of project teams, reciprocal participation / contribution to the events organized, share of tools and outputs created by the projects.	Online or onsite meetings to update what is going on in the different projects, learning from others, avoiding overlapping, finding synergies.	Requires systematic approach, similar goals and regular meetings.
NETWORKING EVENTS (ON-SITE) R	Women entrepreneurs, business advisors, business angels, project staff members, other interested stakeholders (e.g. authorities)	Creating quadruple-helix networks, learn to know people personally, lower the threshold to ask help from peers or advisors, share inspiring business stories and best practices.	Short events (1–2 h) in a restaurant or similar easily reachable venue, flexible agenda including the introduction of participants. Discussion led by the project team to keep the session active.	Announcement and marketing good time before the event using multiple channels. Pre-registrations needed for the catering. Needs an agenda and facilitator, though the participants should have the main role in the event.	Good practice is to offer a breakfast or similar to tempt participants in a wide range. Also, the time of the event is worth thinking (e.g. beginning of the day or during lunch break, and sharp in length).
BRAINSTORMING T	Entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in a specific sector	Loosely facilitated workshop with a specific agenda, e.g. to create common products to handicraft market. Co-creation with peers.	Single or several sessions, invitees based on sectoral selection, facilitator with selected workshop methodology.	Careful planning of methodology with the organizing team, consideration of the relevant participants to be invited, planning the full process (1, 2 or more events, what is the required output).	Can be also a joint effort by two or more projects with similar goals and target groups. Content is co-created by the participants rather than directed by the facilitator.

6 TABLE 1. THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF REGIONAL **R** AND TRANSNATIONAL **T** LEARNING.

Training type T R	Target group(s)	Competences to develop	Training methodology	Way(s) to implement	Key elements
THEMATIC WEEKS T R	Women entrepreneurs, business advisors, project personnel, other professionals, students, general public	Peer learning from others, finding similarities and difference across the project regions, internationalization.	Onsite or online approach. Events are organized and facilitated by the selected regional partner. Online events benefit matchmaking platforms (tested platforms in the project were B2BMatch and Tavata platforms).	Thematic week combines several elements of learning in an effective package, e.g. benchmark, trainings and workshops, webinars, networking, peer-learning, train the trainer.	Key element is to engage stakeholders from each project region to participate the full week. Project may be able to support the onsite participation financially.
REGIONAL CONFERENCES R	General public, women entrepreneurs, business advisors, other professionals, project personnel	Learning from project pilots, networking.	Onsite events to share information related to project key topics. Top speakers to widen the perspective.	Regional conferences are important to engage the general public to support the project goals.	Pre-marketing of the events is crucial to reach new persons to become part of the W-Power community.
PUBLIC EVENTS R	General public, professionals	Sharing information about women entrepreneurship, its challenges and opportunities, solutions found, and regional support mechanisms.	Open public events, fairs, exhibitions or information sharing stands.	Onsite information sharing as part of a larger event, which is thematically relevant to the topic.	Need to create some tempting and informative giveaways, e.g. brochures.
INNOVATION WEEKEND / WORKSHOPS R	Women entrepreneurs, start-ups, persons interested to create new business	Innovation capacity and tools, development of business ideas to successful business, strengthening cooperation and support networks	Group coaching for registered group of participants. Facilitated by professional trainers.	Onsite events in a place, which supports grouping, networking and focusing to the topic in hands. Two full days or lunch-to-lunch.	Hard to organize online, thus physical appearance is recommended. Optimal group size 8–12 persons.
INNOVATION PLATFORM / BUSINESS IDEA COMPETITION T R	Women entrepreneurs, start-ups, persons interested to create new business	Business plan creation, pitching skills, business development from idea to action	Business idea competition following a structured and scheduled process. Prizes for winners but the process itself supports learning.	Online or onsite. Regional, national or transnational. Can be integrated e.g. with pitching training (before) or with group coaching (after).	Online approach supports place-independent participation. More detailed description of the approach is available here .

7 TABLE 1. THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF REGIONAL **R** AND TRANSNATIONAL **T** LEARNING.

Training type T R	Target group(s)	Competences to develop	Training methodology	Way(s) to implement	Key elements
ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY R	Women entrepreneurs in sparsely populated areas	Networking skills, online working skills, generic entrepreneurial skills, specific sectoral skills	Tailored Slack-platform, facilitator coordinating the process in the beginning (6–12 months)	Systematically organized online events with varying agenda: upskilling, networking, peer-mentoring	Online peer-community, viable organically after the project
SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNITY T	Women entrepreneurs, business advisors, project staff members, other interested bodies	Internationalization, peer-learning, sharing best practices, supporting global business, export and joint business ideas transnationally.	Closed social media group in LinkedIn facilitated by the project staff members. Pre-check of new members.	Aim to activate the group members in a way that the group would stay active organically.	In the end of the project includes 185 members from 10 countries.
PODCASTS T	Women entrepreneurs, students, other professionals, general public	Learning from peers' experiences and best practices	15–20 min podcasts for public dissemination, based on detailed manuscripts and professional production.	Selected interviewees include entrepreneurs, business advisors, other stakeholders. Soundcloud platform used for dissemination.	Qualitative production process and marketing materials ensures wide dissemination.
MOTIVATIONAL VIDEOS T	Women entrepreneurs, students, other professionals, general public	Inspirational visual stories from woman entrepreneurs across the regions, learning from role models.	Short videos (2–5 min) based on pre-set interview questions and careful edition.	Selected woman entrepreneurs with an interesting business story. Produced by professional multimedia team.	Subtitles for accessibility. Ideal for dissemination e.g. in social media. Produced in a way, which makes the videos usable also for the entrepreneurs themselves.
NEWSLETTERS T R	Women entrepreneurs, business advisors, other interested stakeholders, general public; project team in other regions	Sharing the information of coming and past project activities, learning from the outputs. Getting ideas from other regions how to implement the project in the own region.	Regional monthly newsletter with a local language, created by MailChimp or similar software. Transnational newsletter in English. Both published also in social media and shared widely.	Proactive approach in regional newsletters, concentrating a lot for marketing the upcoming events but also sharing info about past activities and learnings. Transnational newsletter more post-descriptive. Content created jointly but needs a responsible editor with technical skills.	GDPR and accessibility must be considered. E.g. a permission must be asked to add persons to the attendance list (good practice: tick the box alongside the registration of events). Public share in social media widens the audience and is not problematic related to the GDPR regulations.

8 TABLE 1. THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF REGIONAL **R** AND TRANSNATIONAL **T** LEARNING.

Training type T R	Target group(s)	Competences to develop	Training methodology	Way(s) to implement	Key elements
INVENTORY OF GOOD PRACTICES T	Project personnel, business advisors, other professionals	Familiarizing with the field of the development by searching existing methods and protocols, listing the findings in an open access document.	Literature review and interview of relevant stakeholders (e.g. financiers, business advisors) across regions.	Report of the outcomes (open access). Conclusions for further development.	Directing the project activities based on the findings.
TRAIN THE TRAINER T R	Project personnel, business advisors, other professionals	Teaching the methodology created by the project team to the professionals, who may benefit the skills in their work. E.g. gender-sensitive coaching methods and tools.	Transnational or regional Train the Trainer sessions online /onsite.	Short and effective info by professional trainers. Sessions are based on tools and process protocol available open access.	Good experience of combining expert presentations and active discussion of participants.
CROSS-EVALUATION T	Project personnel, partner organizations, funding body	Learning from peer projects, sharing best practices and finding development points.	Joint plan for cross-evaluation with common activity points: (1) desktop study of the project documentation, (2) stakeholder interviews, (3) evaluation workshop for the project team led by the evaluator from other project, (4) evaluation report following a joint structure	Both projects nominate the evaluator(s), which can be e.g. the project managers + one project team member. Full project team is engaged to collect the stakeholder data and to participate in the evaluation workshop. Core evaluation team organizes planning and follow-up meeting regularly. When finishing the report, final check-up is done together to avoid misunderstandings.	Needs a joint will to engage in the evaluation process. The cross-evaluated projects should have similar elements, e.g. same funding programme and similar degree of implementation. Also, the resources for the evaluation must be existing in the project budget. More detailed description of the cross-evaluation is found here .
PROJECT BOOKLETS T R	Business advisors, project personnel, other professionals and stakeholders, general public	Learning from the findings of the concrete pilots of action (e.g. gender-sensitive coaching pilot and the innovation platform pilot).	Edited publications in a booklet form, ca. 20–40 pages thus easy to read. Pdf format makes them easy to share open access e.g. on the website and social media.	Booklets contain the process descriptions of the pilot activities, describe them in a popular and understandable manner and visualize the process models. Regional approaches with local languages are also recommended.	The aim of the booklets is to model the implemented pilots in a clear and repeatable way.
ANIMATIONS (T) T	Business advisors, project personnel, other professionals and stakeholders, general public	Learning from the findings of the concrete pilots of action (e.g. gender-sensitive coaching pilot and the innovation platform pilot).	A short and sharp animation, length max. 1–2 minutes. Animator or similar software used in creation. Easy to share e.g. on the website and social media.	The animation shows the key processes /pilot activities in a popular and visualized way.	The aim of the animations is to model the implemented pilots in a clear and visualized way. The goal is to tempt viewers to become interested in the topic.

9 TABLE 1. THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF REGIONAL **R** AND TRANSNATIONAL **T** LEARNING.

3. Lessons learnt

3.1. Experiences of the COVID-19 effects to the programme implementation

In the planning phase of the project, the project was to invest more in arranging on-site events and training, complimented by some online activities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the project had time to implement three successful international thematic seminar weeks on site in Finnish Lapland, Scotland and Sweden. Experiences and feedback from those meetings were extremely positive, and the participants found the seminar weeks both inspiring and rewarding. The project also had an opportunity to arrange many regional on-site events before lockdowns changed the world. Consequently, this has given the project an opportunity to reflect some of the differences between the online and on-site activities in the project.

The drastic changes in the operating environment led to the implementation of most of the project's activities online throughout the project area. The project partners were required to adapt their planned activities to meet the requirements set by the pandemic, both in terms of the implementation of the measures and their contents. The original goal of the project to support the emergence of new business ideas was adapted more closely also to the preservation of companies oppressed by the pandemic. The project provided support, among other things, for technical capacity building, online business and marketing knowledge, and support for entrepreneurs' mental resilience.



The exchange program would have provided wider benefits, if the participants had been able to travel.

THERE WERE MORE ONLINE-BASED TRAININGS AND ACTIVITIES THAN ORIGINALLY WAS PLANNED. BELOW ARE SOME PROS AND CONS FOR BOTH WAYS TO IMPLEMENT LEARNING SESSIONS (PICTURE 1).

- + Ability to offer more trainings as costs were lower
- + Wider range of experts are reachable for training sessions online
- + Wider regional accessibility without travel allowed for more participation
- + Lower threshold to participate in international activities online
- + A wider area for finding support and networks that are just right for the participant
- + Increased technical abilities have enabled online learning for more participants
- + New business ideas/services emerging from utilizing online skills and tools

- The commitment to be engaged online is looser because the investment in participation is lower
- Networking is often looser online compared to on-site meetings where more time is spent on building the interaction
- Some stakeholders might still lack technical abilities, equipment or connections for participating online activities
- Huge competition for participants' time and attention online; the supply of various online-events has increased significantly during the pandemic

PICTURE 1. PROS AND CONS FOR ORGANIZING EVENTS ONLINE.

On the basis of the experiences it can be said that selective investment in on-site meetings pays off, when they are relevant for the purpose of the event. Very good experiences have been gained from on-site group discussions where participants get to share their own experiences and comment on the entrepreneurship of others. One example of this are the training groups of the business idea competition, where, according to the feedback received from the participants, interaction and co-development have supported the further development of the business ideas.

The original concept of **the peer-to-peer program** was largely abandoned in terms of physical exchanges during the project due to the pandemic. Some of the peer-matches had good experiences with online interaction, but based on the experience gained in the project the exchange program would have provided wider benefits, if the participants had been able to travel. The benefits of interaction and authentic communication are clearly related to the amount of time and degree of commitment of the participants and used methods. In shorter online meetings the connection is often more superficial, and the benefits are not directly forthcoming.

Clearly substance-focused trainings and information sharing are the easiest events to be transferred online. Content-focused sessions are usually short entities that last for up to a few hours. It is easier to adapt them to the busy schedule of entrepreneurs, as online events do not require time to travel to the training location. Participation is simple and fast online. Alternatively, there is a chance to watch the session recording afterwards. On the other hand, on the basis of the received feedback, a higher amount of face-to-face sessions including networking possibilities were still in the wish list of the entrepreneurs.

“Best part of the learning event was the networking and possibility to share thoughts with other participants.”

3.2. Feedback from the participants

Feedback was collected from the learning programme participants in many ways: by feedback surveys after events, bilateral discussions with participants, and by specific feedback interviews. Most of the feedback has been positive or even excellent, but gladly also development suggestions for future approaches has been given and thus, it was possible to improve the activities in the course of the project. Most of the variation in feedback considered to the event arrangements/practicalities and to the experienced personal benefits of the training.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE FEEDBACK FROM LEARNING PROGRAMME EVENTS ARE LISTED ON THIS PAGE. THE FEEDBACK IS DISCUSSED IN MORE DETAIL ON THE PROJECT SEMI-EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT:

“I learnt from different funding possibilities and business support services in my region.”

“Sharing business experiences with other women has helped me to overcome my feelings of ‘imposter syndrome’, and so to move forward with more confidence in every aspect, e.g. hiring staff.”

“A bit more time for practicing personal pitches would have been good – maybe filming them in small groups?”

“Short personal coaching sessions would have supported the group coaching.”

“I miss the travelling! I was looking forward to meet my P2P pairs and see they working in their own environment! I found that the visits are very important and essential part of this kind of peer-mentoring program.”

“It would be great if you could add in some round table virtual networking sessions as well as the individual meetings.”

“The accountability of the Mastermind Group I participated in was really powerful in driving me and the other members to take action and get things done.”

“The innovation weekend gave me a possibility to stop for a while, concentrate on developing my business idea and to get new view-points from the other participants from other business sectors.”

“Very good information! Now I understand a bit more about SEO!”

“I got a new business idea during the group discussions!”

The most profound feedback was collected after the innovation platform pilot rounds and gender-sensitive coaching pilots attached to those. Summary of the participant thoughts include the following viewpoints.

- Participating in the pitching competition encouraged entrepreneurs to transcend themselves and expanded the comfort zone.
- It was reassuring to see that a lot of other women participated as well, because in general, men are more visible in events related to entrepreneurship.
- The innovation competition was a useful and positive learning experience.
- The innovation competition encouraged entrepreneurship.
- Participation and implementation have been perceived as an encouraging and positive experience.
- The written feedback provided by the jury was much appreciated.
- The race, coaching and training have given you the opportunity to stop and invest in developing your own idea.
- Group discussions have provided an opportunity to reflect on the development of one's own ideas.
- Participating in the project activities has given encouragement and faith in the possibilities of one's own idea.
- Participation has provided tools, forms, coach instructions and questions that have guided the development of entrepreneurship.

Micro-courses or short thematic trainings meet better the needs of busy entrepreneurs.

Feedback was also collected from the trainers. Some trainer emphasized that the baseline knowledge and learning goals of the participating entrepreneurs varied a lot in some sessions, which caused challenges to offer right level training to each of the participants. In addition, some of the participants were present online, but not active in discussions. In general, the learning needs were really practical e.g. related to the productization. One notice from an experienced trainer was also that micro-courses or short thematic trainings meet better the needs of busy entrepreneurs than longer courses requiring more engagement and time resource.

3.3. Continuation of the learning programme

The continuation of the learning programme consists of several different elements. During the project, partners have tested and developed different kinds of tools, concepts, models, and approaches for creating a model for transnational learning and capacity building of women entrepreneurs, based on regional and sectoral strengths, as well as capacity building of business advisors. Project partners represent different organizations (business support, education) with different roles in the regional field of entrepreneurship support activities. All partners need to apply measures into their ongoing operations and the regional needs to ensure continuity.

The post-project approaches of the learning programme include the following elements:

- Regional stakeholder forums exist either organically (e.g. the Slack network in Scotland) or engaged to some organization (e.g. Rohkea hub attached to Lapland University of Applied Sciences).
- Peer-to-peer mentoring relationships go on and many of the pairs are planning to meet when travelling is again safe and possible.
- Existing business advisory peer-networks.
- Transnational business relations have been created during the project transnational meetings and those relations continue based on personal interest.
- Regional coaching groups have continued cooperation also after the official coaching period. E.g. Realise groups in Shetland have organic continuation in terms of an instant messaging group and regular reunions.
- Maintenance of the transnational networks is supported by the social media channels such as the closed W-Power LinkedIn group (185 members in December 2021), official Facebook site (almost 500 followers in December 2021) and regional Slack-supported group in Scotland.
- Several success stories, videos, podcasts and publications are accessible on the **project website** and have been shared by newsletters and other communications.
- The project pilots and activities are well documented in the form of model descriptions, toolkits, booklets or animations.
- The innovation platform /business idea competition continues at least in four project regions.
- **ETRAC (Ethical Tourism Recovery in Arctic Communities)** NPA cluster project continues disseminating the project outcomes.

4. Conclusions

W-Power transnational learning programme piloted over twenty different approaches for upskilling women entrepreneurs, women planning their own business and business advisors in the context of the European Northern Periphery and Arctic. A lot of success stories were experienced as well as new development ideas were discovered. As a summary, we feel that the threshold to set-up one's own business was indeed lowered and especially new motivation and insights were gained through the peer-learning both regionally and transnationally. Based on the gathered feedback, participants found the peer-support especially important when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and businesses faced completely unexpected challenges.

The pandemic has also impacted the project. The most long-awaited activities, the transnational visits of the peer-to-peer mentoring pairs had to be cancelled. Online approach compensated some of the disappointment and at some level even equalized the accessibility to the learning programme activities, but it would be essential to upgrade the pilots further in the post-pandemic world during the coming years: there is still a lot to be accomplished in order to raise the number of women entrepreneurs to reach the equal number of entrepreneurs in general.

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W-Power



Northern Periphery and
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