Children’s Literature and Culture in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

The research explores the Children’s Literature in the UAE and attempts to analyze the content of 30 books in English and Arabic, to find the elements of UAE Culture: Religion, History, Values, Social Organizations, and Language. Moreover, these books are being used to teach the children expats and locals, about the UAE. This study addresses two key research questions: what social, moral, national, civic, religious and culture values and themes do the children’s literature in the UAE reflect? How appropriate is the content endorsed in the literature for children, in terms of themes, messages, morals and values conveyed? This research is a content analysis of Children’s Literature in the UAE, in particular, thirty books in English and Arabic language will be explored and analyzed in the research.

Keywords: Children’s Literature, Communication, Culture, UAE

Introduction

Learning, whether it is through creativity, art, books or even physical activity, has always been a way to educate young adults and teach them different ways of thinking and behaving. With the globalization that is being witnessed today in the Gulf region, children’s literature has become wider and more expanded beyond its own culture, but with preserving and perpetuating its uniformity and identity (Stephens & Belmiro, n.d. (2017)). Consequently, in the United Arab Emirates, the Emirati culture is based to a great extent on the Arabian Islamic Culture despite the diversity of the population. As an example, in the Emirati culture, the clothing is an important aspect to convey the heritage and traditions of the UAE: men in UAE wear a white cloak known as “Thawb” and it is a source of pride to show the part of history the Emirati people have. This shows how culture plays a major role in building a person’s identity. In addition to that, culture impacts and influences a person’s way of thinking, his/her values, beliefs, morals, and ethics. Unfortunately, some people tend to neglect and abandon their own culture and values, and they focus more on developing the country like others without taking into consideration their civilization and heritage. According to Masudi (2018), “the Emirati culture will fade with each passing generation unless Emirati youth fully learn and appreciate their traditions.” Hence, this becomes a major challenge for Emirati people and a wakeup call to teach their young children about their civilization and values that their society follows. Since the world is getting more diverse and includes various people from different cultural backgrounds, religions and economic groups it is important to build up communities that are open to each other and appreciate other’s cultures.

According to Zacharias (2017), in a country that is becoming more globalized and developed like the United Arab Emirates, there should be more focus on preserving the local heritage. This leads to the concept that some authors in the UAE are using creative ideas to teach Emirati kids and others about the culture in UAE using books; since children’s books often introduce the readers to new morals, social problems in addition to teaching them what is right and what is wrong. Therefore, it is beneficial for young children to know their own culture and traditions because it gives them a sense of belonging to their society and in general supports their wellbeing.

In this article we are going to explore the content of 30 books written in the UAE in English and Arabic Language through the methodology of the content analysis. We are going to analyze all the elements of the UAE culture found in the books as a method of teaching for the children.

Literature Review

A culture combines many elements that leads to creating a unique, distinctive and an outstanding identity. There are certain elements found everywhere that make up a
culture. These elements consist of language, values and norms, symbols and food etc. Moreover, in order to enhance the belief of appreciating one’s culture many authors wrote books that include the Cultural Elements found in the Emirati society. According to Shaikh Abdullah (2016), it is important that these books are being written to develop children’s education and more importantly to promote the cultural elements and tradition to future generations. According to Sarah Sillies (2018), these books that talk about the Emirati Community are important, and there are some initiatives from the Ministry of Education to add social studies to the UAE curriculum for children to know more about their society and how they should deal with their surroundings when they are grown-ups. The following are the summaries of 30 stories that include the elements of Emirati culture to teach kids from young ages about their society.

1. **UAE My Homeland, Hamad Learns About Patriotism**
   A book written by Ahmad Al-Shoaibi, that talks about a 10-year-old Emirati boy named Hamad that has been taught in school about the concept of Patriotism and Nationalism, but he does not fully grasp the lesson. In addition, he is hesitant to ask in class about it; so, he asks his father’s help in order to find out more about his questioning. After that, Hamad’s father explains the seven elements that Hamad needs to adopt and accept in order to fully understand his love for his homeland which is United Arab Emirates. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

2. **The Camel and the Done, Hamad Confronts his Bully**
   A book written by Ahmad Al-Shoaibi, it is one of the stories found in the collection of “Tales of Hamad” that talks about his adventure in his new school and the isolation he is experiencing since he does not have one of the desired new popular drone toys. In addition to that, he gets bullied when his classmates and friends know that he owns a pet camel. This leads Hamad to feel weak and exhausted because of his bullies so he decides to confront them and challenge them to arrange an extraordinary race between the drone and his camel to prove to everyone who is the winner in that race. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

3. **Keep trying Saif**
   This book teaches kids about perseverance, persistence and determination through the character Saif that has a hard time learning the skill of Yola as he wished to. However, he never gave up because his parents always supported and gave him advice about believing in himself in order to reach his desired goal so, Saif decides to practice till he becomes perfect in the skill of Yola. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

4. **Who Likes Emirati Food**
   In this book the writer Shama Khan, emphasizes mostly on the Emirati food like hot Chebab bread, Harees and luqaimat showing more about the food in the United Arab Emirates and how important food is in identifying the Emirati culture. In addition, in the book “Who likes Emirati food” is set in an authentic Emirati environment that describes in depth the traditions and the culture of the UAE and more specifically about the Emirati cuisine. (Khan S., 2016)

5. **Abu Dhabi Places to See**
   In this book that is written by both Shama Khan and Ahmed Al-Shoaibi, it helps the young reader discover more about the capital of United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi. Moreover, Ahmed the main character in this book helps the reader recognize this city more by exploring and showing landmarks, the Grand Mosque of Sheikh Zayed, waterparks, Yas island, Emirates Palace, etc. In addition, this book is not only for young readers but also for adults like tourists. (Khan & Shoaibi, 2016)

6. **Perfect Pictures**
   In this book the writer Ahmed Al-Shoaibi introduces the character Sultan an eight-year-old boy that has a secret superpower in which he can realize any missing element in a certain perfect picture. Sultan takes the reader in a journey through a normal day in his life by showing others how they can help their society and volunteer without any return. Hence, those people help in making the picture perfect in a certain society. (Shoaibi A. A, 2016)

7. **I Spy a Desert**
   Shama Khan, the author of this book uses a rhyming sequence in order to export the ideas that she needs the kids to understand and always remember. This
book is all about demonstrating to young children about the nature in the United Arab Emirates and how the wildlife survives in certain conditions, in addition to exploring the desert in the region. (Khan S., 2017)

8. Count with Me
Within this book that talks all about teaching kids about the numbers from (1 to 20) and using the rhyming sequence the author merges between the idea of young children learning the numbers through the Emirati culture. (Khan S., 2017)

It is one of the parts in the book collection of “Tales of Hamad” in which Hamad discusses Hamad’s first fishing experience with his father that doesn’t only teach Hamad about the techniques of fishing but also about the patience and perseverance that he must always embrace in order to reach his desired goal. Furthermore, Hamad’s father also explains about the history of fishing in the United Arab Emirates and how it was and still being used as a tool of survival for the citizens in the UAE. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

10. Be Confident Shaikha
Within the story, the writer Shama Khan introduces the character Shaikha that has been chosen by her teacher to star in a play in her school about the UAE National Day. However, Shaikha starts facing anxiety and lack of confidence towards the big responsibility the teacher gave her. So, for Shaikha to overcome her fear, she gets support from her family and her teacher by providing her with examples about Sheikha Fatima that helped and improved people in UAE. Because of all the support and the idol example that the teacher provided her with, she finally finds confidence to star in the show without any hesitation and successfully makes a show to be remembered. (Khan, S., 2017)

11. Our father, Zayed
The story of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (May God Have Mercy Upon Him) is a tale of a country. In this book the writer Ahmed Al-Shoaibi talk about the heritage and the traditions that the Emirati people used to and still appreciate until this day. Moreover, it is also stated that Sheikh Zayed is one of the great leaders that promised a bright future for the United Arab Emirates and its citizens. (Shoaibi A. A., 2017)

12. The Ghoul and the Phoenix: Hamad has a Nightmare
One of the stories in the selection of “Tales of Hamad” in which Hamad experiences a new adventure which is waking up to a nightmare scared and anxious. And in this nightmare Hamad sees a monster named “Ghoul of Failure” who pressurizes and scares Hamad that he will follow him wherever he goes. So, Hamad’s mother helps him overcome his fear and supports him by introducing him to thinking in a more positive way by using the Phoenix of Positivity. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

13. The Palm Trees with The Sweetest Dates
In this story the author Ahmed Al-Shoaibi stresses on the importance of having a real relationship with friends and knowing what true friendship is, by introducing a new character Ayesha. Ayesha wins in the contest made in her school that is all about art. However her close friend Salama doesn’t show any heart-warming actions because she envied Ayesha. After that, Ayesha felt broken hearted because her best friend didn’t support her, so she went home sad. Consequently, Ayesha’s father sees how sad she is, so he decides to take to the date palm farm and cheer her up by offering the sweetest dates and explaining to her what real friendship is. (Shoaibi A. A., 2017)

14. The Pearl Necklace and The Ugly Handbag
Within the book the author Ahmed Al-Shoaibi introduces a new character which is Ayesha, a girl that has been bullied by her friends at school because of her handbag. She decides that she will prove to everyone that she has beautiful things then she decides to take her mother’s pearl necklace and show it to everyone in the party she will go to. Under some circumstances, Ayesha loses the necklace so she falls into a situation in which she must confront her mother. However, her mother faces the situation as a lesson to teach Ayesha the meaning of true beauty in addition to exploring more about pearls. (Shoaibi A. A., 2017)
15. The Ghosts of Gergi’an: Hamad meets Umm Al Sa’af and Hamar Al
When Hamad and his friends go play “trick or treat” at night during the local festivities of ‘Gergi’an’ without even paying attention to their curfew time, Hamad and his friends meet a mythical character which is ‘Umm Al Sa’af’ when walking in the dark in his town. However, this mythical character decides to let Hamad and his friends go uninjured and safe only if they promise one thing. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

16. School of Happiness
A book created by Ahmed Al-Shoaibi in which two characters are introduced, Fatima and Shama. These two characters take the young reader to a new adventure with them in their new school called the school of happiness. In addition, this book teaches the reader about being always positive and ways to find true happiness. (Shoaibi A. A., 2017)

17. Eid Road Trip: Hamad Receives the Best Gift
Hamad and his family plan on celebrating the Eid with his grandparents and Hamad is excited to receive his Eid gift. However, on their way to Al Ain where his grandparents live, the car stops working and Hamad realizes that he might miss his gift. In contrast, instead of worrying about what will happen, he learns more about Eid rituals and receives his best gift. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

18. Daniel of The Desert
Daniel, a young British boy that heard his parents will move to a new city, Dubai, becomes anxious and nervous because he doesn’t want to leave his home and especially his friends. Daniel starts to over think about the situation he is in, especially that his family will be moving to city located in a desert. However, all of Daniel’s nervousness goes away once he starts his new school and meets an Emirati boy named Hamad that shows the hospitality of the Emirati people and tells Daniel that he won’t face any difficulties living here since the citizens are diverse. In addition, Daniel will find friends even though he sometimes doesn’t expect to. (Bryant D., 2017)

19. The Space Nokhitha
When Nokhitha comes from school excited about the dream that she wants to accomplish, to be the first Arab girl to land on Mars, her mother doesn’t reply in the enthusiasm that Nokhitha had, so she gets heart broken. However, her grandfather tries to encourage and comfort her by telling to be determined in order to reach her desired goal and promises her that he will help her become a well-known Nokhitha of space. (Shoaibi A. A., 2017)

20. My Brother’s Horse
Ayesh who loves her brother too much is sad, because he must go to fulfill his duty for his country. However, he asks his sister Ayesh to take care of his horse Salsabeel and for Ayesh to do that she must get over her fear of horses. In addition, Ayesh cannot reject her brother’s request because she promised him. Consequently, Ayesh becomes brave and overcomes her fear and she becomes also an expert in riding horses. (Shoaibi A. A., 2016)

21. The boy who knew the mountains
This heart touching story talks about a boy named Suhail that has special needs and was abandoned by his tribe because he was different, and people felt uncomfortable around him. While living alone in the mountains, Suhail rescues a young lost girl. When they return to her village, she introduces him to her tribe, however they greeted him in a good way in comparison to how his tribe did. The girl’s tribe accepted his differences and in contrast to how his tribe did. The girl’s tribe accepted his differences and respected him and at the end they knew that he was special. (Christina M., 2016)

22. Two great leaders
This book that has been translated from Arabic to English talks about the two great leaders that were presidents of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed (May God Have Mercy Upon him) and Sheikh Rashid and the way they envisioned a successful country in which its citizens can and will reach their goals. In addition, both sheikhs wanted the people UAE to be happy and contented. Moreover, the author explains how the 7 presidents of the 7 emirates united in order to unify the country and live peacefully. (Maktoum, M. B., 2016)

23. I Love my Dad’s Long Beard
The author Maitha Al-Khayat, talks about how fathers differ in sizes and shapes and work so hard to make their children happy. In this story the writer describes how in the Middle East most fathers have
long beards and describes them as a special indication. And they can be the start of all sorts of experiences. (Khayat M.A., 2009)

24. When A Camel Craves Luqaimat
This story by Maitha Al-Khayat talks about a camel that loves and gets addicted to the Emirati dessert called luqaimat. However, a girl teaches and introduces the camel to other delicious dishes found in the Emirati cuisine. (Khayat M.A., 2016)

25. When unified there will be strength (في الاتحاد قوة)
In this book the writer stresses on the concept of unity by giving the example of UAE when all 7 Emirates united to form a strong and peaceful country and the story takes place in the same time as the national day. It talks about a boy that spends a day with his family in the village and they do lots of activities related to the national day of UAE and these activities reflect the Emirati culture. Moreover, his grandfather teaches the main character in the story more about the Emirati culture, their traditions and history. (Balan A., 2018)

26. I Love My Mom’s Pretty Veil
Around the world there are millions of mothers that wear head scarfs all over them which is something normal and it’s a matter of faith; however, some people think it’s an act of modesty. In this story, the main idea is: how children observe their mother who puts a veil and how proud they feel about it. (Al Khayat M., 2016)

27. Love in Ramadan
Ramadan as known to most people it is the month of love, joy, caring and giving. In this book written by Maitha Al Khayat it shows an adventure of a small family in Ramadan and how they spend their time in this beloved month. (Al Khayat M., 2016)

28. Our Father Sultan (بابا سلطان)
This book is a brief biography of his Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, Ruler of Sharjah. His biography addresses his excellence in various stages of his life and highlights his excellence throughout the years of study in scientific subjects and student activities such as sports and drawing, his humanity and nobility and his passion for science and knowledge, which is reflected today in his promotion of science and arts and in cultural events that take place in Sharjah under his direction and under his care. The story introduces young readers to His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah in a manner that suits their age and provides them with role models. (Ghabesh S., 2016)

29. Eid shoes (حذاء العيد)
Dima wants to buy blue shoes she likes a lot, but she has to wait for Eid to buy it. In the morning of the feast, she wears her new blue shoes with the holiday dress and goes with her family to the grandfather's house to celebrate. This story is heart-warming, in which the young reader learns about the customs the Emirati people practice on this occasion. (Aldin F., 2010)

30. Baba Zayed (بابا زايد)
This book is a brief biography of His Highness Sheikh Zayed. Sheikh Zayed was not only an ordinary political leader, but a man with a vision of the future, respected throughout the world, who united the country. A Bedouin poet who lives a simple life, loves his love for knowledge and work, and manages to lead the country and unite it, the title of "father of the nation. (Ghabesh S., 2011)

Methodology:
Nowadays, the issue of abandoning one’s culture has become a major problem and it is evolving at an alarming rate. Moreover, this problem is not only found in the Emirati culture, but all over the world. This leads many people in the United Arab Emirates and specially authors to shed light on the importance of knowing a person’s heritage by writing books for young children to teach them more about the culture, traditions and values of their country. By that, children from young ages are being exposed to their country’s history and getting to know it better; these books are being used to teach the children expats and locals, about the United Arab Emirates. For this reason, we got encouraged to find the elements of Emirati culture for example Religion, History, Values, Social organizations and Language and then analyze the way these ideas are being taught to kids. This follows the idea of us reading 30 books for young children that are related to the Emirati culture. This study addresses two
Finding/Results
This chapter covers the analysis and the interpretation of the results after reading the thirty books. Firstly, the six installments of the author Ahmed Al Shoaibi which are in the collection of stories “Tales of Hamad”. They all follow a young Emirati boy that shares his culture and traditions to all young readers by providing simple stories and experiences that he passes through. In this way by providing an interesting adventure that happens with the young boy and with the help of simple yet meaningful words, there is always a theme or a moral lesson that the writer wants the reader to know at the end of the story. Consequently, by presenting this kind of education to young children they grow up with the belief of belonging to their country so it will be more effective to reach common goals instead of each group planning in isolation for their nation’s development. As an example, in the story “UAE my homeland”, Hamad the young Emirati boy that didn’t get the concept of patriotism in his school, then understands it from his father’s experience. So, in this story the author shows the traits that a normal Emirati young child should abide by for him to fulfill his duty for the country when he grows up. Moreover, these stories do not only highlight the concept of patriotism and nationalism but also it shows other traditions and traits that Emirati people have.

For instance, in the story “Keep Trying Saif” the author wants the young reader to know more about the concept of perseverance and how people in general in the UAE do their best when doing things, they are passionate about. Besides these main ideas that the authors in UAE want the children to know, there are also books about the Emirati cuisine, the traditions in Eid and Ramadan, the customs that women wear, in addition to teaching kids about previous leaders that helped develop the country and educate kids about unity using the story when all 7 Emirates united to form a strong and peaceful country under a just leadership.

Going into details about the elements of the Emirati Culture and based on the books read we can divide the elements into many parts. First of all we can start talking about the dress code which is a very important aspect found in the Emirati culture that differentiates Emirati citizens from other Arab Cultures as known that men wear a white Dishdasha topped with a white head cloth (Gutra) secured by a black coil (agal) and women wear long, black cloak (abaya), and sometimes a black head cloth and in some cases they might also wear a stiff, gold-colored mask (burqa) to cover their faces as a sign of modesty. These parts of the Emirati culture are reflected in the stories “I love my mom’s pretty veil”, “The pearl necklace and the ugly handbag”, “I love my dad’s long beard” and “Eid shoes”. According to these stories wearing the traditional custom is something to be proud about, rather than being effected with western traditional customs. Although modesty is one of the goals that Emirati citizens should follow, they can show their beauty through henna which is also a traditional element that Emirati women follow. Hence, we can sum up that the idea of the Emirati clothing has been abided by, from hundreds of years from the times when the UAE was populated by Bedouins in addition to its advantages because of the hot climate found in the UAE. Thus, the religious beliefs that Muslims in the UAE are convinced by.

Another important element found in the Emirati culture is Food. Its importance is reflected in the stories “Who likes Emirati Food” “Hamad Goes Fishing” “The palm Trees with the sweetest dates.” “When a camel craves luqaimat”. These stories show the Emirati food that consists of Bedouins diet that is all about meat, camel milk, fish and dates. Palm trees are widely spread across the nation and dates are produced from those trees and more than 40 varieties of dates are grown in the UAE; each having its own distinct color and flavor. Although not all Emirati citizens know about their local food heritage these books teach young children from young ages about the Emirati culture. The third most important cultural element is not physical like the ones previously mentioned. It is more related to families and the relationship with
others in addition to the values that an Emirati person should abide by. And these elements are reflected in the following stories: “The camel and the drone Hamad confront his bully” “Perfect pictures” “Be confident Shaikha” “Eid road trip: Hamad Receives the best gift” “Daniel of the dessert” “My brothers’ horse” “Love in Ramadan”. Knowing that tolerance is one of the basic elements found in the Emirati culture, citizens are always willing to be encountered with other members of the society even their own families. And all these acts are because of the huge diversity of population found in the UAE that at some point helped improve the ties and relations with people. Besides the acts and the rapprochement of the Emirati people with people in minorities, Emirati people are highly concerned with family ties and their relations with parents which is something most Arab cultures have in common. For example, in the story “Eid road trip Hamad receives the best gift” the writer stresses on the concept of knowing the rituals of Eid Day rather than cliché thoughts that people have about that day. As shown in the story Hamad was excited to spend the day with his grandparents that are considered as his second parents. Therefore, the UAE government firmly believes in the family system and that it is considered the nucleus of the society, it gives a lot of importance to building a strong familial system. Moreover, the dialogue among children, parents and grand-parents must remain strong thus, Elders will maintain their respected place within Emirati families and society. With all the development and improvements happening within the country, respect is an important element and especially towards women and their role in the society. In the story “The space Nokhitha” the main character is encouraged to follow her dreams and become the first Arab girl to land on Mars, so she is motivated to reach her desired goal and become a well-known Nokhitha of space. As preliminary observation, many citizens and organizations are trying to promote several creative ideas and initiatives that support the importance of the national and civic education and socio-cultural heritage and this is shown by presenting these kinds of learning methods to children and organizing workshops for adults. In addition, these initiatives and ideas stresses on the idea of belonging to a person’s homeland and enriching the thought of social responsibility at all levels. Furthermore, authorities like “Dubai Culture & Arts Authority” are planning events that invites the public to envision the Emirati culture through workshops, exhibitions, children’s activities and pop-ups. (Dubai culture highlights the importance of Islamic culture and art by supporting ‘rise, 2017). All these exhibitions aim at protecting and conserving the Emirati identity and national heritage and traditions. As a result of these actions, this strengthens the interconnection of members that are around a set of citizenship concepts through the school curricula taking into consideration the diversity found in the United Arab Emirates.

Conclusion and Discussion
Generally, culture is a set of human-made objective and subjective elements which in the past have increased the probability of survival and resulted in satisfaction for the participants in an ecological niche, and thus became shared among those who would communicate because they had a common language, and they lived in the same time and place. (Triandis, 1994, p.23). This means that culture can be framed as a set of beliefs that are passed from one generation to the other and these beliefs are dynamic. Moreover, culture is acquired to be transmitted through family members, religious traditions, educational and social purposes. Developing a certain culture requires certain standards; these standards need to be only used to enhance the society not to destruct it. Knowing that, the most important standard or tool to enhance a certain community is education and more specifically children’s education. Children’s education is the most important mechanism for transferring a certain culture and teaching the kids about the society’s tradition especially at young ages. These kids can learn all about religion, language, values, morals and basic components of their personalities from their parents which are their support system, teachers, and the school institution. This education can be formally or informally transmitted to students from their family and teachers. Using children’s literature, ideas can be taught to kids rather than memorizing without understanding the concept; therefore, children’s literature consists of a variety of genres such as fantasy including folktales, fables, myths, legends and fiction stories. Moreover, children’s literature has always been a way to build up and develop the
language, literacy skills, and creative thinking skills of young readers. As a result of that, it modifies the kid’s behavior and promotes acceptable social behavior through the values that are being taught.

This section covers the importance and the effect of stories on children education and their cultural roles in addition to how appropriate the stories for kids are, by stressing on the concept of value and cultural transmission. After reading the thirty stories we can realize and observe that children’s literature that it is a mixture of imaginative adventure with glimpse of ideas about morality through outlooks that include tradition, customs, social and civic values, therefore appropriate for their age. Nevertheless, children may not be interested and fascinated by the stories that are about culture and values; however, they unconsciously absorb and acquire these ideas by the way that the stories are being illustrated. For instance, these stories reflect meaningful socio-cultural codes, moral and civic values since the authors of these stories want to include in the tales the concept of human experiences through symbols. This will result in an endless debate about how young readers interpret these ideas. These tales also anticipate examples of socio-cultural codes that may be projected in children’s literature.

The main aim of tales is to enhance and develop the society and build moral values and positive behavior. In that way students can learn more about their culture and heritage and then transmit it to others by studying their folklore, by gathering traditions from their families and institutions and then writing their own perception about their traditions and heritage in books, tales and rhymes. Consequently, these tales are universal and can help enhance and spread globalization. Furthermore, it is interesting to compare cultures from different sectors in the world in addition to how they were in the past and how they developed in the present time and knowing the similarities between different cultures in that way it brings more people together.

In conclusion, by spreading the Emirati culture through creative ways it gives an opportunity to the UAE to lead and demonstrate cultural index to other countries and to its own citizens in addition to enhancing the concept of globalization and making the world more open to each other rather than each country plan being on their own.

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