

Conference on  
NGOs in Global Future  
Birmingham, UK, 10-13 January 1999

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towards sustainability**

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# Foreign Aid and NGOs in Bangladesh: a way towards sustainability

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## Abstract

NGOs in Bangladesh have emerged as an important actor in national development in general and poverty alleviation in particular. In the past, NGOs received very little mention in the development discourse. But there has been spectacular growth of NGO activities over the last two decades. This paper focuses on why and when international donations extended to the NGOs in Bangladesh and the change from aid dependency to self-sufficiency of the NGOs. The war of liberation in 1971 took a heavy toll of human lives and shattered the infrastructure and economic base of Bangladesh. The NGOs came forward with relief and rehabilitation programme. The majority of these NGOs were foreign ones. Later, they switched over their operation to sustainable development activities aimed at raising the socioeconomic condition of the disadvantaged. A number of national NGOs which originated at the initiative of some committed individuals also flourished during that period. Today, there are more than 20,000 NGOs in Bangladesh but only 1,000 are getting foreign aid. NGOs have been operating a variety of development programmes for poverty alleviation as well as for their self-sufficiency. Micro-credit programme has proved to be effective in poverty alleviation in countries like Bangladesh.

## Introduction

The number and volume of activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increased dramatically in recent years. This is true in the realm of producing social services but also very much in development cooperation. One of the main reasons for their growth is that new types of situations have arisen. One of the major reasons for increasing use of NGOs in developmental activities is to find an alternative and better channel for development aid in the third world countries.

National public sectors in several countries are being downsized but at the same time there is a need to find new ways to take care of public tasks. NGOs are one response to these needs and at the same time they are strategically important for the future of welfare states. On the other hand, in the globalizing world, NGOs have proved their effectiveness in distributing development aid.

The size of the NGO field has increased and it has become more complex, much more quickly than academic research has been able to react. The NGO boom has, however, received relatively little attention from researchers. So far, the issue has mainly been studied by hurried evaluators and consultants hired by donor agencies or by the NGO themselves. Thus, the initiative to generate well-founded knowledge about NGOs in development is largely missing. The factors which determine the success of their activities, their role and planned and non-planned their organization and management, their efficiency and effectiveness from the point of view of sustainability, are all questions that need more and more in-depth scientific work.

NGOs are working for the uplift of developing and underdeveloped countries with support from developed countries and foreign donors. They are constantly seeking to reach the poorest. Their rural development strategies tend to have built into them an element of constructive confrontation against the exploiters: the bureaucracy and the money lenders. Apart from significant effort in development work of these organizations they have been building bridges between people in the North and in the South, and

making disadvantaged people self-reliant. To overcome the global challenges, i.e. fighting poverty, environmental degradation, and upholding human rights, equality and democracy in societies these organizations needed to find their way ahead.

The incidence of poverty in Bangladesh is alarming. It is much higher compared not only to the East Asian countries, but also to our South Asian neighbours. And not only are the women the poorest of the poor; they are also disproportionately represented among the poor. Diana Pearce (1978) coined the term, 'feminization of poverty' which implies that not only are women as a group likely to be poorer than men, but more women than men are falling into the poverty trap. Since poverty at a high level is still persisting in Bangladesh, the development efforts undertaken in this country focus on poverty alleviation. Almost all foreign donations came in this country for poverty alleviation. All NGOs work with two basic missions, poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor women.

This paper focuses on why and when international donors extended support to NGOs in Bangladesh and the change from aid dependency to self-reliance. And also how aid could play role in developing international cooperation. What role the NGOs have been playing in alleviating poverty, empowering the women and for overall development of the country.

### **Emergence of NGOs in Bangladesh**

During the period immediately before the war of liberation of 1971, there were a few international voluntary organizations working in the then East Pakistan. The war of liberation in 1971 took a heavy toll of human lives and shattered the infrastructure and economic base of Bangladesh. Millions of people of Bangladesh were rendered homeless and were on the brink of starvation. The NGOs, at that very critical moment, came forward to help the war-ravaged people of the country with the task of relief and rehabilitation. The majority of this NGOs were foreign ones. Later, they switched over their operation from relief and rehabilitation to sustainable development activities aimed at raising the socioeconomic condition of the disadvantaged section of the population. A

number of national organizations, at the personal initiative and a few committed individuals also emerged during that period.

Few years ago it would be fair to say that NGOs received very little mention in the development discourse. Today NGOs are included in almost every discussion about development in most countries of the world. Role and future of voluntary development agencies are debated in the developed countries as well as in Bangladesh which possesses one of the most dynamic and varied NGO sectors in the world. A question has been raised what the mystery lies behind extending support to the developing or underdeveloped countries although all the needs of the donor countries are not met.

Bangladesh is characterized by extensive landlessness, fragmentation of land holdings, densely populated and abject economic condition, religious tradition, miserable health status, extremely low literacy rate, high rate of tradition, high rate of unemployment, low rate of educated people and severe scarcity of employment opportunity. It is the ninth most populous country in the world with 120.5 million people. Proportion of rural population living in absolute poverty ranges from 60-85 percent. Bangladesh ranks 107<sup>th</sup> among 131 countries in literacy. After two decades of independence the health status of Bangladeshi population is still tragic. NGO help needed to reach the landless and poor women to give them urgent attention to job creation, education, health and family planning.

Despite an unprecedented change and progress in the developing world some 800 million individuals continue to be trapped in absolute poverty, a condition of the so characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, diseases, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy (Robert S McNamara).

One of the major reasons for the increasing use of NGOs in developmental activities is to find an alternative and better channel for development aid in the third world countries. The aim of this search is to pluralise the actors or stakeholders involved in the development activities so that the poorest of the poor could be reached more effectively.

by bypassing the oligarchic state structure of most of the developing countries. Thus, disappointment and criticism with public sector performance, in both donor and recipient countries, has had an important impact on this development. From a more general perspective the issue is also related to the continuously declining environment of the third world development, characterized by recurrent financial crisis, population growth, environmental degradation, poor agricultural and industrial production, growing corruption, bureaucratic complexities, inadequate policies, lack of democratic exercise in the politics. Total development task of a poor country like Bangladesh can not be expected to be carried out by the government alone for obvious reasons. Some others both from within and outside the country, should come forward with helping hand. NGOs have been doing that of for fairly long time.

### Typology of NGOs

Various types of NGOs have been working in Bangladesh. Classification of NGOs could be made through the role of NGOs in different countries. Basically the NGOs are of three types: local NGOs-those work locally to look after the local problem with a small fund. It's work span is not much wider. National NGOs work nation-wide, and the international NGOs works globally. There are some types of NGOs classified based on the hierarchical, value-loaded thought, etc.

A **people's NGO** is a civic organization that gives voices to people's deprivations and demands, and engages citizens in collective action. It is an instrument for distributing power within society, and strengthening the position of the poor.

A **development catalyst NGO** is closely related to the previous group, but it is more narrowly focused on a particular constituency and aims at empowering a much wider community that means the women.

An **empowering NGO** supplements political parties as mechanism through which citizen define and articulate their interest, meet local needs and make demand on government.

**An educative NGO** provides training grounds for democratic citizenship and educates the broader public on a wide variety of public interest issues.

**An advocacy NGO** operates as an advocate of local people when taking cases into courts.

**A watchdog NGO** observes circumstances and incidents in the society.

**A public service contractor NGO's** primary interest is to become pursuing contractual work from donor.

**A charity NGO** does also the same as the public service contractor NGO does.

**A family NGO** tries to have strong influence in the community.

**A white glove NGO** is established by the women with aristocratic background.

**A politicians' NGO** is established by a person who attempts to win supporter's votes and.

**A bureaucrat's NGO** consists of people working in the public sector; those who have found the bureaucracy to be a profitable channel by which they can increase their own personal income (Dicklitch 1995; Korten 1990).

There are some 20,000 NGOs registered with the Department of Social Services and Women Affairs under the Voluntary Act 1961. About 1,078 NGOs are funded by external donors of which 135 are foreign and 943 local NGOs (Salahuddin 1998). These include a wider variety of women, youth and religious groups, humanitarian, charitable and relief organization, professional and commercial associations, trade union, credit institutions and development agencies. The great majority of these organizations are either small clubs or cultural groups. Many exist in name only. It is difficult to determine the active NGOs from the record of Department of Social Welfare of Bangladesh as it does not have a system of periodic renewal of registration.

A trend is also seen here in Bangladesh that small NGOs get very little attention from the donors. As they consider the small NGOs to be inefficient and not capable. Donors concentrate on the big NGOs.

### Role of NGOs in Bangladesh

Poverty is not only a state of deprivation, but also a state of vulnerability. NGOs are poverty alleviators and sustainable developers. A perception is recently gaining ground that NGOs are committed to poverty alleviation activities and are prepared to work for the disadvantaged rural poor at the grassroots level. With the passage of time role of NGOs have been increasing in different development sectors and their activities have been proved to be highly effective although doubts have been generated among a section of the public regarding the roles and enhancement of NGO activities. Disappointment with the government programmes and projects is growing, the non-governmental, non-profit organizations have gained such prominence that development transfers through these types of organizations have become more or less obvious from the donors' point of view.

As far as the role of NGOs in the third world countries are concerned, there are three different perspectives; first the notion that NGOs represent a force toward democratic pluralist civil society; and second a view that NGOs have particular strengths in poverty alleviation and sustainable development, and third, that the NGOs offer the prospect of enhancing efficiency of public sector service delivery.

With a view to liberating the rural poor from the clutch of poverty a good number of NGOs have been working year in year out, probably the time frame spans almost two decades in the third world. A dramatic change was observed during the post liberation period when a number of NGOs came forward with their respective programmes. The NGOs have been playing very important role in changing the lot of the rural poor. They had been able to rebuild and repair over 200,000 destroyed houses in Bangladesh (during 1971-1972) before the government programme got underway at all.



The NGOs identified three enormous problems facing the rural population of Bangladesh. There was a general and desperate lack of resources, massive unemployment and underemployment, and there was the breakdown of social cohesion. The NGOs recognize the poverty and unemployment are closely intertwined and that increasing employment is one of the keys in reducing poverty. The burning question for Bangladesh is how to create nearly 20 million jobs before the end of the century. The NGO programmes are underway and more are planned to create employment. Human development is a very important ingredient for the job creation especially among the poor.

Improvement of human resources is a pre-requisite for successful implementation of development programmes. NGOs have concentrated their efforts on building human infrastructure for initiating meaningful development efforts. The major condition of the NGOs lies in developing human potentials through building organizations of the poor, through structural analysis and continuous education and social action. NGOs are trying to develop capabilities in certain survival skills, in order to promote the development of human qualities.

NGOs organize the landless into small groups at the village level, arrange adult literacy programmes, provide necessary training and arrange regular discussions on planning. NGO interventions now cover almost all the 86,000 villages in all the 64 districts of Bangladesh. They have, so far, organized nearly 8 million poor people into groups. Credit is disbursed among the members of these groups to develop their income generating capacities. Nearly 60 million population of Bangladesh have been brought under different health programmes of NGOs. These programmes aimed at reducing childhood and maternal morbidity and mortality; increasing awareness about sexual health; reducing prevalence of RTI/STD/HIV. NGO's non-formal primary education programme has covered about three million children from poor families. The majority of the children are girls. Non-formal primary education programme of BRAC, one of the largest NGOs in the world, is regarded as the world's biggest private sector educational system and is being replicated in other countries of the world (BRAC Research 1997).

NGOs have fostered solidarity and cohesion among their group members, thereby, strengthening the organizations of the poor. They also encourage the poor to fight against deprivations and social injustices perpetrated upon them. The contributions of the NGOs in the development of appropriate techniques have been notable. Treadle pumps and bamboo tube-wells also developed by some NGOs for the marginal farmers who earn significant economic returns.

Substantial role has also been played by the NGOs in mobilizing destitute women and involving them in various income and employment generating activities. In the field of agriculture NGOs like CARE and MCC, etc. have introduced new crops and cropping patterns. They intend to compliment the government efforts to improve the conditions of the rural poor, and towards the development of workable concepts and models through field level experiments.

NGOs in Bangladesh have pioneered a number of approaches to poverty alleviation. There are some notable examples of NGO innovations that have been tried, tested and replicated (The World Bank Report 1996).

- Group-based mobilization and Beneficiary participation
- Micro-credit for the poor
- Women as beneficiaries
- Access to common property resources
- Health education
- Non-formal primary education
- Non-traditional agricultural extension, and
- Development of appropriate irrigation technologies.

### NGO efforts in Bangladesh: a case of BRAC

BRAC was set up in 1972. Its original purpose was to provide emergency relief to people of small area in northeast Bangladesh. The country had been devastated by a cyclone. one

of the worst in the history of Bangladesh. The situation was particularly bad for people who lived in inaccessible areas. BRAC needed to change its focus, but it was not sure how best to go about building up self-reliant village institutions. BRAC adopted a target group approach in 1977. Households owning less than half an acre of land that also sell manual labour for survival (Abed and Chowdhury 1997). BRAC's programme organizers spent time talking to each poor household separately, inviting them to join BRAC's village organizations and convincing them to break from their dependency relations with rich patrons.

BRAC's Rural Development Programme (RDP), one of the core programmes, has organized over 2.2 million poor landless people into 62,000 groups called village organizations. RDP has been operating a number of development interventions. BRAC felt that only disbursing credit was not enough to bring the poor out of their low-level equilibrium. Hence started a variety of development programmes.

BRAC's ten-year National Oral Therapy (ORT) programme was the first major effort to work closely with the government agencies. ORT is a homemade remedy to combat dehydration among children, a cause of many infant deaths. By 1990, every single village had been covered by this programme. BRAC also assists public-sector programmes of child immunization and family planning in those districts where government programmes are performing poorly (Abed and Chowdhury 1997). BRAC's health interventions cover a population of 25 million throughout Bangladesh. It has two distinct directions like, Reproductive Health and Disease Control and Nutrition and family Planning Programmes.

The public sector's performance record in education in Bangladesh is dismally poor. Major problems have been low enrollment and high dropout rates. Since 1985 BRAC has been experimenting with a new non-formal school system. Today, BRAC runs 35,000 non-formal primary schools. The current enrollment is over 1.2 million. 70% of whom are girls from rural poor families. This programme has been quite successful with dropout rates of 10 percent or less during the three-year cycle (Abed and Chowdhury

1997). BRAC has also set up 2,625 adult education centres in collaboration with the government. BRAC's Training Division operates 12 training and Resource Centres. Research and Evaluation Division (RED) of BRAC has produced, as of December 1997, 563 research reports (BRAC Research 1997).

### **Donors as agents of international cooperation**

Development cooperation is an integral part of international relations. Through development cooperation it is possible to promote sustainable development and well-being in the developing countries. Bangladesh is always vulnerable to natural calamities like cyclone, hurricane, tidal surge, droughts and flood. The coastal areas and off-shore islands of Bangladesh are prone to cyclone and tidal bores. A cyclone that hit the coast of Bangladesh at a midnight in 1991 with hurricane intensity accompanied by a severe tidal surge. The loss of human lives and properties were apprehended to be colossal. The government estimates suggest that 137,000 people were killed and millions of houses were washed away. To cope with this severe disaster Bangladesh sought help from the international community.

The heads of the foreign missions in Bangladesh and the representatives of different bilateral, multilateral and UN bodies responded quickly to the call of the government to provide emergency assistance. Different developed countries extend aid to the underdeveloped or developing countries in different situations. Aid usually is channeled through some agencies. Also, there are some countries which channel aid support through their embassies. The agencies through which aid is channeled to the developing countries are:

The Aga Khan Foundation; Bangladesh Population and Health Consortium; Canadian International Development Agency; Danish International Development Assistance; NOVIB, Japanese RedCross, International Federation of RedCross and RedCrescent Society; Swedish International Development Authority; Swiss Development Cooperation; United States Agency for International Development; NORAD; The World

Bank; The UN Bodies; Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund; Department for International Development; The Ford Foundation, Helen Keller International; OXFAM; European Economic Community; The Netherlands International Development; Concern; Save the Children (UK); Save the Children Fund (USA), Save the Children (Australia); Radda Barnen; Red Barnen; ActionAid; IUCN; HEED Bangladesh; Aus.Aid; Terre Des Hommes-Netherlands; Terre Des Hommes Foundation; Korean International Cooperation Agency; The Asia Foundation; JICA, DGIS-Germany, and CARE.

All the above aid agencies representing different donors and countries have been contributing to the nations' poverty alleviation endeavours. These agencies also helped a lot to enhance international cooperation through extending aid to the third world countries.

### Towards sustainability

To the NGOs, the term sustainability means that benefits flowing from a development programme or project will be able to be maintained after external interventions or donor funding has been withdrawn. Sustainability in these terms is dependent on the degree of self-reliance developed in target communities and on the social and political commitment in the wider society to development programmes that support the continuance of newly self-reliant community (Lovell, 1992).

During the last twenty years there has been a marked expansion of non-government initiative to provide efficient delivery system for human development. This has resulted in a more direct delivery of services in family planning, credit, non-formal education and employment. Some NGOs have tried to organize the rural poor for the social and political empowerment.

Foreign aid has financed more than three-quarters of the total public investment in development in Bangladesh since its liberation. Between December 1971 and June 1991 Bangladesh received a total aid commitment of US\$25 billion (Emile 1992). By the late 80s donor dependency reached new heights. In 1990, 38.6 percent of the government

budget and almost 100 percent of the annual development plan were financed by foreign transfers. Donor dependency has not led to economic self-reliance.

An increasing unutilized aid pipeline and the absence of any noticeable change in the poverty indicators have resulted in donors encouraging NGO participation in development. They have increased their funding to NGOs. The donors claim that their assistance to the government makes little impact on poverty; nor has it lowered the high levels of morbidity, mortality and illiteracy. They became disenchanted with the way in which aid was being used particularly to undermine pro-democratic process. As a result, donors are increasingly stressing greater access to direct financing of NGOs. They feel the NGOs will not only help reach aid to those most in need but also facilitate community participation in identification of needs, setting priorities and in mobilizing local resources (Bangladesh aid group meeting report, 1991).

The micro-credit approach and human resource development activities of those NGOs for the assetless poor, has proven the replicability and sustainability of the approaches. NGOs efforts indicate that with appropriate encouragement and moderate support, they can not only expand programme but continue to innovate for wider participation of the poor in the development process.

The nature of activities of the NGOs limits the process of achieving financing sustainability in all spheres. As it is not feasible to be self-financed in some of the social sector interventions such as health, education, and awareness building programmes. The NGOs have been taking steps to recover some portion of the cost of their operations through introducing income and employment generating activities. In an attempt to achieve financial sustainability some NGOs have set up commercial enterprises to subsidize their social sector activities, although this has given rise to a new source of conflict between the government and the NGOs. The government considers that NGOs venturing into business-for-profit activities should be viewed as commercial enterprises subject to tax, even though their objective is to generate resources to carry out their mission of poverty alleviation and human resource development.

### Strategies for sustainability

Most NGOs are now aware of sustainability issues as any time, they believe, foreign aid might be withdrawn. As such they have been taking some strategies in order to cope with the situation without aid to come in future. Some strategies are commonly seen to be taken by the NGOs are:

**Supplements from commercial ventures:** Setting up commercial ventures to fund the work of the NGOs from its profit. This is a feature of large and more mature NGOs. Some NGOs which are registered under the Societies Act, 1860 have set up commercial ventures as private companies. Some other small NGOs although lacking in capacity to run them, have also chosen to get into these ventures as a hedge against the expected drying up of external fund.

**Credit operation:** Most leading NGOs have credit programme. They form small groups with the poor target people. They introduced a compulsory weekly savings to their group members. This insistence on their own resource mobilization through compulsory weekly savings is an important self-reliance strategy that reduces their dependency on outside agencies.

**Partnership programme with the government:** The collaborative programmes through government subcontracts to the NGOs are currently one of the most promising sources of finance.

**Linkage with the banking sector:** A growing number of NGOs are restoring to the nationalized commercial banks and agricultural banks for replenishing their revolving fund.

**NGO-financing institutions:** There are some NGO financing institutions that help other NGOs to help sustain in the long run.

**Sale of services:** This is a promising source of income for NGOs. The services that attract income most include training, consultancy and research.

**Fund raising derive:** Some organizations raise funds through public collection as sponsored events etc. NGOs are seen to collect fund during the disaster takes place at different times in Bangladesh through public announcement.

**Slashing benefits of the NGO staff:** Now-a-days, this is a common practice among the NGOs to gain financial viability and sustainability.

### Changing pattern of relationship

About 60 percent of the expenses of BRAC comes from overseas donors and international agencies, mostly in the form of grants. To avoid dependence on any single donor, BRAC accepts no more than one-third of its annual requirements from any donor. In response to the BRAC's plan to scale up rapidly, NOVIB took the lead in putting together a consortium of nine donor agencies that together could advance the fifty million dollars required for the new thrust. Consortium funding has been helpful both to BRAC and to individual donor agencies.

Development NGOs are linked through a variety of mechanisms. The largest coordination body for these NGOs in Bangladesh is Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB). Its mandate and membership composition make it a key organization to contribute towards a healthier government-NGO relationship. It has grown into a membership organization for more than 750 development NGOs representing a whole spectrum of international and local NGOs. As an umbrella of the NGOs, ADAB has several key functions to perform that include, NGO-NGO relations; GO-NGO relations; donor-NGO relations; NGO-forum/ Sectoral network relations; NGO-civil society relations and relations with international bodies, and UN bodies (World Bank 1996).



Since 1970 many donors have recognized the importance of certain types of non-governmental, no-profit-seeking organizations to development cooperation. In the new situation these organizations are widely called either non-governmental organizations or private voluntary development organization are recognized as important new partners in development activities. Due to increasing recognition and use of non-governmental organizations as important partners in development co-operation, the international scene of third world development administration has faced several important changes. The new situation can be characterized by three linked developments:

- a) Increasing institutional fragmentation: This is basically caused by the increasing number of organizations working in the field of third world development.
- b) Increasing functional specialisation: This is caused by the changing division of labour between different organizational actors.
- c) Increasing organizational interdependency: Development activities are increasingly organized and managed not inside one or two organizations or inside a clearly defined, simple chain of organization.

NGOs are today enjoying more freedom than before. But greater freedom for NGOs carries with it the obligation to become more accountable to stakeholders and more transparent to the public. There is a debate with this point whether the NGOs in Bangladesh are at all accountable and transparent to the stakeholders.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Bangladesh is the ninth populous country in the world with 120.5 million people with US\$ 180 per capita income. Estimations of the proportion of the rural population living in absolute poverty range from 60-85 percent. The women of the third world countries like Bangladesh have been historically deprived of their due rights. Particularly in Bangladesh women have been kept within the domestic prohibitive confines although the women constitute half of the total population. Besides, this country is always vulnerable to several natural disasters. There is perhaps no coastal or off-shore islands in Bangladesh which had not hit by a cyclone or tidal bore.

Bangladesh has evolved as a sovereign country in the world map in 1971. Immediately after the independence of Bangladesh NGOs have emerged as significant development partners working hand in hand with the international agencies and the government in the nations poverty alleviation endeavours. Most developing countries could not establish an effective, transparent and well-developed bureaucracy and state apparatus. In 1990, 38.6 percent of the government budget and almost 100 percent of the annual development plan was financed by foreign transfers.

Their assistance to the government makes little impact on poverty. And an increasing unutilized aid pipeline and the absence of any noticeable change in the poverty indicators have resulted in donors encouraging NGO involvement in development activities. So the help of the NGOs needed to reach the landless and poor people to give them urgent attention to job creation, education, health, family planning and finally to their sustainable development. NGOs have been undertaking a lot of development programmes, majority of which are donor funded, with a view to alleviating poverty and empowering the women since the independence of the country.

Development NGOs are linked through a variety of mechanisms. The largest coordination body for these NGOs in Bangladesh is Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) . It has grown into a membership organization for more than 750 development NGOs representing a whole spectrum of international and local NGOs.

But question arises with sustainability and self-sufficiency of the NGOs without foreign aid. Any time foreign funding may be withdrawn. Some NGOs are aware of self-sufficiency and sustainability issues. And some of them have been setting up commercial enterprises to subsidize their social sector activities. Micro-credit programme has also been considered as a promising way to sustainability.

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