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## Harnessing ‘communities of practice’ for local development and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals

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### ABSTRACT

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek to address some of the most critical contemporary global challenges in a 17-goal agenda, including poverty, inequality, global environmental and climate crises. Central to these goals is Goal 17, ‘Partnership for the SDGs’ which forms the core framework for implementation of SDGs across scale. After the first five years of implementation, remarkable progress has been recorded globally; however, significant gaps remain across world regions. For Goal 17, while lateral partnerships and sectoral collaborations have improved, there is little synergy at the local level especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Using the ‘communities of practice’ concept and reflecting on Ghana’s local development framework, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on how best to localize global goals, and discusses the relevance of collaboration at the local level in the implementation of SDGs. Our analyses show weak integration of the SDGs into Ghana’s local development structures and poor collaboration among actors at the local level. Given these findings, it is crucial to reprioritize SDG-17 in this last decade of the SDGs by mainstreaming the Goals into statutory local development structures while promoting collaboration and partnerships in ‘communities of practice’ at the local level – where implementation of development occurs.

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Sustainable Development Goals; community of practice; local development; local government; Ghana

### Introduction

The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Established in 2015, the SDGs outline 17 interconnected goals that acknowledge that efforts to end poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health, education, reduce inequality, and tackle the challenges of climate change (United Nations, 2020). The comprehensive approach of the SDGs, coupled with the ambition of ‘leaving no one behind’, offers a transformational agenda for the world’s poor populations (United Nations, 2015). The overall global outlook of progress on SDGs has been positive. For instance, global extreme poverty rate decreased by 2 percentage points from 10% in 2015 to 8% in 2018, children are living healthier and longer as under-five mortality continue to plummet, and global consciousness and commitment to address the global climate change crisis increasing, with about 45% of countries initiating National Adaptation Plans between 2015 and 2019 (UN Foundation, 2019).

Despite this progress, available evidence suggests that most low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) will miss the SDGs given their unique context (United Nations Economic Commission for

Africa, 2017). For instance, extreme poverty is still endemic in most LMICs especially those affected by conflict and political upheaval (United Nations Foundation, 2020). In Africa, a recent SDGs progress report shows improvement on only three Goals – SDG 5: Gender equality; SDG 13: Climate action; and SDG 15: Life on Land (The Sustainable Development Goals Centre for Africa, 2019). With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, even these minimal gains stand threatened. The pandemic's unprecedented health, economic, and social impacts could severely damage the fragile health and economic systems in LMICs, and significantly reverse progress on the SDGs (Kharas, 2020; United Nations, 2020). For example, preliminary estimates suggest that an additional 207 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty as a result of the long-term impact of COVID-19 (UNDP, 2020).

The current global health and socio-economic crises make the SDGs agenda even more relevant now than before because they serve as a roadmap not only for long-term sustainable development, but more importantly, for facilitating recovery from short-term shocks and pandemics including COVID-19 (UNDP, 2020). Similarly, the declaration of the 'decade of action' which amplifies the need to re-strategize and mobilize resources for the attainment the SDGs by 2030 has become more crucial. In this study, we contribute to a global discussion on post-COVID-19 SDGs implementation by examining how 'communities of practice' can accelerate progress toward the attainment of the SDGs in LMICs. We applied the context of Ghana in our analyses because of two main reasons. Firstly, Ghana is an emerging democracy with strong popular participation guaranteed in its decentralization and local governance systems. For this reason, it is considered one of the best examples in the area of participatory local governance and development in Africa (Awortwi, 2016). Secondly, the country performed creditably well on the MDGs. It halved extreme poverty well ahead of the 2015 schedule, and made considerable cutback on maternal, infant and under-5 mortality rates (United Nations Communications Group, 2017). Thus, Ghana represents an interesting laboratory for studying how 'communities of practice' can help to reposition and galvanize citizens and institutional support at the local level for the SDGs. The rest of the commentary is organized in the following main sections: decentralization and local governance in Ghana, the SDGs and the issue of scale, communities of practice and the SDGs, and conclusion.

### Decentralization and local governance in Ghana

Ghana is a unitary republic with a decentralized local government administration system devolving power from the central government institutions to regional coordinating councils and further to metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies as the basic units of governance (Ahwoi, 2017). In recognition of the role of local governments in development, the 1992 Constitution of Ghana authorizes the transfer of resources and responsibilities from the central government to local government authorities to plan, initiate, coordinate, manage, and execute policies in respect of all matters affecting the people within their areas of jurisdiction. The Constitution further identifies the district assembly as the highest political authority at the local levels with deliberative, legislative and executive powers [Article 241(3)]. Ghana currently has 260 metropolitan, municipal and districts assemblies (MMDAs) categorized into 16 regions (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020).

Furthermore, Ghana's decentralized national development planning system – outlined in the National Development Planning System Act 480 (1994) – comprises of the district level planning authorities, regional level coordinating councils, and national-level sector agencies and ministries, as well as the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC). The NDPC has oversight coordination responsibility for planning national development, with direct accountability to the President of the Republic. The NDPC liaises with ministry and sector agencies at the national level to ensure that plans are compatible with national development goals. Similarly, Regional Coordinating Councils oversee development planning and implementation in District Assemblies within their respective regions, while the district planning authorities initiate and coordinate the processes of planning, programming, budgeting, and implementing district development plans.

District assemblies work in collaboration with their respective subunits, including the urban councils, area councils and unit committees, to implement district development plans in accordance with national strategic priorities. The SDGs implementation framework for Ghana builds on the decentralized planning system. It assigns planning functions to the ministries, departments, agencies at the national level and MMDAs at the sub-national level (Republic of Ghana, 2019). However, scholars have emphasized the need to shift greater responsibility over SDGs implementation to MMDAs. For instance, Reddy (2016) identifies the local government as the most effective structure to facilitate and provide leadership for the mobilization of local development stakeholders, including civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector and local communities for inclusive sustainable development.

### The SDGs and the issue of scale

The SDGs build on the preceding Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by seeking to address lingering global challenges and other concerns encountered in the MDGs era. With its 17-Goals, the SDG agenda represents a broader and more comprehensive approach to global development, and captures the urgency of the time for a bold commitment to promoting a prosperous, healthier, and just world for everyone (United Nations, 2015). Nonetheless, various scholars have critiqued the SDGs for being too ambitious, overly broad in scope, and poorly representing nuances at the local scale (Stewart, 2015). For instance, geographers have criticized the SDGs indicators for not adequately accounting for the complex ways and forms development is conceptualized and implemented across scale (Liverman, 2018; Sultana, 2018). Development is a humongous and highly contested concept. Similarly, development priorities and approaches vary by geography and social clustering. However, as observed by Sultana (2018), these important local level geographical dynamics are lost out in the framing of SDGs targets and indicators. Others have raised methodological deficits in documenting progress. For instance, Moseley (2018) argued that the attempt to standardize SDGs progress measures across the globe privileges quantitative methodologies, which tend to capture statistical descriptors – data about individuals and peoples without their complex socio-cultural and historical situatedness. Liverman (2018, p. 177) further observed the susceptibility of aggregated SDGs data to ‘ecological fallacy’ where data for a larger group is used to make inferences about an individual or subset. This problem is apparent in how national statistics are employed in (mis)characterizing and (mis)representing people and their development challenges in the measurement of progress on the SDGs. Given these limitations, geographers question the scale at which the SDGs’ story should be told, while suggesting localization of the goals for effective implementation (Liverman, 2018; Moseley, 2018; Sultana, 2018).

The push to localize the SDGs agenda is grounded on the principle of promoting decentralized governance and local participation in development. Local governance remains the most effective mechanism of delivering sustainable development. Thus, decentralized governance institutions are central in the planning, implementing and evaluation of development projects, and can facilitate the achievement of the SDGs (Reddy, 2016). More so, they are better placed to engage local stakeholders and communities in translating the SDGs into local development plans and mobilizing around their implementation (Slack, 2014)

Localizing the SDGs requires effective collaboration not only between communities and their local governments, but also among civil society organizations and professional development practitioners engaged in the everyday process of facilitating progress in local communities. In particular, the broad scope of the SDGs demands collaboration across a range of stakeholders to complement the efforts of local governments (United Cities and Local Governments, 2019). Collaboration is critical in achieving strategic developmental goals. Gajda (2004), for instance, identifies collaboration as the primary strategy for achieving goals that would otherwise not be attainable with entities working independently. Collaboration enhances the decision-making ability of local authorities, enhances resource capacity, and fosters greater political influence (Arku, 2014;

Arku & Oosterbaan, 2015). Thus, there is an ever-increasing need for networking among government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and local communities to address complex issues confronting society. The interconnected nature of the SDGs – the indivisibility of the goals – makes it difficult for individual organizations to adequately address them. It is essential to note that while collaboration is undeniably an essential tool, it must be used intentionally. Without a well-defined strategy for collaboration, partnerships can be used to promote individual partners' objectives and interests rather than a collective agenda (Norris-Tirrell & Clay, 2016).

### 'Communities of practice' and the SDGs

'Community of practice', which is also referred to as a community of action, or collaborative action learning network, is an effective approach to promoting collaboration and partnerships (Snyder & Briggs, 2003). According to Snyder and Briggs (2003), 'communities of practice' combine disciplines, interests, and capabilities across geographical boundaries to address complex issues. Despite their utility, the challenge of cultivating high-performing 'communities of practice' from 'interest roundtables' continues to be a major hurdle for management, hindering the widespread adaptation of the approach in development practice. In this paper, 'communities of practice' is discussed as a conceptual framework and a potential vehicle for promoting local participation and accelerating action toward achieving the SDGs.

#### Defining elements of 'communities of practice'

'Communities of practice' involve groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014). The principal features of a 'community of practice' include a shared domain of interest, which serves as the identity of the group; and regular interaction among members, which fosters relationships and enables practitioners to learn from each other. In addition, sustained interaction over time generates a repertoire of resources that the group draws on to support their activities (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014). Similarly, Snyder and Briggs (2003) define a 'community of practice' as a network that features peer-to-peer collaborative activities to build member skills as well as organizational and societal capabilities. 'Communities of practice' operate as 'social learning systems' where practitioners connect to share ideas, solve problems, set standards, and develop relationships with peers. According to Snyder and Briggs (2003), well-supported 'communities of practice' can serve as powerful platforms for achieving strategic goals.

Across the various definitions are three important characteristics that make 'communities of practice' a useful tool in facilitating development at the local government level. Firstly, *a common passion*: actors in a 'community of practice' share common interests identified by geographical location (e.g., common local government unit) and/or sector (e.g., health, education). Secondly, *regular interaction* of a group is necessary to qualify it as a 'community of practice'. Indeed, Pyrko et al. (2017) contend that the collaborative learning process brings 'communities of practice' to life. Through regular engagement, members of a 'community of practice' develop relationships that enable them to share experiences and resources. Thirdly, *mutual learning* takes place in a 'community of practice'. Furthermore, 'communities of practice' encourage mutual exchange of ideas thereby increasing collective knowledge and skills. They also help to bridge formal organizational boundaries and facilitate knowledge mobilization across diverse organizations. Therefore, 'communities of practice' mobilize knowledge to promote development (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014).

**'Communities of practice' in Ghana`s local government: gaps and prospects**

The institutional arrangements for implementing the SDGs in Ghana emphasize collaboration and consultation between stakeholders (Republic of Ghana, 2019). For instance, the specialized institutions established to support SDGs implementation are multi-sectoral. These include the SDGs implementation Coordination Committee which involves representatives from 10 key ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs); the Office of the President, the SDGs Philanthropy Platform, as well as the National African Peer Review Mechanism Governing Council (Republic of Ghana, 2019). Additionally, the institutional arrangements for SDGs implementation (Figure 1) include a High-Level Ministerial Committee comprising 15 ministers and a Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) Platform on SDGs, established to facilitate coordination of SDGs related activities among CSOs. The Ghana CSOs Platform on the SDGs does not only serve as an umbrella organization for CSOs working on the SDGs, but it also facilitates networking, coordination and partnership between civil society organizations, the private sector, and the government. The CSOs Platform plays an important role in strengthening a multi-stakeholder approach to implementing the SDGs in Ghana with the representation of CSOs at various national SDG implementation committees. While national level coordination structures are visible and operational, apparent gaps exist at the

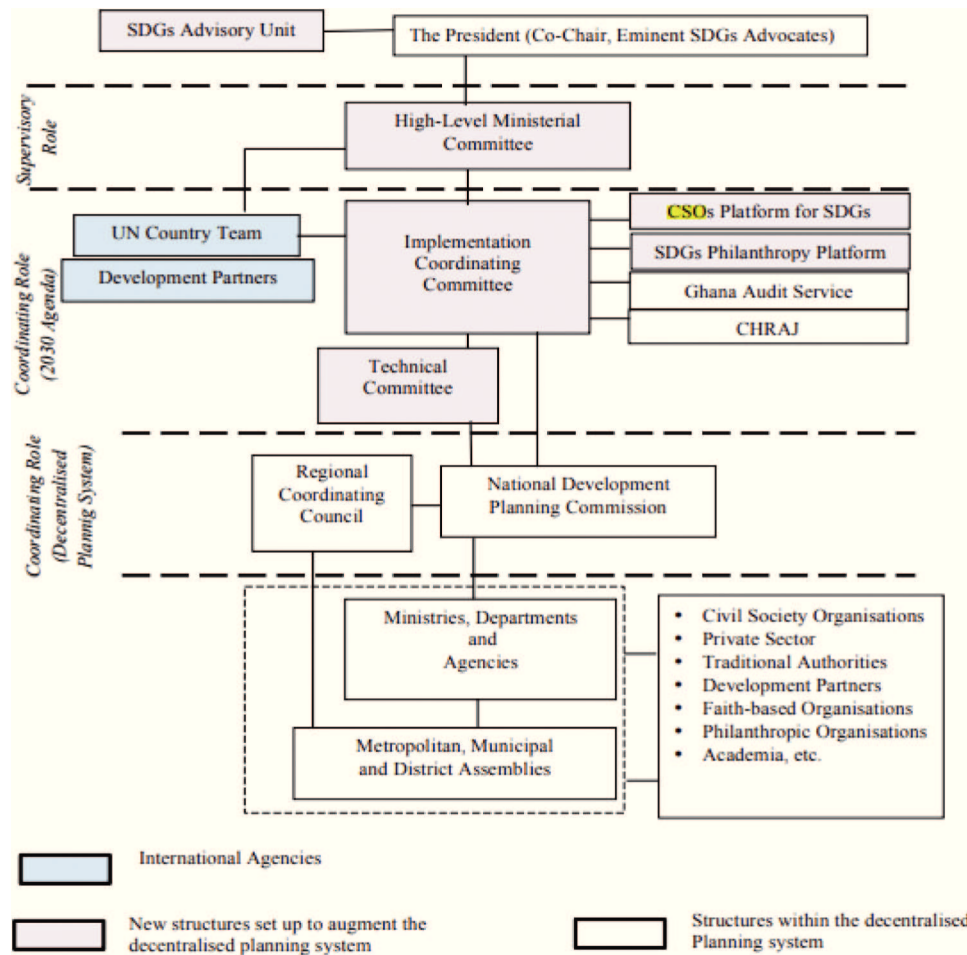


Figure 1. Institutional arrangements for the SDGs in Ghana. Source: Republic of Ghana (2019).



local level, and sub-national level worth addressing (Ghana CSOs Platform on the SDGs, 2019; Republic of Ghana, 2019).

In reflecting on lessons learned in the first four years of SDGs implementation, the Ghana CSOs Platform on the SDGs (2019) acknowledges that adopting multi-stakeholder approaches enhance local ownership and interest in the SDGs, and this, in turn, promotes participation and effectiveness in the implementation of the global goals. Accordingly, we advocate for the replication of national level coordinated approaches at the subnational and local level. This approach is critical and can take the approach of ‘communities of practice’ in order to mobilize stakeholders toward the shared vision of attaining the SDGs (Ghana CSOs Platform on the SDGs, 2019; Slack, 2014). While it is refreshing to note ongoing efforts at localizing the CSOs SDGs Platform in Ghana, we suggest the organization of local stakeholders and CSOs, to function as ‘communities of practice’ under the leadership of the local government. This will enhance collaboration, and harness skills and knowledge to facilitate local development and contribute towards accelerated progress on the SDGs. The next section discusses guiding principles that can be adopted to support efficient and effective ‘communities of practice’, especially in this ‘Decade of Action’ on the SDGs.

### ***Guiding principles for facilitating ‘communities of practice’ at the local level***

#### ***Harmonize and coordinate development efforts***

The range of issues addressed by the SDGs legitimizes the involvement of multiple actors in the development space at the local level. Ironically, activities of local organizations, including CSOs, tend to be inspired by internal interests and the interest of their sponsors, rather than local development agendas and vision. This results in the implementation of programs that are only peripherally connected to local development plans and priorities. Not only does this distract from the principles of sustainable development, it also presents challenges in documenting progress on local development as these activities are often not reflected in official local government reports. Thus, the availability of reliable data continues to be a challenge in the integration and monitoring of progress on the SDGs, particularly in Africa (Beegle et al., 2016; Ghana CSOs Platform on the SDGs, 2019). It is necessary that development activities are properly reported to highlight the local SDGs story.

Regular interaction of stakeholders in ‘communities of practice’ can enhance coordination, build synergy (guard against duplication of efforts), and enable actors to leverage each other’s capacities and successes (Jayasooria, 2021). For instance, the Ghana CSOs platform on the SDGs (2019) observes that the emerging national-level partnership between CSOs and government institutions has increased synergy and collaboration in implementing sustainable development initiatives, thus reducing the typical tension and suspicion between the two parties. It is therefore likely that a similar platform for engagement at the local level will facilitate localization and sustainability of the SDGs.

#### ***Build feedback systems***

CSOs are important stakeholders in the local government system as they represent the voices of marginalized groups and hold duty-bearers accountable on behalf of the communities they serve (Ghana CSOs Platform on the SDGs, 2019). Partnerships with CSOs are, therefore, important for monitoring projects and evaluating the corresponding impact on citizen’s livelihood and on the local economy in general (Jayasooria, 2021). A system of feedback within local government structures can provide an opportunity for robust internal evaluation of development plans, including the implementation of the SDGs at the local level. In addition, such a feedback system should be complemented with a mechanism for horizontal feedback in the form of peer learning with other local government organizations. Vertical exchanges with higher government structures such as the regional coordinating councils and national level structures would also help to mobilize and disseminate lessons.

### *Document learning curves: best practices and low points*

One of the characteristics of the ‘community of practice’ is the potential to develop a repertoire of tools and resources to guide development practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014). Through regular exchanges, the ‘community of practice’ gathers best practices that enable newcomers to learn from the experiences of others, thus, smoothening the learning curve. The lessons learned from the successes and failures of other members of the ‘community of practice’, could inform future initiatives and serve as guiding principles for local CSOs. The ‘decade of action’ requires that experimentation time is minimal and that development initiatives yield the optimum output.

### *Enhance efficiency in local development*

‘Communities of practice’ facilitate capacity building, as development actors can learn from each other. That is, it can provide an important platform for the exchange of knowledge and best practices. For instance, emerging community-based organizations could benefit from the expertise of established CSOs in implementing interventions. Similarly, local government officials and CSOs can benefit from mutual skill transfer to enhance their capacities in development planning, implementation and monitoring. Knowledge transfer in the ‘community of practice’, often indirectly and unintentionally, is an opportunity that can be harnessed to accelerate progress on the SDGs.

Establishing a mechanism for sustained dialogue and collaboration also promotes effective and efficient engagement between local government officials and CSOs. For instance, both local government actors and civil societies would optimize the use of time and resources when development issues are planned, implemented and evaluated through a ‘community of practice. In furtherance of cross-learning, several organizations in a ‘community of practice’ can learn from other more experienced organizations on best practices in engaging decentralized government institutions.

### *Operationalizing communities of practice*

Development practitioners with activities in a district can collaborate to form a ‘community of practice’. The role of the local governments as the first level of public administration makes them best placed to serve as the conveners of ‘communities of practice’, possibly with the highest-ranked official as the chair (United Cities and Local Governments, 2019). Civil society organizations constitute a dominant group of practitioners at the local level because they provide services that complement public service delivery, including activities that target underserved and vulnerable groups. In addition, given the influence of religious leaders and traditional authorities in the local setting, particularly in Africa (Mahama, 2009), it is important to include them in ‘communities of practice’. This is because traditional authorities and faith-based leaders provide alternative channels of representation and offer avenues for social capital. Engaging them in a community of practice will deepen the representation of a wide range of citizens in the planning and implementation of development plans, including the SDGs.

Meanwhile, effective interaction in a community of practice can be achieved through regular meetings. For instance, quarterly meetings of stakeholders with a clear agenda will improve ownership of local development agendas and promote cross-learning among actors in the development space at the local level. In order not to complicate existing bureaucratic structures at the local level, meeting settings of ‘community of practice’ can be made as informal as possible. This approach would facilitate cordial information sharing and support the building of trust among members. For districts that span large geographical areas, meetings could be held at sub-metro and area council levels to minimize logistical strain on members. Meeting records, including sub-district meetings, should be properly documented to provide updates on development activities at the local level. The next section presents some potential challenges that could arise in the adoption of ‘communities of practice’ at the local level.



### **Potential challenges in ‘communities of practice’**

Group management and potential operational costs tend to derail the effectiveness of ‘communities of practice’ at the local level. The process of implementing communities of practice should be managed carefully to ensure that they do not introduce additional layer(s) of bureaucracy to slow down development efforts. Also, innovative strategies should be designed to reduce costs of operation. For instance, brief action-orientated meetings could be used rather than large meetings in order to reduce the cost of hosting meetings. Another strategy is for the local government to lead in hosting meetings, while member organizations take turns to support with logistics.

Organizations and individuals wield varying levels of power, which can present enormous challenges to participation. Influential organizations can dominate and take advantage of emerging community-based organizations. Thus, there is the need for effective facilitation of meetings to promote participation and inclusiveness – ensuring that members have equal opportunity to share their views and benefit from peer experiences. Maintaining an informal meeting setting will go a long way in promoting participation and encouraging comradeship.

Furthermore, the situation where an organization is willing to learn, yet, unwilling to share its experiences more arise in a community of practice. With such a potential challenge, ‘communities of practice’ could adopt the concept of peripheral learning introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) as the mode of accepting new members. This approach links learning to willingness to participate. With such an approach, newcomers legitimize their membership by learning the formal and informal values of the community, as well as actively participating and providing leadership.

### **Conclusion**

The SDGs provide a blueprint for global prosperity that meets the needs of all people. Given the current rate of progress on the SDGs, it seems more likely the world will miss the set targets by the 2030 endline (United Nations, 2020). Moreover, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic threatens to erase the limited gains so far. Consequently, the ‘decade of action’ (last decade for the SDGs) requires urgent and innovative strategies to accelerate implementation of the Goals. This paper proposes the adoption of ‘communities of practice’ as one such innovation that can effectively localize development practice, and harness the skills of a broad range of stakeholders for the attainment of SDGs. Based on long-standing principles of decentralization, ‘communities of practice’ at the local government level can serve as essential platforms for advancing the SDGs. Global and country level ‘communities of practice’ have contributed enormously to organizing, planning, and evaluating progress on SDGs. In the same vein, ‘communities of practice’ at the local level can strengthen SDGs implementation and bring into focus local level nuances in the SDGs story. The story of SDGs told from the bottom will go a long way to address current concerns about measurement and scale in the implementation and evaluation of progress on the SDGs and other development agendas.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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