

Recommendation for Optimum Care and Protection System Reforms for Sri Lankan Street Children (SLSC)

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ABSTRACT

Street children are among those most at risk for exploitation and abuse. Therefore, diverse protection and care issues become more salient at different developmental levels, for them. Although Sri Lanka signed the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991, and protection and care policies have been developed in principle to protect street children from violence and abuse, Sri Lanka has yet to develop, follow and update specific policies and recommendations arising from the CRC, to provide effective care management for them. Utilizing an ecological model, the paper describes and critique existing care and protection policies pertaining to street children in Sri Lanka. It also provides culturally feasible and sustainable recommendations (at individual, family, community-based and service levels) that address care and protection under three main areas: protection from violence & abuse, street children at conflict with law and promoting psychosocial wellbeing within street children

Keywords : Street Children, Sri Lanka, Recommendations, Protection, Wellbeing

I. INTRODUCTION

Street children in Sri Lanka can be divided into three distinct groups: 1. Street working children, engaging in income generation activities ranging from begging to vending (Save the Children, 2011), 2. Children of the street, children who live on the street (or outside of a normal family environment; family ties may exist but are tenuous and are maintained only casually or occasionally, 3. Children who live on the streets with their families (Ennew, 1994; Cosgrove, 1990).

Literature conveys that large number street children belong to the age group 7-14 years (Save the Children, 2011), with majority being street boys (Save the Children, 2011; WHO, 2000). Global and local statistics convey that children are in the street for different reasons such as poverty (Senaratna & Wijewardana, 2013; Remnant, Cader, & Coull, 2008), large family size (Abdullah, Basharat, Lodhi, Wazir, Khan, Sattar, & Zahid, 2014), in search of jobs or running away from home (Save the Children, 2011). Once in streets they become rag pickers, street vendors, child labourers, and sex workers (Save the Children, 2011; De Silva & Punchihewa, 2010; WHO, 2000)

Violence and abuse in the lives of street children

Street children experience different and prevailing forms of abuse and violence which often has been instigated by their primary caregiver/s (Abdullah et al., 2014; Cosgrove, 1990) impacting their premature entry into the streets (Pathirana, 1999; Benitez, 2007). After their entry into the streets, children seem to experience and witness more intense forms of abuse and violence, as victims, witnesses and perpetrators (Abdullah et al, 2014; Benitez, 2007). Literature also conveys that they witnesses and experience, violence and abuse in the detention centres and welfare homes designed to protect and rehabilitate them, as their frequent visitors (Benitez, 2007; Pinheiro, 2006; UNICEF, 2006; UNICEF, 2012).

Global (Shanmugam & Emmanuel, 2010; WHO, 2002; WHO, 2006; Pinheiro, 2003; Panicker & Desai, 1993) and local (Pathirana, 1999; De Silva et al., 2010) literature pertaining to violence, and abuse of street children recognize gender, age, ethnicity and disability as features which leave different impact on the child victims. For instance, street boys tend to externalize and replicate violence they experience as aggressors (Raffaelli, 2000; Raffaelli & Larson 1999), while street girls tend to internalize violence, become victims of

continuous violence and abuse (Barker, 2000; Pathirana, 1999) specially during crisis situations (The African Child Policy Forum, 2006). Ethnic differences has also been recognized as a stigmatizing factor for Sri Lankan street children (De Silva et al., 2010) while disability and other factors may make them objects generating a high income for exploitative and abusive beggar traders (Senaratna & Wijewardana, 2012).

Street children in conflict with law

Proactive concerns raised by national/ international partners working with street children have led to child friendly reforms which are reported to be underway (UNICEF, 2012) for the best interest of the children in conflict with law. These include, providing technical expertise to correct negative feature existing in the current penal code such as separating children's cases from adult cases, ensuring that alleged child offenders have a guardian present during court proceedings, and minimizing the delay in hearings (UNICEF, 2012)

However, street children in Sri Lanka do not appear to relish even this minuscule privileges and comforts that non street juveniles (alleged offenders) have due to several factors. First, majority of the street children in conflict with the law do not have a legal guardian (De Silva et al., 2010). Second, initial responsibility of children in need of protection is with the police, than child welfare authorities in Sri Lanka (UNICEF, 2006). This provides the Sri Lankan police the authority to arrest street children if found begging on the streets or without parental care, vagrancy, being incorrigible or exposed to moral danger (UNICEF, 2006). There have been reports of illegal arrests, forced confessions and physical abuse of children during these arrests due to the magnanimous authority bestowed on the police (de Silva et al, 2010; UNICEF, 2012). Once arrested they are supposed to be placed in protective custody in a "place of safety" until they can be brought before the Juvenile Court (UNICEF, 2006) Ideally, these "Places of Safety" should be a remand home, hospital, or NGO-run children's home (UNICEF, 2006). However, in practice these alternatives are not often readily available. As a result, children who are found in the streets by the police are usually detained in prison, or police lock ups; sometimes placed in the same cells as adult offender where they have been reported to experience varied

forms of maltreatment (UNICEF, 2006). Third, SLSC have more prevalence of being tried as adult offenders, being transported with adult offenders. They also may persistently be vulnerable for being abused by the police during the transportation or while in custody. Fourth, when a street child under the age of 16 is brought before the court, after found on the street by the police, the court often commit the child to the custody of a remand home or a children's home depending on the report of the police and the probation officer (Probation & Childcare, 2012). Majority of the remand and children's homes are not child friendly impacting frequent runaways from them; making child detainees vulnerable for violence and abuse during while running away.

Apparently, street children go through these cycles of abuse several times during their childhood (i.e. they run away from the remand homes/ children's homes, due to varied reasons and are caught placed in the same or a different children's/remand homes). As a result, by the time a street child is between 16 to 18 years; she/he would have exhausted multiple children's and correction center making it very difficult for them adjust to the community.

II. METHODS AND MATERIAL

Rehabilitation and/ or institutionalization

Literature conveys that the government authorities seem to use rehabilitation and institutionalization interchangeably (De Silva et al, 2010). The current, 'rehabilitation process' involves placing street children in a remand home or children's homes if found begging or without a parent/ guardian. Thus, children separated from their parents and often time's siblings, are expected to remain in their placements till they are 16 or 18 years old. Once they come of age they are treated as an adult and supposed to be responsible for their livelihood and wellbeing (Pathirana, 2014). This cycle makes a street child extremely vulnerable, severing the handful of ties she/he have had while living in the streets.

In August, 2009, the Government announced of a program to rehabilitate SLSC by institutionalizing them (De Silva et al, 2010) even though literature conveys that SLSC were petrified and refused to be institutionalized preferring to live with their families(De

Silva et al, 2010). Reports also convey that street children experience extreme violence and abuse during the arrests (De Silva et al, 2010) and institutionalization (Bilson & Cox, 2005; De Silva et al, 2010).

Hence, the situation of the former street children living in Sri Lankan children homes/remand homes seem to be pretty uninviting. Majority may have experienced at least one form of abuse in their lives during these processes. They may also be experiencing psychosocial difficulties due to 1. separation from their care-givers and siblings; 2. abuse/violence experienced in varied remand homes/ children's homes, and 3. Due to the forced suppression and refusal of the authorities to acknowledge the resilience skills that made them survive in the street, at times treating such skills as negative and pathological phenomenon.

Recommendations

The aim of the present paper is to provide recommendations for optimum care and protection system reforms for Sri Lankan street children. Recommendations for policy reforms are provided under several categories. They are: 1. Intervention to prevent violence and abuse, 2.interventions for SLSC in conflict with the law, 3. Alternatives for institutionalization of SLSC and recommendations for their optimum wellbeing.

1. Interventions to prevent violence and abuse

Recommendation 01 : Draw clear distinctions between street children in conflict with the law and street children in need of protection

The paper recommends that the authorities need to draw clear distinctions between street children in conflict with the law and street children in need of protection. The paper further argues against placing street children in need of protection with the child offenders as has been the past practice. Often, street children in need of protection are given the same punishments as the children in conflict with the law (de Silva et al, 2010), impacting unjust penalization for the former.

2. Interventions for SLSC in conflict with the law

Recommendation 02 : Consider alternatives for SLSC in need of protection

Considering the limitations and negative consequences that institutionalization and remand homes pose for former SLSC, the paper urge the Sri Lankan government to reconsider the concept of institutionalization as the last and not the only option for SLSC, especially SLSC in need of protection. It also urges the concerned authorities to explore child friendly alternatives for SLSC who require protection or if found on the streets without a guardian.

Recommendation 03 : Take proactive intervention for street children in conflict with the law, considering their best interests

Even though UNICEF (2012) has initiated training court staff on child friendly practices and have trained around 1,800 legal protection officers (e.g. including magistrates, police court registrars, judicial medical officers, and mediation officers), majority of the SLSC are still being transported, held in custody and given punishments equivalent to those of adult offenders. Hence, they may persistently be vulnerable for being abused by the adult offenders and police during the transportation or while being held in custody (De Silva et al, 2010).

The paper urges the policy makers to realize the disadvantages experienced by SLSC when compared to their non-street alleged child offenders (due to absence of a guardian) and makes following recommendations to promote protection and wellbeing within the SLSC.

1. Initiate appropriate child friendly measures to provide justice to SLSC in conflict with law or in need of protection.
2. Question alleged street child offenders by specialized juvenile police units sensitive to their needs and urges the Sri Lankan government to establish such a unit. It further suggests that this unit need to contain police officers trained to conduct video interviews and record statements in child friendly/ sensitive manner providing a sense of comfort within the child.
3. Establish a juvenile police unit specialized and sensitive to the needs of the SLSC- The police officers to be in civil clothes when questioning SLSC and questioning to be carried out in a comfortable spacious place to create a sense of comfort and trust within them.

4. Prohibit all alleged arrests of SLSC for vagrancy, prostitution and other status offences without evidence
5. Consider the importance of promoting informal mechanisms outside the formal court system to resolve minor juvenile crimes.
6. Stop street children from being transported and kept with the alleged adult offenders/ adult offenders.

Recommendation 04 : Collecting credible and comprehensive data

A major drawback in developing policies and programmes for street children is the lack or absence of credible comprehensive data. Therefore, the paper recommends the government/non-governmental service providers to collect credible, comprehensive and valid information on the numbers, socio-economic, demographic, and mobility profiles of the SLSC. Though such endeavours have been carried out in the past (De Silva et al, 2010; IREd, 1991) either the data collected have been out dated or limited to a certain geographical areas' (De Silva et al, 2010). Hence, the paper stresses the importance of commissioning an island wide census to draw an extensive quantitative and qualitative profile of SLSC.

Recommendation 05 : Create a data base of SLSC in conflict with law

The paper also recommends the government to create a data base of SLSC in conflict with law. This data base should contain records of the delinquency committed by the child, duration between the initial trial and the conviction, and the detention given to the child. This endeavour should be carried out with the intention of improving these mechanisms while and providing psychosocial and legal support to the SLSC in conflict with law.

The paper is also recommends that government should identify ways to track street families in mobility with the aim of providing psychosocial care and protection street children and their families. Acknowledging the shortage of staff in the government service provision agencies the paper recommends that government to identify creative alternatives. For example, the government can assign the record keeping responsibility of street children and street

families with young children to non-governmental care and protection service provision organizations in each district. The papers suggests that records require to contain information pertaining to number of children in each area, the details of the children (i.e. their age, gender of the children, whether they are schooling or not) and the details of the care giver (i.e. caregiver's location, civil status, temperament, addictions....) with the intention of creating wellbeing of the SLSC.

However, the paper argues the importance of appointing and training child care worker to liaise with these NGO service providers in each district. The appointed child care worker's role should be to supervise the credibility and confidentiality of the documentation during data collection and storage. These child care workers could be graduates with a training and knowledge on legal psychosocial issues pertaining to SLSC and attached to NCPA or the department of probation and child care.

Recommendation 06 : Develop activities to recognize and cherish resilience within street children instead of rehabilitating them

Resilience enables children to master difficulties (Rutter, 1987) and promote well functional holistic development. However, resiliency is reported to vary under changing physical, social and emotional conditions (Luthar, 2015) and support provided by significant others in the environment of the child (Szalavitz, & Perry, 2010).

Psychosocial care providers of street children often address the issue of the resiliency and coping strategies of the street children (Pathirana, 1999; Panter-Brick, 2002). Literature conveys that street children have low levels of mental illness (Save the Children, 2011; Aptekar, 2004; Aptekar, 1994). On the other hand, literature also reports that they suffer from low self-esteem, depression and self-hatred (Kidd, 2007; Kidd, 2004; Jones, Herrera, & de Benítez, 2007; Batmanghelidjh, 2006). Hence, the debate on the issue pertaining to whether street children are more or less resilient than non-street children continues.

Literature states that street children are capable of displaying a multitude of coping strategies (Aptekar, 2014; Veale & Dona, Beazley, 2003). However, the societal label of coping does not appear to have the same

meaning in the world of street children. For instance, substance abuse, running away, being a bully or potential future abuser are also acknowledged to be a primary coping mechanism among them (Pathirana, 2000; Raffaelli, 1999; Aptekar, 2014).

Rehabilitation of street children' is a concern that many government and non- governmental organizations discuss. However, the process rehabilitation of SLSC do not seem to acknowledge their resilience. The paper is of the opinion that the impact of personal experiences as well as context and cultural specific factors (de Silva, 2010) of SLSC remains unaddressed during this so called rehabilitation process. As a result, SLSC are often treated as helpless and inadequate victims or potential criminals requiring rehabilitation or reshaping by the authorities.

Thus, the paper recommends against the present measures of rehabilitation believing that the concept of present rehabilitation process and strategies by its very meaning convey that there is an anomaly within the street children. Moreover, they also seem to convey that past experiences and back grounds of the children past requires to be erased or re-written, for SLSC to become law abiding adults in the future. As an alternative, the paper it suggests to the policymakers to perceive the issue of 'rehabilitation of street children' from a different lens, one which is not tarred by the perception that they are a social menace to the society thus requiring remodeling or reshaping through rehabilitation.

As casualties of the society, resulting from the economic growth, war, poverty, loss of traditional values, domestic violence, physical and mental abuse (WHO, 2000), every street child has a reason for being on the streets. Hence, the paper argues that it is the society or the community which requires rehabilitations if at all to be rehabilitated. Thus, street children to be deprived of basic needs or right to family life due to the societal insecurity cannot be justified.

Hence, the paper urges the policy makers to acknowledge and cherish the resilience of SLSC when developing and conducting intervention programs for them. The paper also argues against isolating them in the process of rehabilitation or endowing them with

readymade rehabilitation plans suitable to convenience of the society.

Even though it is important to change the behaviors of the SLSC which creates distress within the community they live in such as prostitution, substance abuse or begging; the paper requests the service providers to consider the circumstances which made them succumb to such behaviors. On the other hand, the paper is of the opinion that it is not advisable to suppress the skills which may have helped them to survive in the streets such as superior mathematical skills learned for survival.

The paper also believes that street children's perceptions, experiences, and achievements should form a key part of service assessment prior to the intervention provisions. Thus, the paper strongly recommends the importance of procuring the participation of the street children as co-developers/ equal contributors in planning and evaluation of their psychosocial service provisions.

Recommendations 07 :

Consider alternatives in lieu of institutionalization

Rehabilitation of street children through institutionalization seems to be the most frequent and convenient option taken by the authorities when a child is found on the streets (de Silva et al, 2010). However, growing bodies of literature convey that attachments that children form with their primary caregivers create positive neural pathways which would condition them to have positive life experiences as children and adults (Szalavitz et al, 2010). This information calls out for positive, close relationships between/among street children and their primary caregivers. Therefore, the paper recommends against separating street children from their non-abusive families (especially against very young infants placed in children's homes in the care of varied multiple caregivers) as such measures would be harmful to the wellbeing of the child leading to negative future repercussions (Szalavitz et al, 2010). The paper further recommends to the policy makers that every effort should be made to reunite former/street children with their families (Save the Children, 2011) if separated.

Without effectively addressing the push and pull factors, rehabilitating SLSC through institutionalizing would be a useless application. Invariably, more children would

flow from the venues which the former SLSC emerged. Therefore, the paper argues for a development and effective implementation of psycho-social policies to secure a social protection system for SLSC. Moreover, the paper urges the government of Sri Lanka to consider a wide variety of options for supporting SLSC such as kinships care, day/night/ day & night shelters, temporary shelters, vocational education and after school shelters respecting the freedom and choice of the children and their parents. Further, the paper argues that even though rules are required to maintain the care and protection of the SLSC, they should not be used to manipulate, exploit, traumatize or penalize them.

Instead, the paper recommends the government to come up with an intervention which would make the street children functional and fit to live in the society while acknowledging their superior survival skills. The paper also suggests the government to offer remedial programs to SLSC in order to change their behaviors which the society cannot accept or approve.

Recommendation 08 : Develop good practices/minimum standards to follow when the institutionalization is the only option

The article recommends the policy makers to develop good practices and minimum standards to follow when institutionalization is the only option. The article recommends them to be,

1. Regulations to prevent SLSC being separated from their siblings. Often times in the Sri Lankan care & protection system girls and boys are placed in separate children's homes depriving former street children the only kinship bonds they shared.
2. Providing support for SLSC to maintain contact with the kin-careers.
3. Conduct mandatory assessment of physical, cognitive, social and emotional development skills/competencies of the former SLSC with the aim of identifying and promoting psychosocial and academic well-being of the child
4. Conduct regular case conferences before and after the child's entry into the institution. The article recommends holding progress reporting case conferences during different measurement points with the initial case conference held immediately upon the child's entry into an institution and

subsequently and after every 3/6 months after to assess the progress of the child. It is recommended that the child and his former non-abusive primary care giver/kin-carers be present during these conferences. It is also recommended that content of these conferences should be documented by the case officer in charge of the former street child and consulted when major decisions in the life of the child are to be taken.

5. Develop individual interventions (e.g. programs to promote education, emotional regulation, health, sanitation, and values as well as programs to prevent/ minimize anger, and aggression through a reward reinforcement system to provide encouragement to the child) if and when required to promote psychosocial well-being of the child.

Recommendation 09 : Develop regulations for service providers (government, private and non-governmental organizations) to the street children

Even though initiatives have been taken in the past to document the organizations that provide services to SLSC none of them have been completely successful. As a result, there is reasonable vacuum existing in the arena of information pertaining to specific services provides to the SLSC. Therefore, based on the past documentation and information available the paper believes that the government of Sri Lanka requires to develop a directory and divide responsibilities among service providers to the SLSC.

Recommendation 10: Develop resources and assessment tools

The paper recognizes the importance of developing assessment tools/instruments/resource to identify physical, cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing of SLSC. These resources/tools should assess each child's levels of physical, cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing competencies in relation to his/her developmental milestones and ecological perspective. These measures should also be developed with the aim of providing the optimal opportunities for the child and his/her family; while striving to recognize their resilience, and strengths Vs. difficulties.

Similarly, the article also recognizes the need for resources (e.g. books, videos, leaflets, posters...) to create community awareness and train child care workers (police officers in children's and women's desks, probation officers, NCPA district and psychosocial coordinators...) who work with SLSC. These resources could either be in the form of distance training modules, in-service course materials or videos to address the gaps in sensitivity, attitudes, knowledge, skills and competencies of working with SLSC.

Recommendation 11: Identify and develop minimum training standards for child care workers who provide psychosocial services to SLSC.

The paper acknowledges the importance of identifying and developing minimum training/internship standards for child care workers providing psychosocial services to SLSC. It agrees that these services could vary according to the exposure and time that each child care worker spends with the street child. For instance, a child psychologists or therapist may spend about an hour per week with a child while a probation officer would be responsible for the wellbeing of the child throughout her/his custody/stay at the children's home/remand home.

Hence, different training standards would have to be mapped out for varied professionals depending on their exposure to the former street child/street children as well as the quantity and quality of the service provision. The paper envisions that these minimum training standards should also vary according to the required skills, competencies and information to work with the SLSC or former SLSC. Therefore, the article suggests that Sri Lankan government and academic institutions which offer training to child care workers requires to identify minimum training standards for varied professional groups; specifying program content and internship requirements.

Recommendation 12: Train child care workers to provide protection and psychosocial care for SLSC in keeping the best interest of the children

The paper stresses the importance of training child care providers to SLSC. Especially if these service providers do not possess prior experience or training. Often times,

SLSC are perceived as a social menace/burden or as vulnerable entities requiring societal sympathy. As entities of the community, service providers to SLSC may also hold such opinions towards street children. Thus attitudes and gaps of knowledge within the service providers may create them to be unfit and insensitive to provide professional care to SLSC; affecting the quality of their service provision. Hence, the papers argue that specific training emphasizing the sensitivity towards street children should be a mandatory requirement for service providers providing care and protection services to SLSC. Further, it recommends that the child care workers should be supervised by an experienced professional with relevant qualifications during the initial phase of their service provisions to SLSC.

As a potential intervention strategy, the paper suggests to the psychosocial service provision agencies in Sri Lanka to consider in procuring the assistance of the former street children as peer counselors or peers academic coaches. A practice, which has successfully been carried out when providing psychosocial care and protection services to street children in India (Panicker & Nangia, 1992).

Recommendation 13: Create community vigilance and sensitivity

The paper recommends to conduct community awareness campaign to create community vigilance, sensitivity and perceptual alteration.(i.e. perceive street children as an outcome of the society and not as a social menace) within the community towards SLSC. Though paper accepts that the civil society initiatives for SLSC have matured in the recent past, creating a visibility and increased community sensitivity towards them (Pathirana, 1999), it believes that they could be further enhanced through creative and innovative measures.

Hence, the paper also makes two recommendations to increase the community sensitivity towards SLSC. First, develop and implement innovative community awareness campaigns to enrich community sensitivity and vigilance towards SLSC. Second, develop a system in which SLSC's varied needs are taken care of. One strategy would be to develop a system to promote community vigilance and sensitivity towards street children through community organizations and schools

(i.e. providing awareness programs to teachers, students and parents). Another would be to create vigilance system through Women's and Children's Desks or local NGO's (i.e. create awareness within the public pertaining to the service provisions available to street children such as how, where and whom to report when they see a child being manipulated as an object of begging or provide information to street families of services available to them).

Recommendation 14: Ensure the SLSC's 'Right to Education'

Due to the violence and abuse experience before and after their entry into the streets, street children's access to educational and health services have often been limited, and discriminatory (Benitez, 2007; De Silva et al, 2010; Save the Children, 2011). Research carried out on Sri Lankan street children also conveys that majority has never been to school (Senaratna et al., 2013). Therefore, once in the so-called process of rehabilitation, placed with their age mates or with children in lower grades street children experience varied academic (e.g. being accused of negligence, demotivation...) as well as psychosocial (e.g. feeling academically inferior), challenges. This may create distress within them leading to eventual school dropout. While recognizing the importance of providing academic empowerment to street children the article recommends doing it through flexible modes such as open schools, non-formal education or individualized programs.

The paper also argues that certain skills which made them resilient on the streets requires to be cherished and productively in cooperated into their education. At present, such skills are often been deemed inferior and harmful. As a result, they are being ignored, discouraged and shunned by the educational institutions and the school curriculum damaging the self-esteem of the former SLSC's.

Hence, the paper recognizes the importance of developing and introducing personalized or individualized proactive awareness programs for SLSC. These should offer children protection, from violence/abuse, information on sanitation and health, counseling to address their difficult experiences if and when

required. The article also identifies the importance of child-friendly exposures, and competencies to protect them from potential future dangers.

The paper also recommends non-formal education classes conducted in street children frequent/prevalent areas on topics such as substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, trafficking children and dangers of drug peddling. Further, paper recognizes the importance of child-friendly spaces which ensures protection and care of street children and thus recommends the governmental agencies responsible for SLSC to set up at least one after school street children center/ dropping center per district in street children frequent/visible area.

Since literature convey that a large number of SLSC drop out of school due to corporal punishment (De Silva et al, 2010); the article also recommends training programs for teachers to sensitize them on issues pertaining to positive discipline and stigmatization of street children.

III. CONCLUSION

Recognition of street children as a group at risk of violence (Pinheiro, 2006), constantly in conflict with law and requiring psychosocial care & protection do not appear to have led to the creation of street child sensitive/ friendly policies; globally or locally. As a result, SLSC seemed to be further victimized by the poorly designed, under-resourced, insensitive and short-sighted policies. Thus, instead of being offered protection from multitude of violence and abuse that they experience; SLSC seem to be further victimized by these policies and policy implementations. Therefore, the paper recommends implementing the recommendations provided in order to create an optimum environment for SLSC and urges the concerned authorities to consider them in the best interest of the SLSC.

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