



VSO's Global Theory of Change

Bringing people together to fight poverty



Summary

VSO's mission is to bring people together to fight poverty.

VSO's experience has shown our contribution to ending poverty is best focused on:

- **Education:** improving learning outcomes for all children including literacy and numeracy.

- **Health:** reducing maternal and child mortality, improving the diagnosis and treatment of STI's and HIV, and improving family planning.

- **Livelihoods:** supporting communities to become more economically self-sufficient and resilient against natural and human-made shocks.

We promote volunteering as a powerful and practical way to tackle poverty and inequality. We believe that it is only when people step forward – either as local, national or global citizens – that sustainable change happens. By enabling people and, in turn, their organisations and communities to play a more active role in development, volunteering provides the means through which the essential pre-conditions for systemic and sustainable change – ownership, participation, empowerment and inclusion – can be realised.

We take a people-to-people approach to development, connecting people through a range of capacity-building interventions and knowledge sharing approaches. Our national and international volunteers work with education professionals, health practitioners, entrepreneurs, community leaders, policy makers, and activists from the government to the community level. By working together - combining volunteers' diverse and complementary skills and ideas with local knowledge and expertise – they are able to identify and implement innovative solutions to development challenges. This creates the environment for social change by strengthening human capital and local ownership.

Our development programmes support and bring together partner organisations across all sectors to work collectively towards common, inter-related outcomes:

- **Services:** improving the accessibility and quality of basic services.

- **Markets and resources:** creating the more equitable distribution and access to productive natural resources, market opportunities and decent employment.

- **Social accountability:** strengthening the voice and influence of local communities and the responsiveness of those in power.

- **Policy:** improving the design and implementation of policies to tackle poverty and inequality.

VSO build on the learning generated from our work about 'what works', together with the perspectives of the people and organisations we work with, to direct our policy engagement and advocacy at national, regional and international levels. By connecting people at every level, we build a global network of citizens and communities engaged in the fight against poverty.



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VSO'S THEORY OF CHANGE

VOLUNTEERS:

CHANGE STARTS WITH INDIVIDUALS



WORKING
IN
PARTNERSHIP
WITH
ORGANISATIONS
AND
COMMUNITIES

ENABLING
CHANGE



LONG TERM
OUTCOMES

CREATING CHANGE AT INDIVIDUAL,
ORGANISATIONAL AND
COMMUNITY LEVEL



HOW WE SUPPORT
LASTING
CHANGE



THE PROGRAMMATIC AREAS



Introduction

This document describes VSO's theory of change and the distinctive contribution that VSO makes in the global fight against poverty.

It identifies the areas of focus for our work and the way in which we implement our 'volunteering for development' approach in accordance with the VSO value chain. It is accompanied by thematic theories of change for education, health, and secure livelihoods.¹

Our global theory of change serves as a guide for VSO's programmes and projects, as well as providing high level purpose and intent to the organisation as a whole. In doing so, it provides the parameters for VSO programmes:

- **Development results:** they work towards a number of inter-related, long-term outcomes to both improve access to quality services, resources, markets and decent employment, as well as strengthening social accountability and policy implementation.
- **Volunteering for development approach:** they work with and through national and international volunteers, utilising a broad range of volunteer interventions.
- **VSO's distinctiveness:** they make use of our distinctive approach to secure both hard and soft development outcomes, support national ownership; and help create a global network of citizens committed to the fight against poverty.

VSO's global theory of change provides the basis for informing our global results framework, monitoring and evaluation, research, strategy and communications. It will provide the basis for an annual organisational review to assess the effectiveness of our theories and continually improve our approach at programme and organisational levels.



1. Our vision

Our vision is a world without poverty. This means a world in which everyone is able to exercise their fundamental rights, live with dignity and respect, and be able to shape the world in which they live. It is a world in which people are neither disadvantaged by nor discriminated against on account of where they were born, their gender, age, ethnicity, HIV status or whether they have a disability. In essence, it is a world in which everyone is able to realise their full potential and become active and equal participants rather than passive beneficiaries of development.

2. The problem

Poverty is the denial of fundamental freedoms – to receive an education, to access health care, to earn a living and to influence decision-making. It is about more than people’s material conditions but about their ability to make choices, to create and respond to opportunities and to have greater control over the world in which they live. The consequences of poverty are that human rights are not realised and human potential is unfulfilled.

In spite of progress to tackle poverty, many people continue to be left out or left behind. We know, for example, that 57 million children of primary age are still out of school, 2.5 million new HIV infections occur every year, with millions lacking access to affordable treatment, and one in eight people remain chronically undernourished.² The fault-lines of inequality exist between urban and rural areas, between ethnic groups, between young and old, between women and men, girls and boys, and among people with and without a disability.

Poverty often persists unchallenged due to poor systems of governance, weak accountability mechanisms and low levels of citizen participation. This situation is created and sustained by inequalities in power between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’.

3. The context

Since the adoption of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness³ in 2005, increased importance has been given to the national ownership of development agendas. It has resulted in significant changes in the way development is delivered, with greater emphasis given to the accountability of public institutions in country and their effectiveness at delivering development and poverty reduction programmes.

With the adoption of the Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles in 2010⁴, the need for a vibrant civil society and active citizen engagement has also received greater attention. Strong local civil society organisations recognised as having a key role to play in making this happen.

The commitments set out in both the Paris Declaration and Istanbul Principles have been reaffirmed by the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Agenda, recently appointed to produce recommendations for the successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The emerging post-2015 agenda demands the stronger integration of economic growth, social justice and environmental stewardship within a global sustainable development framework. To achieve this, the recent UN-appointed High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Agenda has identified ‘effective, open and accountable institutions’ and ‘a new global partnership’ based on solidarity, cooperation and mutual accountability’ as critical transformative shifts required for a new, people-centred development paradigm.⁵

This suggests a shift in emphasis to how we ‘do’ development: moving beyond the traditional approach of development cooperation, which focuses on technical inputs and financing, to one that considers the processes and human relationships through which change – and power – is negotiated.

4. The opportunity: volunteering for development

At its core, volunteering is a powerful expression of a people-centred approach to development.⁶ By enabling individuals and in turn communities to play a more active role in efforts to tackle poverty and inequality, volunteering provides the means through which the essential pre-conditions for sustainable change – ownership, participation, empowerment and inclusion – can be realised.⁷

Volunteering therefore has a significant contribution to make to the implementation of a sustainable development framework based on strong national ownership, mutual accountability and a vibrant civil society.⁸ VSO has a critical role in supporting this agenda in a number of ways: through mobilising national and international volunteers and volunteering initiatives; creating an enabling policy and legislative environment for volunteering; and supporting the development of national volunteering infrastructure.

5. Pathways to change: VSO’s value chain

VSO works strategically towards the achievement of development outcomes in line with national and global priorities. We take a holistic and multi-sectoral approach, engaging at all levels of decision-making and implementation, working in partnership with organisations and institutions that span the public, private and civil society sectors.

Our people-to-people approach is directed towards ensuring development interventions are both locally owned and designed so that they are sustainable in the long-term. We do this by building human and social capital, strengthening institutions and facilitating the global exchange of skills, knowledge and ideas through volunteers.

We contribute to change in accordance with our Value Chain (see Fig 1.):

Stage one: Identifying our global geographic and thematic priorities

We work in countries where our approach can make a significant and lasting contribution to development. The majority of our work is focused in least developed countries and fragile states. We also work in a small number of middle income countries where there are still have considerably large populations of people living in poverty.⁹

Building on VSO’s track record, our programmes focus on education, health, secure livelihoods and participation and governance. Gender equality and inclusion are cross-cutting priorities for all our programmes.

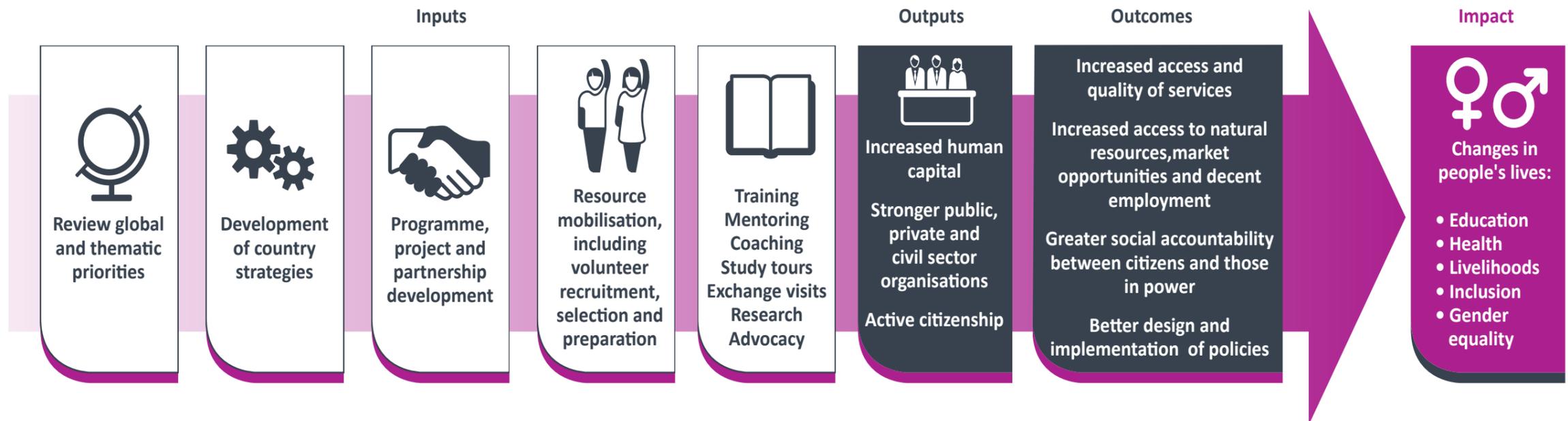
Stage two: Development of country strategies

VSO’s country strategies are developed in response to the different contexts in which we are working and the priorities set out in national development plans and strategies. They are based on a comprehensive analysis the development context, which is informed by research, evaluation and direct consultation with partners, beneficiaries and other key stakeholders. Our country strategies determine our targets groups and the results that we will contribute to. They also provide the basis for more detailed programme and project design.

Fig 1. VSO’s Value Chain

VSO’s distinctiveness:

- We create the environment for social change by strengthening human capital.
- We operate within existing structures to secure locally owned and locally appropriate solutions.
- We build a global network of citizens and communities engaged in the fight against poverty.



Stage three: programme, project and partnership development

VSO's programmes are designed to achieve the results set out in our country strategies and be delivered in partnership with national organisations. They are informed by research and evaluation, generated both within and beyond VSO. VSO strategically identifies and develops partnerships with national organisations at all levels of decision-making and implementation. Our partners span the public, private and civil society sectors, ranging from government ministries to local women's groups, from small enterprises through to inter-governmental agencies. We develop partnerships with organisations that share our objectives, who collectively have the potential to transform the lives of people living in poverty, and who recognise the value of volunteering to furthering their work. VSO then works with the partners to develop and agree partnership plans informed by a joint assessment of organisational priorities and needs. VSO uses its unrestricted funding to leverage additional funds to support the delivery of project and partnership plans.

Stage four: Resource mobilisation, including volunteer recruitment, selection and preparation

We develop and support a range of volunteering initiatives in support of the needs of our partners and communities in which we work. Volunteering interventions range from long-term international, south-south and national volunteering placements through to more short-term, project based initiatives drawing on corporate and parliamentary volunteers. We also harness the energy and ambition of young people, developing specific youth volunteering initiatives so that they can become more influential actors within and outside their own communities.

VSO recruits, selects and prepares suitable volunteers from around the world through our federation members and affiliated volunteer recruitment organisations based in both the Global North and South. As part of our recruitment strategy we develop partnerships with professional associations and bodies, as well as the corporate sector. We select volunteers not only on the basis of their professional experience but also on their ability to work flexibly and collaboratively, and to respect and learn from others. We provide intensive pre-departure and in-country training for all volunteers to ensure that they are prepared for working in a



different professional and cultural context.

Within our programme countries VSO also supports the development of national volunteering at community, organisation and national levels. Our primary focus is the promotion of community level volunteering which leads to active citizenship, working with local organisations to support people within communities to act individually and collectively to shape their own development. We achieve this through volunteer placements to support the development of community volunteering programmes, direct training and support to community volunteers, and capacity building support for organisations supporting community volunteering. At the national level, VSO supports the development of national networks of volunteer involving and placing organisations. The purpose of these networks ranges from knowledge sharing on best practice, research, influencing national policy, volunteering promotion and recognition, to increasing access to volunteering opportunities

Stage five: Activities and outputs

VSO works with partner organisations to improve the skills and capacity of professionals and community members. This includes the provision of formal training, mentoring and coaching support, study tours, exchange visits and professional development placements. We co-create new or improved practices, tools and systems, and oversee the generation and use of new research, materials and resources. In some instances, VSO also works alongside partner organisations to improve awareness, delivering any outreach activities (events, campaigns etc) to provide poor and marginalised people with key information about services and/or their rights. We also collaborate with partners to deliver policy-advocacy initiatives, designed to influence the policies and actions of those in positions of power or authority to achieve positive changes in people's lives at community, sub-national and national levels.

Stage six: Intermediate outcomes

Through a people-to-people approach, changes at the individual level are replicated upwards, contributing to sustainable changes at organisational and community levels:

1. Individual level: Increased human capital. Technical skills and knowledge are improved such as business planning, natural resource

management and advocacy. Professional competencies essential for teaching, nursing or midwifery are strengthened. Individuals also develop softer skills such as new approaches to problem solving, increased gender and disability awareness, improved motivation, self-esteem and social connections.

2. Organisational level: Stronger public, private and civil society organisations. Organisational capacities and practices are improved across all areas: leadership, management, finance, fundraising, human resources and service delivery. Governance systems are strengthened as are external relations.

3. Community level: Improved social and political capital. Active citizenship is strengthened by supporting individuals and groups to engage and collaborate more in the life of their community, through volunteering and occupying both formal and informal spaces for citizen engagement. These include community health volunteering initiatives, school management committees and youth clubs through to advocacy or awareness raising campaigns.

Stage seven: Long-term outcomes

The changes achieved at individual, organisational and community levels contribute to long-term outcomes in four mutually reinforcing areas:

1. Increased access and quality of services. Partner organisations improve the quality and accessibility of services, particularly for the poorest and marginalised groups. In health, this includes maternal, child, sexual and reproductive health and HIV and AIDS services. In education this includes teaching at early childhood, primary and secondary levels.

2. Increased access and equitable distribution of productive natural resource and market opportunities and decent employment.

Individuals and communities have greater and more equitable access to productive resources and market related services. They will be better equipped to understand and manage their local environment and to respond to stresses placed on the ecosystem by climate change, natural and man-made disasters.

3. Greater social accountability through increased citizen voice and responsiveness

of those in power.

As a result of increased skills, knowledge and collaboration, citizens and community groups are engaging more and exerting greater influence in decision-making spaces. There is increased demand for accountability, transparency and for rights to be upheld. Through stronger systems of governance, decision makers are more responsive to the needs and priorities of the citizens and communities they serve, whether they are a national government ministry, a provincial health authority, a land-use committee or the head teacher of a local school.

4. Better design and implementation of policies.

With stronger voice and greater accountability come better decisions. By bringing together decision-makers with those who are affected by their decisions, policies are more likely to reflect the realities on the ground. They are also more likely to be monitored and implemented.

Stage eight: Impact:

Ultimately the changes at outcome level will contribute to improvements in people's lives in terms of education, health, livelihoods, gender equality, inclusion and resilience. In education, health and livelihoods, for example, this means:

- **Education:** Improved learning outcomes for all children including literacy and numeracy.
- **Health:** Reduced maternal and child mortality, improving the diagnosis and treatment of STI's and HIV, and improving family planning.
- **Livelihoods:** Communities become more self-sufficient and resilient against natural and human made shocks.

As a result of these changes, people are able to exercise their fundamental rights, live with dignity and respect and be able to shape the world in which they live.

6. Distinctiveness: how VSO contributes to change

Through our volunteering for development approach, VSO contributes to sustainable change in three critical ways:

1. We create the environment for social change by strengthening human capital

The intrinsic value of volunteering extends beyond *what* volunteers actually do and the skills and knowledge they bring, to *how* they work with organisations and communities to support change. This is driven by the values that underpin volunteering – solidarity, reciprocity, mutual trust, respect and collaborative learning – as well as the individual attributes of the volunteers we recruit and support – flexibility, adaptability, accessibility, a ‘can do’ approach, and a motivation to support change that goes beyond financial reward.

The direct immersion of volunteers within the communities and organisations in which they are working – living on a similar income and in similar living conditions, often on a long-term basis – enables them to develop equal and trusting relationships with colleagues and community members. This creates a mutually supporting environment in which knowledge and skills can be shared, ideas tested and solutions implemented. The dual role of volunteers as both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’¹⁰ means they can play a catalytic role in facilitating collective action. By acting as intermediaries, they can broker access to information, networks and resources both within and beyond the community, thereby helping to generate social capital.¹¹

Volunteering strengthens human capital through the achievement of both hard and soft outcomes. Hard outcomes are reflected in enhanced professional skills or technical knowledge, such as more inclusive teaching practices, improved care of maternity patients or better management of crops. Soft outcomes reflect fundamental changes in the way individuals think and behave: from increased morale and motivation, increased self-confidence, improved problem-solving and analytical skills, through to how they work and collaborate with others. These changes combined provide the critical pre-conditions for social change and support the transition of people from passive recipients to active participants in development.

2. We operate within existing structures to assure locally owned and locally appropriate solutions

Our starting point is to support existing processes and initiatives, building on what organisations, communities and governments are already doing. This makes our interventions more strategic and sustainable in the long term. It also supports the stronger ownership of development interventions.

VSO takes a multi-sectoral and holistic approach, working with partners at local, regional and national levels and across the public, private and civil society sectors. In doing so we are able to map and understand an issue in all its complexity and create better information and coordination across the system. Our programmes are designed to connect the work of our national and international volunteers and, by extension, the local organisations they are working with. This allows us to connect local community groups with national government ministries, thereby strengthening social accountability. Our bridging role also results in stronger co-ordination between formal and informal service provision, including extending the reach of services to hard-to-reach groups.

3. We build a global network of citizens and communities engaged in the fight against poverty

We facilitate the exchange of skills, learning and knowledge within and between our programmes and partners. In doing so, we develop a deeper understanding of how to bring together global evidence with local knowledge in order to achieve lasting results.

We bring evidence from our programmes, generated through evaluation and participatory community based research, to inform VSO’s policy engagement and advocacy at the national, regional and international level. Building on our partnership approach, we work through coalitions and networks, and support our partners to engage in policy dialogue, including inter-governmental processes. We use our convening power to open up spaces for citizen-state engagement, facilitate peer exchanges for parliamentarians and government officials, and help them to lobby for and pass legislation.

VSO’s focus on people builds lasting champions in the global fight against poverty. Our global network of ‘alumni’ spans the Global North and South comprising health, education and business professionals, parliamentarians, academics, community activists, producers and entrepreneurs. The commitment and engagement of VSO volunteers often continues for the rest of their lives, informing their professional careers, future volunteering and social activism. At country level, the spirit and volunteering is instilled within communities creating movements of citizens shaping their own development.

7. Key assumptions

- The countries in which VSO operates continue to provide adequate democratic space for civil society to engage in processes of accountability and democratisation, or are committed to gradually increasing the existing democratic space.
- Governments of the countries in which we operate remain committed to strengthening their role as primary duty bearers.
- The countries in which VSO operates continue to provide adequate democratic space for INGOs to operate.
- VSO partner organisations continue to be adequately resourced to ensure the optimal use of the contributions made by volunteers.
- Learning and knowledge generated by VSO support is embedded within individual and organisational practices, strategies and action plans.
- Political will and ownership is maintained within partner organisations and/ or communities to lead and deliver change.
- The wider context in which our partners are operating remains stable so that results are sustained.
- Changes to policy are implemented and monitored.
- Improvements in services, resources and market opportunities are accessible to our target groups.



¹⁰Theories of change for gender equality and participation and governance will be developed in 2014/15.
¹¹UNGA (2013) A life of dignity for all: accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015. Report of the Secretary General. A/68/202. Available at: www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/A%20Life%20of%20Dignity%20for%20All.pdf
¹²OECD (2005) Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Available at: www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/34428351.pdf
¹³Open Forum (2010) Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles. Available at: <http://cso-effectiveness.org/istanbul-principles,067>
¹⁴United Nations (2013) A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development. The Report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Agenda. Available at: www.post2015hlp.org/the-report
¹⁵Within the context of VSO’s work we understand volunteering as both a formal or informal activity comprising the following key elements: 1) it is done out of individuals’ free will 2) is conducted outside of the household for the benefit of the wider community 3) is driven by motives other than financial gain 4) is directed towards poverty eradication and 5) is not a substitute for paid work.
¹⁶For discussion on the developmental impact of volunteering see: Lough, B. J. and M. Lenore (2013); Turner, K. (2013); Zuurmond, I. (2013).
¹⁷For discussion on the role of volunteering in the post-2015 agenda see: Devereux, P. and K. Guse (2012).
¹⁸See: www.vsointernational.org/where-we-work/
¹⁹Volunteers’ insider status is determined by the fact they live and work directly within the community; their outsider status is determined by the fact they bring in new skills, perspectives or knowledge.
²⁰These links are both horizontal; creating opportunities for volunteers to share insights and networks across interventions, and vertical; supporting volunteers to act as a catalyst for community concerns to be raised at local and national level.

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VSO International
100 London Road
Kingston upon Thames
KT2 6QJ
UK

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