

# **International volunteering: trends, added value and social capital**

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### 1 Introduction

The purpose of this discussion paper is

- to review current trends, innovation and best practices amongst international volunteer cooperation agencies regarding the added value of international volunteering.
- To analyse the current debate on social capital and to identify how the added value of international volunteering can be understood in this context

This paper was presented for discussion at the November 2004 Oslo Forum meeting. It should be read in conjunction with a more detailed presentation on trends in the volunteer cooperation community (see file fosurvey 10 feb 05.pdf)

This paper draws on a survey of Forum members carried out between July and October 2004, and on discussion with IVSOs and others interested in international volunteering.

We are aware that some agencies do not use the terms volunteer and volunteering, but they are used here as a convenient shorthand.

We would like to thank people who have contributed to this work to date – any inaccuracies or misplaced assumptions in the paper are, of course, the responsibility of the authors.

## 2 The international aid and development cooperation environment in relation to volunteering

- 2.1 Global aid at \$68.5 billions is at its **highest ever level** in real terms. After a sharp decline in real terms over the period 1992 to 1997, aid volume has climbed steadily, and with a rise of almost 4% between 2002 and 2003. Provided pledges made at FfD in Monterrey 2002 are honoured, the **rise should continue**, at least for the next 2 or 3 years.<sup>1</sup>

The overall rise in aid disguises significant differences between countries. While aid from the countries such as Belgium, Ireland, Canada, the UK, France and the USA is rising, some traditionally generous donors such as Sweden and Denmark have reduced aid, resulting in cuts for NGOs in the region of 10%.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the real terms rise in volume – aid as a percentage of donor countries' GNI has only shown a **modest recovery from its all time low** of 0.22% in 2000/2001. At 0.25% of GNI in 2003, OECD aid is far below the UN 0.7% target established in 1970, and well below the 0.33% figure sustained from 1970 to the early 1990s. Only 5 donors meet or exceed the UN target. France is the only G8 country to give more than half the UN target; Italy and the USA provide just 0.16% and 0.14% of GNI respectively.

The significance of these figures for IVSOs is that in the majority of donor countries the intense pressure on aid, resulting from major aid cuts in OECD government budgets, has eased. Modestly rising budget expectations may make funding agencies more open to NGO funding and the work of IVSOs.

- 2.2 Achievement of the **MDGs** by 2015, though looking increasingly unlikely, remains a strong focus for many donors, reinforcing a preoccupation with clearly identifiable and often fairly direct poverty outcomes.

In line with donor policy statements in favour of '**ownership not donorship**', **PRSPs** have become the dominant framework for dialogue between donors, developing country government and civil society. For all their shortcomings in practice, PRSPs at least encourage attention to issues of national capacity, the potential for sectoral approaches (SWAp) and budget support.

Whilst the donor community has been aware of, and done little to address, the burdens imposed on developing countries by **donors' own procedures and practices**, there does seem to be a new commitment to change at DAC level, of which the DAC Task Force on Donor Practices is evidence. A new willingness by donors to question the added value of TC, to decentralise and to actually address **national capacity**, has significant implications for IVSOs, who might do well to

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<sup>1</sup> If proposals such as the UK plan for an International Finance Facility take off, there may be a very substantial rise in resources available for spending prior to 2015.

<sup>2</sup> In September 2004 Sweden announced firm spending plans to take aid back to 1% GNI by 2006.

engage proactively in these discussions, rather than simply respond.

2.3 The **overriding preoccupation with security** has already had a substantial impact on aid and development cooperation – both positive and negative.

On the negative side, there are concerns (though little hard evidence as yet) that aid flows are being skewed by perceptions of who can help in the US led 'war on terror'. NGOs are also concerned that DAC definitions of what can be counted as ODA, and choices of spending priorities, may divert funding away from those most in need. They fear that donors will focus aid resources on activities within a definition of security which owes more to OECD defence than human security for all.

On the positive side, at least at the level of statements, links are being made between the issues of poverty, instability and security – and paradoxically, an awareness of interconnectedness may help to raise both the profile of global poverty as an issue – and bolster the case for aid spending.<sup>3</sup>

The specific focus on security that has emerged post 9/11, comes on top of a general donor emphasis on governance. This theme was given substantial impetus by publication of the influential 'Assessing Aid', which concluded that aid works best where the policy environment is 'right'. In some cases, the tendency of donors to focus on 'good policy countries' for bilateral engagement, results in IVSOs and other NGOs having a key role in addressing poverty in countries that do not meet 'good' governance criteria.

2.4 Over the last decade, **globalisation** has become a reality. The globalisation of trade, finance and employment, increased migration, cheap travel, 24 hour globalised news, greatly improved communication (including some increased access to information at community level in developing countries), global consumerism – these provide daily evidence of the reduced significance of nation states.

With their strong links in both OECD and developing countries and practical experience in helping people adapt in a new environment, **IVSOs have a lot to offer individuals, organisations and governments trying to manage these changes**. One particular focus of donors, is how to increase coherence between development and other policies of government. IVSOs should be particularly well placed to identify examples of incoherence which adversely impact on developing countries, with returned volunteers in principle well positioned to mobilise concern into action in the OECD.

2.5 The **twin preoccupations of OECD governments with globalisation and security**, and an upsurge in civil society advocacy, have undoubtedly raised the political profile of aid, development cooperation and poverty. These are now treated as serious political issues – witness their regular appearance on the agenda of G8 meetings. Results of this change include

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the end of the cold war led not to a 'peace dividend' but to a loss of support for aid in the USA, historically the world's largest donor.

the mixed blessing of a greater integration of foreign and development policies, and greater emphasis among donors on public awareness, engagement and support for aid. This should offer **substantial opportunities for action by IVSOs**.

### 3 Trends in international volunteering related to added value

[Note: This is a brief overview. A more detailed survey of trends is available as a separate document – see fosurvey 10 feb 05.pdf.](#)

The 2004 IVSO survey and follow up discussions have illustrated a number of trends affecting volunteering. Many of these trends have been identified in previous surveys – and continue to be relevant. But there are some new trends emerging, and significant opportunities for IVSOs to follow up.

**Not all of the trends affecting IVSOs are pushing in the same direction:** so for example, the trend towards a narrow focus on achieving specific development outcomes is being overlaid by an increasing interest in some of the wider benefits of contact between people.

**IVSOs have become very diverse**, so although there are characteristics and shared values in common across all agencies, Forum membership encompasses organisations that are highly focused on volunteer/personnel sending and those for whom this is only one part of their programme, but also ranges from organisation which are very closely linked to government to those where the relationship is much more arms length.

#### **Fundamental and enhanced trends include the following:**

- 3.1 There is a continued bedrock of **political enthusiasm and support** for international volunteering. Support at the political level is much less equivocal than at the official/professional level. Politicians, most of whom are not development specialists, like the principle of their citizens going abroad to do something useful and the development of linkages between domestic and foreign communities – it is good from a national profile raising perspective. By contrast, **development specialists**, in both NGOs and government departments, are much more likely to weigh the **pros and cons of volunteer sending against a narrower set of more prescriptive departmental objectives, than broader social and political issues**.
- 3.2 Donor agencies continue to emphasise a strong **focus on development outcomes**: The focus on the MDGs and development results in most donor agencies has substantially influenced IVSOs, who have themselves become heavily concerned with development outcomes arising from their work - with the cross cultural and solidarity benefits of volunteering often coming a sometimes slightly apologetic second. The issue of **how to measure added value** and how to present results in a way that funders recognise remains a preoccupation.

It is clear that IVSO are in many cases being required to demonstrate their contributions to MDGs, and relevance in the context of frameworks such as PRSPs. But it seems that this trend has reached its **high water mark** in some countries at least.<sup>4</sup>

The **origins of many IVSOs are to a significant degree political** – for example in cases where an organisation was established to foster international exchange and understanding following conflict. So there is a question as to whether a very strong focus on development outcomes has resulted in the **instrumentalisation** of IVSOs, with their value assessed according to what they can bring to the achievement of quantitative development outcomes

- 3.3 There is emerging evidence of a recognition in some government departments, that **IVSOs have managed a transition** from an approach which sometimes involved ad hoc placements with little attention to opportunity cost or strategic impact, to a programmatic approach, which makes a distinctive contribution to development through the careful matching of skills to a range of need.
- 3.4 The **quality of partnership** in volunteer sending relationships is being recognised, with a growing acceptance that volunteers can bring elements which cannot be supplied through standard technical cooperation (TC). Especially in the context of national strategies for poverty reduction mentioned above, donors are emphasising ownership and capacity building – areas where IVSOs are seen as providing **value-driven, long term commitment, in addition to the professional skills** available through TC. (Whilst the value of TC has been open to debate for many years, renewed questions are being asked about its desirability and effectiveness).
- 3.5 One impact of the more strategic approach being employed by IVSOs, is an emphasis on learning, and a **growing body of knowledge** which is being accumulated by Forum members. An issue is how make this knowledge readily and proactively available.
- 3.6 Although as noted above the decline in aid levels OECD wide has been reversed, some IVSOs continue to face **funding pressures**. In some cases these could potentially **affect the profile** of volunteering – where for example government support is reduced, secular/solidarity agencies may be badly hit in comparison to organisations whose volunteers have more of a missionary background and/or whose funding base is more robust.

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<sup>4</sup> The current Danish government approach to development however, remains solely focused on concrete results, and accords little value to important, but less easy to measure benefits.

- 3.7 **The coherence of IVSO programmes with overall development objectives** continues to be important to governments. Sometimes the need is for coherence in a broad sense, as when an IVSO has to work within a context of human rights promotion or poverty eradication. But sometimes there are much more specific requirements to align with sectors, countries and policies.

**Volunteer agencies themselves are also concerned about coherence** - seeking ways to simultaneously address causes of capacity constraints, as well as trying to work to fill skills gaps in the shorter term. As many IVSOs have made the transition from simple volunteering agency to development organisation, **so IVSOs are expected (and expect themselves) to respond to need with a wider range of reflexes than just sending a volunteer, which is now only one of range of responses.** The context has therefore become increasingly important to IVSOs in their decisions about what sort of volunteers they can supply and what complementary work needs to take place. They find themselves working at different levels on both symptoms and causes.

Another sense in which coherence is becoming an important issue for IVSOs, relates to efforts (in line with MDG goal 8) to ensure that donors' development cooperation approaches are not negated by their other policies. If the pool of talent in developing countries is being drained by **OECD countries attracting skilled workers, whilst sending out volunteers to plug the skills gap**, there is clearly an issue to be addressed. But this issue is part of the wider picture of increased labour flexibility and migration, which forms an increasingly important part of the context within which IVSOs work.

- 3.8 It is possible to detect a significant shift in the type of volunteer skills typically being provided. There is evidence of a move to a **narrower range of skills** – away from some technical specialisms and towards **skills associated with civil society** organisations: networking, community organisation, rights awareness and promotion, advocacy. Some IVSOs have reported that they no longer work with volunteers in the public sector and some people are concerned that IVSOs are being pushed into civil society 'ghetto' – as if this is only place they can contribute.
- 3.9 In the past, the distinction between domestic and international volunteering has been very sharp – with not much cross-fertilisation between the two camps. But international **volunteering is becoming less of a typically north-south phenomenon.** IVSOs and donors are encouraging south-south and north-south-north exchanges – and of course, south-north volunteering has a long (if low profile) tradition, including in situations such as Northern Ireland, where a volunteer from a country such as India could encourage dialogue between parties in conflict.

As discussed in the Social Capital section below, governments in general are very keen on **domestic volunteering**, because of the direct and indirect benefits it brings. Some estimates value this at between 8% and 14% of GDP.

Parallel with efforts to promote or rekindle volunteering within OECD countries, are government concerns to build on **traditions of mutual aid and self help in the**

**south**, so as to promote civil society and accountable government. Against the background of these trends, and greatly increased international mobility, a case emerges for a more **proactive effort by IVSOs to contribute to volunteering debates of all kinds**, as well as in wider efforts to encourage volunteering.

### 3.10 **Impact on domestic attitudes and opinion is increasingly seen as a strategic objective (not just a useful spin-off).**

**Promoting development education and generating solidarity and support for aid**, has always been seen as a comparative advantage of IVSOs. But the twin issues of globalisation and security have added impetus to the perceived need to promote **global awareness and international links**. The fact that over the last decade or so, **multiculturalism** in many OECD countries has shifted from being a political aspiration to a political reality, also presents opportunities for IVSOs who have a tradition of promoting shared approaches among people from many different backgrounds. Part of the opportunity here is to ensure that examples of south-north transfer are not overlooked.

In terms of changing attitudes, it is clear that **advocacy is now recognised** as an important part of IVSOs' portfolio. The incorporation of policy dialogue and advocacy into IVSO work reflects the wider adoption of a more strategic approach – addressing the causes of poverty and utilising a range of options (not only volunteer sending) to make an impact.

## **4 Major changes affecting volunteer scene.**

Some IVSOs remain **uncomfortable with term volunteer**, which may retain connotations of paternalism or a one way flow of benefits. Some people even feel that any implication of 'sacrifice' being involved is inappropriate. There is no point in rehearsing well worn issues here on the question of the difference between a volunteer (fraternal worker etc) and any other development worker. The pros and cons of different approaches will be familiar. But it maybe that there are emerging trends that cast new light on old issues.

A very significant trend is the reality of globalisation, the **proliferation of contact** between people from all walks of life, different countries and different communities.

The factors underpinning these trends include:

- Massive expansion in cheap global travel
- Globalised media
- Greatly improved and more accessible communication
- Changing demographics
- Increased migration
- Shifting identities – national identities giving way to 'layered' identities and loyalties
- Changed working and learning patterns
- Gap year phenomenon and sabbaticals.
- (perhaps a little optimistically) some evidence of global citizenship emerging

These factors are having a major influence on volunteering, which is becoming much **more diverse**.

Corporate bonding which used to involve activities such as paintballing, may now mean going to the Gambia for a week to dig wells. Volunteering has changed!

- ☑ It is much easier for people to travel (physically or virtually), make links and undertake DIY volunteering.
- ☑ More kinds of organisation are now engaged in volunteer sending – including businesses, clubs and societies, church groups.
- ☑ Market based volunteering has emerged – with people are prepared to pay for the experience
- ☑ There is a shift from longer to short term exchanges
- ☑ Online volunteering
- ☑ Youth programmes where learning (and CV development) is the objective
- ☑ Terms for volunteers range from being barely distinguishable from consultancy to local salary to self-funding.

All of these changes continue to have big implications for IVSOs, who are in the process of adapting.

**IVSOs are losing their ‘exclusivity’**. Everyone can travel and encounter different cultures (even if not in the same way as through IVSOs).

But IVSOs are being presented with **major opportunities to shape proliferating contacts**. An **important brokering role** is emerging, with more requests to help nurture and support the development of volunteer associations and groups as part of a strategic development of organisational, institutional and people-people links. This can involve advice on training and vetting of volunteers, effective administration and financial management. But it can also involve a much wider range of (sometimes unfamiliar) requests – because all kinds of people decide they would like to engage in a huge variety of ways. Responding to this plethora of opportunities is **very time consuming and potentially expensive**.

There is a difficult **balance to be struck here between objectives**: encouraging contact and mutual assistance between people; observing the ‘do no harm’ principle; using available resources to obtain the optimum mix of poverty impact and wider development benefits. At present, it seems that IVSOs are (for understandable reasons) focusing on the poverty and development impact areas. With resources constrained, often a high dependence on one major donor – and continued anxiety about long term finance, IVSOs are not well-positioned to respond to all the opportunities that exist. But the broad trends suggest a **continuing expansion in demand for opportunities for the public to engage**. The demand is very diverse but (largely) positive, so in principle this energy should be harnessed. Obviously if IVSOs do not step in to shape the scene, other people (Foreign Ministries and other private and NGO providers) are likely to do so.

## 5 Analysis of volunteering models

The contents of this section will mostly be familiar ground to IVSOs – so readers may decide to skim this or skip to the next section. But we include a brief analysis here, because there may be some new elements – but more importantly because **when these**

familiar points are reviewed in the context of the discussion on social capital below, the familiar advantages perceived in volunteering remain strong, but the critiques of volunteering tend to seem less valid.

### **5.1 *What people say they value about volunteer sending***

- Skills transfer – less in demand, but still valued
- Confidence building
- Commitment and solidarity
- Linkage back to volunteers' own society
- Diversity of skills and capacities in each volunteer (they bring more than one simple skill – this is important in terms of social capital)
- The opportunity for people to make a contribution
- Willingness to work for reduced salary and conditions - an expression of partnership.
- More public support for volunteer sending than official aid in general
- Volunteers bringing an outsiders perspective, independence and often contacts

### **5.2 *What people value about volunteer sending organisations***

- Brokering
- Advice
- Enabling wider participation in development cooperation (involving non-traditional actors in development community – migrants, military, business).
- Help in combating xenophobia/racism and in promoting ideas of wider (global) society/responsibilities
- Volunteer sending agencies bring a different quality of partnership – beyond pure TC
- Some understanding that volunteer sending agencies have the networks and are good at getting grassroots concerns into policy level discussion
- Ability to have a presence where bilateral cooperation relationships are not possible
- Role in making volunteer sending more “professional” though other organisations as well as directly
- Counter-technocratic
- volunteers give sending countries a good image/human face
- Volunteering helps build up development resource base

### **5.3 *What makes people uneasy about volunteer sending***

- Paternalism (some agencies no longer using term volunteer)
- Amateurishness
- Less focus on development outcomes
- Less efficiency perceived by some in delivery of poverty reduction/development impact/MDG outcomes
- Arguments that volunteering is substituting for building local capacity

The discussion on reciprocity below can put a new perspective on issues such as paternalism. If volunteering is perceived in term of reciprocity, it can be seen as a shared investment in a global society.

## 6 Social capital

### 6.1 What is social capital

The notion of social capital has received a lot of attention in recent years. The concept is based on the premise that social networks have a real value.

Just as a family may have capital in the form of animals, or a village may have capital in the form of land and water supply, so the links that exist between people represent a kind of capital.

It is possible to draw on social capital – just as other forms of capital can be used. When a family calls on friends and neighbours to help mind children or repair storm damage, they are able to draw on past ‘investments’ in social relations. When people are able to trade on the basis of trust – so trade becomes quicker and easier because people know one another – it is easy to see clear economic returns on social capital.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth breaking down the idea of social capital into some of its components, because by doing this, it is easier to see the tangible benefits involved.

- Without effective social networks, there can be no collective action of the kind that many development interventions depend upon. From credit groups to improving village water and sanitation, community action is often key.
- Social networking is also critical for information flow - and in areas such as HIV/AIDS

awareness, promoting rights and ensuring accountability, improving peoples’ access to information is vital.

- Reciprocity is at the heart of social capital – the notion that social networks encourage people to do things for others, without expecting anything in return.

### ***What international volunteering contributes in terms of social capital in OECD countries***

- International understanding/solidarity (DED for instance have 4 regional office in GE charged with making link between work overseas and what’s happening in Germany – returnees, school links etc.)
- Linkages between organisations and communities
- More informed public on globalisation and development cooperation
- Opportunity for development of young people
- Training for sector – but also training in how to work effectively in a global economy
- Contacts through volunteer sending mean that southern concerns can be more effectively factored into northern policy engagement
- Volunteer sending agencies can enable wider society to engage in contact with developing countries
- Anti racism and challenging xenophobia

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that social capital can act as a malign force, but this possibility does not need to be explored here.

Networks not only provide the opportunity for people to help one another – they also give people the inclination to do so.

## 6.2 *Volunteerism produces social capital*

The voluntary ethic is central to the production of social capital. In fact it is argued that volunteering can be seen as an index of social capital.

Ideas which can be seen at the core of volunteerism: trust, civility and reciprocity are also critical in the development of social capital.

Trust normally develops between people who know each other. But in the case of international volunteering, people decide to do something for someone they don't actually know, on the basis of just wanting to make a contribution, without any expectation of payback:

I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favour'.<sup>6</sup>

Volunteers work on:

'the assumption that one's trust in others will be reciprocated, which is grounded in our sense of shared citizenship'.

These ideas are intuitive; IVSOs have known them all along. Volunteering creates virtuous cycles of social interaction. International volunteers working in developing countries by their very presence reinforce some of the key elements of social capital within communities. They also help to build awareness of a citizenship beyond community and indeed country – so if social capital can be said to exist beyond local communities, - if there is such a thing as global social capital (which the authors think there is!), volunteer sending has the potential to be a significant catalyst for it.

It is worth pointing out here that social capital as an approach is especially valuable when the definition of development being used is rather narrow. In recent years, donors have focused development policy quite closely on poverty reduction. Less readily measurable benefits, like networking,

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<sup>6</sup> (Putnam, 2000: 134).

### ***What international volunteering contributes in terms of social capital in developing countries***

Volunteers are good at **promoting partnership** (because they embody it)

Northern volunteers may help to **create links** within sectors such as health

Volunteers can help **broker resolution** between parties in dispute

Volunteers often 'go the extra mile' undertaking activity beyond their remit, which tends to reinforce community level action

The presence of an international volunteer in a project or programme can broaden a community's **network** of contacts and help people access and share **information**.

solidarity and awareness, have not been popular with funders – though IVSOs have always been convinced of their value as part of an effective approach to development. The social capital framework focuses attention on some of the less tangible (but no less vital) elements of the development process. It makes values that volunteers have always known to be important clearly evident, in a language that development officials will understand.

### **6.3 What governments like about social capital**

Governments like the idea of social capital, at least in part because strong communities cost governments less. When links between people are strong:

- there may be less need for welfare benefits (strong families and communities may mean less isolation for older people, and more informal childcare)
- less crime (people keep an eye on each others properties)
- less need for government service provision (more voluntary work to provide school equipment and other community resources)
- global social capital can increase security and good community and international relations

### **6.4 How NGOs can make use of the social capital concept.**

In practical terms there are two ways in which IVSOs can use the social capital concept in discussion with government.

Where IVSOs are under pressure to justify their performance in terms of specific development outcomes, the concept of social capital should help agencies to identify and explain the added value that volunteers help to create.

For example, volunteers are often more trusted by local communities than government or TC experts. A volunteer can help build trust between communities and local government. This trust is a form of social capital – drawing on it makes implementing programmes easier – real ‘added value’.

#### **Social capital can be divided into two parts:**

**Bonding social capital** exists between people who are similar or who have a lot in common. It tends to be inward-looking.

**Bridging social capital** exists between different types of people or groups, and tends to be outward looking. Bridging social capital is harder to create – but within increasingly diverse societies – and as globalisation brings different groups into contact with people as never before, bridging social capital is particularly valuable.

International volunteers provide a common denominator between different groups of people – and can be a catalyst for bridging social capital.

If a social capital framework is applied to a lot of volunteer activity, it becomes clear that many of the broad benefits volunteers bring – networking, a people-centred approach,

partnership, a motivation beyond money, an openness to exchange of ideas and information – are ‘not just warm and cuddly feelings’. Rather they are key elements of social capital – which is ‘widely recognised as having the potential to sustain and renovate economic and political institutions’.

At the 2002 IVSO Pretoria meeting, concern was expressed about a tendency to try and place a monetary value on international volunteering – which to some extent undermined the broader global value seen as inherent in volunteering. Putting volunteering in terms of social capital should not be seen as a different way accounting for benefits in monetary terms. Instead it is a way of underlining the fact that activity may have a very high value that cannot easily be expressed in € ¥ or \$!

Looking at more proactive engagement by IVSOs, (beyond accounting to funders), as governments become more concerned with issues of security (the links between human, economic and ‘military’ security) and as the daily realities of globalisation affect the lives of citizens in every country, using a social capital analysis could help IVSOs to demonstrate a wide range of benefits which flow from international volunteering. **These include: international sharing of ideas and perspectives, awareness of mutual rights and responsibilities, the fostering of transferable skills and the adaptability to work within different environments and cultures – the notion of a society that goes beyond the narrow confines of a 19th century nation states framework.**

Global realities mean that governments are reawakening to the value of ideas that IVSOs have always seen as important. This may present an opportunity for IVSOs to work together on a proactive strategy to highlight and promote the value of volunteering.

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