Environmental Social Work: A Path towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract: The repercussions of ecological crises and shortage of natural resources have strongest impact on the most vulnerable and marginalised sections of the society. The impact is seen pertinently in the areas of space, food, energy, health and recreation. Sustainable development as an umbrella concept provides a scope to establish linkage between physical environment and social milieu, human being and issues of ecological and social sustainability. The broad objective of the present research is to find out how Environmental Social Work can contribute to sustainable development and to explore what roles social workers can play to fulfil the needs of the people without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their needs. The article tries to analyse the environmental issues and concerns of the contemporary society and explore possible ways in which social workers can be involved in dealing with the environmental issues at different levels. The current research makes use of explorative and descriptive research design to establish linkages between environmental social work, ecological sustainability and sustainable development. Available literature on sustainable development and Environmental Social Work has been collected and synthesised to critically analyse how environmental social work practice can play pivotal role committing towards sustainable development. It also briefly highlights the environmental social work practices in India and the contribution of Indian social work practitioners to handle the environmental challenges. The research finds that a holistic analysis of the contexts of the resources and problems of individuals and communities is highly needed. It emphasises on the seminal role of inter-disciplinary approach in bringing sustainable development through Environmental Social Work. The research suggests that in the context of the new knowledge available about ecological sustainability, application of 'community organisation' and 'social action' methods can be highly applicable for the environmental social workers to ensure sustainable development.

Introduction

Sustainable development is considered as a holistic and integrative concept that interconnects between the essential dimensions and values for progressing towards a happy, healthy and prosperous society for all over time (Boström *et al.*, 2018). The value, importance and popularity of Sustainable Development as a concept is clearly understood from reading the agenda of international institutions and agencies such as the United Nations' '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (UN General Assembly, 2015), and the International Association of Schools of Social Work/International Federation of Social Workers/International Councilon Social Welfare's 'Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development' (IASSW, IFSW and ICSW, 2012). For instance, during the past few years, the three social work organisations – IASSW, IFSW and ICSW – have shown strong commitments in working in partnership with the United Nations and other international agencies towards meeting the goals of the 2030 Agenda (UNRISD, 2017). Social work is commonly popular as both an academic discipline and a practice-based profession. The main goal of social work is to promote 'social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people' [IFSWas quoted in Ornellas *et al.* (2018, p. 224). Social work, in its education as well as practice is primarily characterized by transformative and emancipatory approach. Hence, there is a requirement of social workers to be equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, attitude and values for bringing desired change in the society. Social workers must be inculcated with and guided by the core values of emancipation, ideology and philosophy of social justice and principles of human rights for bringing change at micro, meso and macro level. Social workers are the catalysts and vital agents of social change. Theymust possess a high sense of professional obligations, moral duties and responsibilities for creating necessary conditions and mechanisms to ensure a better living environment and quality of life for all.

Social work originated with a focus on "Person-in-Environment" perspective. This particular perspective is a practice-guiding principle that highlights the importance for social work practitioners as having a sound understanding of human beings in light of the environmental contexts, in which they live, act and react with others (Kondrat, 2013). In this sense, the professional practice of social work is developed with a holistic perspective that focuses on multiple, reverberating

transactions between people and their social as well as biophysical environment (Hare, 2004). However, social work education and practice has mainly dealt with social issues, with some consideration being given to the economic aspects of society; however, it has largely neglected the bio-physical environment (Gray and Coates, 2015; Harris and Boddy, 2017). In a similar manner, Zapf (2010) states: "As a profession with a long-standing declared focus on person-in-environment, social work might be expected to play a leadership role in interdisciplinary efforts to tackle environmental threats to human well-being and continued existence, yet the profession has generally been silent or less than relevant."Within the context of Social Development, there is a global call for social work education and practice to shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric paradigm through Environmental Social Work (ESW) (Gray *et al.*, 2013; Rambaree *et al.*, 2019). Thus, 'Working towards Environmental and Community Sustainability' has been posited as one of the four priority areas in the 'Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development' (IASSW, IFSW and ICSW, 2012). Social Development requires a major shift towards sustainability in all sectors of society. Therefore, Social workers, as agents of social change, are expected to play vital roles in facilitating such societal transition. In this context, environmental change and its associated impacts on society such as famine, displacement, poverty, and migration turn it a professional obligation for social work to accommodate ecological sustainability within its framework of education and practice. Through Environmental Social Work, social work students need to be prepared for practice in areas such as disasters of natural and human origin (Alston *et al.*, 2019); protection of the bio-physical environment; and proactive engagement with social, human and ecological development in the community (Gray *et al.*, 2013). Essentially, ESWrecognizes the inter-twinned connection between human-nature and well-being, and accordingly sets goals to help create sustainable conditions for the flourishing of both human and natural worlds (Gray *et al.*, 2013; Gray and Coates, 2015; Ramsay and Boddy, 2016).

ESW is central in emerging social work approaches such as 'Eco Social Work' (Matthies *et al.*, 2001), 'Green Social Work' (Dominelli, 2012) and 'Ecological Social Work' (McKinnon and Alston, 2016). In particular, 'Eco Social Work' relies on ecological arguments and justifications in making demands for social justice, as well as advocating for the respect ofhuman rights and participatory approaches through social work interventions in the communities (Matthies *et al.*, 2001). 'Ecological Social Work' places both humanity and nature at the centre of its education and practice with a view to ensure the sustainability of natural resources for the long term (McKinnon and Alston, 2016). Moreover, 'Green Social Work' aims to coproduce

'transformative social change that creates a living, viable earth with equitable shared and distributed resources and opportunities' (Dominelli, 2018, pp. 18-19). All these different approaches connect the social, economic and ecological dimensions to each other, thereby making a shift from modernist to holistic foundations in social work education and practice (Ramsay and Boddy, 2016).

Objectives

The broad objective of the present research is to find out how sustainable development can be brought through Environmental Social Work and to explore what roles social workers can play in meeting the needs of the people of the present generation and at the same time leaving a scope for the future generation to meet their needs. Following are the specific objectives of the present research.

1. To analyse the environmental issues and concerns of the contemporary society
2. To find out the ways in which social workers can be involved in dealing with the environmental issues both at micro, meso and macro level
3. To emphasise the seminal role of inter-disciplinary approach in bringing ecological sustainability through Environmental Social Work

Methodology

The current research makes use of explorative and descriptive research design to establish linkages between environmental social work, ecological sustainability and sustainable development. Available literature on sustainable development and Environmental Social Work has been collected separately. After a critical review and analysis, the relevant information has been synthesised to find out how macro and micro environmental social work practice can play pivotal roles in the path towards sustainable development. The relevance of interdisciplinary approach in dealing with environmental issues has been contextualised keeping in mind the need of the hour. The conceptual framework for the present research is derived out of the researcher's concern for and experience of interacting with many tribal and rural people of Odisha, and learning their indigenous ways of environment management at micro level.

Environmental Concerns in the Contemporary Society

The Earth's average land temperature has warmed by nearly 1°C in the past 50 years as a result of human activity. Global greenhouse gas emissions have risen by nearly

80 percent since 1970, and atmospheric concentrations of the major greenhouse gases are at their highest level in 800,000 years. We are already seeing and feeling the impacts of climate change, with weather events such asdroughts and storms and other natural calamities increasing in frequency and intensity. This trendnot only threatens the world's ecosystems and biodiversity, but also poses a serious risk for peace,security and sustainable development (UN Environment, 2016).Pollution affects our health through the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe.Low- and middle-income countries bear much of the brunt of pollution-related illnesses, where thesituation is coupled with poor health care and food insecurity. Capital intensive industrialisation,including mining and other natural resources-based industries, has not only created ecologicalimbalances, but also displaced people from their environments and pushed them into marginalspaces and livelihoods. High levels of consumption and production, fuelled by such industries,require larger inputs of energy and generate larger quantities of waste by-products (Orecchia andZoppoli, 2007). With 990 pollution-related deaths per 100,000,1 China has an astonishing numberof air pollution fatalities (*The Guardian*, 2016).

Pollution has a particularly disproportionate and negative effect on those who are poor, disadvantaged and marginalised. Although much fewer than China, Pakistan attributed 110,000 deaths in 2015 to pollution (58 per 100,000;2 *The Guardian*, 2016), and a recent report by Green peace India cited pollution as a killer of 1.2 million Indians every year, costing the local economy an estimated 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) (Greenpeace, 2017).While increasing environmental pollution is one of the major contributors to the catastrophic environmental change being witnessed today, global population expansion is putting enormous strain on natural resources. Coupled with over-exploitation of natural resources and a growth in consumerism, the environmental crisis has accelerated. Although increasing populations put strain on the environment, due to over-exploitation of resources, there is evidence that industrialisation and capital intensive development aimed at profit and promoting consumerism have been at the forefront of exploitation of natural resources beyond its regenerative capacity. Furthermore, it is argued that 40 percent of the world's population, classified as the very poor, subsist only on 10 percent of the world's resources, while less than one-third of the world's population, especially the very rich, consumes more than two-thirds of the resources.

Worldwide, 844 million people are living without access to safe water (water. org, n.d.). A Water Aid report in 2016 ranked India among the worst countries in the world for the number of people without safe water. India is not a water-scarce

country, with several major rivers and an average annual rainfall of 1170 mm, but lack of conservation and increasing water pollution has made safe water inaccessible to millions of people in India. Due to such structural inequality imposed by the inequitable distribution of physical resources (Dominelli, 2002, 2012), economically and ecologically fragile communities experience less access to essential resources such as forests, minerals, food and water. Thus, the logic of 'neoliberal capitalism', which precludes equitable resource sharing, has failed both the people and the planet.

Environmental Themes in Social Work

Environmental social work is gradually emerging as a key area of social work practice in the contemporary society. Despite the increasing role environmental concerns plays in allcommunities and for allpeople across the world, the practice of environmental social work continues to be underemphasised by the profession. From a review of the available literature, broad themes of environmental social work can be synthesised as follows:

(1) Economic development, sustainability and social capital to create employment, sustainable livelihoods and food security

(2) Social work activism in relation to climate change

(3) Crisis intervention in disaster and traumatic stress events, including practice with survivors of natural disasters, and disaster relief services

(4) Social work activism in relation to climate change

(5) Social work responses to toxic waste exposure, including social work with low-income communities to reduce exposure of their children to toxins

(6) Social work intervention in times of drought

(7) Mining and industrial damage with those who have suffered at the hands of transnational corporations, especially mining companies

(8) Environmental justice where racism and poverty combine with pollution so communities endure multiple oppressions

(9) Food security, including community gardens, urban agriculture and community-supported agriculture

(10) Community education *vis-à-vis* the environment, ecology, spirituality and related matters

The above-mentioned themes though appear quite vast; it reflects the diversity of areas in which environmentally concerned social workers are engaged with. This

diversity is also helpful to understand certain pertinent questions such as what is environmental social work? What role does social work have to play in terms of the social and environmental changes required? In what ways can social workers incorporate the natural environment into their work with clients? What can the social work profession specifically do in terms of macro- and micro-environmental social work practice interventions most importantly what does environmental social work look like in practice? Anecdotal evidence suggests that many environmental social workers are practising on the margins. They are practising environmental social work but are writing less about these interventions in social work forums. Increased interest in environmental issues and concerns emerging in response to various manifestations of ecological destruction has opened up new avenues for social work to explore its obligations to people and environments as social workers experience the impact of globalisation and international 'development' efforts. Social work profession with its ecosystems or person-in-environment approach is well placed to respond to environmental issues at both macro and micro-practice intervention levels. The themes highlight possible contributions of social work to ecological sustainability and social development and also try to answer the question "how does Social Work intervention promote ecological sustainability? Environmental Social Work is operational in nature and carries out mobilization actions by creating awareness among individuals about their rights and duties of citizenship and social participation. It gives emphasis to all dimensions including economic, environmental, ethical, political and cultural and tries to involve all agents such as institutions, local groups, associations, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations etc.

Involvement of Social Workers

Since the late 1980s, church groups and communityand social service workers began to join the environmentalmovement. Within a few years, articles inprofessional literature followed including the work ofBullard (1994), Hofrichter (1993), Pulido (1996) andSachs (1995). These publications drewattention to the negative impacts on people of industrialpollution, the dumping of industrial waste and agriculturalpractices – spraying and run-off – resulting inexposure to toxins in water, soil and air. Mary Rogge(1994a) summarises the social and political thrust ofthese early environmental social work writings. The communities living in poverty become more vulnerable and marginalised due to the disproportionate amounts of the harmful carry-overs which come from affluence and technology. They get fewer

benefits and are disproportionately excluded from the decision-making processes determining how toxic waste is managed.

The first wide-ranging review of environmental issues for social work, and still a work of considerable relevance, is Hoff and McNutt's (1994) edited work –*The Global Environmental Crisis: Implications for Social Welfare and Social Work*, in which *s*everal chaptersaddress a wide range of areas and interventionswhere social work practitioners could and should beengaged in environmental issues. This was the onlysocial work text on environmental issues for severalyears until Coates' *Ecology and Social Work* (2003a).Besthorn developed the 'Global Alliance for Deep-Ecological Social Work', a web site to promote dialogue and interest in social work practice in which the environment includes all of nature and not just the social environment. Deep ecological social work reflected the expanded conceptualisation of the environment to include a central and significant place for the natural and physical environment (deep), as opposed to the more traditional and 'shallow'view in which an exclusively social understanding of environment dominated social work theory and practice. Despite these efforts, the dominance of the therapeutic model in North America and the shallow, exclusively social interpretation of social work's longstanding'person-in-environment' focus has resulted in many academics being ill-equipped for the relevance and connection between social work and environmental issues. This has contributed to the profession, overall, being quite reluctant to fully accept the importance of environmental issues for social work.

Environmental Social Work Practices in India

Social worker's engagement in environmental protection in India is also noteworthy and praiseworthy. The noted environmental social work practices in India are basically in the form of collective actions and social movements. The control over their resources by the common masses, protection of environment and maintenance of ecological balance and the day-to-day activities concerned with ecological sustainability as the affect the human life to a great extent are the significant concerns of the environmental social work practices in India. The environmental social work in India also sought for economic and political justice and are not only meant for mere distribution of resources but put forth a larger vision like enhancement in the quality of life through recognition of people's rights over their natural resources, their right to live with dignity and their participation in the decision-making process. It focuses not only on basic survival issues but also on larger ecological sustainability. The environmental movement in India is critical of the colonial model of

development pursued by post-colonial state. The post-independent India advocated the modern capitalistic agenda which led to the destruction of environment, poverty and marginalisation of rural communities. The conventional environmentalism in India is in the forms of formation of national perks, sanctuaries, protected areas advocated by the state with the aim of preserving wildlife and bio-diversity. In response to this conventional environmentalism, the environmental social work in India in the form of social movements advocated the ideology of "environmentalism of the poor". It not only criticised modern developmentalism but also strongly advocated for the revival of traditional self-sufficient village economy and brought communities to centre-stage of Indian environmental discourse. Fortunately, the same concept of self- sufficiency is advocated by the state very recently through the new developmental discourse and slogan of "Atma Nirbhar Bharat".

The leaders of the movements argued in order to make sustainable use of resources, the traditional rights should be given back to the people and traditional institutions should be recognised. The environmental social work practices in India basically concentrate on the issues of equity in relation to access and use of natural resources. Some popular movements include Chipko movement, Appiko movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Anti-Bauxite Mine Movement/ Gadharman Bachao Andolan (Balco Project), Chilika Bachao Andolan and some urban-based environmental movements. The environmental social work in India is not confined to any particular group rather it is all encompassing and includes both villages and urban communities, women, tribals, peasants, middle classes and most importantly nature. The basic issues taken up by the environmental social workers in India are protection of people's rights to access to natural resources, prevention of land degradation, prevention of commercialisation of natural resources and environmental pollution, maintenance of ecological balance, rehabilitation of displaced people etc. Furthermore, these issues are concentrated around the social values like people's dignity and worth, environmental rights of people and their participation in decision-making rights on issues concerning them.

The Need of Inter-Disciplinary Approach

The delay in social work scholarship in the area of environmental impacts and solutions, and the necessity to be informed by many fields of research and enquiry, has led those in social work who are deeply concerned about environmental issues to be highly interdisciplinary in their search for information (see, e.g., both Besthorn

and Lysack). The inter-disciplinary approach can benefit social work by bringing in sources and ideas from other social sciences disciplines to develop social work's knowledge base. Management of environment and maintenance of ecological sustainability should be interdisciplinary as it involves an array of knowledge, including the contested science of global warming, scientific studies on the pollution of air, water and soil and their impact on people, habitat destruction and extinctions, agricultural practices and policies, and globalisation and trade policies etc. This is consistent with McNeill's (2000) argument that 'ecological history of the planet and the socioeconomic history of humanity make sense only if seen together'. The inter-disciplinary approach can lead social workers to make alliances with a broad range of academia, community educators and social activists from various fields to explore effective responses across many levels of practices.

In the contemporary society, it is a challenging task for social work as well as other professions to break free of their academic soils and work cooperatively and in unison to understand better and respond to the multiple dimensions of environmental degradation and climate change. The predictions of disasters (both natural and man-made) can be seen to be influenced by climate change and may be inferred to be the repercussions of such human activities as globalisation, deforestation, pollution, industrial agriculture and construction of dams. It is highly needed to respond not only to the symptoms but also to the causes. The major source of carbon in the atmosphere is aided by industrial agriculture, factory farms, excessive use of chemicals and packagingand the transportation of food thousands of kilometres and by the release of methane as the permafrost warms in the wake of global warming. The solution to this problem requires efforts at all levels (micro, meso, and macro) from all disciplines and from every section of the society in which social work can play dominant roles in integration and synthesisation.

Global warming, arguably the most severe crisis facing humanity, is occurring and demands that humanity as a whole address this problem 'before dangerous thresholds are breached by our unwitting collective activities' (McNeill, 2000, p. xvi). Despite the well-publicised but scientifically marginalised critiques of climate change the vast majority of scientists are in agreement that climate change is happening and human activity has played a significant role (Gleick, 2010). The only critical debate remaining is a political one – will humanity act in time to mitigate the most serious negative impacts? There is little doubt that global warming will impact not only the socio-political, economic and physical environment in which social workers are engaged, but also the type of work, both reactive and proactive, that social workers

will be called upon to carry out.As public media carried more stories on climate change and global warming following the BrundtlandCommission (1987) and the several internationalefforts and gatherings addressing climate change, such as the Kyoto Protocol (UNDP, 1998), IPCC (2001, 2007) and Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (Laurie, Bender, Burns & Guggenhiem, 2006), social work course texts began to give more than mere acknowledgement in some quarters to the relevance of the natural environment in social work practice. Responses to global warming can be as complex and diverse as the causes and consequences. What is at issue and why there is so much resistance to effective intervention at global, national and local levels is theWestern way of life with its focus on consumerism and individualism, supported by the 'Neoliberal juggernaut' which includes 'deregulation, privatization and commodification' (Giroux, 2010).In recent years, social work has responded by expanding its theoretical considerations and practice interventions so that the physical environment, and our connectedness to the entire planet and all of life, has become more central to social work discourse. A good example is Van Wormer, Besthorn and Keefe's *HumanBehavior and Social Environment*: *Groups, Communitiesand Organizations* (2007) which expands the traditional concern of social work texts as it gives serious attention to the environment and spirituality as central to social work practice.

Environmental realities have played a significant role in pulling social work to re-evaluate its modernist foundations, and to shift from the primacy of therapy and rehabilitation and recognise our essential connection to all of nature – a nature including all people and all life on the planet. Effective professional interventions must address not only personal stress and family reactions to climate-related issues, but also significant lifestyle, community and public policy issues, in efforts to shift towards a sustainable society and away from the current 'extractive economy' (Berry, 1988) that is exploiting nature and the majority of humanity. Despite social work's person-in-environment configuration or ecosystems approach, which has always directed attention to the connection between individuals and their environment (Besthorn, 2000) the profession's reluctance to engage in environmental issues and the environmental movement has been well documented (Besthorn, 1997; Zapf, 2009). In part, this has been due to the narrow interpretation of the person-in-environment approach to be almost exclusively social, with emphasis on the individual or society over the natural environment. This has largely confined the notion of the environment to the narrow boundaries of the social environment, while the physical environment is often simply treated as a modifier or context (Zapf, 2005).

Western knowledge systems, ideologies, and social care and development methods have repeatedly been shown to be not only inappropriate but also totally inadequate for addressing the major crises confronting our planet (ecological, spiritual, social, economic andsecurity) (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2007; Haug,2005). Mainstream Western ways of thinking is anthropocentric, utilitarian and emphasises on economicgrowth which has led to a competitive process of exploitation of the earth resulting in injustice (social and economic) andpoverty. However, gradually we are beginning to witness increasing advocacy for a major shift from industrial growth to sustainability, that is, development meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). The profession's interest in Indigenous social work and spirituality has also created a welcoming space for environmental issues to be heard (Besthorn, 2002b; Canda, 1998). As Coates, Gray and Hetherington (2006) wrote: 'Within social work, we call this the "eco-spiritual" perspective to distinguish itfrom the more narrowly conceptualized, anthropocentric ecological perspective' (p. 388). Similarly, Zapf (2005) cautioned that if social work limited understanding of spirituality to the individual person, there was a danger it would miss the profound connection to the environment. As Gray (2008) stated: 'We need an outward focussed eco-spiritual social work in which spirituality is "other" rather than self-centred, and not anthropocentric since it embraces all life forms as well as sustainability for the planet' (p. 192). Morrissette,McKenzie and Morrissette (1993) argued that the distinctiveness of Aboriginal world views and traditions included their historical development 'involving a symbiotic relationship to the earth and a belief in the delicate balance among all things' (p. 93). They suggested that this intimate and respectful relationship had resulted in a spiritual consciousness based on survival needs and a belief in the people as caretakers of the Earth's resources. This fundamental view of the Earth as a sacred living thing is important to many IndigenousPeoples, and to a number of authors on the forefront of 'evolution of consciousness' such as Berry (1988,1999), Earley (1997) and Rifkin (2009). This view is in tension with capitalist agendas based on exploitingthe Earth and dominant science perspectives implying human control over nature because it cultivates harmony between humans and all living things and it sees the entire world as interrelated and alive (Baskin, 2002).

Conclusion

Within the social work curricula, Environmental Social Work has remained at the margin in many countries, including in India. Within the context of Sustainable

Development, there is a global call for social work education to incorporate Environmental Social Work. It appears that for long, the teaching and learning of environmental concerns has been neglected in social work curricula. Social work as one of the vital agents of social change needs environmental education to prepare practitioners for working on all the three main dimensions of the neo developmental discourse i.e., social, economic and environmental. The current state of the environment is a major global cause of concern and worry for all. For decades, several political leaders and professionals including social workers have failed to consider societal transformation towards Sustainable Development in a comprehensive and more holistic manner with a high degree of seriousness.

Environmental issues have not received the much-needed attention they deserve from the social work profession globally. The iniquitous impact of environmental degradation on the people, particularly poorer people, is nothing short of a crisis of social injustice. A sustainable world is not possible without taking account of the human dimensions of the environmental crisis. In this context, social work must define its contribution to the notion of sustainable development on both local and global levels (Matthies, 2001: 127). Appropriate actions in the expanded realm of 'person-in-environment', model of practice, both social and physical dimensions of environment should be treated as equally important and it should be an integral part of environmental justice. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development provides the broad framework for action by social workers. More particularly, environmental and community sustainability, the overarching theme of the Dublin Conference 2018, is expected to bring the focus of social work into environmental justice and environmental entitlements. Environmental sustainability is a collective responsibility, where social workers are one of the actors but play a significant role in putting people at the centre of all environmental actions. The environmental entitlement perspective promotes such collective actions through institutional and individual actions. While integrating environmental justice content in social work education and training is a need of the hour, such knowledge and practice models based on social work perspectives, values and skills can ensure that environmental justice is seen as akin to social justice, thereby becoming a central concern for the profession. Social work should also aim to transform neighborhoods into communities (eco-neighborhoods) where people can live, work and prosper in a participatory process of collective construction of integrated and sustainable development and as a promoter of environmental sustainability, well-being and social integration.

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