

UNDRR ASIA PACIFIC
COVID-19 BRIEF

DISASTER- RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

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Photo: ABS-CBN News, the Philippines

Effective social protection is critical to reduce vulnerability and support timely recovery. However, to date, national systems have been too underdeveloped or not flexible enough to allow them to expand before or during emergencies. Despite these shortcomings, many countries in Asia-Pacific are relying on social protection mechanisms to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 crisis, reaching millions of people with cash-based assistance and other forms of support.

This brief was developed by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in collaboration with Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). This brief explores how countries in the region are leveraging social protection systems in relation to the COVID pandemic, highlighting the challenges and successes to date. The brief also draws attention to lessons from the region, including how to ensure social protection systems are in place before a shock occurs. It also explores financing options to expand social protection coverage, especially to help reduce disaster-related vulnerability.

The brief reflects interventions and feedback from the UNDRR Asia-Pacific webinar on 28 May 2020, titled 'Disaster-Responsive Social Protection: Lessons from COVID-19.'

OVERVIEW

As the worst global crisis since the Second World War, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause unprecedented disruptions to economies and societies. The pandemic is not only an immense health crisis, but it is also having an exponential impact on poverty and inequality. It has the potential to slow down progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals as many economies struggle with the current economic downturn.

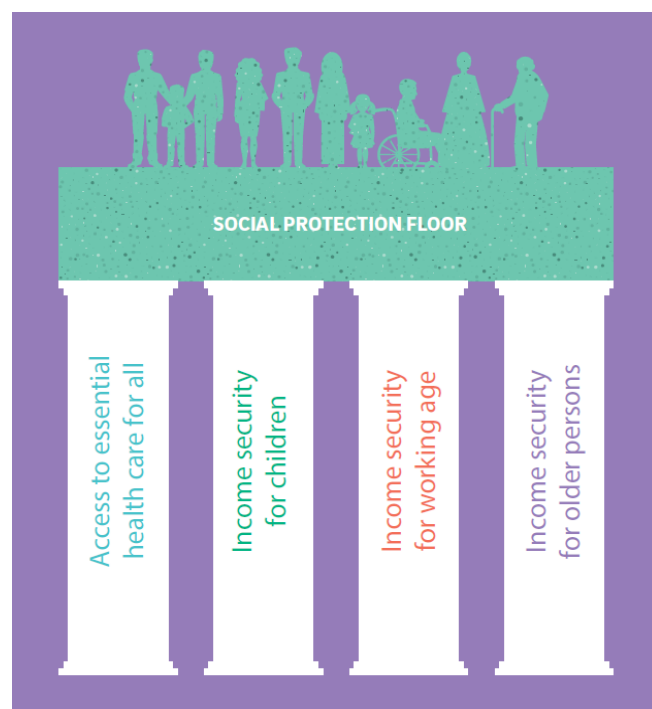
COVID-19's far-reaching impact on livelihoods has brought into focus how important it is for countries to invest in social protection systems. Social protection delivers rapid financial support to those that need it when a crisis hits, thus protecting livelihoods while stimulating economies.¹

Indeed, over the years, more countries and organizations have sought to strengthen institutional capacities and governance in order to build disaster resilience through social protection. With such dire economic consequences, it is not surprising that 126 countries have introduced or expanded their social protection in response to COVID-19.²

However, in the Asia-Pacific region, only 40 percent of the population has access to a social protection programme as estimated in 2017.³ Moreover, many national systems have been too underdeveloped or not flexible enough to allow them to expand before or during emergencies. While good examples exist of social protection mechanisms used as the vehicle for disaster response and recovery, their application for building long-term resilience (including through vulnerability reduction) is largely unexplored. Despite these shortcomings, many countries in Asia-Pacific are relying on social

protection mechanisms to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 crisis, reaching millions of people with cash-based assistance and other forms of support.

The COVID-19 pandemic is shining a light on the challenges and opportunities social protection provides in the prevention, management, and recovery from disasters. The region needs to invest in health and social protection systems and to embed long-term sustainability into stimulus packages and recovery policies, in order to strengthen resilience to future shocks. In addition, increasing policy coordination across countries is critical to ensure that no one is left behind. This issue brief looks into some of these challenges and offers recommendations to expand and strengthen social protection to achieve greater community resilience.



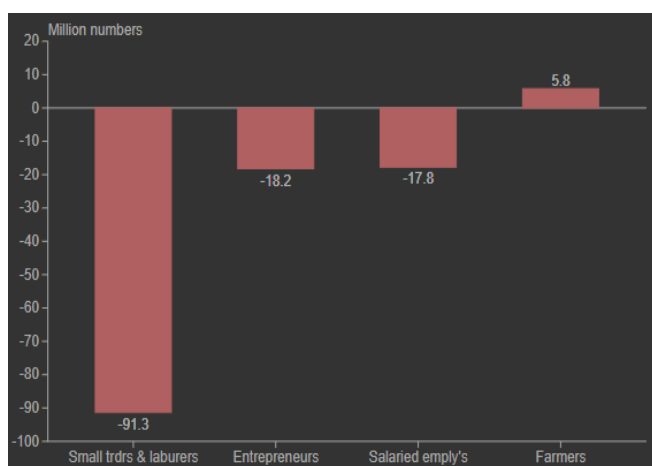
Social protection is a set of policies to help women, men and children reach or maintain an adequate standard of living and good health. (Source: ESCAP)

RESPONSE CHALLENGES

1. Increasing poverty levels

The COVID-19 crisis will result in the first increase in global extreme poverty since 1998. It has been estimated that the crisis could push between 71 to 100 million people into extreme poverty in 2020, effectively wiping out the progress made since 2017.⁴ Sectors that are labour-intensive and employ low-paid and low-skilled worker are the sectors most at risk due to the COVID-19 crisis, which in Asia-Pacific, make up 38 percent of employment.⁵ Compounded impacts of disaster risk and climate change, together with COVID-19, further exacerbate the levels of poverty and inequality.

The social and economic impacts of this crisis will be widely felt, especially in poorer countries. Almost half of the projected new poor will be in South Asia wherein the number of poor people is expected to further increase if the growing inequality and declining GDP growth rates hold true.⁶ In India, for example, unemployment has climbed from around 8.7 percent in March to a record high of 27 percent in May. This has rendered over 120 million people jobless, 75 percent of whom were small traders and labourers.⁷



Estimated numbers of jobs lost by employment type (Source, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd., 05 May 2020)

2. Declining fiscal space

The impact of COVID-19 has resulted in an economic downturn and increased market volatility, and a continued crisis could affect global financial stability.⁸ The World Trade Organization has forecasted that the current recession could be more devastating than the 2008 financial crisis, cutting world trade by up to a third.⁹

Relatively weak economic fundamentals in Asia-Pacific, coupled with limited fiscal space and a lack of access to capital markets are inhibiting the less developed countries in the region from rolling out timely and sufficient stimulus packages, which could in turn trap them in their vulnerable status.¹⁰

A large decline in revenue could reduce the fiscal space of governments at a time when they are rolling-out huge economic stimulus packages to bail out their economies. The average size of such packages has been 10 percent of the national GDP, but most countries have been increasing the size of the package as the economic impact of COVID-19 expands. The declining fiscal leverage of countries is also expected to impact the safety nets and welfare schemes which would ultimately harm the affected populations.

3. Criteria for assistance and impact of disasters

Globally, around 4 billion people today are estimated to have no access to any form of social protection.¹¹ As social protection mechanisms are often designed to help the poorest segments of society, the criteria used to determine eligibility is based largely on poverty-related indicators. Hence, the multi-dimensional nature of vulnerability is often not accounted for when income is the main basis for assistance.

Disasters further aggravate vulnerabilities rapidly and it may not be easy to scale-up social protection systems to address the new and expanded needs. Moreover, factors such as

gender, age, disability, origin, ethnicity and type of employment, often exacerbate the risk of exclusion from social security systems. Under such circumstances, social protection programmes may fail to take into account the new or growing vulnerabilities induced by a crisis.

The occurrence of simultaneous disasters compounds the problem further, as was seen recently with a spate of tropical cyclones in the Indian and Pacific oceans and droughts in Southeast Asia.



Bangladesh Red Crescent Society volunteers procuring food for distribution in shelters ahead of Cyclone Amphan which struck Bangladesh and India in May (source: GRC/ BDRCS)

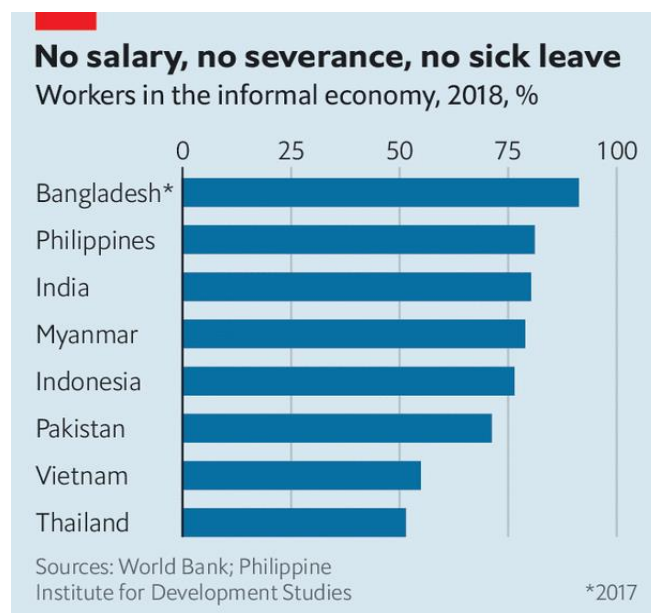
4. Prolonged duration of assistance

The scale and duration of the COVID-19 crisis are unprecedented. While most countries responded with emergency short-term measures, including by enacting new social protection measures, it is increasingly clear that the need for assistance will last longer than originally envisaged. This is due to delays in the economic recovery of countries and because of lingering restrictions due to concerns over second waves of infection. Countries, hence, need to consider long-term investments to sustain social protection while rehabilitating the economies.

5. Limited outreach to the informal sector

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought national economies to a standstill and severely impacted the informal sector. The ILO estimates that more than six out of ten workers and four out of five enterprises in the world operate in the informal economy. In many countries, the size of the informal sector has even grown over time.¹² Workers in the informal sector are more likely to be poor and suffer from a variety of risks, including employment uncertainty and occupational hazards.

Despite facing larger risks, informal workers have limited access to social protection mechanisms. Challenges in designing and delivering social protection systems that extend to informal sector workers, who are often not registered with the government, are compounded by the fact that the informal sector varies widely.¹³ In addition, some worker categories (e.g., women, migrants) are exposed to greater risks and need greater attention from policy makers.



Percentage of informal workers in select Asian countries (source: The Economist)

Expansion of social protection systems will help build long term resilience to multiple sets of crises. ESCAP estimates that if investments in social protection in Asia-Pacific are in line with even the global averages (i.e. 11 percent of GDP), it will lift almost 53 million people out of poverty. Further, basic social protection can help most households weather small shocks, especially if they are able to diversify their livelihoods.¹⁴ Thus, social protection programmes, when made shock-responsive, can be effective in both reducing the vulnerabilities of at-risk groups and in enhancing the resilience of communities to better cope with, respond to and recover from shocks and stresses.

1. Invest in social protection before a disaster

Social protection programmes serve a dual purpose: they can reduce vulnerabilities so that communities are more resilient to shocks and can recover faster, and they serve as a vehicle to enable early action and deliver rapid relief. Investments in shock-responsive and adaptive social protection systems before a disaster can strongly influence recovery speed. The value of linking disaster risk management systems to social protection programmes before disasters strike has been demonstrated across the region. During the 2015 cyclone Winston, Fiji topped up the cash transfers for beneficiaries in its existing national social protection programmes. This investment reduced the impact of the cyclone on the poorest Fijians by more than 20 percent with a cost-benefit ratio of almost 1:4.¹⁵

Despite the fiscal constraints, the benefit of ex-ante investment in social protection is becoming increasingly clear. The pandemic has shown that poverty patterns can change quickly and that groups that were not covered, either by contributory or social assistance programmes, were very hard to reach. Having a system in place before the disaster strikes not only saves valuable time in reaching the most affected, but also enables governments to scale-up the mechanisms, if needed. Moreover, pairing social protection programmes with an early warning system can make them quite effective in responding to slow-onset disasters, such as COVID-19. This has been aptly demonstrated when

social protection programmes are linked with forecast-based financing.

Scaling Up Social Protection in the Philippines

The Government of the Philippines launched the The Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) in 2008 as a conditional cash transfer to the poorest, both for social assistance and social development. The programme was expanded in response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, including by making the cash transfers temporarily unconditional in the wake of an emergency (for example, it removed conditions pertaining to the education and health of children in the household, as well as requiring the attendance of monthly family development sessions).

Following the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the government launched the Social Amelioration Programme (SAP) to provide cash transfer to families in vulnerable sectors who have been affected by community quarantines. The SAP initiative builds on the 4Ps programme by providing top-up grants and subsidies to registered beneficiaries while enrolling additional affected populations. As a result, the initiative has been able to benefit over 20 million low-income and vulnerable families.

2. Promote universal social protection

Universal approaches are essential to reaching both the poorest households and to providing a much-needed cushion to vulnerable households in the “missing middle” (a large number of vulnerable people who do not qualify as extremely poor and are mostly employed in the informal sector). However, universality can only be achieved

through the adoption of non-discriminatory, inclusive and responsive social protection systems that meet the needs of a diverse population in a manner that ensures respect for the rights and dignity of all persons protected.¹⁶

Further, while the provision of protection is based on the level of risk, the extent of the protection should be determined by the level of need. Universal social protection, thus, aims to ensure equitable access to all people and to protect them throughout their lives against poverty and risks to their livelihoods through a nationally defined social protection system.¹⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for policy makers to consider what is an appropriate level of support when faced with a prolonged and wide-scale disaster, so that the required cash is available as soon as the shock hits. If there is no minimum income floor for people to fall back on when such a shock hits, people have little means to sustain themselves.¹⁸ Universal Basic Income (UBI) is one approach that is being considered to set a minimum income floor. For instance, the Republic of Korea is inching towards the possibility of implementing a UBI, starting with the introduction of an emergency-triggered 'anti-disaster basic income'.¹⁹ In Sri Lanka, it has been estimated that at a cost of around 4 percent of GDP, the government could provide a UBI of around US\$ 95 per household per month to ensure minimum income requirements are met in a time of need.²⁰

The United Nations, under its comprehensive response to COVID-19, aims to promote and support countries in establishing and scaling up universal social protection systems. This includes promoting a gender-sensitive perspective that takes into account unpaid care by women, constraints for women entrepreneurs, and women in the informal sector.²¹

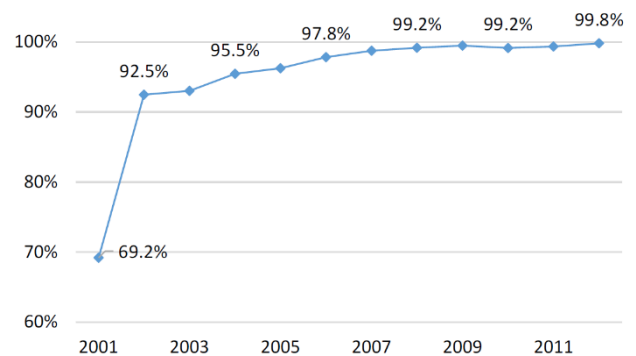
3. Integrate universal health coverage and social protection

The multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to realign social protection and universal health coverage to ensure all aspects of vulnerability are addressed. This includes using national social protection floors that guarantee access to essential health

care and basic income security to the vulnerable sections, while boosting domestic demand. One promising way to do this is through providing universal coverage that protects people especially during critical lifecycle contingencies. During the COVID-19 crisis and in normal times, these programmes have been shown to provide critical support to vulnerable members of society, while indirectly benefiting the wider family, especially those who have to balance caretaking with work.

Thailand's Universal Health-care Coverage Scheme, launched in 2001, has been successful in increasing access to health services and reducing the incidence of catastrophic health expenditures.

As a result, the scheme contributed to the country's effective response to COVID-19.²² It is estimated that all of Asia-Pacific can be protected with an investment of \$475 billion, or 1.5 percent of regional GDP, which would cover the costs of minimum social protection guarantees and universal health coverage for the entire region.²³



Social health protection coverage in Thailand (Source: ILO)

4. Adopt a human rights-based approach to social protection

Social protection is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection acknowledges social protection as "a basic human right and based on a rights-based/needs-based, lifecycle approach".²⁴

Rights-based approaches offer normative standards and principles, analytical tools, and operational guidance, which are relevant in both justifying social protection measures and informing their management.²⁵ Through a rights-based approach, social protection systems are

viewed as a fundamental responsibility of the state and not an act of charity.

Moreover, social protection systems play an important role in supporting the exercise of several economic, social, and cultural rights, especially of the poorest and most vulnerable during times of crisis. To ensure their effectiveness, these programmes should be framed in an integrated manner and backed by regulatory measures, rather than run as isolated responses in different ministries and sectors.

Persons deprived of their liberty comprise a particularly vulnerable group due to the restrictions which are already placed upon them and their limited capacity to take precautionary measures. The UN Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture has called on governments to “reduce prison populations and other detention populations wherever possible.”

5. Strengthen digitization to enhance inclusion

Digital solutions and connectivity are providing new avenues to attain universal social protection and minimize exclusion errors. Across Asia-Pacific, digital identities and digital cash transfers are two innovations that could be scaled up to enable timely responses, curb corruption and ensure that no one is left behind. Digital cash transfers are not only quick and efficient, but in cases like pandemics, can minimize the need for in-person transactions – thus ensuring assistance reaches those who need it without adding new risks to the beneficiaries or the frontline personnel.

In Mongolia, a large and sparsely populated country, digital connectivity has helped strengthen outreach to people living in remote areas. India’s well-known Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Act (MNREGA) is an example of an effective social protection programme that has provided vital cash transfers to the rural poor who are at high risk of drought and floods. However, the programme has long suffered from leakages, exclusion, and delays in payment. The Indian government has hence introduced a

biometric-enabled national identity system (Aadhaar) to verify beneficiaries and link their bank accounts. Aadhaar-linked payments reduced leakage of funds, ensured faster payments, and helped to make the social welfare programme more responsive.²⁶

However, for digital solutions to be successful, the digital divide in the region needs to be closed – 52 percent of Asia-Pacific remains unconnected.²⁷ To fully leverage the opportunities offered by such technologies, it is critical that governments bridge the digital divide by ensuring access to universal, affordable, and reliable broadband.



Users of Aadhaar have the option to authenticate their identities using biometrics such as fingerprint or iris scans.

6. Adopt intersectional approaches to reduce vulnerabilities and reduce exclusions

Multidimensional poverty and vulnerability cannot be addressed unless intersectional approaches are adopted in social protection programmes. Intersectional approaches challenge the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model and offer a way to understand and respond while accounting for different factors, such as gender, age, disability and ethnicity.²⁸

Learnings from the COVID-19 crisis remind us that one of the goals of social protection is to maintain social cohesion and affirm the social contract between the state and its people. COVID-19 has impacted everyone, but differently, and therefore calls for the adoption of a life-cycle approach to social protection, and for understanding the differentiated impacts on different population

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. Invest in social protection before a disaster.
2. Promote universal social protection.
3. Integrate universal health coverage and social protection.
4. Adopt a human rights-based approach to social protection.
5. Strengthen digitization to enhance inclusion.
6. Adopt intersectional approaches to reduce vulnerabilities and reduce exclusions.
7. Adopt flexible assistance delivery modalities.

groups (e.g. the impact on children in terms of reduced educational attainment because they are out of school, increased risk of undernutrition, increased risk of abuse, etc.).

One of the key means to strengthen intersectional approaches to social protection is to improve the collection and sharing of disaggregated data on the circumstances of vulnerable, marginalised and at-risk people. Updated social registries and reliable information systems can play a major role in scaling up social protection programmes, when needed. Also, partnerships with civil society organizations, especially those that serve marginalized or remote or communities, can be critical to enhancing enrolment in protection programmes and minimizing exclusion errors.

7. Adopt flexible assistance delivery modalities

Based on the circumstances of each emergency, there might be a need to explore alternate modalities of assistance delivery. Such decisions should be based on a thorough analysis of the specific vulnerabilities of the affected populations to ascertain the type of assistance needed. For instance, fee waivers for public utilities may not be adequate or relevant enough for all groups or circumstances. Delivery modalities should be

expanded to include electronic payments, or in-kind payments, in addition to the ability to top-up payments to existing beneficiaries.

Another way of changing the delivery modality is by relaxing the conditions around payment delivery. As seen in the example of 4Ps in the Philippines, conditional cash transfers could be altered to make them unconditional in a time of a crisis, or at times when conditions may be hard to meet. Further, the most appropriate combination of assistance (e.g. cash, food and assets) should be determined based on the context and the level of market functionality. Market research should be linked with the early warning system to inform assistance decisions.

Finally, informal mechanisms sometimes work better at the community level and a social protection system would benefit from taking them into account, especially at the local level. Complementarity between the formal and informal social protection systems can provide expanded modality options to ensure programmes are inclusive.

'Cash+' for Resilience

Cash+ is an innovative assistance approach that combines cash transfers with other provisions, inputs or services in order to more effectively achieve successful outcomes and ensure long-term resilience. Complementing the cash with productive interventions enables poor and marginalized families to build assets and engage in economic and productive activities.

Cash+ approaches are contextualized to the targeted sector and local circumstances. Successful examples include those implemented by FAO and UNICEF where cash was paired with inputs (e.g. veterinary services, animal feed, fertilizers, etc.), technical training (e.g. climate-smart agriculture), public work and augmentation of services to enhance the livelihoods and productive capacities of poor and vulnerable households.

FAO's research and experience show that Cash+ can significantly improve agricultural production, income, economic empowerment, dietary diversity and food security, while reducing the need for beneficiaries to resort to negative coping mechanisms in response to shocks.

Acknowledgement

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Additional Resources

- COVID-19 and United Nations: Human Rights: We are all in this together
<https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>
- WHO, Preparedness, prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and other places of detention
<https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-determinants/prisons-and-health/publications/2020/preparedness-prevention-and-control-of-covid-19-in-prisons-and-other-places-of-detention,-15-march-2020>
- IASC guidelines - COVID-19: focus on persons deprived of their liberty (OHCHR and WHO)
<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/iasc-interim-guidance-covid-19-focus-persons-deprived-their-liberty-developed-ohchr-and-who>
- IOM, Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis
<https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs-60.pdf>
- Secretary General’s Policy Brief: COVID-19 and People on the Move:
<https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-covid-19-and-people-move>
- OHCHR Guidance: Emergency Measures and COVID-19
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/EmergencyMeasures_COVID19.pdf
- UN Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech:
<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/HateSpeech/UNGuidanceHate.pdf>
- Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ) report on the COVID-19 situation in prisons and policy recommendations for Thailand. <https://knowledge.tijthailand.org/uploads/publication/file/20200422/en-bdgklnpsuw36.pdf>
- IPU, Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic
<https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-parliamentary-responses-pandemic>
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