Socio-Economic Mobility of Youth:
Factors, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions

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Abstract: In the face of record levels of youth unemployment and starkly unequal opportunities to climb the socioeconomic ladder, young people are facing difficult challenges. From early childhood to young adulthood, there are several key obstacles to socioeconomic mobility that emerge. These include availability of early childhood education, level of peer support during adolescence, secondary school funding and quality, and skills development and job matching as a young adult. This article explores the dynamics of these critical obstacles, analyzes initiatives that are successfully helping young people overcome these obstacles around the world, and makes policy suggestions to create a society in which young people have strong opportunities to fulfill their potentials and advance socioeconomically. The article focuses on the state of socioeconomic mobility of young people in the United States, drawing on examples of successful models from all over the globe.

Introduction

A Generation Fervently Seeking Opportunity

The youth of today – the Millennial Generation – are facing unprecedented challenges and obstacles. Over half of the world's population is comprised of youth – that is over 3.5 billion people under the age of 25 (Special Report, 2012). Sadly, the International Labour organization estimates that nearly 75 million youth are unemployed globally (Global Employment Trends, 2012). Over half of young people are unemployed in the nations of Greece, South Africa, and Spain, and the regions of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East tend to have youth unemployment levels of around 25% or more (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012). It appears, too, that the larger trend is not a positive one, as we have recently seen an increase of 4 million unemployed youth since 2007 and the largest one-year increase on record between 2008 and

2009 (Global Employment Trends, 2012). In light of the impending demographic youth bulge, particularly in developing nations, these statistics seem particularly dire.

What do these grim statistics say about a young person's ability to advance socially and economically? The sad truth is that these indications have strikingly negative implications on any hope of socio-economic mobility for young people in today's world, as youth worldwide are three times more likely than their parents to be out of work. A young person's ability to climb the socioeconomic ladder is truly stunted. In the United States, the nation lauded for the "American Dream," 42% of children born to parents on the bottom rung of the income ladder remain on the bottom rung a generation later (Simmons-Morton, & Chen, 2009). As a result, we have seen the youth of this generation itching for change at a rapidly increasing rate. 2011 alone saw countless protests for social change in nations all over the world. The Arab Spring movements across the Middle East and North Africa have largely been led by the energy and organizing ability of youth, as young people took to Twitter and Facebook to plan live demonstrations that led to the toppling of regimes that were once thought to be permanent mainstays. Indeed, the Middle East and North Africa have an average youth unemployment rate of 25 and 24 percent respectively (Education for Employment, 2012), and this is undoubtedly a driving force of the Arab Spring movements. Additionally, we have seen 100,000 Chilean students taking control of 300 schools in a call for a revamped education system, Greek youth coming together in Syntagma Square to protest the new austerity package in light of the government bailout, the Occupy Wall Street Movements, and more (Shenker, 2011). It appears that we are at a watershed moment in which this problem of socioeconomic immobility must be fixed.

With a trend of unemployment and socioeconomic immobility that looks bleak and a generation that seems ready to explode out of restlessness and dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, where do we begin to search for solutions? How do we maximize the potential of young people and identify strategic approaches to provide opportunity for youth around the globe to move up the socioeconomic ladder? In order to answer these questions, we must carefully consider the determinants of socioeconomic mobility at each point of a young person's life. This paper will chronologically analyze the life of a young person from early childhood to adolescence to young adulthood. In doing this, we will be able to isolate particularly salient issues in the life of a young person that prevent that person from reaching his potential personally and socioeconomically. Then, we can revisit these stages of life and consider promising solutions to tackle the outlined challenges with the ultimate goal of providing as high a level of opportunity to youth as possible. The analysis will have a primary focus on the United States but will consider analyses and examples from around the world.

Personal Development Factors: Childhood to Employment

Early Childhood
Impact of early childhood education
A child's early years are critical when it comes to cognitive development. In an often cited study of the effectiveness of preschool programs, Steven Barnett and Clive Belfield found that these programs do raise academic skills on average for all students, though not notably different effects for different groups of children. The researchers point to an important benefit of preschool education: it is quite able to break links between parental behaviors and child outcomes in areas such as crime, welfare, and teen parenting, all areas very closely tied to socioeconomic status and ability to succeed in the future. Currently, however, not even half of

poor three and four year olds in the United States are enrolled in any kind of preschool program (Barnett & Belfield, 2006).

Further, looking at other case studies, particularly France and Denmark, there are indications that universal preschool programs have partially helped to close the gaps in school achievement and eventual wages. Using France's uptick in preschool enrollment between the 1960s and 1980s, research shows that attendance of preschool for two or three years instead of one year correlated to an increase in students' monthly eventual monthly wages by 3.2% and 3.6% respectively (Does America Promote, 2011).

Adolescence
Peer relationships and dropouts
Amongst the confusion of adolescence years, peer influences on behavior tend to increase dramatically as parental influence wanes. Studies show that peer influence has the uniquely strong position of greatly affecting school engagement (Simmons-Morten, & Chen, 2009). Quite importantly, it is proven that a lack of student engagement is predictive of dropping out, "even after controlling for academic achievement and student background" (High School Dropouts in America, 2010). One statistic indicates that 9 out of 10 American students who drop out of school do so for primarily non-academic reasons; it is often not that the student is incapable of succeeding, but that the surrounding pressures and negative influences create the problems. At the end of the day, dropouts from high school are far less likely to attain employment with solid wages, are more likely to commit a crime, and follow countless other negative correlations. Furthermore, dropouts have an astonishing cost to American society (High School Dropouts in America, 2010).

Because of this, policymakers have done much to try to prevent dropouts. Still, it is critical that we take a closer look at peer mentoring programs and potential positive peer influence in general. Students whose friendships have more positive features show higher levels of involvement in the classroom and have more positive perceptions of their own behavioral conduct. They also feel more accepted by their friends; this builds confidence, and ultimately these students have higher self-esteems, which leads to more enjoyable and fulfilling lives inside and outside of school. Research also points to the fact that a student's general attitudes about schoolwork are often very reflective of their peers' attitudes. Because of the vulnerability and insecurity distinctive of adolescence, even simple expressions of congratulations or praise from friends have the effect of bolstering a youth's self-esteem (Berndt, 1999). In a more tangible regard, a student's motivation to go to college as well as actual attendance in college is likely to be directly affected by the influence of his high school friends (Hallinan, & Williams, 1990).

School quality: funding inequality stacked against low-income children and youth
This discussion so far has not taken into account one very important factor: the context, or the type of secondary school that the student attends. Familial socioeconomic status and the neighborhood in which a child grows up unfortunately have a deep impact on the type of education he experiences and the type of preparation he receives for further education. Occurring at such a formative stage in a young person's life, the secondary school is something that must be analyzed very carefully in searching for the determinants of socioeconomic mobility and future success. A 1996 study by The College Board, which conducted a telephone survey of students taking the SAT, found that "rigorous high school courses, high expectations of all students, and availability of college counseling and information were important elements in the decision to go to college" (King, 1996). These three factors are all tied to the type of

school that the student attends. Unfortunately, the type of school a child attends is far too closely tied to his or her family income level.

The existing public school funding gap between high-income and low-income youth – for elementary, middle, and secondary schools alike – is a threat to the core American value of equality of opportunity. 15.5 million American children live in poverty (2011, Kids Count, 2011) and the dropout rate for these students is five times greater than that of high-income students ("High School Dropout," 2011). Yet, 40% of schools in the US serving low-income students – "Title I schools" – spend less state and local money than non-Title I schools of the same level in the same district (More than 40%, 2011). This type of school funding inequity helps lead to quality inequities that help perpetuate the cycle of poverty in the United States.

Young Adulthood
Next comes the stage in a young person's life in which, assuming he continues in high school and does not drop out, he makes a decision regarding higher education and seeks employment. This will be defined here as the stage of young adulthood. The McKinsey Global Institute's research project "Education to Employment" defines three critical "intersection points" where youth interact with institutions of higher education and the workforce:
   1) the enrollment in higher education
   2) the skills gained during higher education, and
   3) the employment coming out of higher education (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012).

Decision to enroll in higher education
Higher education as a means to move up the socioeconomic ladder
Starting from the first decision point, attending university is traditionally closely tied with the idea of socioeconomic improvement. It is indeed true that a college degree provides a potential boost in socioeconomic status. In the United States, the likelihood of one moving from the bottom of the family income ladder to the top is increased threefold by a college degree. Conversely, the absence of a college degree can be detrimental for the poorest Americans; 47% of those brought up in the bottom quintile of family income who do not earn a college degree remain there are as adults, compared to 10% who do earn a college degree (Pathways to Economic Mobility, 2008). In the wake of the recession, the decline in employment and wages among 21 to 24 year olds was much more severe for those without an associate or bachelor's degree; employment declines for those with only a high school degree was 16% (from 55% pre-recession) compared with a 7% decline for those with a BA degree (from 69% pre-recession) (How Much Protection, 2013). Ashenfelter, Harmon, and Oosterbeek conducted a review of literature that substantiated these findings and indicated that postsecondary schooling has a distinct impact on future earnings. In analyzing twenty-seven studies across nine different countries, the group concluded that the "market-based returns to schooling" range from 6.6% to 9.3% (Haverman, & Smeeding, 2006). With this knowledge in place, we see that it is indeed statistically accurate that higher education is an effective means for socioeconomic mobility. As we will consider later, though, it is not necessarily effectively utilizing its potential.

Skills development during higher education
Even if a student is enrolled and successful in graduating from college, this does not mean that his or her upward socioeconomic mobility is ensured; in fact, the reality indicates that this is very far from the truth. Research indicates that too many youth are uninformed about career choices and make misguided decisions in college. 40% of youth in 9 nations studied – Brazil, Germany, India, Mexico, Morocco, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – reported that they were not familiar with market conditions and requirements for even

well-known professions like doctors and teachers. As a result, students choose their courses more or less blindly when it comes to future employment options, not knowing if there will be a demand for their skills or qualifications when they graduate. High percentages of youth in all nations but Germany also indicated that vocational school is appealing but choose not to attend because of its lesser prestige when compared to academic institutions (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012).

The opinions of youth surveyed show that 58% believe that practical, hands-on learning is an effective approach to training and learning, however only 24% of academic program graduates said they spent most of their time like that. This may not be particularly surprising given the existence of liberal arts educational degrees, however probably more of an eyebrow-raiser is that only 37% of vocational graduates said that they spent most of their time with hands-on learning (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012).

Employment after higher education
A result of this is that the youth unemployment rate in 2011 was 15% across more than 100 countries, three times higher than the unemployment rate of those over 30. Only 55% of youth managed to find a job that is relevant to their field of study. What is startling, and perhaps a source of optimism for a solution, is that nearly 40% of employers surveyed by McKinsey stated that a lack of skills is the main reason for entry-level vacancies. According to Business Europe, the first quarter of 2011 saw 24 million unemployed persons in the EU; simultaneously, employers reported 2.2 million unfilled job vacancies. An annual study of 40,000 employers across 39 countries by ManpowerGroup finds that about one in three employers (34%) were having problems finding appropriately qualified staff, the highest proportion since 2007 (Youth Unemployment Challenges, 2012). Here, we find the mismatch that is the main theme of the two studies; youth are looking for employment and cannot find it, while employers are looking for qualified employees and cannot find them. Higher education, with its lack of data on its graduates' career paths, has not shown the ability to bridge the gap, and the blame is shared among the three groups – employers, educators, and youth – for a lack of effective communication.

Potential Solutions to Foster Socioeconomic Mobility

To take a step back and recount our discussion thus far, we have identified and analyzed at a general level a host of challenges that get in the way of a young person's ability to successfully advance socioeconomically. At each step along the way in a young person's development, we find formidable and complex obstacles that cement socioeconomic inequalities and stifle the potential of youth all across the globe.

In simply reading up until now, one may begin to think that the idea of socioeconomic mobility – the "American Dream" – is nothing but an illusion that dances itself in front of low-income youth only to lead to their disheartening disappointment. However, the obstacles have one thing in common: they are not deterministically set in stone and thus can be remedied. Indeed, each obstacle has the potential to be traversed through a variety of creative and effective programs, policies, and initiatives. There has been proof of progress in each of these areas, and the next section of this paper will examine a few of these proven solutions to some of the challenges raised. We will begin, again, with early childhood and progress to young adulthood, identifying and analyzing ideas that have worked and can expand its impact. Responsibility for these solutions is shared between the public, private, and social sectors. Oftentimes, as we will

see, the leaders of these initiatives are and must be the energetic youth of the Millennial Generation themselves.

Early Childhood
Quality preschool education for all

As discussed, inequalities among children exist already upon entrance into primary schooling. The logical step is to consider is how to provide quality preschool for all children. A major study by W. Steven Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) indicates that quality preschool programs can make a major difference in the lives of young people and ultimately their potential to move up the socioeconomic ladder. The study finds that "well-designed preschool education programs produce long-term improvements in school success, including higher achievement test scores, lower rates of grade repetition and special education, and higher educational attainment." Some programs have associations with reduced delinquency and crime both in childhood and in adulthood. Barnett argues for increased investment in those preschool education programs that are deemed effective for all children. The results would then result in major educational, social, and economic benefits. These types of preschool programs may be administered by the government, like Head Start, or may be private. Barnett notes that publically funded preschool education for all will provide large educational gains for both the disadvantaged and the advantaged children (Barnett, 2008).

Ensuring the required funding and enrollment mechanisms for all children to attend high quality preschool programs appears to be a promising and much-needed solution to the problem of stagnant socioeconomic mobility between generations. Having a quality early childhood program mitigates the potential setbacks of growing up in a low-income household environment. Critically, there is a real need for this as well. About 25% of four year-olds and 50% of three year-olds in the United States do not attend a preschool center. Because Head Start and most pre-Kindergarten programs have family income eligibility requirements (based on the Federal Poverty Level, or FPL), those children that have the lowest preschool enrollment rates are children just above the poverty line but in the lower half of income distribution. Here we see that these children– children who likely deal with very similar negative environmental effects to those just lower than them on the family income bracket – are left to fall through the cracks. Finally, even those who are enrolled in preschool programs are not necessarily where they need to be; it is critical that each preschool program is carefully supervised to ensure it meets the highest standards (Barnett, 2008).

Longer-term schooling with fewer breaks

"Learning in America is a prisoner of time. For the past 150 years American public schools have held time constant and let learning vary… The boundaries of student growth are defined by schedules for bells, buses and vacations instead of standards for students and learning" (Farbman, & Kaplan, 2005). This 1994 quote from the National Education Commission on Time and Learning reveals another solution to provide greater opportunity for children and youth of low-income backgrounds in keeping them away from the negative effects of the household: to have the school year and school day last longer. If the students are spending more time in school, there is greater potential to improve the development of young people from less than ideal home backgrounds. In the US, students spend only a little under one-third of their time in school. Further, they face the greatest risks and opportunities during their discretionary time (Evans, & Bechtel, 1997).

An organization called Massachusetts 2020 examined eight extended-time schools that strayed away from the traditionally accepted calendar of 180 six and a half hour days. The benefits of

more time spent in school are quite plentiful: more individual assistance, greater depth of material covered, more opportunities for feedback on work, more enrichment activities outside of the normal classes, and much more. Additionally, the extra time could potentially be used to address the aforementioned skills gap and the lack of exposure to the workforce (Farbman, & Kaplan, 2005).

Adolescence
Building effective peer support programs
If we are to construct effective peer-mentoring programs that can be installed in schools throughout the nation and have a substantial positive impact on dropout rates, our research about the best practices of developing these programs is key. One important conclusion drawn from research is that the transition to high school is incredibly crucial. Parsons found that a person is most easily influenced when he or she needs information in order to adapt (Hallinan, 1990). This is the case in the transition from middle to high school, as incoming ninth graders are most in need of guidance when it comes to social norms, classes, activities, and many other things. So, peer-mentoring programs are most necessary and most effective if they focus on incoming ninth graders just as they begin high school and begin to adjust. This idea is reinforced by the fact that over one-third of dropouts occur in the ninth grade (High School Dropouts in America, 2010).

Several key qualities must exist for a program to be impactful. As noted, students whose friendships had more positive features had greater school engagement (Berndt, 1999). So, the mentors must be encouraging and positive in their interactions with their mentees. Similarly, mentors need to be consistent. Research shows that students with more stable relationships are better adjusted to school. For a friends' influence to be maximized, the friendship must continuously be reinforced (Berndt, 1999). Thus, mentoring programs must ensure that the pairs meet regularly in some context. Additionally, care must be taken to ensure the matching of mentors with mentees who have similar interests. Adolescents typically form stronger friendships with those who share similar attitudes and interests. An adolescent's behavior is linked to his or her close friends (Simons-Morten, & Chen, 2009), so, to increase the likelihood that a friendship becomes tight-knit, similarities should exist between the two people. Finally, peer-mentoring programs should have the effect of making the entire school's culture and environment more open and welcoming as significant research has underlined the importance of school and classroom environment. Adolescents whose school environments are marked by openness and a welcoming of participation are more likely to intervene in a situation of injustice or exclusion (Feigenberg, King, Barr, & Selman, 2008), thus further spreading the cycle of positive influence.

Young Adulthood
Improving job information accessibility and connecting youth to employers
In order to give youth graduating from high school a fair chance to evaluate their decision to attend or not to attend college, and then what to study in college, detailed information about the workforce must be available. A series of studies by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasizes that high quality career guidance has the effect of helping youth make better-informed decisions about their future (OECD G20 Labour, 2012). However, existing career guidance programs often suffer from poor funding, under-qualified instructors, and lack of access to timely and relevant labor market information. They also potentially start too late in the development of a young person ("Youth Unemployment Challenges," 2012).

The first step that is entailed in overcoming this obstacle is the creation of a base of information, and the second step is getting this information out in a way that ensures all youth know that there are resources available to help them make decisions, regardless of whether their parents have been through those types of decisions before. Examples of successful organizations that fill these two roles are the United Kingdom's National Career Service, the Columbia Labor Observatory, and India's Pratham Institute for Literacy Education and Vocational Training. The UK's initiative provides detailed information about different jobs on the web, and offers career counseling over the phone. Evidence has shown that from its inception in April 2012 to June 2012, the website has received over one million visits, has enabled 270,000 face-to-face sessions, and has led to 50,000 phone conversations, This is all with an 85% average user satisfaction rate (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012).

As Internet job boards are the source of about 25% of new hires according to CareerXroads, online matching organizations are becoming increasingly vital. INJAZ al-Arab, the Arab-world affiliate of Junior Achievement that operates in 14 nations, is currently working on developing an online platform – Arab Youth Portal (AYP) – for the delivery of e-learning and job matching to promote youth employability and entrepreneurship. This group appears to be poised for success in connecting businesses to youth as it currently reaches 200,000 Arab youth annually and has thousands of private sector volunteers. Organizations like INJAZ and Junior Achievement partner with schools and vocational institutions to increase young people's exposure to employment and the labor market at an early age. Junior Achievement has reached more than 4 million students in the US (Youth Unemployment Challenges, 2012). Again, we see the promise of collaborations between the private and public sectors in attacking this problem of socioeconomic immobility.

Skills-training programs for youth
INJAZ and Junior Achievement serve as both communicators of knowledge about the provide sector and skills trainers. They are not the only programs making an impact using solid methods of skills training. Skills training programs serve as particularly useful when dealing with youth who are out of school and work (NEET students). Studies of youth job training programs show that they are most impactful in their long-term impact by emphasizing goals like staying employed, advancing in the workforce, and other values of that nature. The programs are less impactful in the short-term, and do require time commitment that could be spent working. However, long-term benefits can outweigh these short-term challenges.

Studies show that effective skill-training/ job-training programs have certain things in common including recruiting excellent staff with experience working with youth, an understanding of the employment landscape, and follow-up mechanisms after a student is matched with a job (Rappaport, & Jastrzab, 2013). Examples of promising programs like this exist all over the world. A Latin American initiative called "Jóvenes" (which means "youths" in Spanish) requires the employers with which it partners, which range widely in industry and function, to sign contracts promising internships to its graduates. In its teaching, Jóvenes focuses on both technical skills and life skills. It has been successful in scaling to several Latin American nations already, and it may have potential to grow even further (Coy, 2011).

Private sector apprenticeship and training programs
One way for employers to ensure they are getting the type of worker they need, and for youth to sign up for higher education without the massive cost and risk burden, is for employers to invest in the education and training of young people that they want to work for them after graduation. This type of sponsorship model appears to be quite promising in locations all over

the world. In Egypt, for example, the Americana Group linked up with the Ministries of Education and Higher Education in order to train people to work in their restaurants and food businesses. These students spend up to half of their time working and earning wages at the company, and the company pays for tuition and guarantees a full-time position after graduation. From the perspective of the student in this case, he can join the program without worrying about a debt burden or about having to be unemployed for any period of time after graduation celebrations end. On the company's end, this is a sure-fire way to recruit and train skilled labor that fits its needs and to prevent high turnover that plagues other companies, particularly in the food industry in which Americana operates. This is not the only example; Newport News Shipbuilding in the US has a similar program called "The Apprentice School" that invests up front in its students and has had historically very high and long-term retention rates. Students become full-time employees and often key leaders of the company in the long-term (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012).

India's Pratham Institute, mentioned previously, has a model of "learn now, pay later" in which students pay 30% of tuition during their studies and then pay back what they owe in increments after they have secured a job. In uniquely and excitingly filling the critical peer mentoring need and the skills training need at the same time, Pratham provides skills tutoring for youth who then tutor and mentor primary school students. The Institute refers to this as "Education for education" (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012).

Conclusion: Improving Socioeconomic Mobility Step-by-Step

As we can gather from the first half of this discussion, there is certainly no one initiative or policy that can possibly solve the problem of socioeconomic immobility of young people. There are roadblocks that exist even before the child is born, before schooling begins, during school, and after school as the young adult attempts to enter the work force. While it appears that the cards are stacked against the youth of today's Millennial Generation, the latter part of this analysis shows that there are indeed solutions in different places around the globe that are working towards creating societies in which all people have the opportunity to advance socioeconomically. In order for a society to truly tackle this issue of unrealized opportunity, there must be open communication, investment, and innovative partnerships between government, business, community centers, schools, and – crucially – the youth themselves.

In making decisions about how to allocate resources, we must carefully and chronologically consider each barrier faced in the life of a young person and implement and scale up successful initiatives at each step of the way. Starting with early childhood, the most significant thing we can do is assure quality early childhood education for all children. This could take the form of the government ramping up its programs or perhaps a public-private partnership. Whatever the means, it is critical that children are given the opportunity to succeed through early engagement with schooling, as this is an arena in which familial characteristics – something outside of the child's control – cannot be a negative influence.

In adolescence, as young people grow farther away from the influence of their parents, schools must partner with and empower youth to be personal mentors to their peers in order to encourage engagement in school and steer them away from risky behaviors. It is important to note is that youth themselves are the greatest asset in supporting other youth during this very difficult and confusing time in their lives. Additionally, it is critical to establish more effective programs that make use of a young people's out of school time so that their development can be maximized (especially for youth with less than ideal influences at home and in their home

communities). This could mean longer school days, extended school years, and/or more enrichment programs during breaks and after school.

Finally, early adulthood: skills training and vocational schooling should be more prevalent and available for those who do not enroll in college. For those who do attend college, better communication between higher education institutes, youth, and employers is necessary. Career databases and advising services are critical. Sponsorship programs run by employers to help pay for a student's higher education have shown to be a mutually beneficial endeavor that can make a major dent in youth unemployment, supply businesses with the right talent, and ensure that young people of all backgrounds have an opportunity to attend the schooling they are capable of and desire to attend.

Ultimately, the current picture may look dim in some respects, but the many barriers to socioeconomic mobility of youth are very traversable. Today's world has 3.5 billion young people who are more interconnected than ever, have shown an intense desire for social change, and have promising and proven ability to make a major impact on their communities. The challenge before the public, private, and social sector, as well as youth themselves, is how to wholly harness these abilities, ensuring that youth of all upbringings are put in positions to live up to their full potential and become who they desire to become. Excitingly, the large number of promising initiatives all over the globe lead us to a very warranted hope for a future world in which a child can have a real opportunity to succeed socially and economically regardless of the background in which he is born.

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