



What do analyses of Voluntary National Reviews for Sustainable Development Goals tell us about ‘leave no one behind’?

Moizza Binat Sarwar and Susan Nicolai

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A teal-colored circle containing the text 'Key messages' in white.

Key messages

- While Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) have successfully showed countries' political commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), attention is lacking as to how the SDGs are being institutionalised and how the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda is being tackled.
- VNRs cover two aspects of ‘leave no one behind’: firstly, in relation to the inclusivity of VNR preparation processes, and secondly on policies and implementation to drive forward the agenda at country level. However, neither aspect is covered to the extent that it should or could be.
- As the number of VNRs available reaches a critical mass, and with clearer guidelines on ‘leave no one behind’ reporting in place, the review process is essential for tracking commitment and progress on ‘leave no one behind’ and the SDGs as a whole.

Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015) asks member states to ‘conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven’ (UN GA, 2015: para. 79). The UN Secretary General’s Report A/70/684 (2016) suggests a set of voluntary common reporting guidelines which countries can use to structure the review exercises. These Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are then presented at a High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) annually, enabling countries to report their progress on the SDGs and share information with other countries (UN DESA/DSD 2017).

Preparation of VNRs is led by country governments and typically involves ministerial and other relevant high-level participants with variability in the role that civil society can and has been able to play in each country. To date, 64 countries have presented VNRs at the HLPF, with 22 in 2016 and 43 in 2017 (UN, n.d.) (Togo has presented twice). There are 47 countries set to present

VNRs in 2018, after which half of all UN member states will have presented their reviews.

While the UN has synthesised the main messages from VNRs each year, a number of other analyses have been conducted by external experts. Moreover, the UN Secretary General (2017) has recently issued an update to the original guidelines and UN DESA/DSD (2018) has published a handbook for preparation of VNRs. In light of these updates, it is timely to review the cumulative insight provided by existing analyses, the gaps identified so far, and directions proposed by the new VNR resources.

This note reviews official guidelines and 22 available commentaries on the VNRs (see bibliography) with the aim of drawing out common features in the assessments and recommendations for future VNRs, particularly in relation to the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda (see Box 2). It first summarises focus areas of the VNRs to date, as well as the gaps in information identified by existing analyses. It then takes a deeper look at ‘leave no one behind’ – which is unique in that it cuts across all 17 SDGs for

Box 1 Official guidelines and resources on the VNRs

The UN Secretary General’s (2016) guidelines for the VNRs suggest that countries include the following variables in reporting on SDG progress: the country methodology and process for preparation of the review; how countries created ownership of SDGs; incorporation of SDGs in national frameworks; integration of the three dimensions (economic, social and environmental) underpinning the goals; progress on the 17 goals and associated targets; thematic analysis; institutional mechanisms; means of implementation; next steps and a statistical annex. The initial guidelines make no explicit or implicit reference to the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda.

The updated UN Secretary General’s (2017) guidelines provide further detail on the kind of information countries could include under the above variables and specific material they could focus on (e.g. how responsibility for SDGs is assigned across different tiers of government and particular focus on disaggregated data on women and girls). The updated guidelines also include suggestions on how to communicate VNR findings at the HLPF. They emphasise that each country should ensure the VNR process is ‘open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support reporting by all relevant stakeholders’ and ‘will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind’ (ibid: 1).

Box 2 ‘Leave no one behind’ and the SDGs

‘Leave no one behind’ is central to all the goals in Agenda 2030. It appears in the outcome document that was negotiated and agreed upon by all UN members states, in a manner that recognises the problems both poverty and inequality pose in rich and poor countries alike:

‘As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first’ (UN General Assembly, 2015: para. 4).

Practically, at a policy and planning level, ‘leave no one behind’ aims to address (Stuart and Samman, 2017):

1. Ending absolute poverty in all its forms, and ensuring that those who have been ‘left behind’ (in relative or absolute terms) can ‘catch up’ with those who have experienced greater progress.
2. Halting group-based discrimination that has resulted in unequal outcomes for disadvantaged or marginalised populations and bringing a particular focus to people who experience multiple discriminations because of their identities.
3. Prioritising and fast-tracking action for the furthest behind.

every country – by pulling together commentary from existing analyses and reflecting on the degree to which the updated VNR resources address the theme. The note concludes with thoughts on reporting on ‘leave no one behind’ in future reviews.

VNRs and what they tell us so far

Content analysis of the guidelines and the 22 existing VNR analyses from 2016 and 2017 identifies several common themes. Headlines include the degree of political commitment showcased; how institutionalisation has been reported; and the holistic nature and speed of progress on the SDGs. As a backdrop to country-level approaches to ‘leave no one behind’, we look at each of these issues broadly.

Showing political commitment

Commentators (De Meyer et al., 2017; Brimont et al., 2016; Beisheim, 2016) largely agree on the value of VNRs in showcasing commitment to the SDG progress. Together 2030 (2017a) note that the annual VNR process helps move the SDG agenda forward and De Meyer et al. (2017) similarly laud VNRs for motivating national governments to engage with the SDGs. This is particularly important given the voluntary nature of the reviews: that is, countries can choose if and when to present, and the format of their presentation. Commentators therefore find it encouraging that countries have not only presented VNRs, but have also largely followed the Secretary General’s guidelines.

However, De Meyer et al. (2017) and Griffiths (2017) note that while VNRs show governments’ commitment to the SDGs generally, there is little evidence of political leadership at the national level across VNRs, which is crucial for coordinating work across the goals. That said, there are a number of VNRs where the political importance of the SDGs is evident in the fact that responsibility for steering the goals is assigned to executive-level offices (e.g. Colombia, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Madagascar, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, Sierra Leone, South Korea).

Some countries have opted to assign responsibility at a ministerial level so that specific goals are addressed by the relevant agency (e.g. goals on education have been assigned to the Ministry of Education in Egypt). This approach has been critiqued by Brimont et al. (2016) and Beisheim (2016) as encouraging the partition of the SDG agenda, which should, in practice, be treated as integrated. Beisheim (2016) goes on to say that the transformational impact of the SDGs will be lost without high-level political will to coordinate efforts across ministries, and highlights the need for greater political ambition to achieve the SDGs.

Varied understanding of institutionalisation

Although most VNRs have loosely followed the suggested guidelines set by the UN Secretary General (2016), analysts have remarked on the lack of standardisation in content, which has made it difficult to record and compare progress across countries (Together 2030, 2017a and 2017b; Moller-Loswick, 2016).¹

The original VNR guidelines suggested that countries should discuss how ministries were mobilised to implement the SDGs, including central institutional responsibilities for implementation, decision mechanisms around SDGs and mechanisms for review (UN Secretary General, 2016). But countries have chosen to report on institutionalisation in heterogeneous ways. Observers note that while some countries have referred to setting up specific agencies and committees to deal with the SDGs (e.g. Afghanistan and Germany), others have reported on discussions with subnational governments (e.g. Brazil and Kenya). Meanwhile, other countries have discussed institutionalisation in terms of alignment with existing national priorities (i.e. they have highlighted similarities between the SDGs and existing priorities articulated in country visions and national development plans without explaining how the aligned agenda will be executed) (De Meyer et al., 2017; Together 2030, 2017a).

In some VNRs, discussion on institutionalisation mentions processes for monitoring and evaluating national progress (e.g. Czech Republic, Denmark, Jordan, Kenya, Netherlands, Thailand), but Simon et al. (2017) find most VNRs show a limited understanding of what evaluation means in the context of SDGs. While some countries (e.g. Montenegro and Finland) have undertaken a gap analysis to see how ready their institutions are for reviewing SDG progress, other VNRs only note the intention to monitor and evaluate in the abstract with limited discussion on how they will adapt existing monitoring systems to evaluate progress.

Standardisation of VNR content should lead to reporting on each facet laid out in the Secretary General’s guidelines, i.e. how decisions have been reached; the responsibilities of relevant institutions and how these responsibilities are met; and how governments plan to review, monitor and evaluate efforts towards the SDGs (Together 2030, 2017a; UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) and BOND, 2016). Simon et al. (2017: 4) call for the establishment of a ‘standard requirement for all countries to explain in their VNR what role their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system plays in reviewing progress towards the SDGs’. At the same time, Fukuda-Parr (2017), Street (2017) and Howard and Thomas (2017) caution against an overreliance on quantitative data produced by national statistical organisations as the only measure of

1 For Together 2030 (2017a and 2017b) this variability has led them to question the lack of clarity in the original guidelines on the variables that the VNRs were expected to report on.

progress on SDGs. These analysts note that sustainable development is a holistic agenda that is not measurable through a set of quantitative indicators, particularly where progress for the furthest behind is concerned.

Given that the SDGs have been envisaged as indivisible, Beisheim (2016) has stated that a whole-of-government approach is integral to the institutionalisation of Agenda 2030. In such an approach, all government agencies and programmes contribute to the national goal of achieving the SDGs, which ensures cross-government awareness of the linkages between different goal areas. For VNRs, this means country governments need to show how they are investing in dialogue, processes and institutions to anchor the SDGs in all ministries; a discussion that has been lacking in the majority of VNRs to date (ibid.).

Holistic agenda and the speed of progress

Analysts have criticised countries for not reporting on all 17 SDGs in their VNRs (Together 2030, 2017a; Beisheim, 2016). Street (2017) has argued that countries should report on all goals regardless of the targets selected for special focus by the HLPF each year. Beisheim (2016) has proposed that countries clarify where and why they aim to set strategic priorities versus being less active in certain goal areas (i.e. ‘comply or explain’ (p.3)), or else the integrative and transformational potential of the SDGs is undermined. The UN DESA/DSD (2018) handbook now encourages countries to give information on the status of all the SDGs even if they report in depth on a selected few. The handbook suggests that while countries should explain why certain goals have been prioritised, they can focus on key goals if they provide best-practice examples of implementation to share at the global level.

Analysts also recommend that VNRs should report on progress on links between the goals regardless of the specific goals under discussion at each HLPF (Fukuda-Parr, 2017; Together2030, 2017a; Donald and Annunziato, 2017). Together 2030 argues that the responsibility of ensuring the integrated nature of the SDGs falls to the guidelines to a certain degree: for example, Costa and Bellorini (2017: 1) note that ‘[t]he guidelines should support and protect the indivisibility and integrated nature of the SDGs and break a current trend of limited or selective SDG reporting in VNRs’, and that ‘under no circumstances should the Secretary General’s guidelines foster, promote or signal that partial reporting of the SDGs is expected and/or accepted’. To this end, the updated guidelines from the Secretary General (2018) encourage countries to discuss how the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are being integrated in the country, and how policies are being planned and executed to reflect this integration. In turn, the UN DESA/DSD (2018) handbook directs countries planning for the 2019 VNR to the Rapid Integrated Assessment tool (UNDP 2016) developed by the UNDP to reflect on interlinkages between the goals.

Furthermore, in the second annual review of the VNRs, country governments still appear to be speaking about plans for implementation rather than talking about progress itself (De Meyer et al., 2017). Even in some cases where data on progress is presented – such as in VNRs from Latin American countries – reports tend to overflow with data without any real effort at interpretation with reference to the goals, targets or indicators (Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional, 2017).

Beisheim (2016) notes additionally that a central concern of VNRs should be to highlight challenges countries face in implementing the SDGs rather than treating the VNR process merely as a public relations exercise. The value of the VNRs lies in presenting challenges so that the HLPF can serve as a forum to troubleshoot implementation problems common across several countries. This is particularly relevant as some countries have clearly identified challenges that they face around localisation of targets, data collection, political will, cross-ministry coordination, stakeholder participation and funding for implementation (Together 2030, 2017a). Recent discussions that ODI has had with country government representatives around the VNRs suggest that new modalities of engagement can be helpful at the HLPF whereby countries can meet via small-scale workshops to present on progress more rigorously.

‘Leave no one behind’ within VNRs

Recommendations in the existing analyses for how the VNR process can deliver on the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda centre on engagement during the VNR preparation process and also in reporting on policy measures for those left behind in the VNR.

Analysts have tended to approach the priority given to the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda in the VNRs from two angles. The first is the inclusion of ‘leave no one behind’ in stakeholder consultations during the VNR process. The second has been to analyse VNR content for policies that are planned and implemented to reach the most vulnerable populations.

Engaging with the poorest and most vulnerable groups during the VNR process

Commentators have observed that most VNRs do report on government attempts to consult with non-state stakeholders on mainstreaming the SDGs (De Meyer et al., 2017; Griffiths, 2017; Together 2030, 2017a). However, amongst these, the majority give little detail on the nature of their consultations and how inclusive they have been. In some cases, consultations have namechecked marginalised groups such as women, youth and people with disabilities. In other cases, countries acknowledge that they need to support vulnerable groups, but are unclear about the identity of the groups and how they plan to engage them in the VNR process. For the most part, VNRs have not mentioned ethnic, religious minorities and the poorest of the poor (CCIC, 2018).

Only a few countries (Benin, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Tajikistan, Thailand) detail the phases of the VNR process, the specific stakeholders involved and the mechanisms of engagement (Together 2030, 2017a and 2017b). These exercises still fall short of generating consultations where marginalised groups decide on the development of targets and indicators, although cases such as Zimbabwe show promise in how such consultations can be carried out (Machingura and Nicolai, 2018).

The participation of civil society representatives has been similarly varied. A survey on civil society organisations by Together 2030 (in partnership with Newcastle University)² shows that 33% of respondents were unaware their country was undertaking a VNR in 2017, and 38% did not know how to engage in the VNR processes undertaken at the national level. Griffiths (2017: 1) of Sightsavers wrote after attending the HLPF in 2017 that VNRs are often seen as a hasty attempt to pull a report together to present in New York, missing out on the opportunity of making the process a ‘culmination of truly national efforts’ to implement the agenda. In cases where civil society representatives and/or vulnerable populations have been consulted, country governments have not only sought their assistance in the drafting the VNR, but have taken a step further and included them in the delegation presenting at the HLPF as in the case of Denmark and the Netherlands (De Meyer et al., 2017).

To show commitment to the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda, governments need to be explicit about the transparency and inclusivity of the VNR process with regards to marginalised groups (Howard and Thomas, 2017). Standardisation will require countries to report clearly on the procedures undertaken to publicise the SDGs and how different stakeholders – particularly those from civil society and marginalised groups – have been identified and included in consultations, as well as the degree to which these stakeholders have engaged with the process and have been involved with the selection of indicators and targets for marking progress (De Meyer et al., 2017; Together 2030, 2017a; Moller-Loswick, 2016; UKSSD and BOND, 2016).

Beisheim (2016) indicates that governments need to identify the poorest and most vulnerable groups in their country as part of the VNR process (rather than an outcome of the process), and integrate them from the beginning into how SDGs are contextualised in the country and reported on going forward. Moller-Loswick (2016) recommends that governments act to co-produce VNRs with these groups (and civil society members).

Greater detail is called for in the VNRs to showcase how vulnerable groups are being engaged at a national level, particularly since widening stakeholder engagement has proved to be challenging for several countries (Machingura and Nicolai, 2018; Howard and Thomas, 2017; Together 2030, 2017b; UKSSD and BOND, 2016).

Future VNR guidelines should include a new section that requires member states to describe how the government is making efforts to identify those who are left behind for inclusion in the VNR process (Together 2030, 2017a). The updated UN DESA/DSD (2018) handbook recommends that countries publicise the SDGs widely amongst different groups using radio and television, as in Sierra Leone.

Beisheim (2016: 3) further recommends the establishment of ‘a voluntary fund for enabling the participation of these stakeholders in the HLPF reviews’ to fulfil the spirit of the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda not just at the level of national VNRs but also within the HLPF process. Donald and Annunziato (2017: 1) state that in an environment where ‘space for civil society is being actively closed down by governments in many parts of the world, the HLPF should provide a counterbalance, an opportunity for engagement and a place where government action can be subjected to scrutiny’.

Reporting on the implementation of ‘leave no one behind’

In reporting on the actual implementation of ‘leave no one behind’, commentators have observed limited information in the VNRs on programmatic and policy efforts under the agenda (Donald and Annunziato, 2017; Beisheim, 2016; UKSSD and BOND, 2016). In an illustrative study, UKSSD and Bond (2016) note that while a few countries mention the phrase ‘leave no one behind’, the majority have held back from providing details on what the approach has meant within each country. Similarly, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) report (2018) observes that while almost all the reviews presented in 2017 recognized the principle of leaving no one behind, only 14 countries reported on strategies for putting the principle into practice.

In cases where countries have expounded on the efforts under the agenda, they have shared examples of ongoing projects focused on vulnerable populations (e.g. Republic of Korea and Uganda) or have acknowledged the need for disaggregated data to track SDG progress for marginalised populations (e.g. Mexico, Sierra Leone, Germany). Some countries (Belarus, Botswana, Chile, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, India, Indonesia, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Tajikistan, Thailand, Zimbabwe) describe actions targeting particular groups or populations of concern. The tendency to list ongoing programmes under the implementation agenda has been deemed an exercise in ‘sugar-coating the limited amount of ambition to drive the Agenda forward’ (De Meyer et al., 2017), and is seen by analysts to reflect a failure to conduct in-depth assessments of those areas where progress for marginalised groups is lacking.

A range of commentators have argued that member states should be asked to delineate how their policies

2 The survey collected 461 responses from national, regional and global civil society organisations on the VNR processes in 2017.

and programmes are being adapted to prioritise reaching groups furthest behind on each goal. UKSSD and Bond (2016: 7) go further to state that ‘meaningful reporting on progress to fulfil the pledge should be made a permanent feature of future reporting guidelines, underpinned by support and guidance from the Secretary General and the UN’. The updated UN DESA/DSD (2018:18) handbook recommends that actions to ‘leave no one behind’ include policies that aim to ‘end extreme poverty, policies aimed at reducing inequalities; and policies aimed at discriminatory barriers, including those arising from geography. The impact of multiple and overlapping inequalities – being a woman and living in a rural area – could also be considered.’

The Overseas Development Institute’s (ODI) (Blampied et al., 2018; 2016) stocktake of progress on the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda in Kenya and Nepal’s health sectors and Ghana’s health and education sectors demonstrate how countries can report on a joined-up approach to data, policy, finance and service delivery in areas integral to meeting SDGs for the poorest. The updated guidelines from the Secretary General (2017) have encouraged countries to report on the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda in the main text of the report and to also prioritise it in the two-pager briefings made at the HLPF. It recommends that countries ‘assess how the principle of leaving no one behind has been mainstreamed by reporting on how vulnerable groups in the countries were identified through data and what specific policies are being implemented to address their needs (with a particular emphasis on the status of women and girls)’ (ibid: 3).

However, Persson et al. (2016) are cognisant of the challenges in reporting on goals where quick progress may be hard to achieve. They note that a system that allows countries to report on the specific nature of actions towards achieving SDGs may be more fruitful in incentivising countries to engage with the VNR process than reporting on outcomes of policy actions. Beisheim (2016) has also recommended that countries that have been early reviewers at the HLPF should communicate ideas to troubleshoot implementation issues that follow a whole-of-government approach.

Finally, countries presenting VNRs should make cycles of accountability clear to national stakeholders, such as the different ministries, civil society, private-sector groups and – importantly – marginalised populations. The impact of the 2030 Agenda will be circumscribed if national actors are unaware of the SDGs (Moller-Loswick, 2016). Therefore, for accountability mechanisms to be set in place, SDG champions need to publicise the goals to all national actors and generate demand for accountability (ibid.).

Once a VNR has been presented at the HLPF, accountability should extend to adapting the review to contain information on how findings from the HLPF are fed back at the national level. To this end, nrg4SD and ORU Fogar (2017) argue that civil society actors in each country should be given more space at the HLPF to hold

their government accountable on SDG progress. Such a measure will be crucial in challenging the ‘partial picture of progress’ (Street, 2017: 1) presented by countries in their VNRs and highlighting how those left behind are being included within the SDGs in practice.

Ways forward

Recently updated VNR guidelines, alongside a rich set of existing analyses reviewed here, provide detailed insight on the role and effectiveness of SDG reporting to date. With more than half of countries soon to have completed VNRs, an increasingly important ‘sample size’ exists on early action for the goals. Analysts are encouraged by country engagement with the VNR process so far, even as they are aware that initial VNR presentations at the HLPF in 2016 and 2017 have, for the most part, met the minimum requirements for action on the SDGs.

The transformative aspect of the SDGs lies in taking a maximalist approach through the lens of the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda. To date, however, the dearth and diversity of reporting on ‘leave no one behind’ mean that trends, approaches and lessons of success and failure have been difficult to identify. The UN (2018: 15) has recommended that successful implementation of the ‘leave no one behind’ principle will require countries to identify ‘macroeconomic policies conducive to equitable growth, sectoral policies that expand productive capacities and universal social programmes in addition to targeted policies’. The Secretary General’s (2017) updated guidelines on the VNRs, recommends specific ways countries could review how the principle is being implemented: ‘In this regard, the review could detail how vulnerable groups have been identified, including through improved data collection and disaggregation, as well as what policies and programmes are being implemented to address their needs and support their empowerment’ (ibid: 3).

With the updated VNR guidelines having strengthened the call for reporting on ‘leave no one behind’, there are several directions for analysis going forward.

- A natural direction would be to undertake a holistic analysis of the three years of VNRs to identify how reporting on ‘leave no one behind’ has evolved, particularly in terms of reporting for high-, middle- and low-income countries.
- By delving deeper into the different ways countries are setting up SDG operations – from decision-making, to allocating responsibility for implementation of policies, monitoring and reporting at international level, and inputs from government, civil society and private stakeholders – we can examine how the commitment to ‘leave no one behind’ is being institutionalised. This level of analysis would also enable an assessment of how countries are adapting whole-of-government approaches for the SDGs.
- Furthermore, a crucial angle that has not been referenced in the existing analyses of the VNRs is the

way countries have allocated financial resources to implementation of the SDGs. Meeting the SDGs will require changes to the way public finance is allocated and delivered. An analysis of existing VNRs through a financial lens could help to gauge government effort towards 'leave no one behind'. While national governments will be the main players in how finance is mobilised, allocated and delivered, there is still a clear role for development partners to meet the expected financing gap, particularly in delivering health services, education and social protection (Greenhill et al., 2015). VNRs could thus also be a space for national governments to reflect on the engagement of international donors with the SDG agenda, holding these agencies accountable to the global development goals.

- An analysis of VNRs to draw out the implicit trade-offs in terms of 'leave no one behind' would help to highlight how countries can better maintain the integrity of the SDG agenda. The SDGs are meant

to be comprehensive and ambitious, and emphasise interactions and linkages across the 17 goals and related targets. However, the majority of VNRs have focused on a select number of goals, possibly encouraged by the focus in each HLPF meeting. Better understanding of the processes by which governments have chosen to prioritise certain goals over others would be useful, as an examination of progress in one area can reveal how efforts constrain or contradict gains in other areas (Machingura and Lally, 2017).

While the VNR process remains voluntary, the high number of countries that engaged in 2016 and 2017, and now in 2018 HLPFs, will begin to exert international pressure on the countries yet to report on their progress. It is likely that these reviews will play a growing role in our understanding of how countries are approaching and progressing towards the SDGs, and there will be much to learn in respect of 'leave no one behind'.

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203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
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