
Local Planning in Nepal: Understanding Among Local Officials

Govinda Adhikari

M.A. Sociology, Rural Development &
M.Phil. Education, Development Studies
adhikari2033@gmail.com & govindacres@yahoo.com
DOI: 10.3126/hj.v15i2.70669

Abstract

This study describes local government officials' understanding of planning provisions, particularly annual planning, in Nepal to identify gaps and improve effectiveness. Based on document reviews, interviews, and focus group discussions with officials from five local governments each in Lumbini and Madhesh Provinces and two in Koshi, it reveals significant knowledge gaps, particularly among grassroots officials. The study highlights the need for enhanced training and capacity-building to address these deficiencies, improve decision-making, and support sustainable development. Recommendations include strengthening training programs for both officials and community leaders who can exert pressure on local officials to implement provisions improving information dissemination, and reinforcing accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: Local Government, Local Planning, Planning Process, Official, Understanding.

Introduction

Local Development Planning (LDP) is a pivotal element of the country's decentralization efforts. The main objectives of local planning include stimulating regional development, promoting community participation in planning and implementation, mobilizing and utilizing local resources, and enhancing the overall welfare of local communities (Nepal, 2008).

Since the 1960s, local government planning has been implemented through various approaches and initiatives. Sapkota and Malakar (2021) clarify that various planning techniques have been used all over the world, although the typologies differ depending on the governing framework that each economy has chosen. Initially, many nations, including Nepal, practiced a top-down approach to planning, which has an innate tendency to make people dependent on the state. Top-down planning and development attempts to provide rather than promote the local population (Karna, 2007). Contrary to this idea, Nepal and many other developing democratic economies have adhered rigorously to the bottom-up

approach to planning and development, particularly after 1970, which marked a turning point in the debate around alternative development (Sapkota and Malakar, 2021).

With over 70 years of experience in both local and national development planning, Nepal adopted its first annual budgeting system in 1951 (Sapkota & Malakar, 2021) and introduced the first five-year plan (1956–1961) in 1956. Local planning was simultaneously incorporated under this plan, aiming to foster self-sufficiency and a "welfare state" (Pant, 1966). Since the 1960s, various approaches and initiatives have been employed for local government planning. Significant efforts were made in the 1970s and 1980s to enhance local development planning, including participatory planning. Despite these efforts, development plans remained centralized (Hachhethu, 2008; Tandon, 2023). Regarding participation during this period, Lohani (1980) further contends that in Nepal, people's participation remained more of a concept discussed than practiced. This closed planning process was a result of centralized reasoning, unaccountable growth, social taboos and malpractices, elite resource control, remoteness, harsh terrain, and political and economic isolation (Khanal, 2016).

However, in Nepal, it is claimed that community-centered development and local planning became more effective only after the People's Movement of 1990. Acharya and Zafarullah (2020) argue that this movement created a favorable environment for increased community participation in local planning, execution, and decision-making processes. Tandon (2023) highlights that the 1990 Constitution introduced significant reforms that enabled ordinary citizens to engage more actively in local governance. The 1999 Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) further solidified these reforms by establishing a participatory framework for annual planning (Tandon, 2023). Bhusal (2018) notes that this framework was designed to actively involve community members in formulating local public policies and development initiatives, with oversight provided by elected local government leaders.

The provisions for promoting community participation faced significant challenges during implementation. Acharya et al. (2022) note that the Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006 severely restricted community involvement, particularly affecting marginalized groups. Tandon (2023) highlights that the inability to hold local elections from 2002 to 2017, due to the civil war, further obstructed effective local planning and governance.

The promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015 and the enactment of the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) in 2017 significantly advanced the implementation of local development projects, inclusive planning, and budgeting processes (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020). These legal frameworks grant substantial autonomy to subnational governments and empower citizens to participate actively in local planning under the oversight of elected representatives (Tandon, 2023). The LGOA and associated guidelines establish provisions for participatory planning through a seven-step annual planning and budgeting process, ensuring that all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups, are engaged in the selection of policies, strategies, activities, and budget allocations.

Despite these provisions, the new federalism structure in Nepal has led to the incomplete implementation of local planning and budgeting processes. Consequently, local planning remains dysfunctional, centralized, and influenced by specific interests (Acharya &

Zafarullah, 2022). While research on the causes of these issues in post-federal Nepal is limited, some studies suggest that a lack of confidence and understanding of planning provisions, along with insufficient commitment from local government officials and communities, significantly contributes to the incomplete implementation (REDEF, 2022; Adhikari, 2024).

Despite the legal and regulatory frameworks established by the Constitution of Nepal and the Local Government Operation Act (2074), effective local-level planning remains a significant challenge. The issue is that these frameworks, intended to promote participatory and inclusive planning, are not fully implemented in practice. This problem affects the ability of local governments to address community needs effectively and to ensure that resources are allocated equitably. Evidence shows that despite the existence of guidelines, participatory planning often falls short due to insufficient stakeholder engagement and operational inefficiencies (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Tandon, 2023).

Consequences of this issue include persistent disparities and inadequate responses to community needs, undermining the goals of participatory governance. The study aims to investigate the extent of this implementation gap and identify practical solutions for enhancing the effectiveness of local-level planning (Bhusal, 2018; DFID, 2020). By focusing on these gaps, the research seeks to propose actionable strategies to improve participatory planning processes and ensure they better meet community needs.

There is limited empirical research on the changes in Nepal's local government budgeting and planning processes since the shift to federalism, highlighting several critical gaps. Few studies focus specifically on the provisions and practices of local government planning, with many overlooking the detailed budgeting processes and their implications for stakeholder engagement. While participatory methods and transitions to bottom-up approaches have been explored, comprehensive theoretical frameworks that assess the effectiveness of participation remain underdeveloped. Addressing these gaps is essential for enhancing participation and formulating policies that promote more effective and inclusive governance.

In this regard, this study aims to assess the extent to which local government officials across three provinces in Nepal comprehend the provisions related to local government planning. The study uses qualitative methods, including interviews and focus group discussions, to evaluate officials' understanding of these planning and budgeting provisions. By identifying gaps in their knowledge, the study highlights areas where additional capacity-building and training are needed. The final report presents these findings, showing how officials' understanding impacts their planning and decision-making, and offers recommendations for improving training programs and addressing knowledge deficiencies.

The rationale for this study is to identify and address gaps in local government planning in Nepal by assessing how well local officials understand the provisions of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the LGOA (2017), and related guidelines. This understanding is essential for improving the effectiveness of local planning, fostering participatory governance, and ensuring that development initiatives align with community needs. The key

objective of the study is to assess how well local government officials understand the provisions for local government planning.

Methodology

To address the research objectives effectively, a structured approach was adopted. The study utilizes several methodological tools to assess officials' understanding of the provisions of local government planning.

The study follows a phenomenological approach grounded in a constructivist ontology, recognizing that reality is socially constructed and varies across individual experiences (Ahmad, 2008). It acknowledges multiple subjective realities, especially in how marginalized communities and local government officials engage with planning and budgeting processes. The study adopts an interpretivist epistemology, aiming to understand the meanings individuals assign to their experiences through qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In terms of axiology, the research acknowledges its value-laden nature, reflecting on the researcher's biases and aiming for transparency and respectful representation of marginalized voices through member checking (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the understanding of local government planning provisions among local officials. Through interviews and focus group discussions, the study aims to gain in-depth insights into how officials perceive and interpret these provisions. Additionally, the research uses a descriptive research design to systematically document and describe the level of understanding among local officials. The focus is on detailing their knowledge and perspectives regarding planning and budgeting processes, without addressing the implementation or outcomes of these processes.

Key methods used in the study include document reviews, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Document reviews involved examining key sources such as the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA), the Constitution of Nepal, and related guidelines to understand local planning provisions. The literature review assessed secondary sources, including reports, scientific articles, and books, to explore perceptions of local government planning provisions. FGDs were conducted from April 2023 to May 2024 with local governments across various provinces: five in Lumbini Province, five in Madhesh Province, and two in Koshi Province. Specifically, ten FGDs with 40 respondents were held with ward members from one local government in Lumbini and two in Koshi Province. Additionally, 12 FGDs with 79 respondents were conducted with municipal and village executives, one in each local government. Interviews were conducted from April 2023 to May 2024 across five local governments in Lumbini Province, five in Madhesh Province, and two in Koshi Province. A total of 46 interviews were carried out, including 23 with planning officers and Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) and 23 with mayors/chairpersons and deputy mayors/vice-chairpersons.

Research Site and Sample

The study employs purposive sampling, given the researcher's role as a facilitator and trainer in local government planning. Interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs)

were conducted where feasible. The study focuses on rural municipalities selected for their relevance, with data from planning workshops, including statements and the status of the planning process, integrated into the analysis. Purposive sampling, a non-probability method, involves the deliberate selection of units based on their relevance to the study's objectives (Kothari, 2010).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, several measures were implemented. The questionnaire and interview techniques were developed based on literature and expert feedback, with pilot testing conducted to ensure clarity and relevance. Data triangulation, using multiple data sources and methods, was applied to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the findings. These steps ensure that the research accurately represents the level of understanding among Nepali local government officials.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were crucial in this study to ensure participant welfare and honesty. All participants, including those from marginalized communities and local officials, provided informed consent with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The names of participants who consented to publication were disclosed, while those who did not remained confidential. Conflicts of interest were declared and managed transparently. The researcher, who is also a consultant for local government planning in the provinces, accessed documents and planning processes only with informed consent from the respective authorities.

Delimitations

The study exclusively examines the level of understanding among local government officials regarding annual planning and budgeting provisions following the promulgation of federalism in Nepal. However, it does not assess the actual implementation or status of these provisions.

Findings

Provisions for Local Government Planning

Before examining the level of understanding of planning provisions, it is crucial to briefly review the local government planning framework in Nepal. The Constitution of Nepal (2015), the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) (2017), and the Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act (IGFMA) (2017) establish the core processes for local planning and budgeting, focusing on inclusivity and systematic procedures. Additionally, the Guideline for Local Level Plan Formulation (GLLPF) (2078), the Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline (LLAPBFG) (2074), and the Annual Plan and Budget Formulation Handbook for Local Levels (APBFHLL) (2077) provide further specifications and detailed frameworks for these processes.

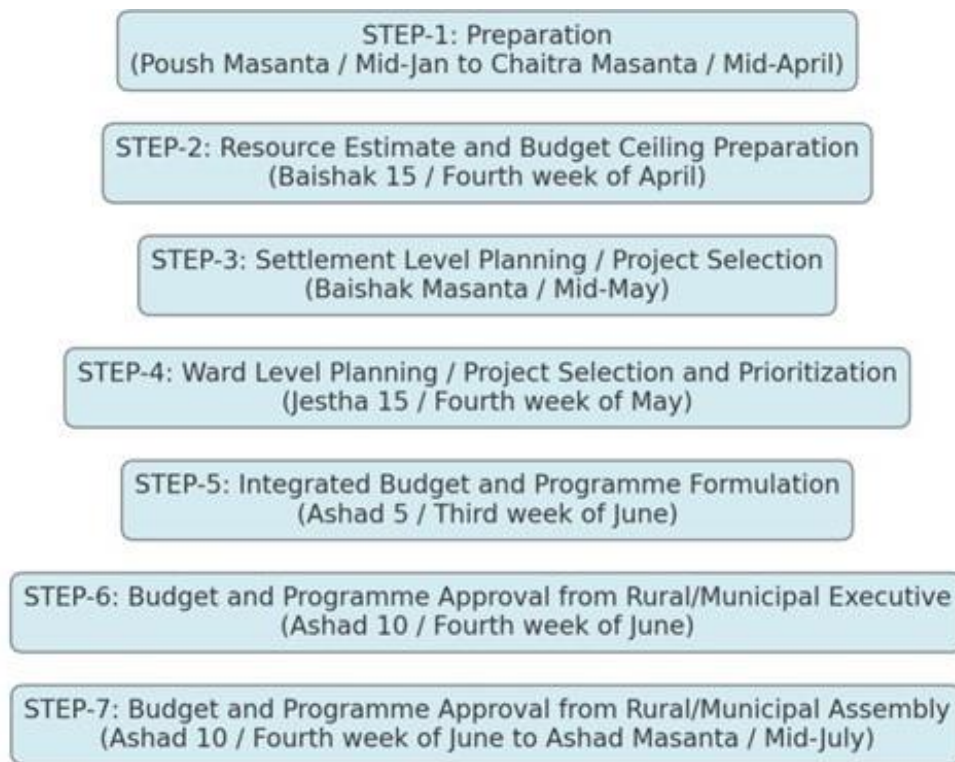
Types of Plans: The Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) 2017 mandates local governments to prepare three main types of plans: Periodic Plans (5-7 years), Annual Plans (one year), and Strategic Sectoral Plans (mid to long term) (Government of Nepal, 2017).

The Periodic Plan covers various development sectors, the Annual Plan addresses all sectors annually, and the Strategic Sectoral Plan focuses on specific sectors. Additionally, the Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act (IGFMA) 2017 requires a Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) every three years to outline public expenditure strategies and align with other plans (Government of Nepal, 2017).

Sectors to be Covered: Section 5.1.3 of the Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline (MOFAGA, 2017) and Section 4.8 (1.2) of the Guideline for Local Level Plan Formulation (National Planning Commission, 2078) outline five key thematic areas for local government annual plans. These areas include Economic Development, which focuses on sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and financial services to boost productivity and support small enterprises. Social Development addresses education, health, and social inclusion, aiming to meet the needs of marginalized groups. Infrastructure Development covers essential projects like roads, energy production, and urban development. Forest, Environment, and Disaster Management involve conservation efforts, climate adaptation, and disaster preparedness. Finally, Good Governance and Institutional Development emphasize human resource development, fiscal management, and service delivery improvements.

Planning Process/Steps: According to the GLLPF and LLAPBFG (National Planning Commission, 2078; MOFAGA, 2074), the participatory planning process known as the seven-step planning process for annual planning and budgeting is conducted before the start of the fiscal year, meaning that plans and budgets for the upcoming fiscal year are prepared during the current fiscal year. The local government planning and budgeting process in Nepal involves several key stages.

Fig. 1. Seven Step Planning Process



Source: National Planning Commission, 2078; MOFAGA, 2074

Fig. 1 above presents the participatory planning process of local government known as the seven-step planning process. This process outlines the key stages involved in annual planning and budgeting, from initial preparation to final approval and publication.

The participatory planning process for annual planning and budgeting in Nepal involves several key stages. STEP 1: Preparation (*Pausa masānta*/ Mid-January to *Caitra masānta* / Mid-April) includes updating data, preparing the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), projecting revenue and expenditures, and assigning responsibilities for thematic areas. Following this, STEP 2: Resource Estimate and Budget Ceiling Preparation (*Baiśākha* 15 / Fourth week of April) focuses on obtaining ceilings from federal and provincial governments, conducting pre-budget discussions, and determining budget ceilings based on updated data. Subsequently, STEP 3: Settlement Level Planning / Project Selection (*Baiśākha masānta*/ Mid-May) involves organizing meetings to select plans, ensuring broad community participation, and aligning projects with development goals.

Next, STEP 4: Ward Level Planning / Project Selection and Prioritization (*Jeṣṭha* 15 / Fourth week of May) includes grouping projects, prioritizing them, and presenting them to the municipality's budgeting and planning committee. STEP 5: Integrated Budget and Programme Formulation (*Āṣāḍha* 5 / Third week of June) then covers integrating inputs from various stakeholders and drafting the budget proposal. Moving forward, STEP 6: Budget and Programme Approval from Rural/Municipal Executive (*Āṣāḍha* 10 / Fourth

week of June) involves obtaining approval from the rural/municipal executive for the budget statement and related documents. Finally, STEP 7: Budget and Programme Approval from Rural/Municipal Assembly (*Āṣāḍha* 10 / Fourth week of June to *Āṣāḍha masānta*/ Mid-July) requires presenting the budget and program documents to the assembly for discussion and final approval, with the final budget published in the local gazette.

Understanding of Among Local Officials

From the FGDs and interviews conducted between April 2023 and May 2024, it was found that most officials in the studied local governments have a limited understanding of the categories, sectors to be covered, and provisions of the seven-step planning process. However, planning officers, Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), and deputy mayors/chairpersons of municipalities possess some knowledge of these steps.

Table 1. Number of Respondents on Knowledge of Planning Process & Seven Steps

Interview or FGD	Total Respondents	Types of Plans to be Prepared (tell all types)	Partially know the process	Know the Seven step	Don't know the seven step
FGD (ward committee)	40	0	40	7	33
FGD (Municipal/village executive members)	79	0	79	16	63
Interview (ward chair)	82	0	68	15	68
Interview (Planning officer & CAO)	23	0	20	7	16
Interview (Mayor/Chair & Deputy Mayor/vice Chair)	23	0	16	7	16
Total	247	0	223	52	196
Percentage	100	0	90.28	21.05	79.35

Source: FGD, 2024 and Interview, 2024

The data in Table 1 present a comprehensive overview of the knowledge and understanding of the planning provisions, including the seven-step planning process, among local government officials in Nepal. Overall, out of 247 officials, none were able to fully explain the types of plans to be prepared, indicating a significant gap in detailed knowledge across all groups. This suggests that even basic elements of the planning process are not well understood by the officials surveyed.

A substantial 90.28% (223 out of 247) of respondents have only partial knowledge of the planning process. This includes all 40 respondents from the ward committees who participated in the focus group discussions (FGD), all 79 municipal/village executive members from another FGD, and a majority of 68 out of 82 ward chairs, as well as 20 out of 23 planning officers and CAOs who were interviewed. Despite some dissemination of training and information, it appears insufficient for a complete understanding of the planning process.

Regarding awareness of the seven-step planning process, only 21.05% (52 out of 247) of respondents are familiar with it. Among these, awareness is highest among planning officers, CAOs, mayors, and deputy mayors. Specifically, in the FGDs with ward committee members, only 7 out of 40 (17.5%) were aware of the seven-step planning process, and among municipal/village executive members, 16 out of 79 (20.25%) had this knowledge. Interviews with ward chairs revealed that 15 out of 82 (18.29%) were aware of the seven-step planning process. Conversely, among planning officers and CAOs, 7 out of 23 (30.43%) were aware, as were 7 out of 23 (30.43%) of mayors/chairs and deputy mayor's/vice chairs. Although these figures reflect higher awareness among certain groups, they still represent a minority within each category, suggesting that knowledge of the seven-step planning process is not widespread even among higher-ranking officials.

A significant 79.35% (196 out of 247) of respondents do not know the seven-step planning process. This lack of awareness is most pronounced among ward committee members (33 out of 40, or 82.5%), municipal/village executive members (63 out of 79, or 79.75%), and ward chairs (68 out of 82, or 82.93%). This highlights a major gap in knowledge at the grassroots level, which is crucial for effective local governance and planning.

The analysis of Table 1 reveals that a significant gap exists in the understanding of the participatory planning provisions known as the seven-step planning process among local government officials in Nepal. Despite some partial knowledge among various groups, including ward committee members, municipal/village executive members, and higher-ranking officials such as planning officers and mayors, none of the respondents could fully explain the types of plans required, except for annual plans and budgets. This indicates that while some training or information has been provided, it is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the planning process. The most pronounced lack of knowledge is among grassroots officials, highlighting the need for more targeted and effective educational programs to ensure all officials are adequately informed about the seven-step planning process.

The data underscore a critical need for enhanced training and capacity-building among local government officials in Nepal. The widespread lack of comprehensive understanding of the seven-step planning process and the types of plans required suggests that current efforts at disseminating information and training are inadequate. To improve local governance and planning, it is essential to implement more robust educational initiatives that address these knowledge gaps. By ensuring that all levels of officials are well-versed in the planning process, local governments can better facilitate effective and inclusive community development.

Summary

The local government planning framework in Nepal is defined by several critical legislative and guideline documents, including the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) (2017), and the Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act (IGFMA) (2017). These documents mandate the preparation of various plans: periodic

plans (5–7 years), annual plans (one year), and strategic sectoral plans (mid to long term). Additionally, the IGFMA requires a Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) every three years to align expenditure strategies. Annual plans must encompass thematic areas such as economic development, social development, infrastructure development, forest management, environmental management, disaster management, and good governance and institutional development. The planning process adheres to a seven-step planning process, which is crucial for effective local governance and budgeting.

Nonetheless, there is a notable gap in the understanding of these provisions among local government officials. Many officials, particularly at the grassroots level, demonstrate limited or superficial knowledge of the types of plans required and the specific steps involved in the seven-step planning process. While higher-ranking officials, such as planning officers and mayors, exhibit a better understanding, this knowledge does not extend uniformly across all levels of local government. This disparity indicates that existing training and information dissemination efforts are insufficient. To enhance local governance and community development outcomes, there is a pressing need for more robust and targeted educational initiatives to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the annual planning process among all local government officials.

Conclusion

The evaluation of local government planning in Nepal reveals critical deficiencies in the comprehension and application of planning provisions among officials. Despite the comprehensive framework established by key legislative documents such as the Constitution of Nepal, the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA), and the Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act (IGFMA), there is a notable lack of thorough understanding regarding essential planning processes and provisions among many local government officials. The seven-step planning process, which is integral to the formulation and execution of annual plans and budgets, remains inadequately understood, particularly at the grassroots level.

The pervasive gap in knowledge impairs the effectiveness of local governance and the planning process. The insufficient awareness of planning procedures across various levels of local government suggests that current training and information dissemination efforts are inadequate. To enhance the efficacy of local governance, it is imperative to implement more robust and targeted educational programs. Addressing these knowledge deficiencies will facilitate more informed decision-making and contribute to the advancement of community development. Ensuring that all local government officials are well-informed about the planning frameworks and processes is crucial for achieving effective governance and promoting sustainable development at the local level.

Implications and Recommendation

Implications

The findings of this study highlight significant gaps in the understanding and execution of local government planning provisions. Many local government officials lack a deep familiarity with frameworks such as the periodic, annual, and strategic sectoral plans and the seven-step planning process. This gap in knowledge and application limits the effectiveness of local-level governance and contributes to inconsistent planning and

budgeting outcomes. Furthermore, there is a need for greater community engagement to hold local officials accountable and to ensure that planning processes are more inclusive and reflective of community needs. These insights underline the necessity of strengthening both institutional capacity and grassroots participation to improve the overall quality of local governance.

Recommendations

Training for Local Government Officials: Implement targeted, practical training programs aimed at enhancing the knowledge of local government officials regarding planning provisions. These programs should focus on real-world applications and be regularly updated to reflect current guidelines and best practices. By equipping officials with a clearer understanding of the seven-step planning process and related frameworks, local governments can achieve more coherent and effective planning outcomes.

Community Empowerment and Engagement: Develop initiatives aimed at raising community awareness about local planning processes. These initiatives should be designed to empower stakeholders to actively participate in decision-making. Engaged communities can serve as a driving force in ensuring that local officials comply with planning provisions, fostering a more transparent and inclusive planning process.

Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: Establish strong monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to continuously assess the effectiveness of local government planning. Regular audits, reviews, and feedback loops should be instituted to identify challenges in real time and provide opportunities for corrective measures. This ongoing evaluation will promote a culture of accountability and ensure that planning processes are consistently improving.

Enhancing Accountability through Oversight: Strengthen oversight structures by forming dedicated committees and enhancing transparency through public reporting. Regular audits and open reporting will ensure that local government officials are held accountable for their actions, thereby promoting greater adherence to planning guidelines and fostering trust among community members.

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