

The Role of Government to Mitigate Unemployment during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to economies worldwide, leading to severe disruptions in employment and livelihoods. This article delves into the critical role of governments in managing and mitigating the employment crisis during the pandemic. Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of governmental responses and policies implemented across different countries, the study explores the multifaceted dimensions of governmental intervention. The article examines how governments have navigated the complex landscape of employment support, focusing on measures such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, job retention schemes, and support for vulnerable groups. The efficacy of these policies in stabilizing labor markets and protecting workers' rights is assessed in light of the evolving pandemic situation. The article considers the challenges governments faced in balancing public health imperatives with economic recovery goals. It explores how policy decisions regarding lockdowns, business closures, and social distancing measures have directly impacted employment and unemployment rates. The role of government in fostering innovation, digitalization, and the growth of new sectors that emerged during the pandemic is also discussed. Governments' efforts to facilitate transitions in the labor market and promote reskilling and up skilling initiatives are explored as a means to build a more resilient and adaptable workforce in the face of future uncertainties. The article delves into the implications of government responses for different sectors and industries, highlighting variations in the impact on the formal and informal economy. The paper concludes with key lessons learned from the government's role in managing employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasizes the need for comprehensive and flexible policies, collaboration between public and private sectors, and the imperative of prioritizing social protection measures to ensure a sustainable and inclusive recovery.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a seismic shift in the global economy, with governments grappling to address the challenges brought on by the crisis. One of the most significant impacts has been the disruption to employment, as businesses across various sectors have faced closures, downsizing, and financial strain. In the face of this unprecedented situation, the role of government in ensuring and stabilizing employment has become more crucial than ever before. As the pandemic took hold, governments worldwide were faced with the urgent need to protect jobs, livelihoods, and economic stability. Their responses ranged from implementing sweeping policy changes to enacting comprehensive stimulus packages, all aimed at mitigating the impact of the crisis on employment (COVID-19 PAKISTAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK, May 14, 2020). The paper is developed into the multifaceted role of governments in managing employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining the measures they have taken and the outcomes they have achieved. First and foremost, governments had played a vital role in creating an enabling environment for businesses to retain their workforce and sustain operations during the crisis. Pakistan government has facilitated policies such as tax breaks, grants and loan schemes to provide financial relief to businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are often the backbone of many economies. By easing the burden of operational costs and ensuring access to liquidity, governments have sought to prevent widespread layoffs and business closures, preserving jobs and maintaining income stability for workers (Shafi, 2020, p. 03).

The governments have been instrumental in implementing labor market interventions to safeguard workers' rights and address the vulnerabilities that emerged during the pandemic. They have adopted measures such as wage subsidies, job retention programs, and extended unemployment benefits to protect employees from the adverse effects of the economic downturn. These initiatives have aimed to reduce the pressure on businesses, incentivize retention, and provide a safety net for those who have lost their jobs, empowering individuals and families to weather the storm. The short-term measures, of governments have also embraced long-term strategies to enhance employment prospects and promote economic recovery (OECD, April 27, 2020). They have prioritized investment in infrastructure projects, green industries, and technological advancements, recognizing the potential for job creation and economic growth in these sectors. By leveraging fiscal stimulus and partnering with the private sector, governments have sought to retrain and up skill workers, fostering resilience and adaptability in the face of changing labor market demands. However, the challenges governments have faced in managing employment during the pandemic are manifold. Balancing the need to preserve public health by implementing restrictions with the imperative to maintain economic stability has posed a delicate tightrope walk. Furthermore, disparities in access to government support and the ability to adapt to remote work have exacerbated existing inequalities in employment (UN, Development Advocate Pakistan, October 1, 2022, vol.9, issue 3).

The article will investigate into the various approaches governments have taken, the successes they have achieved, and the lessons learned during this unprecedented crisis. By examining the role of government in employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can gain valuable insights into effective strategies for future crises and foster resilience in labor markets worldwide.

Role of Government in Industry Support and Restructuring

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented challenge worldwide, impacting various aspects of life, including the workforce. In Pakistan, where a significant percentage of the population relies on daily wages to meet their basic needs, the pandemic has posed a severe threat to workers' health and livelihoods. To address this crisis, the Pakistani government, in collaboration with relevant authorities and organizations, has implemented a series of policies to protect workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article aims to explore some of these policies and their impact on the lives of workers in Pakistan.

1) Financial Assistance

Identifying the economic strain faced by workers during the pandemic, the Pakistani government introduced several financial assistance programs. The Ehsaas Emergency Cash Program was launched, providing cash transfers to vulnerable workers who lost their livelihoods due to lockdowns and restrictions. This program aimed to alleviate the immediate financial burden and ensure access to basic necessities. Additionally, small businesses and industries were offered low-interest loans and grants to support their operations and prevent layoffs, indirectly safeguarding workers' employment (Shafi, 2020, p. 05).

2) Workplace Safety Guidelines

To protect workers from COVID-19 transmission in their workplaces, the Pakistani government issued comprehensive guidelines. These guidelines mandated employers to ensure proper hygiene practices, provide personal protective equipment (PPE), and enforce social distancing measures. Moreover, employers were required to conduct regular health screenings, establish sanitization protocols, and promote remote work whenever feasible. Such measures aimed to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission in workplaces and safeguard workers' health (Ikram, Khan, Kazmi, Saval, & Lalani, 2019, pp. 1-12).

3) Occupational Health and Safety Regulations

The pandemic highlighted the need for strengthened occupational health and safety regulations in Pakistan. As a response, the government enacted additional measures to protect workers. These regulations included strict monitoring of workplace safety compliance, increased inspections, and penalties for non-compliance. Moreover, workers were given the right to refuse work if they felt it posed a substantial risk to their health and safety. These initiatives aimed to ensure that employers prioritize the well-being of their workforce and take necessary precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (ASSE, 2018, pp. 1-20).

4) Job Security and Social Protection

In recognition of the economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic, the Pakistani government focused on enhancing job security and social protection measures. The Provincial Employees Social Security Institutions (PESSI) extended coverage to workers previously excluded from social security benefits, providing them with healthcare, maternity leave, and financial assistance in case of disability. Additionally, the Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI) increased the minimum pension and introduced a pension enhancement program to support retired workers. These measures aimed to reduce vulnerabilities, provide a safety net, and ensure workers' well-being beyond the immediate crisis (Markhof, December 2020, pp. 1-58).

5) Vaccination Programs

To combat the spread of COVID-19 and protect workers, the Pakistani government initiated a nationwide vaccination campaign. The government facilitated access to vaccines for all citizens, prioritizing frontline workers and those in high-risk sectors. Mobile vaccination units were deployed to reach remote areas, and awareness campaigns were conducted to address vaccine hesitancy. By prioritizing workers in the vaccination program, the government aimed to safeguard their health and create a safer working environment (UNICEF, August 30, 2021).

6) Support for Informal Sector Workers

The presence of informal sector workers in Pakistan's economy, the government implemented measures specifically targeting this vulnerable group. The Kamyab Jawan Program provided interest-free loans to informal sector workers, enabling them to sustain their businesses and generate income during the pandemic. Additionally, the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) expanded its coverage to include more informal sector workers, providing them with cash transfers to mitigate the financial impact of the pandemic (FD, 2021, pp. 235-236).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought numerous challenges for workers in Pakistan. However, the government's implementation of various policies has helped protect and support workers during these difficult times. Financial assistance programs, workplace safety guidelines, occupational health and safety regulations, enhanced job security measures, vaccination programs, and support for informal sector workers have collectively contributed to mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic on workers' health and livelihoods. Moving forward, it is crucial for the government and relevant stakeholders to continue monitoring and revising these policies to ensure sustained protection and support for workers in the face of evolving challenges (Shafi, 2020, p. 6).

Government intervention in industry restructuring and reskilling

Government intervention in industry restructuring and reskilling during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan has played a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of the crisis and ensuring a sustainable and resilient economy. As the pandemic hit the country, Pakistan faced significant challenges, including disruptions in various industries, widespread unemployment, and the need to adapt to new ways of working. In response, the government swiftly implemented policies and initiatives aimed at restructuring industries and providing necessary reskilling opportunities to the workforce.

Pakistani government was the establishment of a dedicated task force responsible for industry restructuring. The task force comprised by experts from various sectors, including government officials, industry leaders, and labor representatives. Their primary objective was to analyze the impact of the pandemic on different industries and devise strategies to restructure them in a manner that would enable them to weather the crisis effectively. The task force conducted comprehensive studies and consultations with stakeholders to identify key challenges and develop tailored solutions (Mohmood, et al., 2021, pp. 105-169). To support industry restructuring, the government introduced various measures, such as financial assistance programs and tax incentives. These initiatives aimed to provide immediate relief to businesses facing financial difficulties and encourage them to adopt innovative approaches to sustain their

operations. The government also collaborated with financial institutions to offer low-interest loans and credit facilities to struggling businesses. To provide financial support, the government aimed to prevent widespread bankruptcies and ensure the continuity of essential industries (OECD, April 27, 2020).

The Pakistani government recognized the urgent need for reskilling and upskilling the workforce to adapt to the changing demands of the post-pandemic economy. To address this need, it launched several initiatives to provide training and educational opportunities to individuals affected by job losses or those seeking to acquire new skills. One of the most notable programs introduced was the National Skills for All Program, which aimed to train millions of workers in emerging sectors such as digital technology, e-commerce, and healthcare. The government also partnered with private organizations, educational institutions, and international development agencies to expand the reach and effectiveness of reskilling programs. Through these partnerships, training centers were established across the country, equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and experienced instructors. Additionally, online platforms and virtual learning initiatives were launched to provide accessible and flexible learning options for individuals unable to attend physical training centers. The digital approach proved crucial during the pandemic when physical gatherings were restricted, allowing individuals to continue their learning journeys remotely (Selvarej, Vishnu, KA, Benson, & Mathew, September 2021, p. 02).

Moreover, the government actively engaged with industry associations and employers to identify the emerging skill requirements and design training programs accordingly. By aligning training with market demand, the government aimed to enhance the employability of individuals and ensure a smoother transition into new job opportunities. It also fostered collaboration between employers and training providers to develop apprenticeship programs, internships, and on-the-job training initiatives. These initiatives not only provided individuals with practical experience but also allowed them to establish valuable industry connections. To promote inclusivity and ensure that no one was left behind, the government paid special attention to marginalized communities and vulnerable groups. It provided targeted support to women, youth, and individuals with disabilities to ensure their active participation in the reskilling programs. Specialized training programs were developed to address the unique challenges faced by these groups, enabling them to acquire skills that would empower them economically and socially (UNDP, March 26, 2021).

The government also recognized the importance of entrepreneurship and innovation in driving economic recovery. In this regard, it established innovation hubs and incubation centers to support aspiring entrepreneurs in developing their business ideas and launching new ventures. These centers provided mentorship, access to funding, and networking opportunities to help entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of starting a business. By promoting entrepreneurship, the government aimed to create new job opportunities and stimulate economic growth. Government intervention in industry restructuring and reskilling during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan has been instrumental in mitigating the negative impact of the crisis on the economy (FD, 2021, p. online).

International Cooperation and Government Coordination

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to countries around the world, demanding swift action and effective coordination to protect lives and mitigate the impact. Pakistan, like many other

nations, faced the daunting task of combating the virus while ensuring the safety and well-being of its citizens. In the face of this global crisis, international cooperation and government coordination played pivotal roles in Pakistan's response to the pandemic. Pakistan actively engaged in international cooperation to access vital resources, share knowledge, and collaborate with global partners. The country collaborated closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international agencies to gain access to accurate information, guidance, and best practices (UNICEF, August 30, 2021). Through this cooperation, Pakistan benefited from the expertise and experience of the global community in handling the novel coronavirus. Pakistan actively participated in global initiatives such as COVAX, a global vaccine-sharing program, to ensure equitable access to vaccines. By joining hands with the international community, Pakistan was able to secure vaccine doses and ensure the rapid and efficient distribution of vaccines across the country. This collaboration not only safeguarded the health of its citizens but also contributed to global efforts in curbing the spread of the virus (Saadeh, May 2021).

- **Government Coordination**

The Pakistani government swiftly recognized the gravity of the situation and established robust coordination mechanisms to effectively respond to the pandemic. The National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) were established as the nerve center for coordinating and monitoring the country's COVID-19 response. The NCOC, comprising representatives from federal and provincial governments, as well as health experts, played a vital role in devising and implementing a cohesive national strategy. The NCOC's coordination efforts encompassed various aspects of the pandemic response, including testing, contact tracing, quarantine protocols, healthcare infrastructure, and public awareness campaigns. This centralized approach ensured a unified response and allowed for quick decision-making, resource allocation, and communication of vital information to the public. The government's ability to coordinate effectively was instrumental in managing the crisis and mitigating its impact (Shahid, September 25, 2020).

- **International Aid and Assistance**

Pakistan received substantial international aid and assistance, further strengthening its response to the pandemic. Countries such as China, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates provided medical supplies, equipment, and financial assistance to support Pakistan's healthcare system. This assistance played a crucial role in bolstering the country's testing capacity, enhancing healthcare infrastructure, and ensuring the availability of essential resources. Moreover, international organizations, including the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, extended financial support to Pakistan to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic. These funds were directed towards providing relief to vulnerable populations, supporting businesses, and strengthening the healthcare system. The international community's assistance not only eased the burden on the Pakistani government but also demonstrated the power of global solidarity in times of crisis (United Nation Secretary General, January 9, 2023).

- **Local and International Collaboration**

The collaboration between the Pakistani government and local stakeholders was another key aspect of the pandemic response. The government worked closely with provincial governments, healthcare professionals, civil society organizations, and the private sector to develop and implement effective strategies. This collaboration allowed for the efficient mobilization of resources, leveraging local expertise, and addressing the specific needs of different regions within the country. The international experts and organizations collaborated with Pakistani counterparts to provide technical assistance, training, and capacity building. This exchange of knowledge and expertise contributed to strengthening Pakistan's healthcare infrastructure and capacity to manage the pandemic effectively. The collaboration between local and international stakeholders served as a crucial bridge, ensuring that the response efforts were well-informed and comprehensive (Jacobi, August 28, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of international cooperation and government coordination in tackling global crises. In Pakistan, the government's efforts to coordinate and collaborate with international partners, as well as local stakeholders, played a crucial role in managing the pandemic effectively. Through international cooperation, the country gained access to vital resources, expertise, and vaccines, while government coordination allowed for a unified response and effective decision-making. The assistance received from the international community further strengthened Pakistan's response efforts. The lessons learned from this experience will undoubtedly shape future responses to similar challenges, emphasizing the need for continued global collaboration and coordination (Mocic, Shore, Hilty, Krysta, & Krzystanek, 2021, p. onlin).

Assessing the Effectiveness of Government Interventions

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to nations worldwide, and Pakistan was no exception. As the virus began to spread rapidly within the country, the government swiftly implemented a range of interventions to curb the transmission and mitigate the impact on public health and the economy. This effectiveness of the government interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan was evaluating their impact on various aspects of the crisis. One of the primary areas where the government intervention played a crucial role was in public health (Raza, 2021, pp. 1-2). The government swiftly implemented measures such as the imposition of lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the establishment of quarantine facilities. These interventions aimed to slow down the spread of the virus and prevent overwhelming the healthcare system. While these measures undoubtedly had a significant impact on curbing the transmission of the virus, they also presented challenges, particularly for vulnerable populations and daily wage earners who faced difficulties in meeting their basic needs. Another critical aspect of the government's response was the strengthening of the healthcare system.

Pakistan's healthcare infrastructure faced significant strain during the pandemic, with shortages of hospital beds, ventilators, and personal protective equipment (Khalid & Ali, .2020, p. 552). To address these challenges, the government ramped up efforts to increase the capacity of hospitals, procure essential medical equipment, and train healthcare professionals. Although there were initial struggles to

meet the surge in demand, these interventions helped improve the overall response and ensure the availability of critical resources.

The government launched extensive awareness campaigns to educate the public about the virus, its symptoms, and preventive measures. Television, radio and social media platforms were utilized to disseminate information, promote hygiene practices, and encourage social distancing. These campaigns played a vital role in raising awareness among the general public and promoting responsible behavior. However, the effectiveness of these efforts was hindered by misinformation and rumors circulating on social media, emphasizing the need for more targeted and accurate communication strategies (Khalid & Ali, .2020, p. 554).

Economic interventions were also a crucial part of the government's response. Recognizing the severe impact of lockdowns on businesses and livelihoods, the government introduced relief packages and financial assistance programs to support affected sectors and vulnerable populations. These measures included cash transfers, utility bill waivers, and tax relief. While these interventions provided much-needed relief to many individuals and businesses, there were challenges in the disbursement of funds and ensuring equitable distribution. The informal sector, which constitutes a significant portion of Pakistan's workforce, faced particular difficulties in accessing government support (Hashim, June 10, 202).

In addition to public health and the economy, education was another area significantly affected by the pandemic. As schools and universities closed their doors to prevent the spread of the virus, the government introduced online learning platforms and remote teaching strategies. However, the transition to online education posed challenges due to limited access to technology and the internet, particularly in rural areas. This led to a disruption in learning for many students and highlighted the digital divide within the country (Asher, 2021, p. 123). Besides, the government's interventions were not without criticism. Some argued that the measures implemented were not stringent enough to contain the virus's spread, citing instances of non-compliance with social distancing guidelines and the lack of enforcement. Others criticized the government for not effectively utilizing data and technology to track and trace the virus, which could have helped identify hotspots and target interventions more efficiently. These criticisms highlight the need for a comprehensive and coordinated response to effectively tackle a crisis of this magnitude (Asher, 2021, p. 129).

Despite these challenges, it is important to recognize the efforts made by the government and the positive outcomes achieved. The implementation of vaccination campaigns, in collaboration with international partners, played a vital role in reducing the severity of the pandemic. The government's efforts to secure vaccine supplies and administer doses to the population helped build resilience and restore some semblance of normalcy (Kiani, Shafaq, , & Javed Malik, April 16, 2020). Assessing the effectiveness of government interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan reveals a mixed picture. While significant strides were made in controlling the spread of the virus, strengthening the healthcare system, and providing economic relief, there were also challenges and areas that require improvement. The pandemic has shed light on the need for long-term investments in public health infrastructure, technology, and social protection systems to better prepare for future crises. By the experiences of the past, Pakistan can develop a more robust and comprehensive response to protect its citizens and mitigate the impact of future pandemics.

Future Considerations and Policy Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on countries worldwide, including Pakistan. As the nation grapples with the challenges posed by this global health crisis, it becomes crucial to address future considerations and formulate effective policy recommendations. This article aims to shed light on the key areas that require attention and outline policy measures that can help mitigate the impact of the pandemic on public health, the economy, and the overall well-being of the Pakistani population.

1) Strengthening Healthcare Infrastructure

The primary lessons learned from the pandemic are the importance of a robust healthcare infrastructure. Pakistan should focus on enhancing its healthcare system, including hospitals, clinics, and laboratories, to better handle future health emergencies. This involves increasing the number of healthcare facilities, improving their quality, and ensuring the availability of essential medical supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators. Furthermore, investing in research and development can facilitate the creation of domestic expertise and reduce reliance on external sources during emergencies (OECD., June 24, 2020).

2) Enhancing Testing and Surveillance

Efficient testing and surveillance systems play a crucial role in containing the spread of the virus. Pakistan should ramp up its testing capacity by establishing more testing centers across the country and ensuring easy access to testing for all citizens. Moreover, the development of advanced contact tracing applications and the deployment of a skilled workforce to conduct contact tracing can help identify and isolate potential cases promptly. This information can assist in targeted interventions and limit the transmission of the virus (Sharoz, et al., 2021, p. 02).

3) Vaccine Distribution and Awareness

Vaccination remains the most effective tool in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Pakistan needs to ensure equitable access to vaccines across all regions of the country. A comprehensive vaccination campaign should be launched, targeting vulnerable populations first and gradually covering the entire population. It is essential to address vaccine hesitancy through public awareness campaigns, dispelling misinformation, and promoting the benefits of vaccination. Collaborating with international organizations and pharmaceutical companies can help secure an adequate supply of vaccines and expedite the vaccination process (Sharoz, et al., 2021, p. 05).

4) Strengthening Social Safety Nets

The pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of the socio-economic fabric in Pakistan. It is crucial to strengthen social safety nets to protect the most vulnerable sections of society, including daily wage earners, informal workers, and marginalized communities. Expanding cash transfer programs, providing food assistance, and extending health insurance coverage can alleviate the financial burden on affected individuals and families. Additionally, introducing unemployment benefits and support mechanisms for small businesses can help prevent long-term economic repercussions (Wim & Richardo, 2020).

5) Promoting Digital Transformation

The pandemic has accelerated the need for digital transformation in various sectors. Pakistan should prioritize the development of digital infrastructure, including improved internet connectivity, to facilitate remote work, online education, and telemedicine services. Encouraging the use of digital payment platforms and e-commerce can reduce physical contact and boost economic activity. Moreover, investing in digital skills training and digital literacy programs can enhance the workforce's adaptability to changing circumstances and promote inclusive growth (Sharoz, et al., 2021, p. 09).

6) Strengthening Education Systems

The closure of educational institutions during the pandemic has disrupted the learning process for millions of students. Pakistan needs to develop robust online learning platforms and provide access to remote education resources, particularly for marginalized communities. Ensuring that students have access to digital devices and the internet can bridge the education gap. Additionally, investing in teacher training programs for online instruction and promoting the use of digital tools in classrooms can improve the quality of education in the long run (Teras, Suoranta, & Teras, 2020, p. 776).

7) Crisis Preparedness and Response Mechanisms

The pandemic has highlighted the need for effective crisis preparedness and response mechanisms. Pakistan should establish a dedicated national task force responsible for monitoring and coordinating responses to public health emergencies. This task force should collaborate with international health organizations, share real-time data, and develop standardized protocols for managing outbreaks. Investing in research and development for the development of indigenous diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines can also enhance the country's preparedness for future health crises (Wouters OJ, 2021, pp. 1028-1029).

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented Pakistan with unprecedented challenges. However, by considering the future implications and implementing effective policy recommendations, the nation can mitigate the impact of the crisis and build resilience for future emergencies. Strengthening healthcare infrastructure, enhancing testing and surveillance capabilities, promoting vaccination and awareness, strengthening social safety nets, promoting digital transformation, improving education systems, and establishing crisis preparedness mechanisms are critical steps in ensuring the well-being of the Pakistani population in the face of future health crises (QMGPI, February 8, 2022). Through concerted efforts and strategic planning, Pakistan can emerge stronger and more prepared to face the challenges that lie ahead.

Conclusion

It is important to government for intervention in stabilizing employment and protecting workers during times of crisis. The government's swift response in implementing fiscal stimulus packages, wage subsidies, and social protection measures proved instrumental in supporting businesses and preserving jobs. The proactive measures helped to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable segments of the

workforce, including informal workers and daily wage earners. There are some challenges and areas that require further attention from the government. There is the need for targeted policies and interventions to address the disparities in employment outcomes among different sectors and regions. Additionally, the study emphasized the importance of ensuring equal access to support programs for marginalized groups and promoting inclusive growth.

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