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Addressing System Barriers for Intra-Africa Trade: Case of East African Community

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Abstract

Africa has had difficulties in its regional trade system due to tariff and non-tariff barriers. These include (1) differences in adopting the ideological framework of liberal trade, (2) unreachable territories due to transportation difficulties, (3) enclave rather than inclusive economies, (4) exclusion of small-scale dealers in the trading system, (5) insecurity and lack of enough manufactured and finished goods to sell. However, if these obstacles are removed, people can develop, have money, produce more, and eliminate poverty. They can benefit economies of scale equally, including access to diverse and affordable products and regional jobs.

This study uses qualitative inquiries to analyze these barriers to inter-African trade but with a focus on the East Africa Community (EAC). The study answers the following questions. What are the intra-Africa regional trade barriers in general, and what are the specific trade issues in the East African Community (EAC)? How can they be addressed so that Africans can use the opportunity in larger markets (economies of scale)? What are the benefits of free trade and regional integration, and what does the case of EAC inform us?

Keywords: Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCTA), Economies of Scale, Market, East African Community, Free trade

1.0 Introduction

Systemic barriers to trade in Africa are the main hindrance to development because society can never develop without trade, especially international and regional trade. Africa remains weak in the international trade system. The continent plays a marginal role of 2.4 per cent share in international exports, counting Africa as a whole and 1.7 per cent, counting the sub-Saharan region (Schmieg, 2016). The East African Community is located in the Sub-Saharan Africa Region. It comprises eight countries, including Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. While Africa's trade with other continents is lagging, intra-Africa trade could be an alternative to fill that gap and increase welfare derived from trade and economies of scale. Buheji and Muhorakeye (2023)

The intra-Africa trading system has been an alternative and has been implemented so far through the creation of African Regional Integration. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and EAC serve as examples. Recently, the African countries decided to have one single market – the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), in which many countries are signatories. Premises of these agreements have been put in place, and some countries have removed visa barriers to other fellow citizens of Africa. EAC is one of the progressive regional integrations with standard market agreements and later with political federation plans.

The EAC have a functioning Common Market agreement related to the free movement of goods, Services and people. People from Uganda can freely move to Kenya and Rwanda and vice versa. Tanzania is also flexible on visas for a person moving from EAC. EAC member states agreed to set up trade infrastructure apart from trade cooperation. In addition to Mombasa and Dar Es Salam Port, a railway, electricity, and roads project joined the community and facilitated trade.

The EAC also has factor endowment and comparative advantage in trade as it has a lot of mineral trading with the rest of the world, coffee and tea. However, internally, there is also specialization in the food industry in Uganda, manufacturing in Kenya, and agricultural commodities from Tanzania, especially rice and wheat (Mushimiyimana, 2016). However, some countries, including Rwanda and Burundi, have remarked on the intra-regional trade deficit in recent years. This negatively affected Burundi until other member states decided to compensate her as stipulated in the EAC integration agreement. Besides, trade in EAC has systemic barriers. Among them are tariff barriers, lack of common currency, lack of enough production, lack of political will to implement trade agreements, insecure places, lack of joint investment in mineral and oil deals etc. Mineral resources have been a large endowment of EAC member states.

Though there have been wishes to jointly invest in them, very few EAC companies have shown interest in doing so. Moreover, transport issues and the abrupt closure of borders remain a trading barrier to EAC member states. In addition to inaccessible territory due to insecurity, poor transportation, and generally poor rural areas, borders between states are abruptly closed. In this paper, we discuss all these systemic barriers to trade and explore ways or mechanisms to handle them.

2.0 Literature Review

The paper discusses two main points in this section. The first is an intra-trade theory, and the second is an intra-trade theory in EAC.

2.1 Intra-Trade Theory

Different approaches exist in trade theory: (1) Factor endowment approach with Heckscher-Ohlin theory, and Krugman-Helpman and Linda theory on modern intra-industry trade system (Kunroo and Ahmad, 2023). The former is based on factor endowments or the modern trade theory, while the latter hinges on intra-regional trade in overall trade flows and specialization. Moreover, the former theory of factor endowment assumes the existence of different products in the trading system, and compels intra-regional buyers and sellers to complement each other. The factor endowments commonly refer to complementarity in the market and the comparative advantage of every nation.

The EAC revealed that countries with almost the same economic level have some specialities in production and market, for instance, Kenya in manufacturing, Uganda in the food industry, and Tanzania in mining and agriculture (Mushimiyimana, 2016, 2019). With factors endowment theory, EAC has reason to trade with each other, though the production level is still low given the industry and levels of other multiple ranges of production.

Factor endowment goes hand in hand with trade bias. The latter touches on the cultural aspect and likeliness in the market structure and system, which comprises the geographical, social, linguistic, and policy spectrum. This means that politics, ideologies, and language matter much in the trade system, Ferguson (2006). For instance, the political or cultural mindset determined that most commodities exchanged within neighbouring states can eventually be imported far away due to neglect, discrepancies, political disagreement, sanctions and blockades that touch the trading system. It was revealed that most of the African economy depended much on Western production due to colonial mindset and developmental ideology – consume, build, speak, and wear as if you are in Western society – the view post-developmental scholars challenge (Ferguson, 2006). This affects the trade system, especially the intra-African trade. The market policy and factors in Africa are affected by this mindset, either in the kinds of products exchangeable or in dependence on imports from far away that can be substituted in the African market realm.

This challenges the geographical factor of trade, where an individual country can avoid trading with neighbours and choose to trade with faraway countries, such as *ceteris paribus*. Normally, every individual country is willing to have some of each commodity produced across the geographic areas, explaining consumers' homothetic preferences, if there are no other biases. The geographic factor is more linked with the gravity model of trade or centripetal or centrifugal forces of the market.

Friction is a factor that causes resistance in the flow of goods between partners in the same region. This happens due to (1) human-made policies or intervention, either tariff or non-tariff barriers or (2) natural barriers, including language, culture, religion, border, landlocked or isolated/insular territory or geographical distance. All these factors affect EAC's trade system in one way or another. Some countries, including Uganda, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Burundi, are landlocked. Moreover, the part of East DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) is distantly close to East Africa, the Western part of the country's capital and main port – Matadi. Therefore, they are considered isolated or landlocked. The geographical distance between Goma and Bukavu to Matadi port is far away and long compared to Goma and Bukavu's distance to Mombasa, Dar Es Salam. Buheji and Muhorakeye (2023), Mushimiyimana (2016).

Actually, a good market system implies that there is a large number of buyers and sellers. The implication is that in that system, the price decreases, and the equilibrium pricing is independent of the market structure. Buyers can easily find a variety of commodities available and ready for consumption. The more consumption increases, the more welfare increases. The rule of Dixit-Stiglitz stipulates that the more competition there is, the more preference there is for buyers. This is the most crucial theory as far as integration is concerned.

Moreover, Linder Hypothesis states that countries with similar per-capita income consume similar quality products that push them to trade more. EAC member states mostly have similar incomes, between $500 GDP per capita PPP and $2500 GDP per capita PPP. Buying and selling each other in the EAC can work properly. This means that people from Rwanda can easily buy commodities from Tanzania and Kenya, or people from Tanzania can easily buy commodities from Uganda, South Sudan, DRC, and the rest of the community. The consumption, capacity, and preference levels can balance and trigger a mutual trade system in EAC, except for Burundi and DRC, where we find very low GDP per capita PPP.

2.2 East African Free Trade: Case of East African Community

EAC managed to set up an integration and reached the common market level. At least, there has been a functioning ease of trade and transport agreement through the North Corridor of EAC, including Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya, a decade ago. This functioning road from Kigali to Mambasa has not faced problems so far. At least from Goma, Kigali, Gatuna, Mbarara, Masaka, Kampala, Jinja, Malaba, Eldoret, Nakuru, Nairobi, Machakos, Voi, to Mombasa. As mentioned earlier, even if the road is long, it gives advantages to EAC trade with East DRC and probably with Burundi. Mushimiyimana (2016).

Quantitatively, the level of Intra-regional trade within the East African Community (EAC) has been increasing. There is an upward trajectory at $10.17 billion in September 2022. The intra-EAC trade counted for imports and exports in the EAC Partner States, grew from 13% in 2019 at a value of $ 7.1 billion to 15 % in 2021 at a value of $9.5 billion (Owaka, 2023). The intra-EAC trade, through imports and exports in the EAC Partner States, grew from 13% in 2019 at a value of $ 7.1 billion to 15 % in 2021 at a value of $9.5 billion (Owaka, 2023, Kigambo, 2021). By September 2022, the EAC trade value was $10.17 billion, representing a 20% share of Intra-trade to global trade (Owaka, 2023).

There is goodwill in the EAC for mutual trade, especially after COVID-19. The Secretary-General Hon. (Dr.) Peter Mathuki mentioned an increase in political will, for which there is an increase in the trade outcome of member states. However, Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) are still hampering rapid moves to trade, and the removal of these would increase trade in EAC by up to 40 per cent in the next five years (Owaka, 2023, Ngowi, 2017). In a retreat in Machakos County in 2023, the EAC leadership mentioned the threat to non-tariff barriers in EAC and highlighted that EAC had been able to remove more than 200 NTBs, intending to enhance intra-EAC trade since 2007. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024)

This included topping up the tariff of imports of available goods in EAC that are brought out of the regional boundaries. The imports of locally available goods into the region including meat, furniture and textiles, have been given a protective tariff of 35 per cent (Owaka, 2023) to encourage local exchanges and value addition.

As new membership increases, such as DRC and Somalia, the opportunity to trade also increases. EAC was planning to open more trade opportunities with India and Arab due to the long Indian Red Sea coast of Somalia with Arab countries. Opportunities of fishing characterize Somalia's blue economy endowment in EAC. The capacity of endowment increased thanks to the territorial enrolment of EAC, and the size of the population increased. Before Somalia joined there were about 300 million populations in the region – a larger market for trade system.

The major trade challenges as highlighted previously, are security in the part of EAC, especially the eastern DRC, and instabilities in some of its fragile territories in South Sudan and the region neighbouring Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. Other trade issues are associated with the lack of establishment of the single currency, setting decentralized institutions and eventually fostering political federation.

3.0 Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach to highlight the challenges of intra-regional trade in Africa in general and in EAC in particular and how to solve them. It is based on the theoretical framework of intra-regional trade, especially the Heckscher-Ohlin theory and Krugman-Helpman and Linda's theory on the modern intra-industry trade system while interpreting the situation of EAC trade. It hinges on requirements of integration, such as the stage of common market and political federation, as far as EAC aspires to reach and fully implement those important stages in trade. All of these are done by analysing the four market systems: Goods, services, labour, and money.

This research also uses observation techniques. The researcher has managed to visit some of the important market sites of EAC, including Bujumbura, Dar-es-Salam, Huye, Kigali, Machakos, Mbarara, and Nairobi. All these areas have different market endowments, specialisations, and socioeconomic factors that influence intraregional trade. Therefore, observation was one of the main research techniques, in addition to interviews.

This research uses interpretivism as the epistemological stance of qualitative research. It assumes that reality exists depending on how people interpret social phenomena such as the market. Exploring this requires techniques of interviews, observations and documents to explore how people make sense of their socioeconomic life and realities. Interpretivism assumes that reality is constructed in society. Therefore, in this study, we assume that the way people interpret trade hindrances is how they perceive them as reality per se. It should be considered as it is in any case, and it depends largely on how they coin or construct them. The fact that trade challenges in EAC are highlighted in this paper may or may not be the reality for other readers or people from inside or outside the region, but the current reality of this research should be considered.

4.0 Finding

4.1. Market System Barriers in the EAC

The research found that the market of goods and services in EAC faces the following challenges: (1) lack of enough goods to trade with each other, (2) lack of transport means and decentralized market system, (3) insecurity and political influence that is used to punish each other after certain disagreement.

The lack of enough goods hinges on the fact that there is a general scarcity of goods due to a lack of enough production. Some countries do not produce enough for themselves in their local market; thus, they cannot satisfy the needs for their people domestically and trade with the rest of the region. For an example was Burundi and Rwanda in the last decade. Their domestic market was too low to stand by themselves, so they relied heavily on Uganda and Kenya to survive.

Lack of production in the market inhibits trade, creating a trade deficit for Burundi and Rwanda. After some of the policies in Rwanda, especially those *made in Rwanda,* it was clear that the country can overcome inefficiencies in production. The country of Rwanda is currently reaching a good production level in maize flour, rice, cements, and construction materials like steel reinforcement bar, which she used to import from EAC members like Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania.

The EAC countries such as Burundi and Rwanda experience shows that the means of production was relatively low due to the lack of skilled labour and capital to invest and boost production – especially in manufacturing and agro-intensive production and processing. This made trade more difficult in the EAC trade system, especially for Burundi and Rwanda, through policies of bringing investors and *ease doing business* policies, and the agro-industry reform, especially in maize and rice production, has done tremendous resilience capacity in Rwanda. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2023)

It was clear that EAC Kenya was exporting industry-based manufactured goods while Uganda and Tanzania were exporting food-based goods. Burundi and Rwanda did not have enough to trade with the rest of EAC.

The services market is another interesting trade aspect in EAC. All member states and stakeholders agree upon general services to the people of EAC, but however, a shortcoming exists. It is clear that services like education, health and security are mostly limited in EAC. Very few countries have given free scholarships to the EAC citizens, from partner states without the intervention of other donors, or from foreign stakeholders. However, together with private partners and foreign stakeholders, Rwanda provided education services to some EAC member states, including South Sudanese, Somali and Congolese. However, EAC member states shared other services, including education, health and security, but at the limited level and depending on foreign stakeholders. There was no referral hospital or other EAC service deliverers for EAC citizens that are competitive to another international standards like India, China, Europe and the West.

In terms of the labour market, very few people get jobs within EAC apart from their home country place. Finding labour markets from one country to another in EAC is difficult. The labour market policy is still protected and unstructured at the regional level. This hinders the common market protocol as job opportunities, and search is not shared at local and regional levels. In-country strategies such as RDB (Rwanda Development Board) and other Tanzania or Kenya labour offices have not strategized this strategy for the last two decades. Besides, initiatives such as Hanga Umurimo (create job), Harambee Rwanda and other initiatives link young job seekers with other countries such as South Africa and Qatar rather than engaging in any EAC member states.

In terms of the money market, it is hard to establish the economy of different economies of EAC. The harmony of establishing a single market is hard without the same currency. Any successful RI (regional integration) requires harmonising the money market and fiscal policy. Take the case of the European Union. EAC has been willing to establish regional currency but has not yet been implemented. This makes financial harmony harder and affects the region's labor remuneration system and payment of goods and services.

Table1. Price distortion of currency in EAC compared to $1 USD

EAC member states	Their currency	Price in $USD	Name
Burundi	2,857	1USD	Franc
DRC	2,842	1USD	Franc
Kenya	128	1USD	Shilling
Rwanda	1,330	1USD	Franc
Tanzania	2,625	1USD	Shilling
Somalia	568	1USD	Shilling
South Sudan	130	1USD	Pound
Uganda	3,719	1USD	Shilling

Source: Author, from a different financial institution, June 18, 2024

The table above shows that it is very difficult to harmonize trade within countries with total differences in money and financial valuation of currency. Any successful common market system needs a single currency so that whoever gets paid in any state feels the same weight of payment in the other. Having a common EAC market with wage discrepancies would make no sense. The common market needs a lot of work on financial harmony and good compensation mechanisms or distribution.

4.2 Trade Biases and Cultural System Barriers in EAC

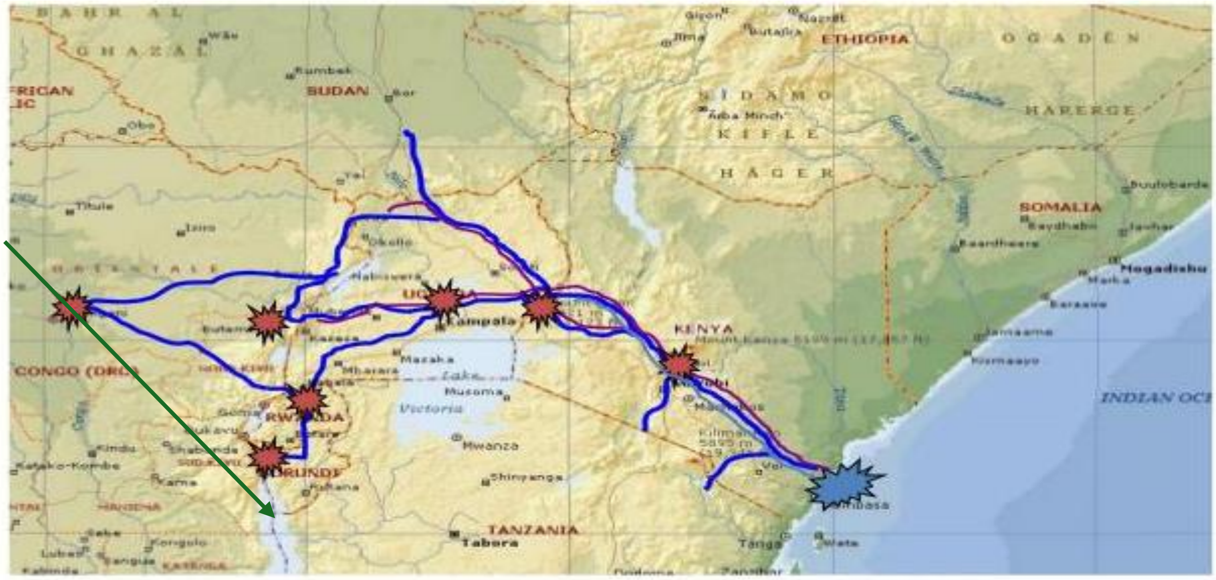
There is not much difference in terms of culture in the EAC. Even though there exist different languages, three languages are used for intra-regional trade: these are for instance Kiswahili spoken in large territories of East Africa, English, and French. Kinyarwanda and Kirundi are almost similar to the two countries, meaning that the two nations speak almost the same language. Part of Eastern DRC speaks Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili and can easily communicate with the rest of EAC. Buheji and Muhorakeye (2023)

A culture of corruption is a hindrance to trade though. Most of the countries in the EAC are very corrupt. This distorts trade. Companies and especially good investors cannot benefit from the EAC trade since, in most countries, corruption does not allow better uses of resources and money from trade. This is mainly linked to the culture of not studying, as the EAR (East African Region) is the least educated globally. Businessmen and women try to bribe political elites and military elites and turn business into state capture. Corruption, resource curse, and enclave economy are some of the hindrance of trade in EAC.

The lack of a culture of mutual trust and cooperation between states hamper trade, especially for trade requiring large investments. It is not understandable that South Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, and DRC all have an oil industry, while the rest of the region, including Burundi, suffer from a lack of oil. DRC and Tanzania have a large number of minerals, and other companies from abroad exploit these minerals and repatriate revenues at the detriment of the EAR economy. In the wake of Uganda's petroleum industry in the Albertina Graben, the President of Uganda called upon the EAC member states to invest in that exploitation, and the companies from France, the UK, and China invested, but no EAC company joined.

No EAC country was eager to invest in Uganda’s nascent oil industry. This problem of mutual cooperation is lacking in EAC and hampers large-scale investment or trade. This mistrust goes hand in hand with tribal conflicts, abrupt closure of borders and lack of democratic institution to back the society and protect it from instability. An example of abrupt closure happened between Uganda and Rwanda in 2010s, and is happening currently in 2020s between Burundi and Rwanda.

Figure (1) Shows the Northern corridor links Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan and Tanzania.



Source: Ministry of Roads and Transport | Kenya
https://x.com/TransportKE/status/591934902842556416

The other problem in the region is tribalism and genocide ideology. The region has been undergoing a situation where there is a low understanding of cultural pluralism and tolerance of differences. This puts EAC in a category of societies which are low in terms of socioeconomic transformation and development. The abrupt closure of borders humpers trade deals and free movements of goods, people and services, and it questions the political and economic level of integration.

The regulatory framework of trade in EAC needs harmonization. Each country has its own policy – which is not bad per se but needs to include local people's interests. It looks like in EAC, a single country can set up rules that affect trade regionally and not be accountable for that.

Sometimes, international trade does not favor intra-trade in African states, especially in the mining sector, which is linked with neocolonialism (Campbell, 2004). Some rules do not favour local state establishing trade, including processed minerals. It is deemed necessary to overcome this hindrance to developing business that can enable Africa in general and EAC in particular to develop intra-trade, especially for metal mining, which is one of the endowments of EAC.

5.0 Discussion of the Findings

Lack of enough production is the first hindrance to intra-EAC trade. This is linked with other research by the United Nations Commission for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), highlighting that EAC member states rank low in the global value chain (GVC). Other countries rank very low in increasing value addition in their commodities except Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. According to that research, Kenya at least takes the lead in EAC in value addition to the commodities value chain. Lack of production and value addition to products hinder intra-regional trade in EAC and in the trade of EAC and another region.

In addition, EAC trade system is characterized by unstructured service, labour and money market that need to be reformed to enhance intra-regional trade. There is no structured integrated labor market in EAC. This market does not seem to exist in EAC like it works in the European Union (EU). Another associated issue is the financial market, where money value and fiscal policies are different in the EAC.
The culture, politics and society are not problems per se, as they are all similar. However, they are not good for business since they promote mistrust, and mismanagement of resources, and they trigger the lack of mutual investment in the project that requires big finance. The tribalism, political instability, and lack of enough infrastructure increase the issue of trade sustainability in EAC.

Countries have been reluctant to invest in their member states despite the general call – see the case of Uganda oil. This limits trade profitability in EAC to the general population and increases the chance of a resource curse. In Tanzania and Uganda, there have been signs of a resource curse (Mushimiyimana, 2019). Therefore, this research shows that the EAC trade system faces the issues that the whole African continent is generally facing – the resource curse. Most of the issues related to the position of Africa in the neoliberal world order, including the enclave economy and lack of distribution, have been hampering free trade in Africa.

Joint ventures, public-private partnerships (PPP), and consortia for higher investment levels do not include EAC actors in more integrated ways; in most cases, foreign companies replace them. For intra-regional trade to prosper and trust to increase, joint state activities or PPPs are encouraged at the regional level. Other issues of insecurity, institutional instability, and transport issues should be solved as we need more active trade regions (Appling, 2017).

Moreover, the problem we see in trade in EAC can be generalized within the entire Africa – sub-Saharan Africa, where we see the similarity of problems of trade, including lack of enough production, added value products, and lack of cultural and political harmony (Kigambo, 2021), to engage with trade and lack of joint venture, mutual investment and trust. There is also a distorted market system not only in the goods and services, but also in labour and financial exchange, valuation and harmonization.

6.0 Conclusion

This research was about the assessment of the challenges that face trade in EAC and analysis on how we can solve them after diagnosis of these issues. The most theories we relied on is based in trade theory with endowment approach and intra-regional trade approach.

These approaches shows that EAC can improve trade if some conditions are addressed effectively. These are for instance increasing the production level, adding value to products, setting up structure and integrated market of labor, goods and services and harmonization of valuation of money, fiscal policy or introduction of single currency. Transport also is another issue to solve in EAC for effective trade system.

These are in addition to trade bias and cultural system barriers that occur in the EAC. The trade bias include refusal to buy form EAC goods, refusal to invest in EAC partner states, e.g Ugandan nascent oil industry for instance, international law that hinder trade and investment in the region especially in mining sector, and the abrupt closure of borders that inhibit free movement of goods and services. The other cultural aspects including language are not problematic in business in EAC as such, but rather the issues of trust, tribalism, lack of cultural pluralism and education are, and they need to addressed for effective trade and business in the EAC. The problem of trade we see in EAC have similarity with the rest of sub-Saharan region and therefore can be generalized for the study of the new functioning of AfCTA. Similarly, the effective removal of trade barriers in EAC can be same in AfTCA. Further studies are recommended.

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