



SOCIAL PROTECTION EXPENDITURE AND POVERTY REDUCTION: A CALL FOR THE ADAPTION OF SOCIAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMMES AT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS LEVEL IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Poverty remains a critical challenge in Nigeria, with over 40% of the population living below the poverty line. Social protection expenditures, including cash transfers, skills acquisition programs, and microcredit schemes, have proven to be effective tools for reducing poverty and fostering economic resilience. While federal initiatives like the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) have made strides, local governments, being the closest administrative units to the populace, possess the contextual understanding required to design and implement programs tailored to specific community needs. This paper aim to explore the relationship between social protection expenditure and poverty reduction, emphasizing the critical role of local governments in adapting federal social investment initiatives. The paper relies on secondary data obtain from various publications. Based on the data gathered, the work find out that programmes such as N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT), and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) can be decentralized to align with local labour demands, provide targeted financial support, and empower youth through entrepreneurship and skill acquisition. The paper also find out that challenges like inadequate funding, weak institutional capacity and corruption can hinder the implementation of localize Social Investment Programmes have the potential to drive significant progress in poverty alleviation and community development, contributing to Nigeria's broader sustainable development goals. It therefore recommends increase funding for local governments, improve capacity building and promote transparency and accountability.

Key Words: Social Protection Expenditure, Social Investment Programmes, Poverty Reduction and Local Social Investments.

Introduction

Poverty remains one of the most persistent challenges in Nigeria, significantly affecting millions of households and hindering sustainable development with over 40% of the population living below the poverty line according to recent statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020). Social protection programs, which encompass interventions designed to reduce poverty and

vulnerability by promoting efficient allocation of resources and resilience to shocks, have emerged as a key tool for poverty reduction globally. In the Nigerian context, where poverty and inequality levels are pronounced, the adaption of social investment programs at the local government level is critical for addressing poverty at its roots and improving the well-being of the most vulnerable populations.

In Nigeria as in many other developing nations, social protection expenditure have undergone an important transformation since the 1980s. The effects of economic crisis, structural adjustment and globalisation on developing countries have made governments and international agencies to increasingly come to accept social protection as a policy framework for addressing poverty (Barrientos, 2011).

Nigerian government had over the years made different attempts to reduce the rate of poverty and unemployment in the country. Several poverty alleviation programmes and projects were instituted to achieve this aim. They include Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in 1986; Better Life Programme (BLP) in 1987; National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in 1987; Family Support Programme (FSP) in 1993; and Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) in 1997. The programmes came with stated objectives of reducing the rate of poverty, but unfortunately the wide spread of corruption, fiscal indiscipline, political and policy instability that characterized the nation made these programmes not to achieve the set goals (Bello, Toyebi, Balogun and Akanbi, 2009). The democratically elected government of Obasanjo recognized the need to introduce another poverty alleviation programme following the continuous increase in the poverty level and mass unemployment of youth. In the year 2000, poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) was launched. The programme was designed to provide employment for about 200,000 people, and the sum of N106 million was set aside for the programme. In the following year (2001) PAP was replaced with the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), which has the responsibility of coordinating and monitoring the activities of the core poverty eradication ministries and Agencies, such as health, education, power and steel, water resources, work and housing among others.

Following removal of oil subsidy on 1st January, 2012 to eliminate the huge financial burden it poses on government, the government initiated and introduced the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) with a goal to reduce poverty and unemployment by empowering young Nigerians with adequate skills to take up existing job vacancies in both private and public sectors and/ or become entrepreneur of labour themselves. The programme has eight (8) components namely, the Social Safety Net (SSN), Niger Delta Development, Road Infrastructure, Rail Transport, Water and Agriculture, Selected Power Projects, Petroleum and NNPC Projects and Information and Communication Technology (Saibi, 2016). The objectives of the programme were defeated by gross mismanagement of resources and party affiliation. It therefore had little or no impact to the majority of targeted beneficiaries. The allegation of gross mismanagement of resources and lack of transparency in SURE-P made the new Muhammadu Buhari led government to end the programme.

Following the increase in the rate of poverty and unemployment in the country, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the National Social Investments Programmes (NSIP) in 2016, to tackle poverty, unemployment and hunger across the country. The programme has four components known as the N-Power (which was initiated to cater for unemployed graduates), National Home Grown School Feeding (HGSFP), Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) and Government Enterprises Entrepreneurship Programme (GEEP).

Adesina (2022) noted that local governments as the closest administrative units to the people have an essential role to play in designing and implementing social investment initiatives that align with the peculiar needs of their communities. This is because local governments understand the specific needs of local communities better than other tiers of government. However, their potential remains underutilized in Nigeria due to inadequate financial resources, weak institutional capacity and insufficient policy implementation frameworks. Social protection expenditure, particularly on programs such as cash transfers, health insurance, skill acquisition, and agricultural subsidies, has demonstrated significant potential to alleviate poverty when efficiently implemented. Beyond poverty alleviation, such investments foster economic growth, human capital development, and social cohesion.

In this context, the call for adapting social investment programs at the local government level becomes imperative. These programs, tailored to address local socio-economic realities, can bridge the gap between national poverty reduction strategies and community-level impact. This paper explores the relationship between social protection expenditure and poverty reduction, emphasizing the need for local governments in Nigeria to adopt and prioritize social investment initiatives. It argues that a well-funded, inclusive, and sustainable approach to social protection can transform local communities and contribute significantly to national development goals.

2 Literature Review

Social Protection

Social protection is a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approach that contributes to poverty reduction, articulating policy priorities of government towards sustainable development. Social protection, or social security, provides benefits to individuals on the basis of risks faced across the life cycle (e.g., unemployment, disability, maternity, etc.) and to those suffering general poverty and social exclusion. Social protection schemes can be financed through contributions from wages (social insurance) or through general taxation (social assistance). Social protection is essential to ensure unemployed individuals and older persons enjoy income security.

Social protection has been defined in various ways. According to the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD, 2010), "social protection is concerned with preventing, managing and overcoming situations that adversely affect people's wellbeing". It aims to alleviate or maintain people's standards when confronted by contingencies such as unemployment, illness, disability, old age, economic crisis or natural disasters. The world Bank (2019) defined social protection as "public interventions that assist individuals, households and communities in managing risk better and in providing support to the critically poor". It regards social protection as a safety net as well as a springboard for poor people to climb out of poverty.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defined social protection as a set of public measures that are provided to members of the society to protect them from economic and social distress that can be caused by the reduction or lack of income as a result of various contingencies such as sickness, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age and death of breadwinner (García and Gruat, 2003). ILO divides those public measures into three general categories: Social insurance, labour market regulations and social assistance (International Labour Office, 2001). Social insurance programmes are contributory schemes designed to protect workers and their households against life-course and work-related contingencies, such as old-age, accidents, maternity, unemployment and sickness. Labour market policies and interventions are legal frameworks to ensure basic standards for employment and safeguarding

workers' rights. Social assistance is a non-contributory intervention designed to help individuals and households cope with poverty and vulnerability (Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2012).

Social protection encompasses a wide range of interventions, including conditional and unconditional cash transfers, public works programs, healthcare subsidies, and educational support. According to the World Bank (2018), such programs contribute to poverty reduction by directly improving household incomes, enhancing access to essential services, and building resilience against economic shocks. Research indicates that increased expenditure on social protection not only alleviates poverty but also promotes social inclusion and reduces inequality (Holmes & Jones, 2013).

Some features distinguish the pattern of social protection in developing countries where there is a strong focus on poverty reduction and providing support to the poor. Whereas in developed countries, the emphasis is on the maintenance of income and protecting living standards. Social protection is not restricted to compensating the poor but rather aspires to have a broader developmental role which involves: (a) to help in the protection of basic standards of consumption among people living in poverty and those at risk of falling into poverty; (b) to enable investment in human capital and other productive assets, which can provide a gateway for families trapped in the cycle of poverty; (c) to strengthen the agency of those in poverty in order to overcome their dilemma (Barrientos, 2011).

Social Protection Policies in Nigeria

Several social protection programmes have been implemented from the military regime to the current democratic dispensation in Nigeria. Most of the programmes implemented between 1986 when the Structural Adjustment Programme was initiated, and 1997 fell under social services and focused on the rural population, mostly the poor. In 1986, the Directorate for Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI) was established, which targeted the rural communities through an integrated approach to rural development. The World Bank supported this to promote community development and social mobilisation, community self-help projects, and rural development, as well as improve the quality of life of the rural population of Nigeria (Oluseyi, 2018).

In 1987, the federal government introduced the Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW), a self-help and rural development programme targeted at skills acquisition, provision of credits, and cottage industries for rural women. The programme also had social welfare services donating food, money and equipment. (Nkpoyen et al., 2015) Family Economic Advancement Programme was instituted in 1997 to provide credit facilities to locally-based producers of goods and services in cottage industries (Osinubi, 2005). Other programmes within this period include; National Directorate of Employment (1986) established to train and provide financial guidance to unemployed youths, and Family Support Programme (1994), which replaced the Better Life Programme, targeted at providing health care delivery, child welfare, youth development, and nutritional interventions to families in rural areas (Osinubi, 2005).

The return to democratic government from 1999, saw the introduction of safety nets programmes such as the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) was established in 2001 to eradicate extreme poverty in Nigeria. The activities of NAPEP were classified under four programmes: Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), Social Welfare Service Scheme (SOWESS), Rural Infrastructure Development Scheme

(RIDS), and Natural Resources Development and Conservative Scheme (NRDCS) (Taiwo). The first conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme in Nigeria was implemented under NAPEP in 2007. The CCT programme of NAPEP was reviewed in 2009 to address challenges and later implemented under the Conditional Grants Scheme of the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Millennium Development Goals (Aiyede et al., 2015).

Social Protection Expenditure

Social protection expenditure refers to the financial resources allocated by governments or other entities to programs designed to reduce poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion, and to promote equitable economic growth and social cohesion. It encompasses spending on measures such as social assistance, social insurance, labor market programs and universal or targeted support systems aimed at ensuring basic livelihoods and access to essential services. These expenditures aim to safeguard individuals and families against various risks and contingencies, such as unemployment, illness, old age, disability, and poverty, and to promote social inclusion. Expenditure on social protection varies significantly across countries and regions, reflecting differences in fiscal capacity, governance priorities, and socio-economic contexts. International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021) observed that developed countries typically allocate a significant proportion of GDP (10-30%) to social protection programs, while low-income countries often spend less than 3% of GDP on social protection due to fiscal constraints and limited institutional frameworks.

Social protection expenditure systems generally include three main components – social assistance, social insurance and labour market programmes. Social assistance provides direct support such as cash transfers, food assistance or subsidies, often targeted at the poor and vulnerable populations. Social insurance is a contributory programs that protect individuals from economic risks such as unemployment, sickness, disability or old age, including pensions and unemployment benefits. Labour market programmes are initiatives that promote employment, enhance skills or support income generation, such as job training programs and public works schemes. Governments and international organizations emphasise social protection expenditure as a key tool for addressing inequality, reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (United Nations, 2015).

Most of Nigeria's social protection expenditure has been executed through the National Social Investment Office (NSIO) since 2016. The NSIO provides oversight function for all of the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) and covers the expenditures under the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP), conditional cash transfer programs, N-Power and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP). The NSIO accounted for 88 percent of all federal social protection expenditure in 2020 and 87 percent in 2021; accounted for 46 percent of all federal social expenditure in 2020 and 80 percent 2021; and the Office has continued to receive sizable allocations in recent years with NGN 410 billion in 2022 and NGN 534 billion in 2024 (World Bank, 2022).

Outside the NSIO, the National Commission of Refugees and the North-East Development Commission are the federal agencies with largest social protection budget allocation. Between 2015 and 2019, the National Commission of Refugees received between 40 to 86 percent of all federal social protection budget (Figure 4.B). After the inception of the North-East Development Commission in 2020, it became the largest federal agency other than the NSIO to receive federal

social protection budget. It was allocated 6 percent of all federal social protection financing in 2020 and 2021 (46 to 48 percent outside the NSIO).

Social Investment Programs

Social investment is about investing in people. It means policies designed to strengthen people's skills and capacities and support them to participate fully in employment and social life. Key policy areas include education, quality childcare, healthcare, training, job-search assistance and rehabilitation. The federal government in 2015 launched a set of social protection schemes called the Social Investment Programmes (SIP) to address the country's high rate of poverty and vulnerability. The programme is coordinated by the National Social Investment Office (NSIO) under the supervision of the office of the Vice President of Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Budget and Planning, 2017; The World Bank, 2019).

Programmes under the NSIO also known as the National Social Investment Programs (NSIPs) are the key platform to channel federal public expenditures on social protection. The NSIO was established in 2016 under the Vice President's office and was moved to the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development (currently the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation) after the ministry establishment in August 2019.

The key programs under the NSIO are the conditional cash transfer programs (which includes the household uplifting program and the economic shock responsive cash transfers financed primarily through external sources as well as the grants to vulnerable women), the national home-grown school feeding program, the N-Power program and the government enterprise and empowerment program. However, programmatic data on the coverage, beneficiaries, and expenditures are not available publicly although a total of NGN 1.34 trillion has supposedly been spent on these programs between 2016 and 2022.

The Household Uplifting Program

The Household Uplifting Program, also known as the National Cash Transfer Program, is the largest cash transfer program in Nigeria. The HUP was supported through the US\$500 million World Bank financed Nigeria National Social Safety Nets Program (NASSP) between 2016 and 2022. The core program provided NGN 5,000 per month for poor and vulnerable households selected from the National Social Register. The program expected to support the households for a period of at least three years. The program was quite effective in targeting support to poor and vulnerable households.

The HUP supported nearly 2 million households over the course of the NASSP project. The number of beneficiary households supported by the HUP rose steadily from 0.27 million households in 2018 to 1.94 million households in 2022 (Figure 6.A). The expenditures rose commensurately, from NGN 6.7 billion in 2018 to NGN 104 billion in 2021.

However, support stopped in 2023 after the World Bank financing ended in 2022. As the World Bank financing ended in 2022, the expenditure dropped to NGN 40 billion in 2022. Further, there was no expenditure under the program to the beneficiaries in 2023 in the absence of government financing. Follow on World Bank financing, the National Social Safety Nets Program – Scale Up (NASSP-SU), is expected to provide benefits to the beneficiaries in 2024, so that the initial set of beneficiaries under the HUP receive at least two years of support across the NASSP and NASSP-SU programs. This illustrates the risk of relying on external financing for the nation's flagship social assistance (cash transfers) program.

Economic shock responsive cash transfers

Launched in 2023, in response to the price hikes caused partly by the removal of fuel subsidies, the economic shock responsive cash transfers (ESR-CT) provides short-term cash transfer support to the poor and vulnerable households in Nigeria. This program is expected to be financed partly by the government and partly through World Bank financed NASSP-SU. The program seeks to support 15 million households with NGN 25,000 per month for a period of three months. In 2023, the program provided support to 2.06 million households and incurred total expenditure of NGN 51.6 billion on cash transfers and associated fees.

National Home-Grown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP)

The National Home-Grown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP) was launched in 2016 with the aim of ensuring one solid quality meal a day for children. In addition to providing school meals to incentivize schooling and improving nutrition, the program also seeks to create jobs for community members as cooks and to stimulate local agricultural production. The program provides one meal per day per child enrolled in grades 1 to 3 in participating public schools across all states in the country. The NHGSFP initially covered 34 states and the FCT, whilst Kwara and Bayelsa signed the MOU and officially joined in 2022 and 2023 respectively meaning it now provides full coverage for all states.

The NHGSFP is the largest social assistance program in terms of its coverage. Its coverage increased steadily from 8.7 million schoolchildren in 2019 to about 10 million schoolchildren by 2022 (World Bank, 2023). By 2022, this program had covered over 57,000 schools across all states of the country and provided employment to 127,000 cooks. Whilst the coverage of this program is extensive, it is still only covering a small proportion of the overall number of schools that would hope to opt into the program. The benefit levels are also low at NGN 70 per child per meal for hundred days in a school year.

This program also receives the largest allocation among all NSIPs. In 2021, the NHGSFP received an allocation of NGN 139 billion and spent NGN 53 billion. The detailed breakdown of allocations and expenditures are not available for recent years. In aggregate, the total program expenditure from its inception till 2022 is supposedly NGN 201 billion (2023).

N-Power

N-Power is a job creation and employment program that targets young Nigerians between the ages of 18 and 35. Launched in 2016, this program seeks to deploy unemployed youths, particularly graduates, in the communities towards public service delivery in education, healthcare, agriculture, and civic engagement. It also seeks to develop skills of unemployed youth (graduates and non-graduates) in key sectors including innovation and technology. Beneficiaries receive a monthly stipend of NGN 30,000 during the course of their deployment and could include material assistance such as computers depending on the nature of the beneficiary assignments. The exact duration of the assignment has fluctuated across schemes and over time.

The N-Power has six specific schemes organized under the graduate and non-graduate streams. Under the graduate stream, N-Power Teach deploys beneficiaries as teaching assistants in primary schools; NPower Agro deploys beneficiaries as agricultural extension workers providing advisory services to farmers; N-Power Health beneficiaries work towards improving preventative healthcare in their communities; NPower VAIDS beneficiaries function as community tax liaison

officers and encourage businesses and individuals in their communities to declare and pay taxes. The graduate schemes give priority to graduates with training in specific areas (e.g., healthcare for N-Power Health). Under the non-graduate stream, NPower Knowledge beneficiaries receive training to be freelancers and entrepreneurs in technology and innovation sectors; N-Power Build beneficiaries receive accelerated vocational training and certification in specific sectors such as building services, utilities, construction, automotive, built environment services and aluminum and gas.

While comprehensive and consistent data is not available, the program is supposed to have benefited millions of beneficiaries. Between 2016 and 2022, the program is supposed to have benefited 1.4 million youths with a total expenditure of over NGN 890 billion.20

Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP)

The Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP), targets micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and provides zero-collateral soft loans to beneficiaries to expand their enterprises. The loan amounts differ by beneficiary groups but typically range from NGN 50,000 to NGN 300,000 for the duration of 9 months to 12 months.

The GEEP has three schemes for micro loan provision. The Trader Moni targets petty traders and artisanal youths (ages 18 to 40 years) from underprivileged and marginalized groups; the Market Moni targets women-led SMEs within established market association clusters (such as tailoring, fashion, jewelry trading); the Farmer Moni targets farmers belonging to aggregator farming groups.

While authoritative data on number of beneficiaries and expenditures are not available, the reach of the program seems to have declined in recent years. Between 2016 and 2019, the program supposedly reached 2.4 million beneficiaries. After the introduction of GEEP 2.0 in 2020, the program has supposedly reached about 175,000 beneficiaries by early-2023 across its three schemes and had spent around NGN 17.6 billion.

3 Adapting Social Investment Programmes at Local Governments

Social Investment Programs initiated and implemented in Nigeria by the federal government as discussed in the proceeding sections of this work can be adapted at local government level taking into cognizance the peculiarity of the needs of local community. As stated by Oduwole, (2020), federal government initiated and executed N-Power to equip young Nigerians with skills for employability and entrepreneurship, while GEEP provides loans to support small businesses. Same initiatives can be adapted at local government to get many local populace out of extreme poverty. As pointed by Kalejaiye et al (2019) adapting SIPs at grassroots level can help government to easily meet the specific needs of vast of local communities. The programmes can drive significant progress by creating employment, building capacity and reducing inequality. The following can be adapted as localize Social Investment Programmes:

Skill Acquisition and Vocational Training: At the local government level, SIPs can emphasize skill development by aligning training programs with local economic needs. N-Power, for example, could be tailored as L-Power to include specialized vocational training in areas like agriculture, carpentry or information technology, based on local labour demands (Chukwuma & Onwuka, 2018). Research has shown that youth who acquire vocational skills through SIPs are more likely to secure jobs or establish small businesses (Adedokun & Adefila, 2020).

Local Cash Transfers: Targeting the poorest households within communities to improve consumption and access to basic needs.

Youth Entrepreneurship Support: Entrepreneurship is a critical avenue for youth economic empowerment. Programs like GEEP offer microloans to help young people start small businesses. However, to maximize effectiveness at the local level, these programs should also include mentorship, business planning support, and market access facilitation (Egwu, 2021). Studies have found that youth who participate in government-supported entrepreneurship programs report higher levels of business success and income growth (Obasan & Adekola, 2020).

Community Awareness and Participation: For SIPs to be effective, youth must be aware of these programs and understand how to access them. Local governments can play a vital role in raising awareness through community-based outreach efforts, using social media, community events, and local radio broadcasts (Ayodele, 2019). When youth understand program benefits and how to participate, their engagement levels increase, leading to more impactful outcomes (Eke, 2021).

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E): Effective monitoring and evaluation of SIPs at the local government level are essential to assess impact and make necessary adjustments. By establishing local M&E frameworks, authorities can collect data on program outcomes, challenges, and successes (Ayoade & Olujide, 2022). This data can then be used to improve program implementation, ensuring that SIPs are relevant and beneficial to the youth in specific communities.

The adaptation of SIPs at the local level has the following prospects:

- **Reduction in Youth Unemployment:** By providing skills and entrepreneurship support, localized SIPs can help reduce youth unemployment (Okeke & Uche, 2021). The N-Power program, for instance, has been shown to improve the employability of youth who participate (Olawale, 2022).
- **Increased Economic Independence:** Microloans from GEEP and similar programs offer youth the means to start their own businesses, promoting financial independence and stability (Aina, 2020).
- **Enhanced Social Inclusion:** Localizing SIPs can ensure that marginalized youth, including those in rural areas, have access to support, thus reducing social inequality (Adeyemi & Ibe, 2021).
- **Improved Civic Engagement and Trust in Government:** Youth who feel that their needs are being addressed by the government are more likely to participate in civic activities, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility (Nwagwu & Udoka, 2020).

4 Conclusion

Social protection expenditure is critical for poverty reduction, but its impact is maximized when programs are tailored to the unique needs of local communities. Local governments in Nigeria are uniquely positioned to adapt and implement social investment programs effectively as a strategic approach to tackling poverty and as they have better knowledge of community needs and challenges. Despite the potential benefits, there are challenges to implementing SIPs at the local government level. These include bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of funding, and

corruption. By prioritizing such initiatives and addressing systemic challenges, local governments can become catalysts for sustainable development and social transformation.

5 Recommendations

To address challenges and implement SIPs at local government, the following recommendations are offered:

Increase Funding for Local Governments: Adequate funding is essential to implement SIPs effectively. Federal allocations for social investment could include specific provisions for local-level youth programs (Ekanem, 2021).

Improve Capacity Building: Training local government staff on SIP implementation, management, and youth engagement can help improve program outcomes (Ogunde, 2020).

Promote Transparency and Accountability: Corruption remains a barrier to successful implementation. Transparency mechanisms, such as public reporting and community feedback channels, can help ensure that resources are used appropriately (Kehinde & Salawu, 2021).

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