

Guiding the Goals: Empowering Local Actors

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The draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are intended to guide the post-2015 development agenda have many ambitious goals and targets. They seek both to meet needs, such as greatly reducing poverty, and to address regional and global ecological goals, including avoiding dangerous climate change. But they do not outline the changes needed in institutional structures, governance, and finance to achieve them. As with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), little attention is given to local government and local civil society, despite the fact that these are the most important actors for addressing most of the goals and targets. The data collection systems that are meant to monitor achievements also fail to serve and support local organizations and local action.

The United Nations is developing a new set of goals and targets, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to begin in 2015.¹ These are intended to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2001 and to which all member states and many international agencies have committed. Most MDG targets are meant to be achieved by 2015.

This paper's main interest is in how well the draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address urban development issues. It is specifically interested in: (1) whether the goals cover all key areas and are appropriate, (2) whether the capacity to meet them is enhanced in each urban center, (3) the extent of their responsiveness and accountability to those with unmet needs, and (4) whether the data are available to support their implementation and monitoring.

This paper is also interested in the limitations of the MDGs, particularly in monitoring progress, and whether the draft SDGs address these limitations. The current draft SDGs have a long list of commitments that are more ambitious than the MDGs in coverage and content. While the MDG goals were mostly partial—for instance, to halve the proportion of people with inadequate incomes or without sustainable access to water and sanitation—the SDGs have many goals and targets that are universal. If

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implemented, these would ensure universal provision for many basic services by 2030 and move the world significantly towards sustainable development and away from dangerous climate change. However, the draft SDGs, like the MDGs, fail to address the issue of how the goals can be achieved. The SDGs suggest a belief that radical change can be achieved in environment and development outcomes without changing the institutional and governance structures that have constrained these outcomes in the past. Also, like the MDGs, the SDGs give little attention to local governments and civil society, even as these are central to meeting many of the goals and targets.

This paper reviews the commitments in the current SDG draft that will be sent to the UN General Assembly for review and considers their relevance to urban issues, urban governments, and urban civil society. As

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the Report of the High Level Panel set up by the UN Secretary General states, “The post-2015 agenda must be relevant for urban dwellers. Cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost.”² This includes whether there exist the needed recommenda-

tions to achieve change in the system and ensure that the commitments are met in urban areas. The paper focuses on urban areas as the scale and nature of deprivation in these areas has received little attention, something which the draft SDGs seek to remedy by including a goal and various targets specifically for cities.

What Issues Do the Draft Sustainable Development Goals Cover?

The SDGs are meant to form the basis for a global agreement within the United Nations on post-2015 development. Yet most of those who have been engaged in the discussions on the SDGs come with a particular theme they want included or strengthened, for instance, increasing the attention the SDGs pay to biodiversity or water resource management, or, as in this paper, urban development. One key issue is how much the draft SDGs address urban issues within the two goals that define sustainable development.

The first goal of sustainable development, outlined in 1987, is development that “meets the needs of the present.”³ The draft SDGs are clear that “poverty eradication is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” and that “people are at the center of sustainable development.”⁴ For over thirty years, there have been documents using the term “sustainable development” that focus only on conservation and have no consideration of people’s needs.⁵

The second goal of sustainable development is meeting these needs “without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”⁶ This is in regard to avoiding the breaching of planetary boundaries

and the incursion of dangerous climate change, as well as to being resilient to changes that cannot be prevented. The draft SDGs call for “the widest possible cooperation by all countries and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response” in order to “stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”⁷ Unlike the MDGs, the draft SDGs include a goal and some targets for “cities and human settlements.”⁸

The introduction also includes a note that each country has primary responsibility for its own economic and social development, and that there are different approaches, visions, models, and tools that can be used to achieve sustainable development. Furthermore, it recognizes that “there is a need to take urgent steps to improve the quality, coverage, and availability of disaggregated data to ensure that no one is left behind.”⁹

In the goals and targets, far more detail is given on the specifics of addressing poverty. These include commitments to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” (Goal 1) and “end hunger and all forms of malnutrition” (within Goal 2). Perhaps surprisingly, there is no goal for universal provision of social protection—just a subsection to “achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable” by 2030 (Goal 1.3).

Most of the goals are for universal provisions—for instance, ending preventable deaths of newborns and children under five years old, and ending epidemics for a range of diseases. These commitments are intended for universal provision toward urban and rural populations. They cover most needs in urban areas, though they leave out drainage, household waste collection (except references to waste management), and coverage by emergency services. Most critically, the goals do not include a voice within political systems and bureaucracies, especially for the very people to whom most of the goals and targets are aimed. For

urban areas, this includes roughly one billion urban dwellers living in informal settlements where the deficits in service provision are most evident. The inhabitants of informal settlements are meant to be targets for national government commitments. But the SDGs are very weak on ensuring the accountability of national and local governments

to provide for those at whom most goals and targets are addressed. There is also a worry that they focus too little on quality, as there is little point in measuring who has access to health care services if these services are of poor quality and unable to respond adequately to the majority of illnesses and injuries.

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Can Existing Institutions Meet These Goals and Targets?

Perhaps the most pressing issue in regard to the SDGs is simply whether they will be implemented. If the ambitious goals and the commitment to leave no one behind really are achieved (and proven to be achieved through measurement with accurate and relevant indicators), it will be a very strong endorsement of the SDGs (and of the MDGs that preceded them). But what is notable about development in urban areas is how little has been achieved to date towards many of these goals and targets. The last forty years have seen many unfulfilled international commitments, including commitments made in UN conferences for eradicating hunger and for universal provision of water, sanitation, and health care made in the 1970s. The SDGs, like the MDGs, successfully state what needs to be done, but not how or by whom.

In urban areas, the universal provision of most of the services noted above depends on the quality and capacity of local governments and on the extent and quality of their relationships with those who lack these services. These include the one billion urban dwellers living in informal settlements with very large deficits in provision for water, sanitation, drainage, solid waste collection, health care, schools, the rule of law, and other basic rights and services.¹⁰ In many nations, the proportion of the urban population with access to particular services has declined.¹¹ Success in addressing these deficits also depends on how urban poor groups are organized and whether they have representative organizations and federations to press for change and to work with local governments in ensuring universal provision.

Here we find significant local innovation to learn from, including many local governments that have dramatically increased the proportion of their population with secure housing and basic services.¹² Some examples include the thousands of initiatives undertaken by federations or networks of slums and shack dwellers, many of which seek to work with local governments.¹³ Furthermore, various models of finance support these federations, networks, and their work with local governments, such as the Urban Poor Fund International and the Asian Coalition for Community Action.¹⁴

Yet the SDGs and the MDGs focus on national government plans with little recognition of the two most important urban actors: local governments and the organizations representing those lacking basic services. The SDGs discuss finance components needed for their goals but not finance for these key actors. There are recommendations on the need to develop the capacity of governments, but solely on a national level. Accountability gets a small mention, but not enough to ensure that international agencies along with national and local governments are truly held accountable to those who lack the promised basic services. Goal 1 includes creating “sound policy frameworks, at national, regional, and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies to support accelerated investments in poverty eradication actions” (Goal 1.b), but does not mention local governments.

Local Action Needs Relevant Local Data

For local governments to be able to meet their responsibilities for basic services, they need basic data on service provision for each household in their jurisdiction. But the monitoring of the MDGs, and, in all likelihood, the SDGs, relies on national sample surveys that have sample sizes too small to inform local governments on these matters. There is some recognition of the vast data gaps. For example, in the section on data, monitoring and accountability, the draft SDGs state that they will, “by 2020, enhance capacity building . . . to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts” (Goal 17.18).¹⁵ The High Level Panel had also been clear on this point, saying, “in the course of our discussions, we became aware of a gap between reality on the ground and the statistical targets that are tracked.”¹⁶

However, this requires enormous changes in data collection, for instance, with regards to data collected on what the SDGs refer to as “equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.” At present, there is no data collected on who has safe or affordable drinking water. The indicator used for the MDGs (and likely to be applied to the SDGs) is for what the UN defines as “improved” water, yet this does not assess who has water that is safe, drinkable, affordable, or easily accessed.¹⁷

Furthermore, a more fundamental issue is how to get detailed data on who is hungry, suffering from poverty, or lacking provision of services, as well as where the most vulnerable live, so that local planning and action can address the problem. Data are needed on each locality that make evident the deprivations faced by those in different informal settlements or other areas where low-income groups are concentrated, including data on housing conditions, infrastructure, and service provision to each street and neighborhood. Although the Demographic and Health Surveys or Living Standards Measurement Studies may tell government that a certain percent of the urban population lack water piped to premises, they do not show which urban center such people live in, let alone where they live within each urban center.¹⁸

National sample surveys are of little use to local governments and other local actors in identifying whose needs should be addressed and where they live. The key issue here is the lack of data available for the smallest political unit (e.g., the ward) or geographic unit (e.g., each street). So a commitment to ensuring safe, sufficient, affordable provisions needs to be supported by a commitment to generate the data on which housing units and streets are underserved. Aggregate figures produced by sample surveys do not do this. Censuses should provide data down to this level, but they are expensive, generally completed only once every ten years, and often do not provide data to local governments in a form that allows them to identify the needs within their boundaries. Censuses and other household surveys may not include households in informal settlements for which there may

be no maps, street names, or house addresses. Or, perhaps, those doing the surveys may be reluctant to enter these types of settlements.¹⁹ But there are many positive examples that can guide and support improvements in each settlement, especially the detailed surveys, censuses, and maps of informal settlements completed by organizations and federations formed by the inhabitants.²⁰

What Can Be Learned from the MDGs?

One of the key lessons from the MDGs is that indicators for monitoring poverty or service provision need to be more detailed and more appropriate to each local context. The United Nations reported great progress on meeting most of the MDGs in a report released in September 2013.²¹ The foreword, written by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, claims that the MDGs “have been the most successful global anti-poverty push in history. Significant and substantial progress has been made in meeting many of the targets—including halving the number

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of people living in extreme poverty and the proportion of people without sustainable access to improved sources of drinking water. The proportion of urban slum dwellers declined significantly.”²² However, much of the evidence for this is based on faulty statistics or estimates where data are lacking, leaving this and other official UN reports at odds with realities on the ground in urban centers in low- and middle-income nations.

The MDG report states, “The proportion of people living in extreme poverty has been halved at the global level.”²³ But if a poverty line is set low enough, there appears to be very little poverty. This MDG “success” is based on the \$1.25 per day poverty line, yet \$1.25 per day is not enough to cover the costs of food and non-food needs in many locations, especially for low-income groups in larger and more prosperous cities. If accurate poverty lines were set in each nation that represent the cost of both food and non-food needs with adjustments upwards for locations where costs are particularly high, the proportion of people in extreme poverty would have declined far less.²⁴ Apply the “dollar a day” poverty line to urban populations and it suggests that there is virtually no urban poverty in China, the Middle East, North Africa, or Central Asia, and very little urban poverty in Latin America.²⁵

The MDG report states, “Over 2 billion people gained access to improved sources of drinking water.”²⁶ Yet this is merely because the bar is set too low in defining improved provision. A household is said to have improved provision even if they only have access to a public tap, tube well or borehole, protected spring, protected dug well, or rainwater collection.²⁷ So someone who has access to a public tap shared with dozens or hundreds

of others (and who has to queue and carry all the water from the tap to the home) is said to have improved provision. The MDG target is to halve the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015, but available data on “improved provision” does not include data on whether the water is safe, of drinking quality, or sustainable.²⁸

The MDG report states, “Gains in sanitation are impressive—but not good enough.”²⁹ But, here too, the bar is set so low that what is measured has no relation to what urban dwellers need: a toilet in their home with good provision for removing and disposing of waste and water for washing. A household is said to have “improved sanitation” even if it only has a pit latrine with slab. It is difficult to see how such latrines can provide adequately for sanitation in most urban contexts.

The MDG report states, “The proportion of slum dwellers in the cities and metropolises of the developing world is declining.”³⁰ It also suggests that the MDG target of a significant improvement in the lives of at least one hundred million slum dwellers by 2020 had been met by 2010: “Between 2000 and 2010, over 200 million slum dwellers gained access to improved water sources, sanitation facilities, durable housing or sufficient living space, thereby exceeding the 100 million MDG target. In fact, between 2010 and 2012 alone, conditions improved to the point where an additional 44 million people were no longer considered to be living in slums.”³¹ Yet the evidence for this is lacking. UN-Habitat, the UN agency from which these statistics are drawn, claims that between 2000 and 2010 there was a very large drop in the proportion of the urban population living in slums in India, Bangladesh and Uganda; however, there is no evidence of this in these countries. Many such nations lack the year-to-year national survey monitoring of their slum inhabitants necessary to produce the indicators used in calculating slum populations. Instead, it is likely that much of the reporting on this indicator, as well as others, comes from estimates or from projections based on older data.

Urban Populations Are Privileged

This MDG report, like most UN documents, stresses that conditions are worse in rural areas. But, in part, this is because the same indicators are used for rural and urban areas when, in reality, contexts are drastically different. This is the case whether for income level needed to avoid poverty or for types of provision for water and sanitation or access to food. In most urban areas, large sections of the low-income population have to pay for housing rent, water and use of toilets, and often for schools and health care as well, because public provision is not open to them. Poverty lines need to reflect this.³² In most urban contexts, there is a need for more sophisticated provision of water and sanitation because of the much larger and more concentrated population and waste production.

In addition, aggregate statistics for any nation’s urban population hides the scale and nature of deprivation within it. In those rare instances where there are careful assessments of health and of basic services to low-

income urban dwellers, such as in the path-breaking surveys by the African Population and Health Research Centre, results show that aggregate statistics hide high levels of deprivation and premature mortality among their low-income population or populations living in informal settlements.³³

A review of the MDGs raised the issue of how their focus on a limited set of simple goals and targets meant a neglect of many key development issues including engagement with low-income groups, accountability, and strengthening of national capacity.³⁴ To this should be added the lack of attention to strengthening local government capacity and accountability as well as the lack of engagement with those meant to benefit from the MDGs. The one billion individuals living in informal settlements and their representative organizations, including the city and national federations and networks of slum, shack, and homeless people that are active in more than thirty nations, were not adequately engaged in the goal setting and implementation of the MDGs.³⁵

Will the SDGs Address the Deficiencies in the MDGs?

The draft SDGs do address many of the deficiencies in the MDGs, both in what is covered and in the commitment to universal provision. But the SDG draft still relies on the \$1.25 per day poverty line as the indicator for measuring and monitoring extreme poverty. There is an additional commitment by 2030 to “reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions” (Goal 1.2), but many national definitions of poverty also undercount and underestimate urban poverty.³⁶

The draft SDGs do address issues of sustainable production and consumption, but they fail to mention the extent to which wealthy lifestyles are driving the globe towards dangerous climate change. From the perspective of global planetary limits, the greatest sustainable development challenge will be to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from prosperous nations and affluent individuals’ lifestyles.

There is mention of the need to “ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels” (Goal 16.7), but far more than this will be needed to achieve universal provision of the services listed in the draft SDGs. Agenda 21, which came out of the UN Earth Summit in 1992, was far more explicit about the key role of local governments: “Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. . . . As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development.”³⁷ Local Agenda 21 also stated that “each local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organizations and private enterprises and adopt ‘a local Agenda 21.’”³⁸ A similar expectation should be applied to addressing the SDGs. The possibilities of meeting most of the SDGs and their targets would be significantly enhanced if local government

and organizations of the urban poor saw the targets as serving their goals and priorities.

Thus, in conclusion, the SDGs need to be much more explicit about the means by which all of the commitments are to be achieved. Furthermore, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the MDGs, these means must be accountable to those who the commitments are meant to benefit.

For urban areas, the SDGs, along with the national governments and international agencies who commit to them, must recognize the extent to which the achievement of most goals and targets depends on more competent, better resourced, and more accountable local governments. They also need to recognize the key role of local civil society in this, especially the role of representative organizations and federations of slum and shack dwellers. This includes both what these organizations demand and what they can contribute to meeting the goals and targets. The best safeguard against the limitations of target-driven approaches is to empower local actors to guide and implement the goals.

Notes

¹ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, "Introduction to the Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals," United Nations, July 2014, http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518SDGs_FINAL_Proposal%20of%20OWG_19%20July%20at%201320hrsver3.pdf.

² High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, "A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development," United Nations, May 2013, 17, <http://www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/UN-Report.pdf>.

³ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, "Introduction to the Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals," 1.

⁵ Jorge E. Hardoy, Diana Mitlin, and David Satterthwaite, *Environmental Problems in an Urbanizing World: Finding Solutions for Cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2001).

⁶ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*.

⁷ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, "Introduction to the Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals," 2.

⁸ The term "human settlements" was added largely to placate the rural development lobby who see any focus on cities as drawing attention away from their concerns.

⁹ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, "Introduction to the Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals," 4.

¹⁰ Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite, *Urban Poverty in the Global South: Scale and Nature* (London: Routledge, 2012); United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), "Basic Services for All in an Urbanizing World," Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD), 2014.

¹¹ UCLG, "Basic Services for All in an Urbanizing World;" UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), "Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation," WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation, 2012.

¹² This is especially so in many Latin American nations; see UCLG, "Basic Services for All in an Urbanizing World."

¹³ David Satterthwaite and Diana Mitlin, *Reducing Urban Poverty in the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁴ Somsook Boonyabancha and Diana Mitlin, “Urban Poverty Reduction: Learning by Doing in Asia,” *Environment and Urbanization* 24, no. 2 (2012): 403-422; Somsook Boonyabancha, Fr. Norberto Carcellar, and Thomas Kerr, “How poor communities are paving their own pathways to freedom,” *Environment and Urbanization* 24, no. 2 (2012): 441-462.

¹⁵ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, “Introduction to the Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals,” Goal 17.18, 4.

¹⁶ High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, “A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development,” 1.

¹⁷ A household is said to have improved provision of water if it has use of piped water into dwelling, yard or plot, public tap or standpipe, tubewell or borehole, protected spring, protected dug well or rainwater collection; UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), “Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation.”

¹⁸ See the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) Program, USAID, <http://www.dhsprogram.com>; see the Living Standards of Measurement Study (LSMS), World Bank, <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/lsmssurveyFinder.htm>.

¹⁹ See Sarah Sabry, “How poverty is underestimated in Greater Cairo, Egypt,” *Environment and Urbanization* 22, no. 2 (2010): 523-541.

²⁰ See Avery Livengood and Keya Kunte, “Enabling Participatory Planning with GIS: A Case Study of Settlement Mapping in Cuttack, India,” *Environment and Urbanization* 24, no.1 (2012): 77-97; Sheela Patel, Carrie Baptist, and Celine D’Cruz, “Knowledge is Power: Informal Communities Assert Their Right to the City Through SDI and Community-Led Enumerations,” *Environment and Urbanization* 24, no.1 (2012): 13-26; and Braimah R. Farouk and Mensah Owusu, “If in Doubt, Count: The Role of Community-Driven Enumerations in Blocking Eviction in Old Fadama, Accra,” *Environment and Urbanization* 24, no.1 (2012): 47-57.

²¹ United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013*, (New York: United Nations, 2013), <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/mdg-report-2013-english.pdf>.

²² Ibid, 3.

²³ Ibid, 4.

²⁴ See Sarah Sabry, “How poverty is underestimated in Greater Cairo, Egypt;” also Miniva Chibuye, “Interrogating Urban Poverty Lines: The Case of Zambia,” *Environment and Urbanization* 26, no. 1 (2014): 236-256.

²⁵ See Martin Ravallion, Shaohua Chen, and Prem Sangraula, “New Evidence on the Urbanization of Global Poverty,” World Bank, 2007.

²⁶ United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013*, 4.

²⁷ UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), “Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation.”

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of how official figures for water provision greatly overstate the quality of provision, see Kapongola Nganyanyuka et al., “Accessing Water Services in Dar es Salaam: Are We Counting What Counts?” *Habitat International* 44: 358-366.

²⁹ United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013*, 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 50.

³² Mitlin and Satterthwaite, *Urban Poverty in the Global South*.

³³ African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), “Population and Health Dynamics in Nairobi’s Informal Settlements: Report of the Nairobi Cross-Sectional Slums Survey NCSS 2000,” APHRC, 2002; and African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), “Population and Health Dynamics in Nairobi’s Informal Settlements: Report of the Nairobi Cross-Sectional Slums Survey NCSS 2012,” APHRC, 2014.

³⁴ Sakiko Fukuda-Parra, Alicia Ely Yamin, and Joshua Greenstein, “The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of Millennium Development Goal Targets for Human Development and Human Rights,” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 15, no. 2-3 (2014): 105-117.

³⁵ See Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), www.sdinet.org.

³⁶ Mitlin and Satterthwaite, *Urban Poverty in the Global South*.

³⁷ United Nations Sustainable Development, "United Nations Conference on Environment & Development: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3 to 14 June 1992," United Nations, 28.1, <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>.

³⁸ Ibid., 28.3.

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