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Empowering Smallholders, Women and Youth for Inclusive Agri-food Transformation in BRICS

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1. Introduction

Global agriculture is at a critical crossroads. The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts, amid the increasing frequency of droughts, floods, and heat waves, have exposed the vulnerability of agri-food systems, disrupting food and input supplies, increasing price volatility, and worsening food insecurity, particularly in developing countries. These challenges are shifting policy focus towards building sustainable, resilient, and inclusive agri-food systems.

BRICS plays a significant role in this transition. Representing nearly half of the world's population, this bloc significantly contributes to global agricultural production and trade. More importantly, BRICS includes highly diverse agricultural systems, from Brazil and Russia's large-scale, export-oriented farming to the predominantly smallholder agriculture in India, China, Ethiopia, and Indonesia, as well as the technologically advanced water-efficient systems in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This diversity offers a rich pool of technologies, institutional innovations, and policy experiences that can be adapted and shared across countries.

Smallholders are central to this transformation. In most BRICS countries, they represent the majority of agricultural producers. However, their capacity to engage in and benefit

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from agricultural transformation is limited by restricted access to technology, finance, infrastructure, markets, and information. Women and youth face additional challenges despite their significant roles in agri-food systems. Concurrently, smallholders face increasing exposure to climate risks, resource degradation and evolving market demands. Therefore, their transformation necessitates empowering them to adopt new technologies, diversify production and income, manage risks, access markets, and engage in higher value segments of agri-food chains.

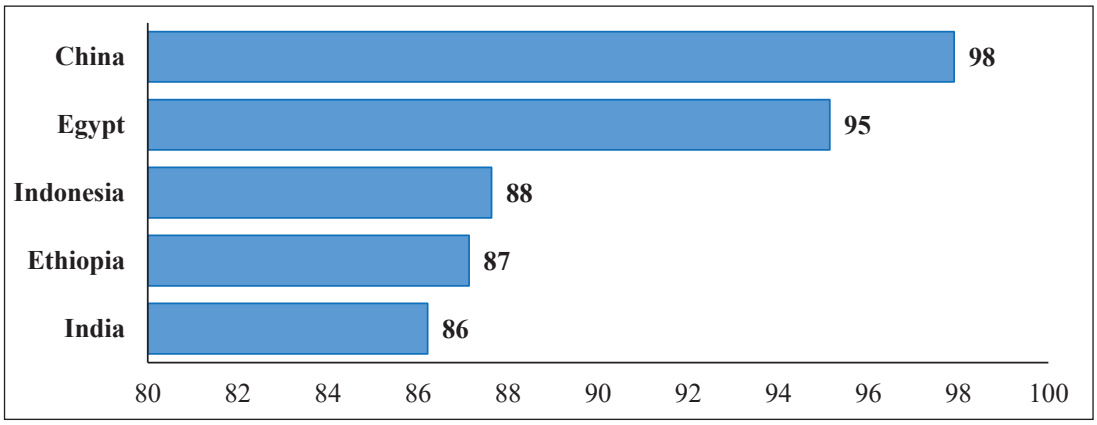
This provides a strong rationale for a smallholder-centered BRICS cooperation agenda. The Indore Declaration (BRICS, 2026), adopted under India's BRICS Presidency, acknowledges this by emphasizing agricultural cooperation and the empowerment of smallholder farmers, women, and youth. BRICS can use its complementary capabilities through joint research, technology adaptation, digital agriculture, climate-smart practices, knowledge exchange, capacity building, and stronger market and value chain linkages. Such cooperation can help overcome the structural constraints facing smallholders, accelerate inclusive agricultural transformation, and strengthen the resilience and sustainability of the BRICS agri-food systems.

2. Pillars of BRICS Agrifood Systems

2.1 Smallholders: The backbone of agrifood systems

Smallholder and family farmers are the backbone of agriculture and food security in BRICS. Of the 570 million farms worldwide, nearly 84% are smaller than two hectares (Lowder et al., 2016), and almost three-fourths of the small farms are located in BRICS countries. In India, China, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Egypt, more than 85% of farms are small (Figure 1). These small farms produce not only staple grains but also nutrient-rich, high-value commodities, such as fruits, vegetables, milk, and meat, which are crucial for improving nutrition and rural livelihoods.

Figure 1: Share of Small Farms (< 2 ha) in Selected BRICS Countries (%)



Source: Authors' compilation from FAOSTAT.

In addition to food production, small farms provide several environmental benefits that may not be captured in the agricultural statistics. Mixed farming systems, prevalent on small farms, support nutrient recycling, enhance soil fertility, and improve ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, water conservation, and pollination. Notably, mixed farming systems are more sustainable and resilient to climate change. This resilience was demonstrated in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. While most sectors faced disruptions due to lockdowns, supply chain interruptions, and labor shortages, agriculture maintained positive growth.

Recognizing the central role of smallholders in food security and rural livelihoods, the BRICS countries have adopted diverse, context-specific policies to strengthen their productivity, income, resilience, and market integration. India supports smallholders through Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) for collective action and marketing, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) for direct income support, Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) for crop insurance, the Soil Health Card Scheme for improved nutrient management, and the electronic National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) for market integration and transparency. Brazil supports family farming through the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (PRONAF), which provides concessional credit and technical assistance, complemented by the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) and the National School Feeding Program (PNAE), which create assured markets for smallholder producers. China is facilitating smallholder modernization through specialized farmer cooperatives, mechanization services, digital extension, land reform, and rural e-commerce. South Africa supports smallholder farmers through the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP) and Ilima/Letsema Programme, whereas Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) combines social protection with support for rural livelihoods. Indonesia has expanded access to finance through Kredit Usaha Rakyat (KUR), along with investments in agricultural extension, irrigation, and initiatives such as the Food Estate Programme. Although these approaches differ across countries, they share common pathways for smallholder transformation: improving access to finance and technology, strengthening collective institutions, managing production risks, expanding market access, and integrating smallholders into modern value chains. BRICS cooperation can build on these experiences through policy learning, knowledge exchange, technology adaptation, and joint innovation tailored to diverse smallholder contexts.

2.2 Women: Key Drivers of Smallholder Agri-food Transformation

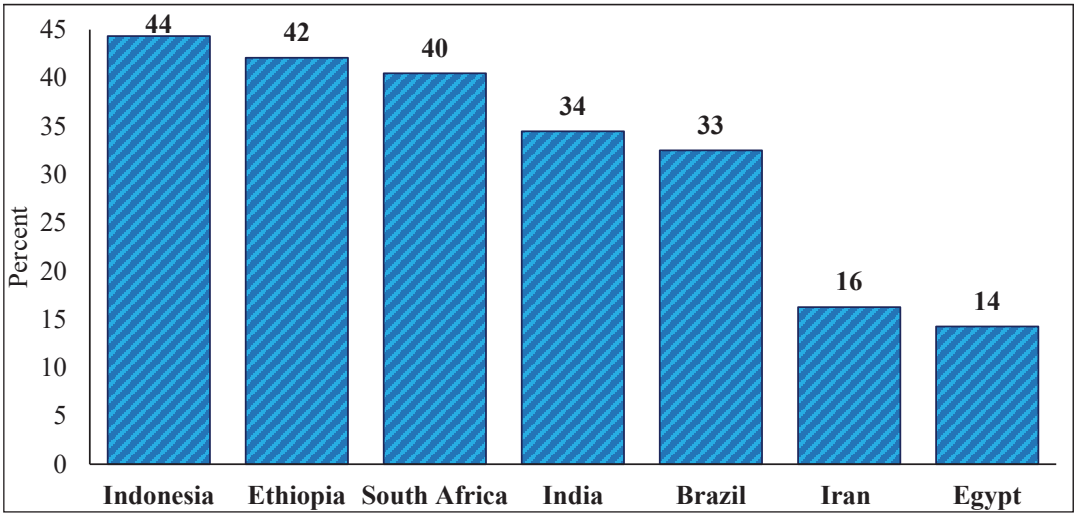
Women play a crucial role in global agriculture, accounting for 40% of the agricultural workforce (FAO, 2023). This figure is reported to be higher (48%) in low-income countries. Women participate in the value chain as farmers, livestock keepers, fishers, wage laborers, entrepreneurs,

processors, traders, and retailers. More importantly, they play a crucial role in household food preparation, nutrition, childcare, water and fuel collection, and caregiving. However, their contributions are frequently overlooked and undervalued.

In the BRICS countries, particularly India, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Indonesia, women comprise a significant proportion of the agricultural workforce (Figure 2). Some countries are also experiencing the feminization of agriculture, primarily due to male out-migration, demographic shifts, and structural transformations in rural economies.

However, women face significant barriers in accessing land, productive assets, credit, technologies, extension services, and markets, which hinders their ability to realize their full potential. On average, farms managed by women are 24 percent

Figure 2: Women's Share of Agrifood Employment in Selected BRICS Countries (%)



Source: Authors' compilation from FAOSTAT.

less productive than those managed by men of comparable sizes. Women working in agrifood systems also earn 18 percent less than their male counterparts. Closing gender gaps can substantially improve agricultural productivity, strengthen food security, and generate broad economic benefits (FAO, 2023).

Thus, the challenge is not to increase women's participation in agriculture but to ensure equitable access to productive resources, economic opportunities, and decision-making.

Several BRICS countries have introduced targeted programs to strengthen women's participation in agriculture by improving access to finance, skills, productive resources, markets, and collective institutions. In Brazil, PRONAF Mulher provides women with concessional credit and technical assistance and promotes their participation in agricultural cooperatives. India's Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) and Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) organize women

into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and facilitate access to finance, skills, dairy cooperatives, and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs). Indonesia's Women Farmer Groups (Kelompok Wanita Tani) support women in food production, community agribusiness, processing and value addition, and access to cooperatives and digital markets. China's National Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2021–2030) promotes women's entrepreneurship through vocational training, farmer cooperatives, digital agriculture, and rural e-commerce. In Ethiopia, the Second-Level Land Certification Programme strengthens women's land rights through joint land certification, and the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) supports livelihoods and resilience. South Africa's Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP) and Ilima/Letsema Programme improve women's access to productive inputs, extension, finance, infrastructure, and markets. Together, these initiatives illustrate complementary pathways for integrating women more effectively into agricultural production, entrepreneurship and agri-food value chains.

2.3 Youth: The Future of Agrifood Systems

Worldwide, there is a consistent decrease in youth engagement in agrifood systems. The proportion of young people aged 15 to 24 years employed in food systems dropped from 54% in 2005 to 44% by 2021, primarily because of reduced employment in agriculture (FAO, 2025). A similar trend is observed across most BRICS countries. This declining engagement is driven by fragmented landholdings, low and volatile farm incomes, climate-related production risks, limited access to land, credit, and modern technologies, inadequate rural infrastructure, and fewer opportunities for entrepreneurship, innovation, and career advancement. Consequently, many rural youth migrate to urban areas in search of better education, employment, and higher incomes. This demographic shift poses a significant challenge to the future of family farming, agricultural innovation, and long-term food and nutrition security.

Agriculture is paradoxically becoming increasingly knowledge-intensive. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, drones, robotics, precision farming, satellite imagery, the Internet of Things (IoT), biotechnology, and digital advisory systems are fundamentally transforming agricultural production. These advancements necessitate new skills and present opportunities for entrepreneurship in agribusiness, food processing, logistics, climate services and digital agriculture.

The BRICS countries are proactively implementing programs to attract and retain youth in agriculture. India has been promoting youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness through schemes such as Agri-Clinics and Agri-Business Centers (ACABC), Agri Startup Incubation, Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF), and Startup India. These initiatives provide technical training, incubation, and mentoring while facilitating access to finance and markets. In Brazil, young farmers receive support through PRONAF Jovem, which offers concessional credit and technical guidance. China has implemented the

New Professional Farmers scheme. In South Africa, youth engagement in food systems is supported by the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP) and Ilima/ Letsema Programme, which offer financial and market support and skills training. In Ethiopia, initiatives such as the Agricultural Transformation Institute (ATI) and the Rural Job and Opportunity Creation (RJOC) program play a crucial role in promoting agripreneurship among youth. Indonesia supports youth-led agribusiness through Youth Entrepreneurship and Employment Support Services (YESS), Kredit Usaha Rakyat (KUR), and digital extension and capacity building programs.

3. Challenges to Smallholder Agrifood Systems

The BRICS countries face a common set of structural challenges that impede productivity improvements and discourage smallholders, women, and youth from actively participating in agrifood systems.

Small and fragmented landholdings: The overwhelming dominance of small landholdings remains a significant barrier to adopting mechanization, precision farming, and irrigation. In addition to technical constraints, small landholdings weaken farmers' bargaining power when purchasing inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and equipment, often forcing them to pay higher prices. Similarly, when selling produce, smallholders struggle to access favorable terms.

Limited access to finance, insurance, and productive assets: Although agricultural credit and insurance programs have expanded in many BRICS countries, smallholder farmers often remain excluded due to insufficient collateral and high transaction costs. Women and youth face even greater obstacles because they typically have less ownership of land and productive assets.

Climate change: Increasing temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, and frequent droughts and floods pose significant threats to agriculture in BRICS countries. Smallholders are especially at risk because of their limited financial and technological capacity to adapt.

Technology and knowledge gaps: Advancements in artificial intelligence, drones, robotics, biotechnology, satellite-based monitoring, and precision farming are revolutionizing agriculture globally. However, the BRICS countries are constrained from realizing their full potential due to inadequate infrastructure, weak extension systems, limited digital literacy, and insufficient investment in research and innovation.

Weak market integration and value addition: Smallholders often encounter challenges when integrating into modern value chains because of limited access to reliable market information and inadequate transportation networks, which lead to higher transaction costs, lower prices, and increased post-harvest losses.

Institutional exclusion and governance gaps: Many BRICS countries face an institutional deficit in organizing farmers into effective cooperatives, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), and producer companies. Consequently, smallholders have limited access to quality inputs, credit, mechanization, extension services, modern technologies, and remunerative markets. These institutional weaknesses disproportionately affect women, who remain underrepresented in farmer organizations.

4. Way Forward for BRICS Collaboration

These common challenges create a strong basis for cross-learning and knowledge exchange, allowing the BRICS countries to draw on diverse experiences and adapt relevant solutions to their local circumstances. Moreover, the Indore Declaration brings this into sharper focus by placing smallholder farmers, women, and youth at the center of agricultural cooperation. The following areas can be strengthened for cooperation among BRICS:

i. **Accelerate agricultural diversification:** Diversifying into fruits, vegetables, spices, medicinal plants, floriculture, dairy farming, poultry, and fisheries provides higher and more consistent returns and job opportunities compared to traditional staple crops. This is particularly beneficial for women, who are more involved in these activities. Additionally, diversified farming systems improve soil quality, support biodiversity, reduce production risks, and enhance dietary diversity. This approach aligns well with the resources available to smallholder farmers, such as limited land and surplus labor.

   Beyond the farm, the increasing demand for high-value commodities, such as fruits, vegetables, livestock products, and fisheries, creates significant employment and income opportunities throughout agrifood value chains, including input supply, processing, storage, logistics, retail, and food services. Therefore, bypassing the diversification stage in agricultural transformation may slow down agricultural and economic growth (Timmer, 2009).

   Considering the diverse agroecological conditions, production systems, and comparative advantages across the BRICS countries, there is considerable scope for cooperation in promoting high-value agriculture.

ii. **Promote digital agriculture:** Digital technologies are transforming agriculture into information- and knowledge-intensive enterprises, which can enhance returns and reduce risks in farming.

   The BRICS countries have complementary strengths in digital innovation. India has been at the forefront of developing Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) for agriculture. China has made significant progress in artificial intelligence, smart farming, e-commerce, and digital extension services. Brazil has advanced in precision agriculture and satellite-based monitoring systems, whereas Russia has developed enhanced geospatial

technologies and digital farm management systems.

The BRICS Network on Digital Agriculture, launched during the Indore Declaration, can provide a platform for translating these complementary capabilities into practical solutions. Cooperation should focus on affordable and interoperable digital tools for agricultural extension, weather and climate advisories, market information, precision farming, geospatial services, and access to finance.

iii. **Invest in agricultural research:** In many BRICS countries, persistently low investment in agricultural R&D limits the capacity to develop resilient crop varieties, enhance sustainable farming practices, and integrate cutting-edge technologies, such as precision agriculture and biotechnology (Birthal et al., 2026). Future innovation efforts must prioritize multidimensional issues, including climate change adaptation, mitigation of natural resource depletion, reduction of food loss throughout the supply chain, and combating antimicrobial resistance, which threatens both crop and livestock health.

Each member country has unique strengths that complement one another: Brazil in tropical agriculture and livestock systems; China in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and digital agriculture; India on climate-resilient crops, dryland farming, and dairy production; Russia for advancements in wheat improvement, mechanization, and precision farming; South Africa in horticulture; Egypt in water management; and Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, in protected cultivation and precision irrigation.

Leveraging these complementary strengths through joint research programs, scientific exchanges, and shared knowledge platforms can accelerate the development, adaptation, and dissemination of technologies suited to diverse agroecological conditions across the BRICS countries.

The BRICS Agricultural Research Platform can serve as an important platform for translating research into farmer-oriented solutions. Its future orientation should increasingly focus on moving from research collaboration to the adaptation, demonstration, and scaling of technologies.

iv. **Promote climate-smart and regenerative agriculture:** Climate-smart agriculture aims to enhance productivity and resilience and reduce greenhouse gas emissions through the use of improved crop varieties, efficient irrigation, conservation agriculture, integrated nutrient management, agroforestry, renewable energy, and precision resource management. Regenerative agriculture focuses on restoring soil health, improving ecosystem services, and increasing the carbon sequestration.

Joint BRICS initiatives can build on complementary strengths: Brazil in conservation agriculture, India in natural farming, climate-resilient crops, and climate advisory services, China in AI-enabled weather forecasting and precision agriculture, Russia in climate-resilient cereals, South

Africa in water-efficient farming, Egypt in efficient irrigation, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in protected cultivation.

The establishment of the BRICS Network of Centres of Excellence on Agroecology and Regenerative Agriculture during the Indore Declaration provides an institutional platform for joint research, capacity building, and the exchange of practices in sustainable and climate-resilient farming. The network should place particular emphasis on practices that are affordable and scalable for smallholders, including soil health management, efficient water use, diversified farming systems, agroforestry, natural farming, and locally appropriate climate-resilient technologies.

v. **Strengthen farmer institutions:** Small farmers often face constraints in accessing quality inputs, mechanization, finance, extension services, processing facilities, and remunerative markets. Collective institutions such as cooperatives, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), producer companies, and commodity associations enable the aggregation of production, reduce transaction costs, improve bargaining power, and facilitate participation in modern value chains.

vi. The BRICS countries have developed distinct farmer-led institutional models tailored to their national contexts. Brazil's cooperatives, India's Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), China's Specialized Farmer Cooperatives, South Africa's commodity-based producer organizations, and Ethiopia's cooperative unions all represent collective efforts. These diverse experiences provide a strong basis for institutional learning to advance agricultural transformations.

vii. **Promote entrepreurship for youth:** The future of agrifood systems depends on attracting and retaining youth. Rapid advances in digital technologies are creating new opportunities for entrepreneurship across the agrifood value chain. BRICS countries should strengthen vocational education, digital skills, agribusiness incubation, start-up financing, and innovation ecosystems to enable young entrepreneurs to establish enterprises in high-value agriculture, agro-processing, logistics, digital agriculture, renewable energy, and other emerging bioeconomy sectors.

The BRICS countries have the potential to enhance the appeal of agriculture to young people by leveraging their diverse strengths. India's burgeoning AgriTech startups, China's agriculture powered by artificial intelligence, Brazil's innovative agribusiness sector, Russia's advancements in agricultural machinery, and South Africa's entrepreneurial spirit in agribusiness illustrate how technology, innovation, and business can modernize agriculture, making it a lucrative career path for the youth. Sharing knowledge across these countries can accelerate the implementation of effective models within the BRICS framework.

viii. **Evolve gender-responsive policies:** The BRICS countries should design gender-responsive agricultural policies that integrate women throughout

the entire agrifood value chain. Priority interventions include strengthening women's land and property rights, improving access to institutional credit, crop insurance, and digital financial services, expanding women-friendly extension systems and climate information services, and promoting mechanization and labor-saving technologies

Taken together, these areas of potential cooperation can help BRICS address common agricultural challenges and advance agri-food system transformation.

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The word "DAKSHIN" (**दक्षिण**) is of Sanskrit origin, meaning "South." The Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, inaugurated DAKSHIN – Global South Centre of Excellence in November 2023. The initiative was inspired by the deliberations of Global South leaders during the Voice of the Global South Summits. DAKSHIN stands for Development and Knowledge Sharing Initiative. Hosted at the RIS, DAKSHIN has established linkages with leading think tanks and universities across the Global South and is building a dynamic network of scholars working on Global South issues.

AIC at RIS has been working to strengthen India's strategic partnership with ASEAN in its realisation of the ASEAN Community. AIC at RIS undertakes research, policy advocacy and regular networking activities with relevant organisations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN countries, with the aim of providing policy inputs, up-to-date information, data resources and sustained interaction, for strengthening ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

CMEC has been established at RIS under the aegis of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPS&W), Government of India, and in collaboration with the Indian Ports Association (IPA). It has been mandated to act as an advisory/technological arm of MoPSW to provide the analytical support on policies and their implementation.

FITM is a joint initiative by the Ministry of Ayush and RIS. It has been established with the objective of undertaking policy research on economy, intellectual property rights (IPRs) trade, sustainability and international cooperation in traditional medicines. FITM provides analytical support to the Ministry of Ayush on policy and strategy responses on emerging national and global developments.

BEF aims to serve as a dedicated platform for fostering dialogue on promoting the concept in the Indian Ocean and other regions. The forum focuses on conducting studies on the potential, prospects and challenges of blue economy; providing regular inputs to practitioners in the government and the private sectors; and promoting advocacy for its smooth adoption in national economic policies.

FIDC, has been engaged in exploring nuances of India's development cooperation programme, keeping in view the wider perspective of South-South Cooperation in the backdrop of international development cooperation scenario. It is a tripartite initiative of the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, academia and civil society organisations.

FISD aims to harness the full potential and synergy between science and technology, diplomacy, foreign policy and development cooperation in order to meet India's development and security needs. It is also engaged in strengthening India's engagement with the international system and on key global issues involving science and technology.

As part of its work programme, RIS has been deeply involved in strengthening economic integration in the South Asia region. In this context, the role of the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) is very important. SACEPS is a network organisation engaged in addressing regional issues of common concerns in South Asia.

Knowledge generated endogenously among the Southern partners can help in consolidation of stronger common issues at different global policy fora. The purpose of NeST is to provide a global platform for Southern Think-Tanks for collaboratively generating, systematising, consolidating and sharing knowledge on South South Cooperation approaches for international development.

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