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Kira Le

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**The Process of Conducting Socioeconomic Research in Vietnam:
An Internship with the Development and Policies Research Center (DEPOCEN)**

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ABSTRACT

As Vietnam continues its rapid development, its government and people will be increasingly reliant on research organizations such as the Development and Policies Research Center (DEPOCEN) to study the socioeconomic issues that demand to be addressed in the interest of the sustainable development of the country. DEPOCEN is an independent research organization that has studied issues ranging from poverty and gender equality, to business & investment environment and trade liberalization. Since its establishment in 2005, DEPOCEN has developed collaborative relationships with many other research institutions like Oxford Economics and the Korean Institute of Economic Policy, and has offered its services to a plethora of clients, including the World Bank and UNICEF. DEPOCEN not only designs and conducts research on socioeconomic issues, the organization also consults on development and its associated policies, offers trainings on skills like survey-conducting and statistical analysis, and promotes academic development. Throughout my short internship at DEPOCEN, I learned a lot about the complex process research organizations undergo in order to secure funding for their projects. I learned a great deal about the specific issues in Vietnam DEPOCEN's work seeks to address, especially Vietnam's income gap between males and females – its causes and explanations, the specific tendencies in which it presents itself in different positions of the wage distribution scale, and what it will look like in the future. Perhaps most importantly, I learned more about how an organization like DEPOCEN operates. I learned about teamwork, reading between the lines in order to maintain an appropriate flow within a workplace environment, and independent problem-solving, and I am so grateful for the time I spent there.

Keywords: development, research organizations, socioeconomic issues, workplace environment

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Academic Director of SIT Vietnam, Dương Vân Thanh. Cô Thanh is so dedicated to not only making this program possible, but to making sure that the participating students receive the best and most rewarding educational experiences possible. I am so grateful for the countless hours she has spent doing paperwork; structuring the program and making sure all its content is approved; coordinating lecturers, other speakers, and students' homestay families; scheduling tours; booking transportation, flights, and accommodations; listening to the needs and criticisms of students and doing her best to address issues they may have; buying gifts for the people and organizations who welcome us students and contribute to our learning; the list goes on and on. Our academic director has created a fantastic program that I will remember forever. Cô Thanh's passion for education and for her country is truly inspiring, and I don't think I have ever met someone who works as hard as she does. I am so grateful for everything she has done.

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especially patience. Most importantly, they were incredible friends to us, and truly cared about our mental and emotional well-beings. I feel so lucky to have met both Trường and Minh, and am so thankful for everything they have done.

I would also like to thank my incredible host family in Ho Chi Minh City for taking me into their home and their lives and making me a part of their family. I will be forever grateful for the love and care they showed me. My homestay father would drive me to the SIT Center in the mornings. My homestay mother would make me incredible meals every single day, hug and kiss me goodbye every morning, and work with me to better learn and understand the Vietnamese language. My homestay siblings spent time with me, helped me with my assignments when I needed it, and always gave me lots of advice. I shared many laughs with my homestay family, and knew I could always count on them if I needed anything. I will treasure my incredibly fond memories of them forever.

Finally, I would like to thank DEPOCEN for the internship experience of a lifetime. I have learned so much despite spending such a short amount of time at the organization. I would like to thank Chi and Lily for welcoming me into the office and showing me the ropes. They both have been incredibly kind to me, and have become cherished friends. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Chị Ha, for giving me valuable assignments and always being willing to answer any questions I had regarding my tasks. I have really enjoyed working for this organization, as I believe those working there are doing really valuable things for the development of Vietnam. I wish DEPOCEN and its team all the best.

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Introduction of DEPOCEN

The Development and Policies Research Center, commonly abbreviated DEPOCEN, is at its core an independent research organization. Established in 2005, DEPOCEN has worked to research a myriad of socioeconomic issues including: poverty, macroeconomic policies, business and investment environment, market research, trade liberalization, governance, gender equality, project M&E and impact evaluation (About Us). While DEPOCEN is an excellent, self-sufficient center for research, they are also often known to collaborate and partner with other research institutions. In particular, Oxford Economics, the Korean Institute of Economic Policy, the University of Lancaster, the Institute of Development Studies, Centre d'Economie de la Sorbonne-CES, Maison des Sciences Economiques, and the Policy Studies Institute have developed crucial relationships with DEPOCEN, enabling them to hone their research abilities (About Us). Over the last ten years, the Vietnam Economist Annual Meeting, a meeting of excellent reputation, has been hosted by DEPOCEN. This is an admirable feat and is a powerful demonstration of the ability and influence that DEPOCEN has, particularly due to its global range of participants. DEPOCEN, a diverse research organization, focuses the majority of their work on four operations: designing and conducting research on socio-economic issues; consulting on development and policies; providing training on M&E, survey, statistical analysis, and economics, among many other things; and promoting academic development (About Us). DEPOCEN provides their services to many clients. However, a number are worth mentioning: World Bank, IFAD, British Council, UNDP, UNICEF, and UN WOMEN (About Us). As mentioned earlier, DEPOCEN welcomes collaboration and has provided their services to many ministries and state organizations, rather than exclusively international organizations located in Vietnam. DEPOCEN, a well-rounded organization, has proven their strong reputation through

many years of quality service and participation in international meetings, and their independent research has provided excellent information to multiple parties over the last twelve years.

Methodology

Before beginning my work at DEPOCEN, I was not informed by (who I believed at the time to be) my supervisor, Chì Mai, of exactly what I would be doing at the organization, or even what sort of projects I would be working on. The only information I had received as to how I might be spending my time there came from Cô Thanh, my program's Academic Director, who told me I might be assisting various research projects, editing documents written in English, etc. In other words, I did not know what to expect, nor did I know what I needed to do to prepare myself to intern at the organization.

Except for one specific task asked of me by my supervisor, my time spent at DEPOCEN ended up consisting of strictly hands-on work – assisting with the ongoing projects of researchers – rather than my own independent study on the socioeconomic issues that the team at DEPOCEN researches. In addition, I did not have the time during my 12 days interning at DEPOCEN to interview, or really even talk to, the researchers I was working alongside about the work that they are doing at the organization. I was never informed about the projects that my work was assisting. Therefore, the following writing on my experience at DEPOCEN is based solely on my personal experiences in the working environment, and the few observations I was able to make on my coworkers.

During my time at DEPOCEN, I researched grant applications that DEPOCEN would be eligible for. Prior to doing so, I had no experience on the process of applying for research grants, or the process of conducting socioeconomic research in general. I researched a specific issue at the request of my supervisor – Vietnam's gender income gap. I wrote a summary of my

extensive research on this topic. I analyzed charts and graphs that were part of a larger report DEPOCEN was writing for Oxfam, an international organization that studies and works to eradicate poverty. Finally, I edited the English portions of a large report that various DEPOCEN researchers were working on regarding the sustainable economic development of one of Vietnam's poorer provinces.

Internship Responsibilities

Supervisor

- Ha Nguyen
 - Email: hanguyen@depocen.org

Work Relationships

- Dr. Ngoc Anh, *Chief Economist, Director*
- Nguyen Thi Phuong Mai, *Deputy Director*
- Chi Que Banh, *Economist*
- Lily Owen, *Intern*

Working Conditions

- Development and Policies Research Center (DEPOCEN)
 - Suite 305-307, 12 Trang Thi Street, Hanoi, Vietnam
- Monday – Friday, 8:30 AM – 5:00 PM

Responsibilities

- *Researching and compiling an ongoing list* of upcoming research grant applications relevant to the work of DEPOCEN
- *Literature research and writing* on the current state of the gender income gap between males and females in Vietnam
- *Analyzing* charts, tables, and graphs as part of a larger research report
- *Editing* excerpts of a research report that had been translated from Vietnamese to English

My first task was assigned to me when I met Chị Ha, who ended up being my actual supervisor, rather than Chị Mai, who I met, along with the director of DEPOCEN, on my first day. She asked me, after a brief explanation, to begin compiling a list of research grants that

DEPOCEN is eligible to apply for in the near future. I was to list, in an Excel spreadsheet, or similar fashion of my choosing: the name of the grant applications that were being accepted for; the name of the foundation or organization offering the grant; a link to the website on which the grant information and application could be accessed; and any notes that DEPOCEN should be aware of when looking to apply for the grant, such as the deadline, any specific requirement for applicants, or any special instructions for applicants. I spent multiple days, during different periods of my internship, working on this list.

My second task, also assigned to me by Chi Ha, was to write a summary/review of the gender income gap between male and female workers in Vietnam. Those were the only instructions I received for this project. I was not provided a length the summary needed to be, a due date, the purpose of the assignment, the structure the summary should be in, etc. What I decided to do was conduct extensive research on the topic, and structure the summary by breaking it up into different sections, depending on the information I found. I included an abstract of the summary at the beginning of the paper. This was followed by an introduction and background information. The next section headings were as follows: the causes of the gender income gap in Vietnam; the sticky floor & glass ceiling effects; the effect of globalization and prospects for the future; and conclusions. At the end of the paper, I included a works cited page, where I documented the 5 sources I had utilized to gain information for my summary. The summary was 6 pages single-spaced, and I believe it took me about two and a half workdays to complete. I did not receive any feedback upon submitting the summary to Chi Ha.

My next task came again in an email from Chi Ha, kindly requesting me to “analyze” the attached documents. She had sent me a few charts that were to be included in a section of a much larger report DEPOCEN was working on. The charts contained percentages of answered

questions from respondents of three different survey groups – a shrimp-rice project group, a rice project group, and a shrimp-rice comparison group. I believe that the shrimp-rice comparison group was a control group for the study, and that my analysis should compare the results of responses from the shrimp-rice project group and the rice project group only. I believed this because Ha told me that the comparison group was a control and that I should talk about the other two groups. She also sent me another set of data on the demographics of the respondents of each group of the survey and asked me to analyze those results as well. In addition, she sent me an email containing charts and graphs and a few notes on edits to these charts and graphs that she wanted me to make in the larger, original document that she had sent to me. I could tell by her demeanor that Chị Ha was very busy, and did not have a lot of time to answer the many questions I had regarding this assignment. Therefore, I did the best analysis of all the data that I could, and made all of the conclusions that I could based on data that had not yet statistically been analyzed. I also knew that Ha did not expect me to statistically analyze this data, as I did not have the full dataset, and only had percentages of the respondents' answers to various survey questions. In my response email to Chị Ha, I included a section on the notes and questions I had regarding specific parts of the assignment. This task took me two to three days to complete, and I again did not receive much feedback on the work that I did.

My final assignment was given to me by Chúc Nguyen and Huong Thanh Ngo, two people to whom I have never been introduced. Chúc reached out to me first, informing me that DEPOCEN has been working on a project in Cao Bằng province called the Commercial Smallholder Support Project (CSSP), and has implemented a baseline evaluation survey for the project. The report written on the baseline survey was approximately 70 pages, and Chúc sent me a copy of the entire document. Pages 13 through 31 had been translated from Vietnamese to

English, and she asked me to edit those pages, and send the document back to her by Saturday. She also mentioned in her email that the deadline for the report was approaching – the upcoming Sunday. I received this email on Wednesday right before lunch. Early Thursday morning, before I had even arrived at the office, I received an email from Huong Thanh Ngo, asking me to edit the next portion of the report as well, pages 31 through 49. Later that afternoon, I sent Chuc the first few pages that I had edited and read over a few times to ensure that I hadn't missed anything. I included some questions and comments in my email about some information I did not understand or thought might need to be changed. I then continued editing the next portion of the report. Early the next morning, on Friday, I saw that Huong had sent me another email notifying me that he or she had incorporated my first edits into the final draft of the report. They also asked me to start editing another section of the report, from pages 49 through 66. Later on that same morning, I sent Huong the edited version of pages 31 through 49. That afternoon, I sent Huong another email that included the edited version of pages 49 through 66. I received an email from Huong the next evening, thanking me for my work and notifying me that all of my edits had been incorporated into the final version of the report.

Internship Discussion

I was quite intimidated upon receiving my first assignment from Chi Ha. I really did not know anything about how organizations acquire funding for the research they do, much less the specific work that DEPOCEN does. I didn't know anything about the different types of grants, or the different categories of applicants who apply for grants. I really didn't understand which category DEPOCEN might fall under. Therefore, when Ha asked me to begin compiling this list, I really didn't know where to begin. I was already feeling really discouraged, and definitely unqualified. I began by searching keywords in Google like "research grant", "international", and

“application”. I encountered many barriers at the beginning of my search. First, I found many funding sources for individuals academics, such as those pursuing a masters degree or a PhD, rather than for organizations such as DEPOCEN. Second, many applications sought out individuals and organizations looking to implement *projects* to solve certain issues that foundations were interested in supporting, rather than more research-focused activities. Third, many foundations and organizations were looking to provide grants to organizations looking to do research in specific areas of the world, areas outside of Vietnam. Fourth, many of the potential grant opportunities for DEPOCEN had deadlines that had already passed, or nearly ending that DEPOCEN would not have enough time to write an application or proposal. Fifth, many grants were restricted to applicants in the United States, the European Union, or other areas of the world more relevant to the funding organization’s or foundation’s interests. Sixth, many grant applications that *were* looking for research did not align with the work that DEPOCEN does. For example, many foundations were looking for international organizations to do research on specific medical issues, like brain function. In other words, trying to compile a list of research grant applications for DEPOCEN was very difficult, especially considering my lack of experience and domain knowledge. I am quite proud to report, however, that I created a list of about 20 grants that DEPOCEN is eligible to apply for in the (very) near future.

I was thrilled to receive the email about my second assignment. I knew nothing about the gender income gap between males and females in Vietnam, and I was so excited to learn more. I was a little concerned with the fact that I really didn’t know what Chị Ha’s expectations were for the summary, or when my deadline was, but I felt confident that I could produce a summary that would suffice for whatever she needed it for. Upon some initial research, I decided I would break up my summary into different sections that highlighted the main aspects of the income gap.

These main sections were as follows: the causes of the gender income gap in Vietnam, the sticky floor & the glass ceiling effects, the effect of globalization and prospects for the future. These were the sections I chose because these topics encapsulated the majority of the information I found throughout my research on the topic, and, I felt that together they painted an accurate picture of the status of the gap in Vietnam. This assignment was easily my favorite of all the things I did at DEPOCEN. I learned a great deal, and felt as though I was doing meaningful work and improving my skills. The following is the abstract of the summary that I wrote:

The percentage of women who participate in the workforce in Vietnam is at a high 72% compared to a global average of 49% (Nhân Dân). They also make up 48.4% of the total workforce in Vietnam. (Nhân Dân). Although these statistics are clear and leave little room for subjective interpretation, the statistical results of many other reports and surveys that study the economic treatment of female workers are not as clear and raise many questions as to the current state of gender income equality in Vietnam. This summary aims to bring together multiple studies in order to create a clearer picture of the trajectory of gender equality in Vietnam, a crucial facet to the sustainable development of the country. It begins with background information on the nature of women in the workforce in Vietnam, then goes into the summary of various research studies that look at different aspects of the income gap. A report published by the World Bank makes the claim that the main cause for the gender income gap in Vietnam is the tendency of female workers to choose occupations that pay less and instead offer other, non-monetary benefits, because women in Vietnam spend significantly more time than their male counterparts on household labor. Anh Tran, writing for

the Journal of Asian Business and Economic Studies, studied the income gap in consideration of how it changes at different points in the income distribution scale. The study found that the sticky floor effect is more prevalent in Vietnam than that of a glass ceiling effect. In other words, the gender income gap is more significant at the very bottom of the income distribution scale in Vietnam, than it is relevant for women working at the top and looking to continue promoting their careers. Finally, the summary discusses a study that analyzed that effects that foreign firms, multinational enterprises, and the phenomenon of globalization in general has had on gender inequality in Vietnam, and the income gap in particular. The researchers concluded that globalization and the presence of these firms in Vietnam plays an important role in reducing gender based discrimination, and closing the gender income gap, as more and more companies determine the wages of workers based solely on individual productivity, and are employing more and more women. The study offers hope for the future of gender equality in Vietnam as the country continues to work toward sustainable economic development (Le 1).

Of all my assignments at DEPOCEN, I think the income gap summary was the one which I felt most capable and confident. Writing the paper impacted the way I thought about everything else I was doing at DEPOCEN. Learning extensively about the kinds of issues that DEPOCEN cares about, is researching, and is working to eradicate, made me appreciate the organization and the processes that everyone working here goes through to be able to bring real change and development to Vietnam.

My next assignment was a little more stressful for me. I was asked to analyze a plethora of tables that were part of a larger report that DEPOCEN was writing for Oxfam. Chi Ha did not give me any further details about the report or the study. I do not know the purpose of the study, or where it took place. However, I do know is that it studied two groups – the shrimp-rice project group, and the rice project group. I first analyzed the demographics of the two groups, and the comparison group used as a control. Secondly, I analyzed the results of different survey questions. The data I had consisted of percentages of respondents – disaggregated by grouping and sex – who responded in certain ways to the survey questions posed by the DEPOCEN study. I did not have the complete dataset, and only had percentages, so I could not statistically analyze the data. I only made conclusions that I could based on the information that I was given, and compared the two groups being studied if there was clearly a significant difference between them (or if they were the exact same or similar). I provided comments on what I could. Although most of the time I felt as if I was just writing down exactly what was clear to the eye in the graphs and charts, when I could make comparative statements based on the data, and certain conclusions, I felt as though I was actually making a contribution to this report. Also, I realized after a while that even if I was just writing down exactly what the charts said, it was helpful information and made the results more clear. I was glad to have helped put together this report for Oxfam.

My final assignment at DEPOCEN was to edit a report that was being translated into English. I really enjoyed it. The report was on a baseline impact evaluation survey for a Commercial Smallholder Support Project (CSSP) in Cao Bang, a mountainous province in northern Vietnam. The survey was conducted on households in the Cao Bang, both inside and outside the project area. I really enjoyed reading about the results of the survey as analyzed by survey responses – what was more common inside the project area as opposed to outside. The

survey covered the number of household members, sources of income, crops cultivated, animal husbandry, etc. As one could imagine, most of the results of the baseline survey showed that the standard of living was lower for households income the project area, as opposed to outside the project area. This makes sense it is more reasonable for DEPOCEN to implement this project in the area that needs it most. The report wasn't at all hard to read. In fact, the English translation was very good structurally, and most sentences made logical sense to me. This assignment was meaningful to me because I could connect it back to a really special person in my life, Chi.

Chi and Lily were the two coworkers I ate lunch with on most days throughout the week, and the only people I often spoke with at DEPOCEN. Chi was 23, and originally from Cao Bang province. Lily was also 23, and from England. They explained to me how exactly DEPOCEN, as an office, operated. They told me that people don't really talk to each other in the office. Usually, if you have a question about something, you send an email. They told me that my supervisor, Ha, especially wasn't much of a talker. Information like this was incredibly relieving. If it wasn't for talking through everything with Chi and Lily, I would have constantly been worried that I was doing something wrong and that nobody liked me at DEPOCEN. I truly treasure Chi and Lily's kindness and for welcoming me into the office, and will miss them both dearly.

Limitations

There were a few limitations that I felt held me back from having a more productive and education internship at DEPOCEN. The hardest part of the internship was definitely the lack of communication in the office. A logical response to my claim would be, "If you didn't know, why didn't you just ask?" There are many reasons for why, in most instances, I did not just ask someone about the many questions I had regarding my assignments. First, I had entered not only a new office with its own norms and standards of what is appropriate, but I had also entered an

entirely different work culture, having taken a position in Vietnam rather than the American work culture I am used to. Therefore, I felt it would be inappropriate to assert myself in the office, and take up a lot of space, when clearly doing so wasn't the norm. Additionally, my role at DEPOCEN was to be of service to my supervisors, to do what they asked me to do. It was quite clear that the researchers were all extremely busy, and juggling multiple reports and studies at once. In fact, for two weeks (out of the 14 days total) during my internship, around half the office was gone, doing fieldwork in Ben Tre province for a household sanitation survey.

Therefore, I felt it would be inappropriate and disrespectful of me to bother my supervisor at her desk for every question I had. I felt it was important for me, coming into this office as an intern, to solve problems for myself. I did not want to cause waves in the office work group, as it was very clear that the office was very functional, in its own specific way. All that being said, the lack of communication was very difficult at times. For the majority of my work, I did not receive very clear instructions or deadlines. I found that I would have to 'read between the lines' a bit to try and decipher exactly what it was that my supervisor wanted from me. Additionally, a part of this difficulty can be attributed to the language barrier.

The fact that I was not introduced, and therefore hardly knew, anyone in the office only exacerbated my issue with the lack of communication. On my first day – for which I only stayed about 15 minutes of, as they had nothing for me to do – I was introduced to Chi Mai – who I thought was going to be my supervisor – and Anh Anh, DEPOCEN's director. After that day, I only spoke to either of them again once, at a farewell lunch for Chi that the entire office attended. On my second day, I met my supervisor, Chi Ha, who I also never really spoke to or got to know. The only people in the office who ever spoke to me were Chi and Lily, and that was only during lunch. While we were in the office, we did not talk to each other. Granted, as

mentioned before, many employees were gone doing fieldwork during the majority of my internship. But even so, I never got to know the people who were left and in the office every day. I don't think this is the fault of anyone. Everyone was incredibly busy, and there just simply was not enough time or many opportunities throughout the day to talk and get to know someone.

On top of the lack of communication in the office, there was the issue of unclear expectations and purposes. Oftentimes, not only was my assigned task unclear, but I also did not know the purpose of my work or what I should be trying to accomplish. Although knowing the purpose of the work I was doing was not really a requirement for completing the assignments, having that information would have made the tasks much easier, provided some context for my work, and would have given me more guidance to produce the best work possible and fully understand what I was doing. Secondly, the expectations of my assignments were never really communicated to me. I was always only given a few words of instruction on what I was supposed to do, never a length or deadline or anything of the like. It was stressful and definitely invited the possibility of me spending hours and days on an assignment for it to end up not meeting my supervisor's needs or expectations. Fortunately, that did not seem to have happened, not that I would really know, as I never received any specific feedback on my work.

The final main limitation of my internship at DEPOCEN was simply lack of time. I only worked at the organization for 12 full days in total. I felt as though I did not have enough time to really invest in any particular project the organization was working on. I did not have enough time to get to know anyone at the office, and have real conversations about DEPOCEN. I felt as though I really learned hardly anything about DEPOCEN while I was working there. I do feel like my time there was valuable, and it was amazing to be able to contribute to the work the organization was doing, but because all of the employees were extremely busy all the time, I was

disappointed that I was not able to talk to any of them about the work they were doing, especially in terms of the purpose of their work.

Internship Assessment and Conclusions

Overall, I had a very valuable internship experience at DEPOCEN, and I would change very little. However, I do not think that anyone who had been in my position would feel the same way. I think there were a lot of aspects of the internship that were very good for me, but might be really difficult and unbearable for someone else. Then again, that probably goes for an experience. I am a very introverted person, and actually appreciated the lack of interaction that went on in the workplace. It gave me more space to focus on my work and know I would be disrupted by human interaction, than worrying about when I would have to talk to someone and about what. I think I work best when left alone, and when things are quiet. I am also a very anxious person, and I like when things are clear and explicit. However, not always having that luxury forced me out of my comfort zone, and resulted in me gaining more confidence in my competence. I felt unqualified for the work that I was doing, but learned that I actually was qualified. The internship tested my problem solving skills, and improved them.

Although I did not always know the specific purpose for the work I was doing, all that really mattered to me was that I was helping out and making a difference at DEPOCEN, and I now know that I was. I received many a “thank you so much” email from Chi Ha, and I know that if I had done something incorrectly, she would have told me. It took me a while to really get it, but eventually I understood how much the researchers really needed my help, as I realized just how much everyone really had on their plate. I learned that a research organization can be a pretty hectic place sometimes, and that DEPOCEN actually takes on a really large number of projects and studies. My role was to jump right in and go with the flow of the organization for

the short period of time I was there, and I really enjoyed doing that. I was there to work, and I did just that. DEPOCEN was the perfect internship site for me, and I am so grateful for my experiences there, and for everyone I met. The concerns and fear I initially had ended up not being a big deal at all, and did not affect what I got out of the experience. I would recommend this internship to any SIT student looking to improve their independent problem-solving skills, and hands-on work.

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