

ZEF POLICY BRIEF

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**MEASURING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:
ASSESSING EXISTING METRICS AND ADVANCING GENDER
TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite progress in gender equality, women around the world continue to face systemic discrimination. This is evident within agri-food systems where; despite constituting a significant share of the agricultural workforce, women still face entrenched disadvantages. Women have weaker access to land, finance, and markets, carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, and are also largely excluded from the decision-making processes that shape food and agricultural systems¹. These gaps are not only inequitable but also undermine broader sustainability outcomes. Agri-food systems have the potential to support women's empowerment: closing gender gaps in productivity and ensuring equal access to inputs, technologies, and resources would generate gains in food security, nutrition, and rural development. This is particularly important as agri-food systems are transforming due to climate change, digitization, shifting diets, and global value chains, creating new risks and opportunities for women's economic participation and agency.

Numerous agricultural development and women's empowerment initiatives have been implemented to strengthen women's participation and reduce gender inequalities, however these initiatives have not brought about the required structural improvements needed for lasting impact²⁻⁴. This is because most of these initiatives do not address the political, social and structural systems that bring about and reinforce gender inequalities. Agricultural programs often adopt gender-accommodating approaches, focusing on improving women's access to resources and individual capacities, and measuring progress primarily through indicators of women's empowerment at the individual or household level. While women's empowerment is a crucial component of gender equality, the indicators used to measure it often reveal little about whether these gains are sustainable or translate into long-term gender equity. They do not fully capture transformative changes in social relations, rules, norms, and practices at the individual, community, and societal levels that

extend beyond women alone to include changes among men and in relations between women and men⁵.

Agricultural programs that adopt a gender-transformative approach in agri-food systems operate at multiple levels simultaneously. At the household level, they seek to shift the relational dynamics that constrain women's autonomy and resource control. At the community level, they aim to challenge and reshape the social norms that normalize gender inequality. And at the policy and institutional level they aim to reform the structural conditions that reproduce gender inequality across generations^{5,6}. Even when Agri-food systems programs adopt a gender-transformative approach they face a common challenge: while tools exist to monitor change at the household and community levels, approaches for tracking structural change at the policy level are less developed, less standardized, and more difficult to operationalize.

The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of key tools and metrics available to measure gender-transformative change in agri-food systems programs. It offers guidance on how to link program goals with practical indicators and measurement tools across household, community, and policy levels. We first review the current landscape of women's empowerment metrics used in agri-food systems, assessing their strengths and limitations. We then explore how existing measurement frameworks can be expanded to better capture gender-transformative change and identifies critical gaps that remain at the policy and institutional levels.

2. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT METRICS

Agri-food system initiatives that focus on women's empowerment play an important role in advancing gender transformative change. Women's empowerment is understood as a

process through which women expand their capacity to make strategic life choices especially in contexts where that capacity has historically been constrained⁷. It operates across three interconnected elements: resources (access to, ownership, and control over the human, material, and social assets that enable choice); agency (the ability to define and act on one's goals, through decision-making, negotiation, bargaining, and collective action); and achievements (the outcomes of that agency, expressed in individual and household well-being). Agency is further understood in relation to power: intrinsic agency ('power within') encompasses confidence, self-awareness, and recognition of rights; instrumental agency ('power to') is the capacity to pursue goals even in the face of opposition; and collective agency ('power with')⁸ involves acting together with others toward shared ends^{3,9-11}. These distinctions matter for measurement because different tools are designed to capture different dimensions of agency, and selecting the right indicator depends on which dimension a program is trying to shift.

Metrics for measuring women's empowerment have evolved over time to better capture its multidimensional nature and key components such as agency¹². Early measures used simple proxies such as women's education, employment, poverty, income and asset ownership that did not fully reflect the theoretical concept of empowerment¹². Over time, measurement approaches have expanded to include indirect and direct measures, quantitative to qualitative approaches, and single-dimension indicators (resources, agency, or achievements), single-level indicators (individual, relational, or environmental), and multidimensional and multilevel approaches^{13,14}. Advanced indices have since been developed to measure empowerment across multiple dimensions, levels and contexts.

These metrics are useful for programmatic goals that track progress in strengthening women's agency and decision-making, improving access to and control over resources, and achievements that might reflect norms and structural changes. A summary of these quantitative metrics, along with their

strengths and limitations are presented in Table A1 in the appendix. Additionally, other qualitative methods offer the added advantage of capturing context-specific information on how empowerment is locally defined, providing insight into the processes through which it occurs, and highlighting its complexity, including the trade-offs involved^{10,15}. Examples include the ladder of power and freedom and the gender indicator monitoring tool (GIMT)^{10,16}.

Existing women's empowerment metrics are primarily designed to capture changes at the individual and household level, focusing on relational shifts rather than structural transformation. As a result, they rarely measure changes in norms, institutions, policies, governance, or resource allocation that sustain gender inequality. They also require intensive data collection, making them costly and hard to integrate into routine monitoring. For programs aiming to track macro- or policy-level change, these metrics provide limited guidance, creating a gap for feasible, low-cost indicators that capture structural and systemic transformation.

3. MEASURING GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Women empowerment is shaped by the cultural, political and social environment that constitute the norms and institutions that define the choices and possibilities available to women and girls within a given context^{17,18}. The current persistent gaps in gender equality despite numerous advocacies, policy and investments efforts have highlighted the importance of implementing initiatives and tracking changes in the structural and power relations that bring about these inequalities. Gender-transformative change (GTC) can be defined as the process of examining, questioning, and altering gender norms and unequal power relations that disadvantage women and girls and create discrimination across the life course, from early childhood and embedded within societal institutions and practices¹⁹. These approaches go a step further

and seek to examine, challenge and address these underlying barriers through:

- Developing a context-specific understanding of intersecting inequalities and power relations grounded in insider perspectives to inform indicator design and measurement approaches^{3,20}.
- Engaging men and women and a range of stakeholders to critically examine gender norms, resource distribution, and the unequal structures and policies that sustain inequality³.
- Promoting continuous collective reflection and learning across stakeholders at multiple levels to drive and sustain transformative action¹⁷.

In practice, these approaches aim to shift individual capacities, interpersonal expectations, and institutional rules so as to expand equitable choices for marginalized women and men, strengthening fair social norms, and creating the conditions for more balanced gender relations²¹.

In order to measure GTC within typical project timeframes, agri-food programs need to translate conceptual dimensions of transformation into observable and feasible indicators. Gender-transformative change can be measured across three interconnected dimensions in order to capture where change occurs and how it influences outcomes^{3,21}: *agency* (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions), *power relations* (the dynamics within households, communities, and organizations), and *structural and institutional change* (the formal and informal rules, norms, and policies that govern gender relations at the community and policy level)^{3,21,22}. It is important to consider intersections with other social identities, incorporate participant perspectives, and account for both positive and unintended effects. A multi-level measurement framework linking project goals to indicators and tools enables programs to track gender-transformative change across these levels. Translating ambitious transformation objectives into practical, timeframe-realistic monitoring strategies.

Measuring gender transformative change at the individual level involves programs measuring changes in indicators such as employment, asset ownership, time use, and knowledge, as well as shifts in individual behaviors, attitudes, values, beliefs, and gender-related expectations. This can be measured through complementary approaches that includes self-reports, perception-based indicators, and standardized attitude scales¹⁵ (e.g using the women's empowerment indices presented earlier).

It is also crucial to measure changes in dynamics within households (for example, between spouses, or between parents and children) as well as in relationships outside the household, such as among groups of men, groups of women, and within mixed-gender community groups¹⁵. This can be supported by social media campaigns designed to challenge restrictive norms at scale, creating a broader 'cultural permission' for these private shifts. Measurement may involve working with an individual or several members and assessing metrics such as incidences of conflict, increase of joint decision-making, or participation in community organizations and social groups, complemented by digital analytics and sentiment analysis to track how these relational changes are mirrored or reinforced in online discourse^{15,23}.

However, significant knowledge gaps remain on how to measure gender-transformative change in agri-food systems at the policy level. This requires a different analytical lens beyond household or community monitoring. Policy-level measurement looks into whether the structures, institutions, and resources that govern gender relations changed. At the policy level, GTC can be understood along the following interrelated dimensions:

- **Policy and legal reform:** changes in laws, policies, and regulations that protect women's rights and equal treatment in agri-food systems contexts including gender equity provisions in national food & agriculture strategies (for instance in land tenure, financial services, labor protections).

- **Institutional capacity, governance and culture:** Changes in how ministries and agricultural institutions design, resource, and implement programs, that includes staffing, mandates, and organizational culture.
- **Resource allocation and access to productive resources:** Shifts in how public and development resources are distributed and women’s access to land, credit, and other productive assets at the national level.
- **Voice and representation:** Women’s participation in formal political and governance processes shaping agri-food policy (e.g. parliamentary committees, national councils, multilateral negotiations).

There exists a conceptual and measurement gap between where change is observed at the household and community level and where change is needed at the structural, institutional, and policy level. Projects need to evaluate does impact at the household-level aggregate to policy-level transformation? And over what timeframe, and through what mechanisms? Micro-level changes can result in structural changes as illustrated in Table 1 below, therefore programs interested in measuring GTC need to track changes across all levels and the enabling factors.

Table 1. GTC pathway from household to policy

Household / Community	Intermediate	National / Policy Level
Shifts in intra-household decision-making on farm inputs	Women's groups advocate for input subsidies to local government	National agricultural input policy is revised to include gender equity clauses
Changes in women's control over income from crop sales	Producer cooperatives led by women gain formal recognition	Land tenure law reform includes spousal co-registration requirement
Reduced gender gap in access to extension services at village level	District extension services adopt gender disaggregated targeting	National extension budget allocates 40% to women-led farms

Table 2 summarizes some key measures and toolkits that programs can use to measure and integrate a gender-transformative lens at the different levels according to program objectives^{21,24–28}.

Other tools capturing national-level structural gender inequality include composite indices such as the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which enable cross-country benchmarking of gender equality outcomes. Legal and institutional frameworks are captured by Women, Business and the Law (WBL), which tracks discriminatory legislation across key domains including land, finance, and labor. At the organizational level, Gender Audit frameworks (organization specific e.g CGIAR, FAO, USAID) assess institutional capacity for gender mainstreaming. Political representation indicators, including women's share of parliamentary seats, provide additional macro-level signals of structural change in governance systems.

Programs need to track enabling conditions, not just outcomes and need to invest in longitudinal tracking beyond a project cycle. This presents a challenge since shifts in legal frameworks or institutional cultures take place over many years beyond any single project cycle. Therefore, measurement requires distinguishing between:

- **Outcome indicators:** Direct evidence of structural change (e.g a gender-responsive budget line enacted into law).
- **Process indicators:** Evidence that the conditions for structural change are being built (such as gender provisions included in a draft policy under consultation).
- **Signal indicators:** Early signals that transformative change is underway (for instance women's groups formally represented in a previously male-dominated national advisory body).

Table 2. GTC Measurement: Tools & Metrics by Level and Project Goal

Level of Analysis	Project Goal	Illustrative Indicators	Tool / Metric	Measurable within project time frame?
Individual / Household	Shift gender norms & attitudes among men and women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change in men's equitable attitudes score (GEM scale) % men/women agreeing women should have equal say in household (HH) decisions Reduction in acceptance of gender-based violence 	Gender-Equitable Men (GEM) Scale	High*
	Understand men's & women's gendered behaviors and compare perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparative attitudinal scores between men and women % HHs reporting shared decision-making on key livelihood choices Prevalence of equitable division of unpaid care work 	IMAGES (International Men and Gender Equality Survey)	High-Moderate
	Analyze the root causes of gender & power inequality at the individual level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Degree of women's control over productive assets Women's access to and control over income Prevalence of discriminatory attitudes in target HHS 	Gender and Power (GAP) Framework	Moderate
Community / Social	Facilitate community-led reflection to challenge harmful gender norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community defined norm change milestones # community members engaged in critical reflection sessions Evidence of collective action challenging discriminatory practices 	Social Analysis and Action (SAA) Toolkit	Moderate
	Analyze and shift power dynamics in communities and organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of women's groups moving from 'invited' to 'claimed' spaces # advocacy actions taken by community groups Change in perceived power among women participants 	Power Pack Resource Guide	Moderate
	Measure changes in gendered social norms in food security & nutrition (FSN) contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change in descriptive norms (what people believe others do) Change in injunctive norms (what people believe others approve of) % households reporting changed attitudes toward women's roles in FSN 	JP GTA Guide — Gendered Social Norms Indicators (FSN)	Moderate-High
	Systematically analyze and track social norm change over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Norm strength score (SNAP vignette data) Change in empirical vs. normative expectations Detection of early-stage norm shift among reference groups 	SNAP Framework (Social Norms Analysis Plot)	Moderate
	Facilitate norm reflection & track norm strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-defined norm milestones Norm expectation gaps 	GALS, community scorecards, vignettes, body mapping, SNAP / vignette tools	Moderate
	Empower women & men in communities to shift power dynamics and livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> # women/men completing GALS visioning & planning cycle Change in women's decision-making power over HH & community resources Evidence of collective action and peer-led norm change 	Gender Action Learning System (GALS)	High-Moderate
Macro / Policy	Measure discriminatory social institutions as structural drivers of inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SIGI country score and sub index scores (family code, physical integrity, civil liberties, land & assets) Change in SIGI score across project countries over time # discriminatory laws or practices identified and targeted for reform 	Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)	Low
	Assess and strengthen organizational capacity for gender equality mainstreaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender equality score across organizational pillars (policy, systems, culture, leadership) # gender equity reforms implemented post-assessment % staff trained on gender-responsive programming 	Gender Equality Organizational Assessment Tool	High-Moderate
	Improve gender-responsive allocation of public resources in agricultural and food system policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of new agricultural or food system policies assessed for gender impacts Satisfaction levels of women beneficiaries with government services (extension, credit, inputs) Distribution of subsidy or support programs by gender Impact of tax reforms on women-owned agricultural enterprises Time use analysis 	Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) Analysis (Diane Elson's framework, OECD framework for gender budgeting)	High
	Strengthen women's land rights and gender equality in land tenure systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender gap in land ownership % of agricultural land owned or jointly owned by women Existence of legal provisions ensuring women's equal land rights # reforms addressing gender discrimination in land tenure 	FAO Gender and Land Rights Database	Low
	Track structural gender inequality at the national and cross-country policy level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender gap in land tenure formalization rates (national) % of national agricultural budget allocated to gender-focused programs Women's representation in national food security & agricultural policy bodies # gender equity provisions in national agricultural laws 	Gender and Power (GAP) Framework (policy-level application)	Low-Moderate

*High = realistically measurable within 3–5 years; Moderate = partially measurable (early shifts detectable); Low = unlikely within typical project cycle (long-term structural change)

Within a typical project cycle of three to five years, process and signal indicators are more informative of GTC.

To fully capture the nuances of this transformation, quantitative data must be complemented by qualitative approaches such as process tracing, policy timeline analysis, and key informant interviews. Investing in these mixed-method approaches allows programs to document the long journey of systemic change that cannot be captured by numbers alone.

There are still gaps in measurement of GTC at the policy level. What is available are data sources and indices that show the state of structural inequality but weren't designed to track a program's contribution to changing it. We still need:

- Validated tools for measuring institutional culture change within ministries and agricultural agencies over a project cycle.
- Standardized indicators for tracking policy advocacy contribution to legislative reform.
- Tools that bridge the norm-change evidence from community level to policy uptake.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite decades of progress, women and girls continue to face discrimination in laws, social norms, and everyday practices, limiting their rights, opportunities, and voice within agri-food systems. This demonstrates that true gender equality has yet to be achieved. This is partly as a result of initiatives that are gender accommodating and do not challenge the existing policies, social norms and structures that produce gender inequality in the first place. More recently, attention has shifted to the importance of gender-transformative approaches within agri-food systems that address these systemic forms of discrimination and seek to transform gender relations and social institutions to support gender equality.

Crucial to achieving lasting gender transformative change is measurement. Without robust indicators that capture whether and how women's lives and opportunities are genuinely changing in the deeper structures that govern access to resources, voice, and decision-making power, it is impossible to know whether programs are working, or investments reaching those who need them most.

This brief has highlighted key tools and metrics available for measuring gender-transformative change within agri-food programs. We emphasize the importance of measuring GTC across household, community, and structural & institutional levels. Further we highlighted ways to integrate gender-transformative indicators into programs cycles and gaps that remain in tracking policy level impact.

In conclusion, we reiterate the importance of the following in programs that aim to track and measure GTC especially at the policy level:

1. **Adopting a multi-level indicator framework approach.** Household- and community-level metrics remain important for understanding relational change and project accountability. However, programs should complement these with outcome, process, and signal indicators and relevant global gender indices to capture enabling conditions and early signals of structural change.
2. **Invest in mixed-method and longer-term monitoring systems:** Quantitative indicators need to be complemented with qualitative approaches such as process tracing and policy timeline analysis and support longitudinal tracking to better understand how programs contribute to policy and institutional change beyond typical project cycles.
3. **Integrate GTC measurement into policy engagement strategies.** Monitoring systems should be designed to document contributions to structural

change in policies, institutions, and governance processes, rather than focusing only on project-level outputs.

4. **Apply an intersectional lens in policy monitoring:** Data should capture how policy changes affect different groups of women and men across dimensions such as age, ethnicity, class, disability, and geographic location.
5. **Strengthen institutional capacity for gender analysis and adaptive learning:** Staff and partners should be equipped to interpret gender indicators and use monitoring results to adapt policy engagement strategies in real time.

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Table A1. Summary of Key Women’s Empowerment Metrics for Project

<i>Project goal</i>	<i>WE metric</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Limitations</i>
<i>Track changes in women’s agency, and overall, WE in agricultural HHs</i>	Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) ²⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in women’s empowerment score across 5 domains • Intra-household gender parity gap (women vs. male score) • % women achieving minimum empowerment threshold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First to focus on agency • Allows comparison of men and women within households • Identifies aggregate sources of disempowerment • Transparent counting-based approach with defined indicators and weights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming, high costs • Unsuitable for nationally representative data collection • Hard to administer due to unclear, complex questions • Need extensive training of enumerators
<i>Broad monitoring of women’s empowerment with reduced time and budget constraints</i>	Abbreviated WEAI (A-WEAI) ³⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abbreviated empowerment score across condensed domains • % women empowered at HH level • Intra-household disempowerment gap 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less time consuming • Improves on problematic modules • Allows comparison of men and women within households • Identifies intra-household inequalities • Can be used in national-level surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced indicators limit the multidimensionality of empowerment • May not provide enough granularity for project-level monitoring or targeted interventions • Loss of information results in higher rates of disempowerment
<i>Capture multidimensional women’s empowerment at the project level (agriculture)</i>	Project-level Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI) ³¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Score across intrinsic, instrumental & collective agency domains • % women meeting empowerment threshold across project indicators • Qualitative evidence of agency changes from embedded protocols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multidimensional focus on agency • Additional indicators used to better capture WE • Contains qualitative protocols in addition to quantitative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed methods approach requires more resources and time • Not easily included in project level questionnaires • Lack generalizability beyond project contexts
<i>Assess women’s empowerment in value chain and market inclusion interventions among rural women</i>	Pro-WEAI for Market Inclusion (pro-WEAI+MI) ³²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to market access and inclusion score • Women’s control over market transactions and income • Exposure to sexual hostility and safety in market environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigates barriers to market access and inclusion • Measures other aspects of the empowerment environment e.g sanitation, sexual hostility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific to value chain interventions • Lack generalizability beyond project contexts
<i>Track women’s empowerment in nutrition-sensitive agriculture programs</i>	Pro-WEAI for health- and nutrition (pro-WEAI + HN) ³³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women’s agency in food production and nutrition decisions • Control over food resources at HH level • Change in empowerment score across nutrition-relevant domains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captures dimensions relevant to health and nutrition outcomes • Allows for comparisons across contexts • Goes beyond productive domains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of attention to agency in other aspects that impact nutrition outcomes such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) • Focused on households engaged in agriculture
<i>Measure nutritional empowerment among rural women including non-farming households</i>	Women’s Empowerment in Nutrition Index (WENI) ³⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women’s agency, resources & achievements related to nutrition • Empowerment score including landless & non-farming women • Change in nutrition-relevant decision-making power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes non-farming women, landless households • Captures different aspects of WE crucial for nutritional empowerment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews only women • Omits key nutrition-sensitive themes such as animal-source foods, intrahousehold food distribution, input access, time use, and child nutrition • Not designed for comparisons across communities and groups
<i>Measure women’s empowerment outcomes in sector specific programs</i>	Women’s Empowerment in Livestock Index (WELI) ³⁵ , WE Fisheries Index (WEFI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women’s control over sector specific assets, income and management • Change in empowerment score over project cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captures changes in WE in the specific sector (livestock or fisheries) • Can be used for comparison across individuals and over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews only women (WELI) • Thresholds of empowerment at the indicator and question levels were chosen arbitrarily, caution is needed when interpreting absolute index values
<i>Measure women’s empowerment at the individual level across LMICs (using existing data)</i>	Survey Based Women’s Empowerment Index (SWPER) ³⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SWPER index score (attitude, social independence, decision-making) • Within-country and between-country empowerment comparisons • Time-trend analysis using DHS data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables within-country and between-country comparisons • Can be constructed using existing data (DHS) • Allows for time trend analyses • Shorter, general questions • Can be applied at both the ecological & individual level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only applicable only to women in union • Scope is limited and does not cover all aspects of WE • Countries with limited DHS data are underrepresented • Elements could actually reflect disempowerment (e.g., women work status)
<i>Monitor women’s and men’s empowerment across rural and urban areas at national scale with diverse livelihood strategies</i>	Women’s Empowerment Metric for National Statistical Systems (WEMNS) ³⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full empowerment score across intrinsic, instrumental & collective agency + resources domains • Comparable index scores across countries and contexts • Gender parity gap between men’s and women’s scores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures women’s and men’s empowerment, • Applicable to urban & rural areas livelihood strategies • Comparable: applicable in different countries and contexts • Capture the full range of dimensions of empowerment • Short time required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some indicators are only applicable to women and not men hence scores are not directly comparable

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