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Review of the implementation of the programme of work 2014-2015

Programme work area Sustainable Housing and real estate markets

Main findings and recommendations from the draft UNECE Social Housing Study “Social Housing in the UNECE Region: Models, Trends and Challenges”

Summary:

The UNECE Social Housing Study examines the current trends, challenges and social housing models in the UNECE region. It provides recommendations for possible future activities based on an extensive literature review of housing issues in over 50 countries and interviews with over 30 representatives of governments, private and third-sector organizations. The full draft study *Social Housing in the UNECE Region: Models, Trends and Challenges* is being finalised.

The UNECE Social Housing Study was prepared in conjunction with the UNECE workshop “The Future of Social Housing: Environmental and Social Challenges and the Way Forward”¹ held in Geneva from 4 to 5 February 2014. This report updates and expands the material presented at the occasion and builds on the responses from housing leaders across the UNECE region.

The findings and recommendations from the study provide background information to the discussion to be held at the 75th session of the Committee. The discussion will focus on the challenges of access to adequate and affordable housing in the UNECE region and possible future activities to be implemented by the Committee in cooperation with its partners.

Executive summary

Access to decent and affordable housing is a fundamental human need and a human right.¹ The UNECE Social Housing Study finds that housing is the least affordable human right of all. At least 100 million low- and middle-income people in the UNECE region are housing cost overburdened; they spend more than 40 per cent of their disposable income on housing. High housing costs for low-income households leave limited resources for other basic needs, such as food, health, clothing and transportation. This means that lack of affordable housing makes other human rights increasingly unaffordable.

Housing systems are diverse and context specific. However, in the UNECE region, they share certain characteristics. In nearly all UNECE countries, there is some support for those who cannot afford housing costs. Although each country defines social housing differently, social housing is an integral part of housing systems that are designed to fulfil a housing need for those who cannot compete in the market, afford to be homeowners or rent decent housing in the private market. When the owner occupied sector and the private rental sector suffer, as was the case in the recent crisis, the demand for affordable housing options increases.

The social and affordable housing sector faces two challenges at the moment: increased need and reduced funds. The UNECE Social Housing Study: *Social Housing in the UNECE Region: Models, Trends and Challenges* highlights that the number of households registered on social housing lists in the UNECE member States has risen since the commencement of the Global Financial Crisis. However, the crisis has made state spending cuts necessary and inevitable. These have disproportionately affected the housing sector. “Everywhere, there is great need for safe, decent, and affordable housing at the lowest income levels” (Peppercorn and Taffin 2013, p. 11). The Global Financial Crisis has changed the context in which housing systems operate, and the future is uncertain (Stephens & Norris, 2011).

In the past, social housing may have provided a home for the vulnerable and poor in the majority of UNECE countries. However, the recent crisis has not only increased but also diversified the social housing need. The elderly, young (first-time buyers), middle-income households and key workers as well as vulnerable and special groups are in housing need. Challenges currently observed are real problems but also opportunities to re-examine the sector, adjust it to the new dynamic of the housing market and meet new aspirations, such as energy efficiency and customer adjusted design.

The UNECE Social Housing Study and this summary contribute to bringing social housing to the forefront of the housing agenda of UNECE countries and to providing general guidance for policymakers whose actions can have an effect on where and how people live. The study identifies current trends and challenges and provides advice on social housing policy at the international level. The report is intended to be a platform for further discussion and launch in-depth and context specific research for advancing social housing development by governments, local authorities, investors, private developers and NGOs to advance social housing as a critical housing option.

¹ United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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Key trends and challenges

1. Social housing for the most disadvantaged: the residualization trend

Models of Social Housing Allocation and Current Trends		
Universalistic	Generalist	Residual
		
Households with a wide range of income levels	Households below a defined income threshold	Vulnerable households and special groups

- Today, the UNECE is a region of homeowners. The period preceding the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) was characterized by almost unanimous support of homeownership across the UNECE region. In the western frontiers of the UNECE region, the increased share of homeownership was achieved by making access to mortgages relatively easy. In the eastern parts, the high rates of home ownership were achieved through the privatization of socialist public housing. In the countries with a mature social housing sector, there was a tendency to decrease the social housing stock through limited construction, selling off stock to sitting tenants and demolition. In countries with emerging social housing sectors, new state-supported housing initiatives are at early stage of implementation and limited in scale.
- Although the social housing systems vary in a number of dimensions, according to the social housing allocation model, they can be classified in one of three categories: Universalist (allocating social housing regardless of income limits); Targeted (allocating social housing based on established income levels); Residual (allocating housing only to the defined vulnerable or special groups) (CECODHAS, 2012). The majority of the UNECE member States gravitate toward the residual social housing allocation model either in policy definition or in policy outcomes. Post-GFC demand for social and affordable housing has not been met in majority of UNECE countries. The demand for social housing continues to grow.
- The Global Financial Crisis has changed the context in which the housing systems operate. The UNECE Social Housing Study highlights that the majority of UNECE member States are going through a significant reassessment of their social housing policies and funding mechanisms. In this context, the question about the future of social housing models is being posed anew. It remains crucial that changes benefit those on lowest incomes while also serving new emerging groups in need, such as the elderly, young, or middle-income families. The trends and challenges identified in the UNECE Social Housing Study as well as the recommendations are aimed to support these efforts while promoting the idea of “affordable housing for all”.

1. Increased housing need

Number of people experiencing housing cost overburden in the UNECE region

100 million people in the UNECE region spend more than 40 per cent of their disposable income on housing – this is a conservative estimate.

Combined sources: UNECE (2014), CECODHAS (2012), Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2013, European Union, 2012, Rosstat, 2012.

- The global recession has led to increased inequality and rising poverty. The UNECE Social Housing Study highlights that over 100 million people in the UNECE region are housing cost overburdened. They spend more than 40 per cent of their disposable income on housing expenses including rent or mortgage and utility bills. High housing costs for those in a low-income level leave very limited resources for food, health, clothing, transportation and education, among other basic needs.
- The housing need has not only increased but it has also diversified. The study highlights that there is an increased need for an aging population, young adolescents, key workers and middle-income households, vulnerable/special groups (e.g. disabled, refugees, migrant/immigrants, homeless, veterans), as well as the low-income and no-income population. The lack of housing affordability has raised the need for social housing.
- The number of households registered on the social housing lists in the UNECE member States has risen since the commencement of the GFC. To illustrate this trend, the social housing waiting lists in the United Kingdom are at 1.8 million, 1.7 million in France, 1.17 million in Ukraine. The United States is experiencing a shortage of 5.3 million social housing units. Waiting period for social housing in the Russian Federation is 20 years. The need seems to be the most critical in capital and global cities in the UNECE region, where the housing markets are heated.

Social housing waiting lists in global cities (households)

London	Paris	New York
354,000 (Greater London)	550,000 (Ile-De-France)	227,000
2012	2013	2013

2. Limited housing supply and choice

The lack of housing overall, but of social housing in particular, is one of the key challenges facing UNECE member States. The housing shortage has contributed the housing price increase. Because of housing price increase, the lack of housing affordability has risen, as well as the need for social housing as an affordable option.

- There is a sizable shortfall in net new housing output (all tenures) not just because of the financial crisis but also because of the longer-term lack of supply response. Since 2007, the financial crisis has led to a

drop in housing starts and completions across the UNECE region. The drop in construction has varied across countries. Long-term lack of housing supply response has been noted in a number of Western and Northern European countries. Many Eastern European and CIS countries have not recovered even 50 per cent of the housing construction volume of the 1980s.

- An additional challenge is a lack in the supply of appropriate types of housing because of changing demographic trends (e.g. housing for an aging population). Future policies will have to respond to the diversified housing need. It is essential that such innovation is embedded within the development of sustainable multigenerational communities responding to the needs of many while taking into consideration the specific needs of special groups.
- It must be stressed that the housing shortage is rarely absolute. Areas with high-housing demand (so called pressure zones or heated markets) and low-housing demand (so called shrinking areas) often coexist within one country. The presence of low- and high-housing demand areas highlights the complexity of the housing need as well as the nature of such need within one country. Future policies will have to consider the fragmentation of the national housing markets and develop solutions that can address the low- as well as high-housing demand areas while supporting governance structures needed to respond to local drivers of change (Rosenfeld, 2013).

3. Limited funding and finance

- The UNECE Social Housing Study finds that there is a willingness to provide more social housing in a majority of the member States. However, there is less certainty about the future of funding that supports such developments. Limited funding makes the implementation of new and existing policies challenging. Securing future funding and finance for the social housing sector is one of the key challenges in the UNECE region. While general trends can be observed, it must be stressed that the challenges to the finance and funding of the sector differ between countries.
- In the immediate aftermath of the GFC, a number of North American and European countries responded by increasing public expenditure on social housing. However, following an initial phase of significant investment, housing budgets were significantly reduced in a number of countries. The economic downturn of 2011 posed a serious challenge to national governments to further expand their intervention in social housing.
- The overall trend in the UNECE region marks an increased attention to the reassessment of current social housing finance mechanisms for cost effectiveness and suitability to current market trends. In the eastern and western parts of the region, there is an interest in examining new financial solutions and products. There is increased interest in state guarantees, combining public and private funds creatively and examining new funding and financial arrangements that are more suited to the current and future housing market trends. There is an increased interest in attracting and/or expanding collaboration with institutional investors and international banks. In countries where such practices are in early stages, there is more work to be done to make the collaboration with these organisations successful.

4. Rising aspirations for housing quality, health and energy efficiency

Across the UNECE region there is rising interest in increasing the quality of housing. Considering the limited housing supply, ensuring the quality of the existing stock and establishing energy efficiency standards for new stock are increasingly important. However, no less important are the health standards that have received limited attention until now. The physical and mental health of the residents is directly influenced by the quality of their home (WHO, 2013).

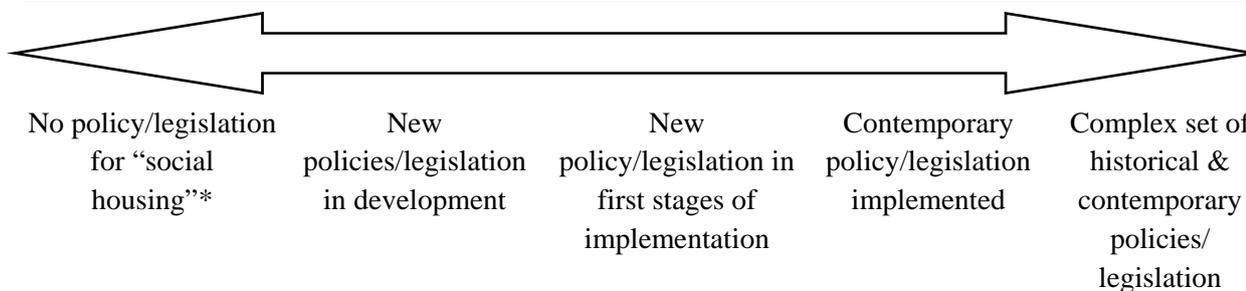
While a number of innovative practices exist, more work needs to be done to make them the norm and to adjust them to the social housing sector. The integration and adoption of housing quality standards (including health and energy efficiency among other issues) are beneficial to reducing energy poverty, ensuring healthy living and securing productivity at school and work. However, aspired housing quality standards should be developed hand in hand with ensuring the financial viability of housing schemes for housing providers and affordability for existing residents. These measures would help guarantee the successful implementation of future policies and certify that those on low incomes can afford increased housing quality. The existing housing stock needs refurbishing and retrofitting to reach the aspired new standards and this is a crucial challenge at the moment. Above-mentioned financial mechanisms for renewal and retrofitting should be further developed.

Policy recommendations

The UNECE Social Housing Study finds the reader at the crossroads between the old ways that resulted in a housing crisis and experimentation with new and innovative solutions in the majority of UNECE countries. Consequently, there are potentially multitudes of issues that could be rightfully addressed. However, responding to any crisis requires rigorous prioritization and focused action in order to move things forward in a climate of resource scarcity. The advice laid out in this section concerns issues that were identified as most critical following 31 experts interviews, collaborations with partner organizations and a literature review of over 200 publications on housing issues in more than 50 countries. The report was able to cover only a carefully selected number of issues that illustrate the new expectation that social housing should play a positive role in solving emerging problems. This report calls all interested parties to capitalize on this renewed energy and enthusiasm for social housing and join forces at the international, national, local and levels and across sectors and disciplines in order to make more homes accessible to more people and families in need.

The social housing sector in UNECE member States is characterized by great diversity and different levels of maturity. This diversity means that there cannot be simple solutions applicable to all. Because of the framework of this report, the strategic decision was made to address the issues relevant to as many stakeholders possible. The recommendations presented here are not readymade solutions; rather, they are a call for work and the advancement of capacity to improve those areas that have been identified as vital for making decent housing more affordable to as many people as possible. The different operational contexts for a variety of housing system trajectories will have to be accommodated to make the solutions suitable to local contexts.

Variation of social housing* policy maturity in the UNECE region



*“social housing” is conceptualized broadly and according to the national definition (see section on definitions). UNECE, 2014.

1. Policy implications

General recommendations for effective social housing policies

- Provision of social/affordable housing considered as an important part of public policy with added social, environmental and economic benefits.
- Long-term political commitment to housing in general and social housing in particular.
- Comprehensive social housing policies with a clearly defined vision for social housing, related legislation and institutions governing competencies for financing, housing supply and allocation.
- Institutional capacity and professional expertise in housing policy design, implementation, maintenance and management.
- Agreed upon standards regarding construction quality, dimensions of space (minimal ceiling height, minimal number of windows per room, minimal size of rooms), basic amenities (toilets/bathrooms, cooking facilities), access to public space.
- Fair and transparent allocation systems of available social housing stock.

2. Tenure balanced policies for balanced housing markets

Future policies should support increased housing supply in a tenure neutral manner. Tenure mix allows economic mobility, is more responsive to the market dynamic and is more resilient to crises when they arise. Governments play an indispensable role in shaping national housing systems and use various tools to enable and boost housing markets. In order to address the post GFC housing challenges, fundamental links between the housing markets and financial markets will need to be factored into future housing policies in a context specific way. Priorities will need to be set in terms of future tenure balance and state intervention in housing finance. In particular, there is a need for well-calibrated government participation in the housing markets with less focus on the direct provision of mortgage credit and more concern about systemic effects and externalities. Better calibrated government participation in housing markets would also rely on more targeted measures to achieve social objectives, such as affordable housing for low-income households (IMF, 2011). There remains a growing need for social housing, which is the only means of securing decent and affordable housing for those households who cannot afford to buy or rent in the market. In relation to social and affordable housing, priorities will have to be re-examined and targets clearly set in relation to providing housing for low-income households, boosting housing supply and/or local economies and guaranteeing housing to enable labour mobility.

3. Adaptability to high- and low-housing demand areas

Locally adjusted solutions and context sensitivity are needed to ensure cost effectiveness. National housing markets are fragmented (Rosenfeld, 2013). In other words, housing prices are not the same across any particular state. For instance, housing prices in cities are higher than in other parts of their respective country. The characteristics of the housing need and the cost of satisfying this need are different between low- and high-demand areas. In low-demand areas, the housing needs of the low-income and poor may co-

exist with the outmigration of other parts of the population and vacant properties. In high-demand areas, the middle class and middle income (key workers) may be struggling to access affordable housing. Future social housing policies should take into consideration the fragmentation of the national housing markets and be able to respond to the housing need in low-demand areas (shrinking areas) and high-demand areas in ways that are both suited to the dynamic of local markets and relevant to those in need in a cost-effective and financially viable manner.

4. Integrated approach to social housing

Housing is a complex good. Access to decent, affordable housing promotes the right to food and water, the right to physical and mental health, the right to education, the right to family, the right to work and the right to participate in the cultural life of the community. Access to decent homes reduces the likelihood of energy poverty and its adverse effects. Social housing policies interact with national welfare benefit systems and their funding streams that support better health and energy efficiency. Within an articulated policy framework for social housing specifically, clear aims and objectives are required not just for individual policies but also for the mix of policies and their system-level coherence, including how they are delivered and by whom (this is especially relevant in a devolved system) (Gibb et al., 2013). For cost efficiency, system-level tests are required to ensure that subsidies are not over provided or poorly targeted. The creative combination of funds, especially in projects aimed at developing sustainable communities (including social mix), should be supported in order to ensure that these goals are achieved at the local level through the collaboration of different local actors.

5. Energy efficiency

Energy efficiency brings multiple benefits not only to the residents but also to the wider environment. There are a number of innovative practices in this area that exist across the UNECE region. However, more work is needed to make such practices a norm and ensure their large-scale implementation.

Dedicated funding for energy efficiency should be creatively combined with that for social housing. In order to reach energy efficiency aspirations in the social housing sector and ensure their successful (long-term and large-scale) implementation, the financial viability of the schemes will have to be taken into consideration. Rent increases that are not proportional to energy savings (utility bills) should be avoided, as they may unintentionally lead to the forced relocation of existing residents and the ghettoization of cheaper, non-retrofitted buildings. While technologically advanced solutions are welcome, affordable and traditional building techniques proven for their energy efficiency should be promoted, especially those that could be executed by the residents themselves.

6. Inclusive design and increased housing choice

A diverse portfolio of social and affordable housing choices and design options is necessary to respond to the increased and diversified housing need. The UNECE Social Housing Study shows that the housing need has not only increased but it has also diversified. The need among middle-income and low-income households is pressing. At the same time, there is growing awareness for the need to make housing suitable for the aging

populations. Young, first time buyers also require support. The number of vulnerable people and the poor with limited or no income are on the rise, along with increase of poverty. Special groups, such as ethnic minorities, refugees, and asylum seekers, should receive continuous attention in order to successfully integrate into their host countries. People suffering from mental diseases and substance abusers should have suitable solutions and special services. The homeless should have suitable solutions for their housing requirements

The diversified needs of the population require increased housing choices and options. It is essential that such innovation is embedded within the development of sustainable multigenerational communities that responds to the requirements of many while taking into consideration the specific needs of special groups. This approach could benefit from the involvement of housing developers of various sizes and engagement of residents of the planned premises.

7. Governance and partnership working

Governments play a vital role in shaping their housing systems in a market economy. Healthy housing markets are the result of political effort (policies, regulations) as much as economic ability. In many countries, the role of the government has changed: power has devolved and new actors have joined the policymaking and its implementation. The decentralization of the state is one of the key trends in contemporary governance of housing.

The governance of social housing is complex. It brings together a network of actors from different sectors; multiple tiers of government; many disciplines; and national, and increasingly, international actors. Acknowledging the roles of these actors in the policymaking process and enabling effective partnerships are essential to the future of policy success. A clear vision and purpose of social housing policies, the clear division of roles and responsibilities and lines of accountability within a given policy framework are of key importance.

The key message for the governance of social housing on the national level is for both the horizontal and vertical integration of efforts and relevant funds. The housing sector is integrative by nature. It requires integrated efforts from different disciplines, tiers of government, and sectors in order to show viable results. The integration of efforts from disparate government ministries and departments responsible for various aspects of housing (or issues related to housing, e.g. social benefits, energy efficiency, health, infrastructure (utility tariffs)), are of great value and can contribute to system-level coherence and alignment of funding streams. Collaboration between different tiers of government (in a vertical sense) is also important. Local authorities have been given the responsibility to deliver social housing but in many instances depend on national (or federal or regional) funding to do so. During decentralization many actors joined the process of social housing delivery. Governmental agencies in charge of social housing should seek to engage with the stakeholders involved in social housing provision, finance, management and maintenance (e.g. private sector investors, housing providers and residents) during the early stages of housing policy design and implementation in order to secure long-term and viable results.

Local authorities and cities

In the UNECE region, local authorities have an important role in designing, co-designing and/or implementing social housing policies. Through direct contact with the population, local authorities are in the best position to identify the scale and characteristics of the housing need and to respond to it. However, the ability as well as the willingness to provide social housing differs greatly within a country or even region and district. Many capital and global cities have already recognized the importance of affordable and social housing provision for boosting their economic competitiveness and supporting social mix and diversity. A number of capital and global cities have set higher social and affordable housing benchmarks than those recommended by their governments. While the context may differ greatly, learning from these examples may be beneficial for other local authorities. Many local authorities will find that the task of social housing is very new or is returning to them after years of privatization. These authorities should seek to increase their skills in the sector, either through work with their own government, neighbouring local authorities or international agencies and organizations. The collaboration between neighbouring municipalities is important as well: for instance, characteristics of local markets might cross the borders of individual administrative jurisdictions (e.g. cities that have neighbourhoods with similar characteristics may become linked), particularly in larger metropolitan areas (e.g. London, Paris). The collaboration between municipalities in the development and delivery of social housing may bring positive outcomes, avoid fragmentation of local efforts and ensure cost effectiveness (or even the combination of funds). Apart from cooperation between cities, local governments should seek broader participation from stakeholders and the involvement of the future residents in the design and provision of social housing. The involvement of future residents in the construction, maintenance and management of the social housing can provide jobs, therefore easing the need for subsidies and lowering the cost level, while building a community that is committed to its living environment because it was actively included in shaping it.

Engagement with the residents

Social housing tenants should be actively engaged in the design, construction, regeneration and maintenance of social housing. Willing and skilled residents should also be involved in providing special services for the elderly, children or other vulnerable groups living in social housing. They should be included in raising and maintaining the energy efficiency of their homes for their own benefit first but then for achieving goals of reducing CO2 emissions. This is especially important in large estates or condominiums. Engaging residents is the best way to learn about their specific needs rather than proposing top-down standards that may be more expensive or unsuitable and therefore requiring further investment. The engagement of residents does not only secure jobs, it also helps the designers provide housing that is adopted to its users, may promote reduction of costs (by providing the adopted solutions and energy responsible use) and foster sustainable and cohesive communities.

Engagement with investors and banks

Constructive and cost-effective engagement with the investment industry in the social housing sector requires a government's long-term commitment to social housing, including a clear vision for social housing policy and regulations. Swift changes in political decision making at all levels of government (national, regional, local) are bound to increase the perception of the risk of the housing sector while raising the price of investment and finance. Such changes may induce losses, especially in cases of large-scale projects that

may be left unfinished. State guarantees for investment and/or housing allowance (assuring that rents are paid) are important to reducing the sector's perceived risk and making it of long-term interest to the investment industry. In the countries where there is interest to engage more with international banks, investment banks and institutional investors, an information barrier between the investment sector and the social housing sector should be addressed and overcome. A constructive dialogue between the sectors is required. International organizations may wish to provide a neutral platform for this exchange.

Housing providers (non-profit, limited profit and private developers)

The housing sector is currently undergoing significant changes across the UNECE region. Housing providers, be it for-profit, limited or non-profit, are essential players in this change. At the time of writing, the demand for housing has not been satisfied in most of the UNECE countries and its affordability is decreasing for many. Housing providers have a particular responsibility to the whole of society. It is recommended that housing providers adopt strategies of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in housing provision in general and social housing in particular. "Complex challenges require housing providers and their stakeholders to work closely together to support and further develop responsible housing: a form of fair and ethical housing production and management which improves the economic and social conditions of local communities. Responsible housing creates a basis for social cohesion, local development and attractiveness, quality of life for tenants, residents, and local actors, thus maximising long term shared value" (EHRIN, 2014).

8. Integration of international efforts in social housing

The GFC has changed the international dialogue about where people should live. There is increased interest in re-balancing the tenures and searching for new and innovative solutions. The need for social housing has increased dramatically. However, the number of organizations both public and private, charities, NGOs and housing experts interested in supporting and advancing the field has increased too. International organizations should support this enthusiasm and energy and help efforts to provide housing to as many people as possible. International organizations are seen as the hubs of knowledge exchange. They should establish long-term commitments to the housing sector, not just initiatives during crises. Housing matters bring together numerous sectors and disciplines. If treated as a mere piece of other disciplines, the solutions are unlikely to bring impactful results. Housing should be treated as a sovereign professional matter that convenes experts for integrated solutions. As the result of the GFC, many organizations have seen an interest in the housing field. International organizations are encouraged to unite their efforts. Each has its own expertise and strength and by combining efforts, housing can become an integrating concern, affect a stronger impact overall and provide for a greater number of people. The following initiatives have been communicated by experts as being of special interest: developing think tanks for specific social housing subjects (e.g. housing finance) and for specific groups of countries; providing capacity building training for local authorities wishing to provide social housing; establishing platforms where the private and public actors can come together and exchange knowledge; most importantly, guaranteeing long-term and coordinated commitment to housing as an integrative field.

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