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Implications of Migration on Food Security in Delta State: Navigating the Dilemma of Abavo Community

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Abstract
Migration has become a central socio-economic force in Delta state of Nigeria, shaping agricultural outcomes and food security in significant ways. Granted that migration generates benefits through remittances, knowledge transfer, and socio-cultural connections, migration also undermines traditional farming systems, particularly in rural agrarian communities in the state. This paper examines the relationship between migration and food security with a focus on Abavo, a farming community in Delta State codenamed the 'food basket of Delta state'. Using secondary sources, including data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and existing scholarship, the study highlights how migration reshapes labour availability, agricultural productivity, food access, and rural household well-being. The study relied on the push-pull theoretical framework to give clarity to the research. The results indicate that youth migration has contributed to reduced crop yields, higher food costs, worsening nutritional outcomes, and increased workloads for women and the elderly. Although remittances offer some income relief, they are rarely reinvested into agriculture. The Abavo case reflects broader national trends of rural decline and deepening food insecurity. The study recommends agricultural modernization, rural development initiatives, gender-responsive policies, and better use of remittances to support agribusiness. It concludes that mitigating the food security challenges driven by migration requires integrated strategies that revitalize rural livelihoods while recognizing migration as both a constraint and a potential driver of sustainable development.

Keywords: Migration, food security, Abavo, remittances, rural development, Agriculture

Introduction

Migration is increasingly recognized as a major socio-economic force shaping Nigeria's development path. It is largely driven by poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and the search for better opportunities. While migration provides households with remittances and prospects for upward mobility, it also reduces the availability of farm labor and disrupts agricultural systems (de Haas, 2010; Tacoli, 2018). This dual effect makes migration both a source of support and a challenge for agrarian communities.

In Nigeria, agriculture remains central to the economy, accounting for about 24% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employing over one-third of the workforce (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). However, the growing loss of agricultural labor to migration poses a significant threat to food production and national food security. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2015), food security exists when all people have regular access to adequate, safe, and nutritious food for a healthy life. Yet, Nigeria's food system has become increasingly fragile, with migration, insecurity, and rural decline undermining production and access.

The Abavo community, located in Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State, reflects this challenge. Once widely known for its production of yam, cassava, and palm oil, Abavo has experienced continuous outmigration of young people to urban centres and foreign destinations. This movement has reduced agricultural productivity, increased food prices, and transferred the burden of farming to women and elderly residents. Although remittances from migrants support household consumption and education, they are seldom reinvested into farming activities (Awumbila, 2015).

This paper investigates the implications of migration on food security in Delta state, using Abavo as a case study of rural transformation. Specifically, its objectives seek to:

i. explore migration patterns in Abavo community.
ii. assess the effects of migration on food availability, accessibility, and utilization.
iii. examine the gender dimensions of migration's impact on food systems.
iv. to propose policy measures for addressing migration-induced food insecurity.

The research questions that guide this study are:

i. What is the migration pattern in Abavo?
ii. What ways has migration contributed to the shortage of food availability, accessibility and utilization?
iii. What are the gender dimensions of migration impacted on food systems?
iv. What are the policy measures for addressing migration-induced food insecurity?

This study is important because it connects migration debates with food security concerns in Delta state with Abavo test-case in Nigeria. By situating the Abavo experience within wider national and global contexts, it contributes to discussions on rural development, sustainable livelihoods, and strategies for strengthening agricultural resilience.

The scope of the study is centered on examining the implications of migration on food security in Delta state: navigating the dilemma of the agrarian community of Abavo. The research specifically explores how migration both (regular and irregular migration) have contributed to the country's food security challenges, especially in the areas of human- capital loss, economic productivity and Infrastructural strain. Geographically, the study focuses on Delta state of Nigeria, with reference made to key destination states such as the United Kingdom, The United States of America, and the Schengen nations in Europe, where a significant number of Nigerian migrants have relocated. The research gives special attention to youth migration, giving the recent rise in the "Japa" trend among Nigerian youth.

In terms of contents, the Study critically analyses the push - and - pull factors driving migration, the socio- economic consequences of food shortage, and the attendant multi-dimensional implications for the Nigerian state.

To analyze this research and give it clear understanding, the study adopted the Push-Pull Theory of Migration propounded by Everett S. Lee in 1966. It is a leading framework that interprets unambiguously why people migrate from one place to another. It emphasizes that migration is driven by combined factors of push (negative conditions in the origin country that compel people to leave) and pull (positive conditions in the destination country that attract migrants).

Lee (1966), further averred that migration occurs when the negative conditions (push factors) in the country of origin outweigh the obstacles envisaged in the line of movement, while the positive conditions (pull factors) in the destination country act as incentives for movement. Examples of push factors forcing people to leave are high unemployment rates, insecurity (banditry, terrorism, kidnapping), poor healthcare and education, corruption and bad governance, economic instability and inflation. These factors make life difficult or unbearable for individuals, prompting them to seek better conditions elsewhere. Examples of push factors attracting people to a new place, these are the appealing features of destination countries like the UK, Canada, USA that encourage migration, and has higher stake for better job opportunities, political stability, access to quality healthcare and education, higher wages and improved standard of living, safer environment and personal freedoms. Pull factors create hope for a better life and serve as magnets for potential migrants. The forgoing scenario captures vividly the picture in Abavo community of Delta state. For Abavo, lack of modernized farming and limited rural opportunities “push” youth out, while urban centers “pull” them in.

Conceptual Clarification

Migration

Migration is the movement of individuals across geographical boundaries either internally (such as rural–urban mobility) or internationally with the aim of settling temporarily or permanently (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020). Migration can occur voluntarily, often in search of better opportunities, or involuntarily, as a result of conflict, environmental disasters, or displacement. In Nigeria, the most common form is rural–urban

migration, with young people leaving farming communities for education, wage employment, and perceived urban advantages (Adepoju, 2021).

Migration and Food Security in Nigeria

Migration in Nigeria takes the form of rural–urban, international, and conflict-induced most times and has reshaped farming and the Agricultural sector to very large extent. Youths' migration from rural areas where farming and Agricultural production takes place predominantly is particularly damaging to the economy due to the fact that youths view farming as unprofitable and move to cities for formal jobs (Adepoju, 2021). This exodus has shrunk the farming workforce, reduced productivity, and heightened reliance on food imports. According to NBS (2022), even though Agriculture still employs over 35% of Nigeria's labor force in rural areas, especially in the South-South and South-East, yet, the Geo-political zones face depopulation. In the Niger Delta, for instance, oil-related jobs pull rural dwellers away from farming, thereby weakening food production in communities and this the scenario in Abavo community (Okpara, 2020). Migration influences these dimensions by reshaping labor availability, altering income flows, and redefining consumption choices within households.

Studies further highlight the link between migration and food insecurity. Amadi and Wordu (2022), note that displacement in northern Nigeria has drastically cut food output, while Ezeh (2019) finds that remittance-dependent households often face food shortages when funds are irregular. Though remittances help with food access, they fail to address declining availability and high prices.

This study also critically examines the paradox of gender effects as male migration leaves the responsibility of farming and food provision to rest on the shoulders of women. Yet, women farmers face obstacles such as limited land rights, poor access to credits, and weak extension services (Olayemi, 2016). The "feminization of Agriculture" further deepens vulnerability of women rather than boosting productivity. The situation in Abavo is much more pitiable and worrisome as the trend of kidnapping and ransom taking by Fulani herdsmen in conjunction with the connivances of disgruntled locals speaks volume of the hardship and horrendous nightmares women face to fend for families and raise children (Iweriebor, 2025)

Food Security

Food security as defined by FAO (2015) suggests a condition in which every person has continuous physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, nutritious, and safe food for an active and healthy life. This condition is permutated around the four pillars of:

i. **Availability**: facilitated and beautified by the steady supply of food from local production or imports.
ii. **Accessibility**: A situation whereby household has the capacity physically and financially, to obtain food.
iii. **Utilization** – this ensures that food is safe for consumption and nutritionally balanced.
iv. **Stability** – the sustained ability to access food over time, unaffected by seasonal or crisis-related disruptions (FAO, 2015).

Migration and Food Security Challenges in Abavo

In African continent, migration contributes positively and also poses as a huge threat to the survival of mankind. It is a factor that has continued to shape the dynamics of unemployment, poverty and violent conflict particularly in Delta and Nigeria as an entity. Reflecting on this paradigm, Awumbila (2017) posited that rural-urban migration in Africa surged unimaginably in the 1980's especially after the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme of the Military Government of Nigeria which removed agricultural subsidies. Agreed that migrants often send remittances, these are largely directed toward food, health, and education, with minimal reinvestment in agriculture. As Ackah & Medvedev (2012) observed, and as typified in Abavo, migration has reduced household farm labour, leading to smaller farm sizes and a shift to less labour-intensive crops. World Bank (2019) notes that similar outcomes are observed in countries such as Tanzania, Ghana and Abavo community in Delta state, where male migration has resulted in the feminization of agriculture. The role of women who used to be full housewives and support-base to men have increasingly drifted to shouldering farm responsibilities but often cannot have access to credit, land ownership, and extension services support and education on new methods in order to be able to cope and move with modern trends.

Against the backdrop of insecurity that is plaguing the Abavo community and other conflict-prone areas of Delta state, forced migration and displacement further undermine food security. For example, insecurity has led to restricted access to farmland, disrupted farming cycles in Abavo and impacting negatively to the rising state of hunger in the communities (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2020). Thus, in Delta state, and Abavo in particular, migration cannot be divorced from structural inequalities, governance challenges, insecurity and climate changes, all of which work in synergy to affect food production systems.

Global Perspectives on Migration and Food Security

The globe in its entirety views migration as both a driver of development and a challenge to food security chain. The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020) emphasizes that migration can reduce poverty and enhance household welfare through remittances, but it also causes demographic imbalances and rural labour shortages. Abavo for instance that once pride itself with large-scale agricultural production now witness astronomic rural–urban migration that has significantly reduced farm labour, compelling the locals to hire Hausa migrants from the North as labourers for farm works (Deshingkar & Grimm, 2005). No doubt that remittance have contributed to improved purchasing power for households but those inflows are rarely directed toward agricultural investment (de Haas, 2010).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2017) further notes that migration affects food security through three pathways: (1) reducing the availability of agricultural labor; (2) changing household income and consumption patterns; and (3) reshaping rural gender roles. In many contexts, women take over farming responsibilities when men migrate, often without access to adequate resources or support (Tacoli, 2018).

Mendola (2008) analyzes from a view point the potentials inherent in migration to foster rural transformation. He stressed that migrants who return with new skills, knowledge, and capital may invest in agriculture that will evidently lead to modernization. Of course, this depends on policy frameworks, institutional support, and the socio-economic conditions of both origin and destination areas. Without enabling conditions, migration tends to exacerbate rural underdevelopment and food insecurity.

Abavo

Abavo formerly called **Avwu** and later **Avbavbo** is located in Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State, in southern Nigeria (Onyekpeze, 2012). It is a great community that migrated from the ancient Bini kingdom historically renowned for its agricultural production, especially yam, cassava, maize, vegetables, and palm oil. The community is organized into several villages, with farming serving as the backbone of livelihoods. Oral history and ethnographic accounts ascribe "food basket" to the people of Abavo community in the region during the mid-20th century, with its produce sold in nearby markets such as Agbor, Owa, Umunede, Ute and transported to other towns in Delta and Edo States (Okpara, 2020).

Traditionally, farming in Abavo was labour-intensive and community-based. Households relied on family labour, seasonal apprenticeships, and indigenous farming techniques that ensured food self-sufficiency. However, with modernization, need to have better prospects and the expansion of oil and service industries that now entrenched Abavo in the oil map in Delta state, young people began migrating out of the community in search of better livelihoods.

Abavo Demography and Socio-Economic Profile

According to the Delta State Statistical Yearbook (2019), Abavo has a population of approximately 120,000 people, with more than 60% engaged in agriculture at varying scales. Farming is predominantly small holder-based, with limited mechanization. The average farm size is less than 2 hectares, and productivity depends heavily on rainfall and manual labour.

Migration has significantly reshaped Abavo's demographic structure. The youth population (aged 18–35) has declined due to migration to cities such as Asaba, Benin City, Lagos, and Abuja, as well as international migration to Europe and North America. As a result, farming is now dominated by women and elderly men, many of whom lack the physical strength to maintain large farms.

Migration Patterns in Abavo

Migration in Abavo is characterized by rural-urban, international migration and seasonal migration. These three main methods shape the migration pattern in Abavo

i. Rural–Urban Migration

Majority of migrants move to close locations such as Warri, Benin City and Asaba in search of non-agricultural means of livelihood and employment while others find their to other choice

commercial hub centres in the country such as Aba, Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt etc for education and better job opportunities.

ii. International Migration

Since the 1990s, Abavo has experienced increasing migration to Europe (Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom) and North America. Remittances from international migrants play an important role in household income, but they are not systematically invested in agriculture.

iii Seasonal Migration

Some youths engage in seasonal migration, leaving during planting or harvest off-seasons to seek temporary work in cities, returning only during peak farming periods. However, this pattern has declined as permanent migration has become more common.

The Implication of Migration on Agriculture

There is no gainsaying the fact that migration has taken toll on Agriculture in Abavo. Some of the attendant consequences of are established below:

i. **Decline in food output**: the famous Abavo market is at its ebb with local traders counting losses as a result of low patronages. Marketers have reported reduced supplies of yam, cassava, and vegetables, previously abundant in Abavo.
ii. **Labor shortages**: Youth migration reduces the availability of farm labour, leading to smaller farm sizes and reduced productivity. Villages (rural area) are grossly depopulated as result the search for greener pastures and the risks of being kidnapped in the farm.
iii. **Import Dependency**: Abavo, though produces for households use is increasingly becoming dependent on food supplies from other parts of the Nigeria federation; a worrisome dimension that is undermining local food sovereignty.
iv. **Aging farming population**: With fewer young farmers, Agriculture is sustained primarily by elderly men and women, who face physical limitations. Youths still in villages are adjudged the never-do-well and without future.
v. **Shift in farming practices**: Traditional cooperative farming such as communal labour groups, friend, family and son in-law's assistance have all gone with the wind of time and replaced by individualized, small-scale farming.

Gender Dimensions

Migration has produced a **feminization of Agriculture** in Abavo where women hold the ace and represent the larger chunk of the farming population, often combining farm work with household chores and care-giving roles. Nevertheless, women are grossly inhibited by structural barriers of the society through limited access to land ownership (as women are discriminated access to patriarchal inheritances). Another female hindrance is higher vulnerability to poverty due to overwork and low yields (Olayemi, 2016). Inadequate access to Agricultural credits and extension services contribute food shortage and migration deepens gender inequalities, with women bearing the brunt of food insecurity challenges in the community.

The Role of Remittances

Remittances from Abavo migrants play a mixed role in household food security. While they provide cash for food purchases, healthcare, and education, they are rarely invested in modern agricultural tools, inputs, or mechanization. This reflects the **consumption-oriented use of remittances,** which improves short-term welfare but undermines long-term agricultural sustainability (de Haas, 2010).

Households that rely heavily on remittances may also face food insecurity when remittance flows are unstable, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when global economic disruptions reduced migrant earnings (IOM, 2020).

Findings and Discussion

The study of Abavo community reveals that migration has multidimensional implications for food security, reflecting both challenges and opportunities. The findings are presented thematically under six key areas: agricultural productivity, food prices, nutrition, gender roles, remittances, and cultural knowledge. These findings are further situated within the national Nigerian context.

Decline in Agricultural Productivity:

The most immediate impact of migration on Abavo is the decline in agricultural productivity. Youth migration reduces the availability of able-bodied labor, leading to shrinking farm sizes and a reduction in crop yields. Traditionally, Abavo was known for its large yam and cassava farms, but outmigration has forced households to scale down farming activities.

This finding aligns with Awumbila (2017), who noted that in many African rural communities, outmigration leads to the underutilization of farmland. In Abavo, interviews with local farmers reported in Delta State agricultural reports (2019) indicate that previously cultivated farmlands now lie fallow because of labor shortages. As mechanization is limited and capital-intensive, smallholder farmers struggle to sustain productivity.

Nationally, this mirrors broader Nigerian trends where rural–urban migration has reduced agricultural output. The NBS (2022) observed that despite over one-third of Nigerians being employed in agriculture, productivity remains low due to the outflow of labor and underinvestment in technology. This undermines national food self-sufficiency targets.

Rising Food Prices

Another significant finding is the rising cost of food in Abavo. As agricultural productivity declines, food supply in local markets diminishes, leading to price increases. For instance, yam and cassava, once abundant in Abavo markets, are now purchased from neighboring communities such as Umunede, Alifekede-Agbor and Boji-Boji Owa, driving up household food expenditure. This reflects FAO's (2017) assertion that migration-induced labor shortages and reduced local production often shift communities from being food producers to net consumers. In Abavo, reliance on external food supplies creates vulnerability to market fluctuations and transportation costs.

At the national level, food inflation remains a pressing concern in Nigeria. According to the NBS (2022), food inflation in 2021–2022 was driven partly by reduced local production due to insecurity and rural outmigration. Thus, Abavo's experience resonates with broader economic realities.

Nutritional Insecurity

Migration also affects food utilization and nutrition. Reduced agricultural diversity in Abavo means that households consume fewer vegetables, legumes, and protein-rich foods, relying instead on starchy staples such as yam and cassava. Nutritional insecurity manifests in poor dietary balance, particularly among children and women.

Tacoli (2018) argues that migration-driven changes in food systems often reduce dietary diversity, worsening malnutrition in rural areas. In Abavo, remittances sometimes improve access to imported or processed foods, but these are not always nutritionally adequate. Hence, while caloric intake may be sustained, dietary quality suffers. This reflects national statistics: UNICEF (2021) estimates that over 30% of Nigerian children under five are stunted due to poor nutrition, a situation worsened by declining agricultural productivity in rural communities.

Gendered Burden and Feminization of Agriculture

Migration has significantly altered gender dynamics in Abavo. With men migrating to urban centers or abroad, women have become the primary labor force in agriculture. This feminization of agriculture has increased women's workload, forcing them to combine farming with household responsibilities. However, structural barriers such as limited land rights, poor access to credit, and inadequate agricultural extension services restrict women's productivity. Olayemi (2016) emphasizes that despite women constituting the majority of rural farmers in Nigeria, they face systemic disadvantages that limit their contributions to food security.

In Abavo, women's farming activities are often small-scale and subsistence-oriented, as they lack the resources to expand production. This results in a vicious cycle where women overwork leads to reduced productivity, thereby worsening food insecurity.

Remittances: A Mixed Blessing

Remittances from Abavo migrants play a complex role in household food security. On one hand, they increase household income, allowing families to purchase food, pay school fees, and cover healthcare costs. On the other hand, remittances are rarely invested in farming, meaning that local agricultural capacity continues to decline.

This supports de Haas's (2010) argument that remittances are often directed toward consumption rather than productive investment. In Abavo, remittances improve short-term access to food but do not enhance long-term food availability. Moreover, households that rely heavily on remittances face risks when these financial flows are disrupted, as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when many international migrants lost their jobs (IOM, 2020).

Loss of Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Practices

Migration has also disrupted the transmission of indigenous farming knowledge in Abavo. Traditionally, farming techniques, seed preservation methods, and seasonal crop calendars were passed from one generation to the next. However, with youth increasingly absent from rural farming, this knowledge is gradually being lost. Adepoju (2021) warns that migration not only depletes labor but also erodes cultural capital essential for agricultural sustainability. In Abavo, older farmers lament that traditional yam cultivation methods and communal farming systems are disappearing, threatening agricultural resilience.

National Implications

The Abavo case reflects broader Nigerian realities. Across the country, migration exacerbates food insecurity by reducing rural labor, disrupting agricultural practices, and straining household welfare. In northern Nigeria, insecurity-driven displacement has displaced millions of farmers, sharply reducing national food output (Amadi & Wordu, 2022). In southern Nigeria, rural–urban migration undermines food-producing communities, while international migration drains human capital.

This convergence highlights Nigeria's migration–food security paradox: while migration provides households with remittances and opportunities, it simultaneously weakens the country's agricultural base. Unless addressed through deliberate policy interventions, migration will continue to undermine Nigeria's quest for food security.

Conclusion

This study examined the implications of migration on food security in Nigeria, with a focus on Abavo community in Delta State. The findings reveal a complex paradox: while migration provides remittances and short-term financial relief, it simultaneously undermines agricultural productivity, disrupts food systems, and threatens long-term food security.

In Abavo, migration has led to labor shortages, rising food prices, declining nutritional diversity, and a growing burden on women farmers. Although remittances offer some relief, they are often channeled into consumption rather than agricultural investment. At the national level, these local realities resonate with Nigeria's broader struggle to achieve sustainable food security amid rural outmigration, insecurity, and climate pressures.

The study concludes that Nigeria must adopt integrated strategies that transform rural agriculture, empower women and youth, and channel remittances into agribusiness investment. For Abavo and similar communities, this requires balancing migration's economic benefits with deliberate policies that strengthen local food systems.

Unless such interventions are implemented, migration will continue to exacerbate the dilemma of food insecurity in Nigeria. However, with proactive governance, inclusive agricultural reforms, and effective rural development policies, migration could be transformed from a threat into a catalyst for sustainable food security

Recommendations

The findings from Abavo underscore the paradoxical role of migration in shaping food security outcomes in Nigeria. To mitigate the negative effects while maximizing the benefits, several policy recommendations are proposed.

i. **Agricultural Modernization and Mechanization:** Given that migration has reduced the availability of labor in Abavo, there is an urgent need to promote agricultural mechanization. Government programs such as the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) should be revitalized and adapted to smallholder farmers. Mechanization subsidies, cooperative ownership of tractors, and access to improved seedlings can compensate for labor shortages (Olayemi, 2016). In Abavo, providing affordable mechanized equipment will enable farmers, particularly women and the elderly, to maintain productivity despite outmigration.

ii. **Harnessing Remittances for Agribusiness:** Remittances, while improving household consumption, rarely enhance local agricultural productivity. Policies should therefore encourage the productive use of remittances through incentives such as matching grants, tax exemptions for agribusiness investment, and community-based cooperative schemes. As de Haas (2010) argues, remittances can play a transformative role when directed toward long-term development. If Abavo households invest part of their remittance income in farming, agribusiness, and food processing, food security will be strengthened.

iii. **Rural Infrastructure and Youth Empowerment:** The push and pull factors manifestation is glaring in Abavo in the face of the exodus of youth from community. There is need to up rural infrastructure such as roads, electricity, irrigation, and storage facilities that can reduce the curiosity and thirst for migration. Youths should be empowered with skills in Agro-business, Agro-processing and ICT which will make rural farming more attractive (World Bank, 2020). Special programme for youth-led cooperative farming enterprises could transform Abavo into a model of rural renewal.

iv. **Gender-Sensitive Agricultural Support:** Since women now constitute the majority of Abavo farmers, policies must address gender disparities. This includes ensuring women's access to land rights, credit facilities, agricultural inputs, and extension services. UN Women (2019) highlights that closing the gender gap in agriculture could increase yields by up to 30%, significantly boosting food security. In Abavo, empowering women farmers will improve both household nutrition and community resilience.

v. **Environmental and Climate Resilience:** Migration is not only driven by economic factors but also by environmental stress, including soil degradation and climate change. Policies should therefore prioritize climate-smart agriculture, reforestation, and sustainable land management practices. FAO (2017) recommends integrating climate adaptation strategies into rural agricultural programs. For Abavo, this means reintroducing traditional crop rotation practices, alongside modern innovations like drought-resistant seeds.

vi. **Security and Governance Reforms:** In Nigeria more broadly, rural insecurity including farmer–herder conflicts and banditry exacerbates migration and food insecurity. Strengthening local governance, community policing, and conflict resolution systems is essential. In Abavo, security interventions would encourage youth to remain in the community and invest in farming. Stronger local governance can also ensure that agricultural development funds reach intended beneficiaries.

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