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A New Path for Northern Ontario: Governance and Economic Development Considerations for a Strong and Sustainable North

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Mr. MacKinnon is a frequent commentator on Canadian fiscal issues.

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Mr. MacKinnon served in several senior capacities in the Ontario Ministry of Finance, the Bank of Montreal and as CEO of the Ontario Hospital Association from 1996 to 2003. He was CEO of the Ontario Development Corporation, Ontario's principal economic development agency, from 1986 to 1993.

He currently serves as Vice Chair of Quinte Health Care, a four-site community hospital in Eastern Ontario and is a Past Chair, West Park Healthcare Center, a Toronto rehabilitation hospital. He recently completed a 12 year term on the board of the Canadian Standards Association including several years as Chair of its Finance Committee. He is a Governor of Loyalist College in Belleville.

Mr. MacKinnon has been involved with and a student of Northern Ontario for fifty years, including responsibilities in health care and economic development that have affected every community in Northern Ontario. He currently lives in Prince Edward County.



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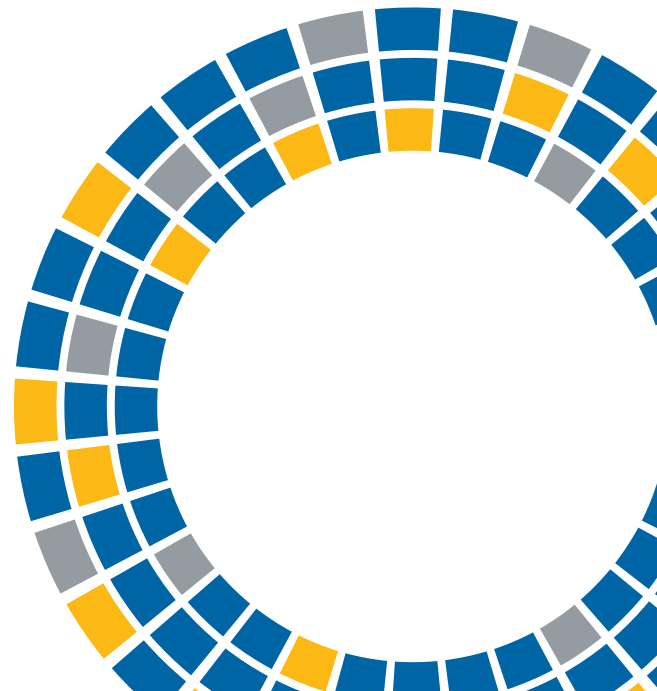
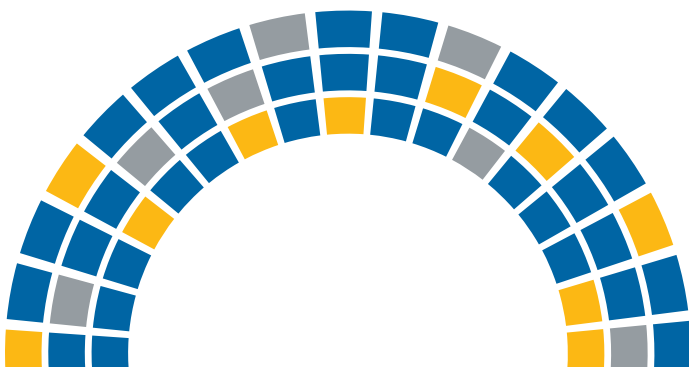
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Executive Summary

There is a serious need to revitalize and rethink the current governance and economic development practices of Northern Ontario. Indeed, as this report shows, there are areas of economic and governing weakness in Northern Ontario that need to be addressed. To do so, the author conducted key informant interviews with a range of business and government leaders from across Northern Ontario in order to expand upon the recommendations published in “A New Northern Lens: Looking Out Is as Important as Looking In” (2015) and “Governance in Northern Ontario: Taking Ownership of the Future” (2016). Some of the recommendations from these reports are:

- Northerners should take greater responsibility for their region and provide specific guidance to governments, rather than the reverse.
- Reviewing and adopting the socio-economic strategies practiced by Indigenous people in other countries ought to be seriously considered.
- An appropriately designed new micro loans program for Northern Ontario ought to be implemented. Such a program could be complementary to the Community Futures program.
- Northern Ontario’s business, municipal, and Indigenous leaders and provincial organizations should develop and present to the Ontario government a plan to implement regional governments throughout the North.

Introduction

In 2015 and 2016, Northern Policy Institute (NPI) published two papers – “A New Northern Lens: Looking Out Is as Important as Looking In” (MacKinnon 2015) and “Governance in Northern Ontario: Taking Ownership of the Future” (MacKinnon 2016) that made recommendations for a different future path for Northern Ontario. To update and test these recommendations against real-world experience and information, key informant interviews were conducted with several business and government leaders from across Northern Ontario.

As a result of these and other conversations with Northerners the original recommendations have been enlarged and new themes have been added. Revised recommendations have been developed to aid major change in Northern Ontario. And major change is needed. In both governance and economic performance, Northern Ontario is not only failing to realize its full potential; it is also underperforming other northern regions in Canada and elsewhere (Conteh and Segsworth 2013; MacKinnon 2015; Palladini 2011). Indeed, according to the federal government’s 2018 “Prosperity and Growth Strategy for Northern Ontario,” Northern Ontario has the lowest gross domestic product per capita – \$38,318 – of any region in Canada (Canada 2018). While this is but one factor, overall economic underperformance as noted earlier matters, not just for Ontario and Canada, but also globally. It is important to remember Northern Ontario is one of the largest northern regions in the world in terms of population. Also, its population is larger than that of Alaska and is much larger than Iceland, which is, of course, an independent country (MacKinnon 2015; US Census Bureau n.d.; Statistics Iceland 2018).

There is, however, little recognition of this performance problem in Northern Ontario itself. Indeed, thinking in the North about the North is astonishingly insular, judging from many government documents and much academic literature about the region (see, for example, Conteh and Segsworth 2013; Ontario 2011), which rarely mention the experiences of other countries and jurisdictions that could offer lessons about growth and governance in Ontario’s North.



The Current Situation

Economic development and governance are closely linked, and a jurisdiction is much more likely to grow if its internal governance is strong. This relationship has been amply documented by the World Bank (Lateef 2016) and by individual commentators (such as Graham, Amos, and Plumtre 2003). Unfortunately, Northern Ontario's economic performance in recent years has been relatively poor, and continues to be weak (Ontario 2018). Additionally, students of Northern Ontario's governance have been troubled by its weaknesses (see, for example, Conteh and Segsworth 2013; MacKinnon 2016). Municipal organizations often lack the scale to discharge basic functions, the sophistication found in regional governments is lacking, wide divisions between big and small municipalities are evident, and structures differ greatly from one part of the region to another. Further, there is substantial evidence that Northern Ontario has too many small governments that limit the capacity of municipal governments to discharge their responsibilities. For example, the District of Timiskaming has 23 municipalities of various types for a population of about 30,000 (Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities 2013).

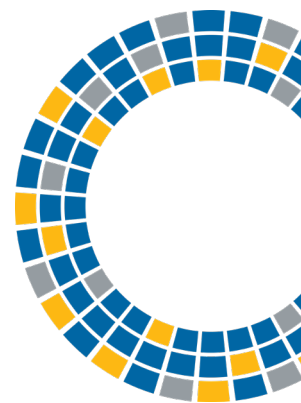
There are also significant issues relating to Indigenous governance and economic development in Northern Ontario (Flanagan 2000; Graham 2012). On the governance point, one example Graham points to is the numerous federal departments First Nations have to communicate with, thus creating difficulty in terms of coordination (Graham 2012).

There is also evidence that another path exists that Ontario ought to explore more thoroughly. This is strengthening linkages with the non-Indigenous economy and cultural preservation as practised by the Sami people of Scandinavia. There are many historical parallels between the experiences of Ontario First Nations communities and the Sami people, including problems with residential schools, the erosion of Indigenous languages, and extensive discrimination over many years. These problems largely disappeared in Scandinavia in the decades after the Second World War: the socio-economic status of the Sami people is now the same as the rest of the population, and efforts to preserve Sami culture have been very successful. These successes, particularly in relation to health and life expectancy, are very different from the experience of First Nations communities in Ontario. For these reasons, the Sami example merits close study by Northern Ontarians (see Burgos n.d; Norum and Nieder 2012).

Previous Recommendations

The two NPI papers cited at the beginning of this paper make several recommendations with respect to Northern Ontario's governance and economic performance. Among the most important of these were that (MacKinnon 2015; MacKinnon 2016):

- Regional governments should be established across Northern Ontario;
- Further devolution of powers to the North or of a separate new province should be discouraged;
- Northerners should spend at least as much effort looking out at the rest of the world as they do looking inward; greatly strengthened relationships with the northern regions of other provinces and countries should be a priority;
- Northerners should not benchmark their economic performance against the southern part of the province;
- Northerners should recognize that the primary sectors, while significant, are not nearly as important as they once were, and will likely be relatively less significant in the future;
- Northerners should not rely on leadership from government to improve both economic performance or the quality of governance; and
- Tourism and mining regulation need to be reimagined.



What Northerners Say

These and other ideas were explored informally with many individuals in the North, and were the focus of interviews with key informants. Several themes emerged from these interviews:

1. There is significant disenchantment with the roles and performance of governments in the North. This pattern is not unique to Northern Ontario, and might be more a matter of unrealistic expectations of government than of any other factor.
2. There is no unanimous support for the implementation of regional governance in the North, although substantially more support the idea than oppose it. Some think it should be implemented differently in different parts of the North; others think it should be implemented gradually.
3. Regionalization is happening informally in all parts of Northern Ontario. A few examples are:
 - The Kenora District Services Board;
 - Regional delivery of fire services, building inspections, and social services in Kapuskasing and smaller communities around it;
 - Regular meetings of mayors of large urban centres in the North to review major issues affecting their communities, a structure that opens positive possibilities for future development;
 - The emergence of the City of Greater Sudbury with the 2001 amalgamation of Capreol, Nickel Centre, and other communities, as well as some unincorporated townships;
 - The Wataynikaneyap Transmission Project, in which 24 isolated First Nations communities have collaborated with Hydro One to get remote communities off the use of diesel fuel for power generation;
 - Partial amalgamations in Temiskaming and in the Parry Sound area, which started but later stalled and which some see as meriting closer study on what can go wrong with such amalgamation processes;
 - Extensive efforts by the City of North Bay to collaborate with surrounding communities;
 - The District of Timiskaming Social Services Administration Board.
4. The principal barrier to regionalization is financial — all smaller communities fear tax increases.
5. A secondary barrier is the feeling by smaller communities that larger centres are insufficiently sensitive to population declines in these communities.
6. A third barrier is that some in the larger centres feel that the smaller communities are trying to hang on in the face of very challenging economic forces when, in fact, managed decline would be the better policy.
7. The Ontario government has not been sufficiently supportive of regionalization efforts, and has few policies that would effectively address existing regional fragmentation.
8. The Northern community has too much internal division and conflict relative to its population, a theme that also appears in the academic literature (see, for example, Conteh and Segsworth 2013; MacGregor 2018).
9. Women need to play a broader role in the North's political realm, but they may be losing ground rather than gaining it, particularly in terms of the composition of municipal councils (Sharma 2018). In six major centers — Greater Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay, Timmins, and Kenora — the share of women on city councils ranges between 15 and 33 per cent (PoliticsNow n.d.).
10. Many Northerners have insufficient knowledge of matters relating to Indigenous communities elsewhere, particularly in other provinces and other countries. Many ideas and practices in the global Indigenous experience could complement the local knowledge of First Nations communities and could also benefit all Northerners (Diamond 2012).
11. Most Northern leaders have little understanding of or interest in conditions in other northern regions in Canada and elsewhere.
12. There is widespread pessimism about the future of Northern Ontario and a clear sense that minor incremental changes will not address the region's problems. Most people are dissatisfied with incrementalism of the type they have experienced for many years.
13. Some Northern leaders feel they are being ground down by the pressures they face and the lack of progress on long-standing and obvious problems.



Recommended Themes

For the future, Northern Ontario should look to government much less than it has in the past. Governments have less capacity to lead due to budget circumstances and rapid global change (particularly the emergence of the digital economy). Moreover, they have demonstrated their failure to lead in other Canadian regions, particularly Atlantic Canada (McMahon 2000; Steele 2014). For these reasons, Northerners should take greater responsibility for their region and provide specific guidance to governments, rather than the reverse. This change might not be easy in a region where the scale of government, relative to the regional economy, is larger than in the rest of Ontario.

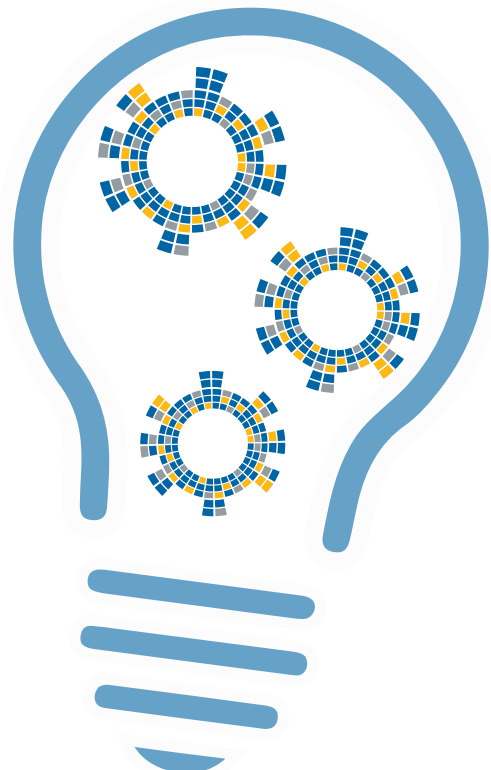
Another theme is the reverse of the first. Northern Ontario should create strong alliances with leading private organizations to generate the ideas necessary for a new approach to northern economic development. For example, the Conference Board of Canada has long been interested in Canada's North (Palladini 2011). Similarly, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce is very active in the region, and organizations such as the Alliance of Manufacturers and Exporters and the Information Technology Association of Canada have important analytical capabilities that could benefit the region's economic development. Furthermore, the Business Council of Canada and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce have the capacity to mobilize Canada's business leaders in efforts to revitalize the Northern Ontario economy. Finally, dialogue with the Canadian Bankers Association and similar organizations is recommended.

Revitalizing Northern Ontario's economy should not be seen exclusively as a northern project. The region's population is greater than that of three of the four Atlantic provinces and is around seven times the total population of the three northern territories taken together (Statistics Canada 2019). Northern Ontario's economic renewal consequently should be viewed as an important national project.

Additionally, immediate steps should be taken to encourage start-ups. Start-ups contribute to the economy by creating jobs, but they also encourage innovation, the growth of an entrepreneurial culture, and personal independence. Many are technology based, which means that geography could be a less important impediment to growth in Northern Ontario if the number of start-ups increased substantially (Lamb and Seddon 2016). An important priority should be to improve the deficient information and communications technology infrastructure and connectivity in the North (Canada 2018). Encouraging start-ups could also help

women further expand their substantial contributions to the economic life of the North. For the past ten years, growth in the number of female-owned companies in Canada has been substantially faster than growth in the number of those owned by males; the same pattern is evident in employment in female-owned enterprises (Grekou, Li, and Liu 2018).

A further theme relates to Indigenous peoples. The number of First Nations people who live in cities in all parts of Northern Canada is greater than the number who live on reserve (Alberta 2017). In Ontario, only 23 percent of First Nations people live on reserve (Ontario 2019). This suggests that there are very serious limits to economic opportunity on reserves that many First Nations people are recognizing by voting with their feet. The full implications of this pattern should be better understood so that the personal transitions people experience when they move can be supported as much as possible.



Specific Recommendations

The many informal conversations and formal interviews undertaken for this study have generally validated the recommendations made in the two previous NPI papers and the directions summarized above. From these discussions, some of the early recommendations should be enlarged and some new ones added:

- Northern business, community, and Indigenous leaders, operating independently from government, should package the initiatives recommended in this and previous NPI studies, as well as some of those from other observers, into a major initiative to renew the Northern Ontario economy. Provincial and national organizations should also be enlisted in the effort and the branding necessary to sell this idea to all Canadians should be developed.
- Northern Ontario's business, municipal, and Indigenous leaders and provincial organizations such as the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, should develop and present to the Ontario government a plan to implement regional governments throughout the North. To alleviate the very real concerns some have about such an initiative, the plan should incorporate mediation and dispute settlement processes to deal with the inevitable financial and operational problems that would emerge. The plan should also be implemented over time, and should evolve from existing regional organizations and existing larger municipalities and districts.
- Northern leaders, especially from Indigenous communities, should undertake a full review of Indigenous experiences in other jurisdictions to learn more about possible strategies to reduce the extent to which the economic welfare and social conditions of First Nations people lag those of the rest of the region's population. Such a review should also identify aspects of the global Indigenous experience that, if adapted to the circumstances of Northern Ontario, could benefit all Northerners.

- Northern leaders should recommend that a large new micro loans program be implemented, across the North, in partnership with the chartered banks and credit unions.

The federal government already provides funding for lending by Community Futures Development Corporations. From 2009 to 2014 these corporations provided \$398 million for all regions of Ontario. The effect of the program has clearly been positive, but it is relatively small in relation to the needs of the North (Antunes 2015).

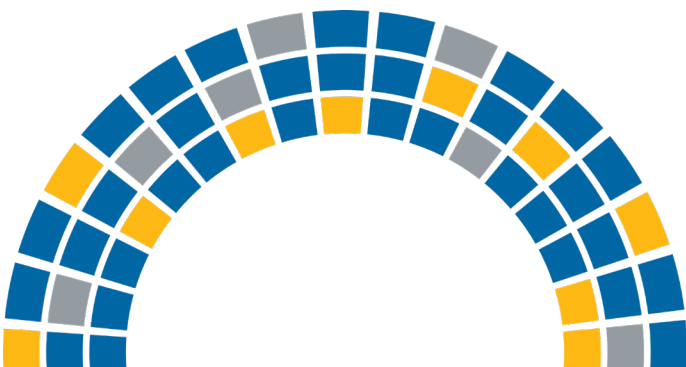
The new program should be an updated version of the New Ventures program operated by Ontario in the 80s and 90s. Under that program, chartered banks and credit unions provided loans to start-up enterprises (up to \$15,000) to match contributions from owners of the new enterprises. The Ontario government funded a portion of the loan losses experienced by financial institutions.

Evaluations of the New Ventures program done at the time demonstrated that the program had a major economic impact, with particular benefit for women (Ontario Legislative Assembly, various) and that loan losses were much lower than anticipated, making the program very cost effective for the provincial government.

A new program of this type could help avoid population loss and other demographic problems across the North. It could also help start-ups develop links with financial institutions that would be helpful at all stages as the new firms grow.

The global experience with micro loan programs of this type has generally been positive (Kiisel 2015).

- Local municipal leaders should convene a forum, including local business and Indigenous leaders and the major national organizations listed above, to form a renewal committee to develop a Northern Economic Renewal Plan and present it to Northerners. The committee should focus strictly on economic development and related financial issues and opportunities. Political leaders and other organizations should be involved at later stages.



Conclusion

Northern Ontario's future could be much brighter if the region were to open up more to the rest of the world, heed the lessons of experiences elsewhere, and develop local Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders who can take it on a different path. Above all, Northerners need to take charge themselves by partnering more and differently with the private sector and by using the existing mechanisms of government more effectively and more selectively. Dr. Charles Conteh has come to a broadly similar conclusion, noting: "The region is thus at a crossroads: it can continue to rely on the provincial and federal governments to respond to legitimate requests, and hope that the answer is both timely and positive; or it can chart a course to making the structural changes in its economy to meet present and future challenges" (Conteh 2013, 45).

The choice seems clear.



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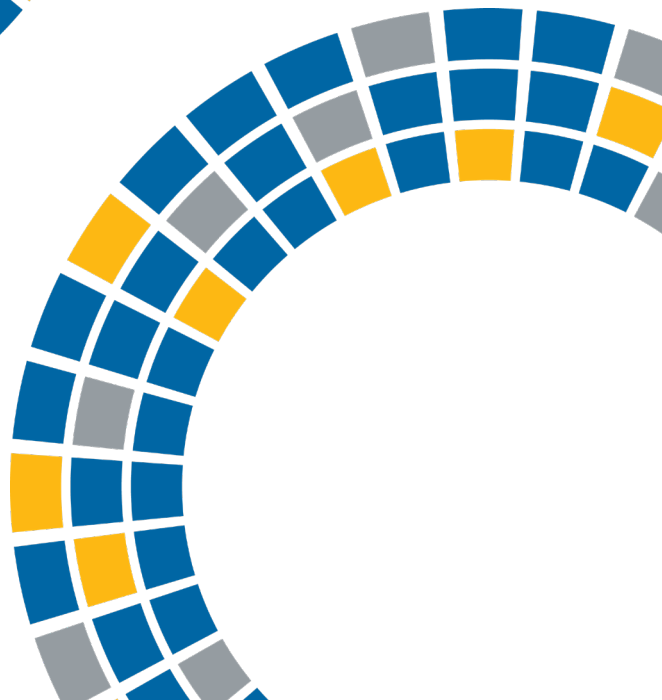
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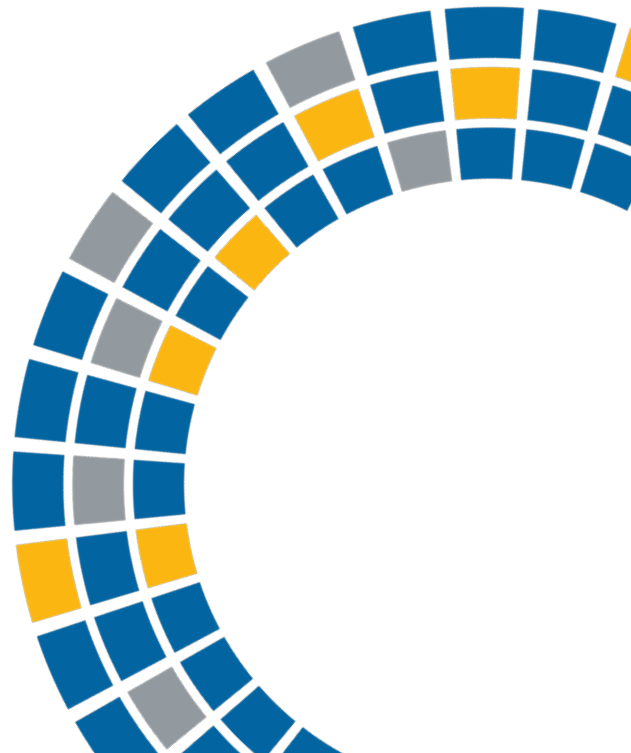
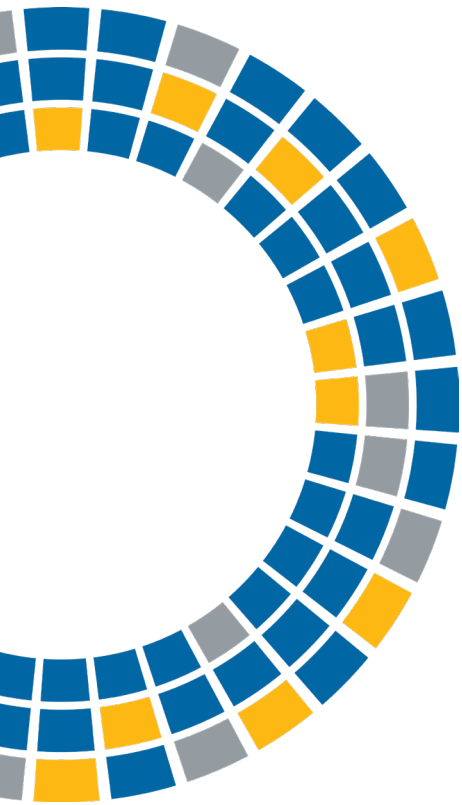
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