

POLICY BRIEF



The Added Value of Psychosocial Support on Sustainable Peacebuilding in Ethiopia



**American
Friends
Service
Committee**

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ACRONYMS

ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
ALLMEP	Alliance for Middle East Peace
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
AU	African Union
CSO	Civil Society Organization
ECSA-HC	East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HEPRRP	Health Emergency Preparedness, Response and Resilience Program
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IICBA	International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoP	Ministry of Peace
MoWSA	Ministry of Women and Social Affairs
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PFA	Psychological First Aid
PSS	Psychosocial Support
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
WB	World Bank
WHFCE	Wide Horizon for Children in Ethiopia
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ethiopia stands at a critical crossroads being exposed to prolonged conflict, inter-ethnic violence, displacement, and human rights violations that inflicted deep psychosocial and social harm. These crises go beyond physical survival without psychosocial healing; reconciliation and sustainable peace remain out of reach. Conflict-related mental health and psychosocial distress has become a silent emergency affecting children, youth, adults, teachers, and economic actors. High levels of anxiety, depression, fear, and social withdrawal combined with limited access to services—fuel mistrust, reduce civic participation, and perpetuate trauma-driven violence. Psychosocial support (PSS) is therefore not an add-on but a precondition for social cohesion, reconciliation, and lasting peace.

Evidence from Ethiopia and global post-conflict contexts shows that integrating mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into peacebuilding accelerates recovery, stabilizes communities, and enables meaningful participation in reconciliation and transitional justice. AFSC (2025) findings from Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Amhara, and Tigray confirm that PSS strengthens trust, dialogue, and social reintegration. International experiences from South Africa to Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Colombia demonstrate that peace processes are more durable when trauma healing is combined with justice, community dialogue, youth engagement, and livelihood recovery.

Ethiopia's indigenous conflict resolution and healing mechanisms such as Jaarsummaa, Shimgelena, Abagar, Manga, Nemo, Sher-Kesha, and communal mourning traditions offer culturally legitimate entry points for psychosocial healing. When combined with trauma-informed counseling, psychoeducation, faith-based support, and community networks, these approaches reduce stigma, restore dignity, rebuild mutual trust, and strengthen community social cohesion and ensure sustainable peace.

Despite existing mental health and peacebuilding strategies, major gaps persist. PSS services remain fragmented, under-resourced, lack of trained personnel, largely NGO-driven, with weak coordination and limited integration into justice, education, and peacebuilding systems. The absence of a dedicated national PSS policy has resulted in inconsistent service quality, unclear responsibilities, and limited access.

This policy brief proposes a PSS–Peace building Pathway linking emotional healing with recovery and resilience: (1) crisis stabilization, (2) trauma healing, (3) community cohesion and reconciliation, (4) livelihood recovery, and (5) institutional integration and prevention that leads to enhanced community resilience, social cohesion, mutual trust and durable peace. The Strategies include integrating cultural practices, training community actors, launching awareness campaigns, and securing long-term funding. Programs must be inclusive and locally grounded (AFSC, 2025).

As a conclusion, institutionalizing psychosocial support as a core pillar of peacebuilding and transitional justice is essential for Ethiopia’s recovery. Through coordinated, multi-sectoral action that embeds trauma-informed and culturally grounded approaches across justice, education, health, livelihoods, and governance systems, Ethiopia can transform trauma into collective healing and build inclusive, resilient, and lasting peace.

POLICY BRIEF DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The policy brief was developed using a systematic approach that combined a comprehensive desk review of relevant literature, including academic studies, government policy documents, NGO and intergovernmental reports, and grey literature, with consultations of key stakeholders to ensure practical relevance and accuracy. The study done by AFSC (2025) on “The Added Value of Psychosocial Support on Sustainable Peace building in Ethiopia” was the springboard for the preparation of the policy brief. Evidence from these sources was analyzed using thematic clustering, grouping findings into core themes such as context, why PSS in peace building, experiences across the world more important in Africa and particularly in Ethiopia policy gaps, challenges, and best practices helped in deducing actionable recommendations.

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationships between interventions, processes, and outcomes, highlighting PSS -impact peace building, policy decisions and contributes to sustainable impact. This methodological approach ensured that the policy brief is both evidence-driven and strategically focused for policy input.

CONTEXT

ETHIOPIA AT A CROSSROAD: Ethiopia's recurring political instability, inter-ethnic violence, and human rights violations have left deep social and psychological scars. Despite reforms, unresolved grievances persist. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2025) reports hundreds of conflict incidents with fatalities—especially in Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray—while United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2025) estimates over 20 million people need humanitarian assistance and millions remain displaced, with conflicts disrupting livelihoods and pushing communities toward famine-level hunger. Human Rights Watch (2025) continues to document grave abuses. The crisis extends beyond survival—lasting peace requires psychosocial healing, restored trust, and inclusive transitional justice.

A SILENT EMERGENCY: Conflict-affected children in Afar and Amhara face severe MHPSS challenges, including anxiety, fear, anger, depression, heightened conflict awareness, and social withdrawal (Women Empowerment in Action, 2024). Across Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia, and Somali, 54% of micro small and medium enterprise members experience psychosocial difficulties, mainly depression (59%), reduced work performance (57.8%), and general distress (52.8%) with the highest burdens in Afar and Amhara (First Consult, 2023). Crises fuel isolation, substance use, and diminished trust, while 54.8% report no access to formal psychological support, and existing services remain rare and limited, showing traditional systems are insufficient for complex needs.

This holistic model demonstrates that peace building cannot succeed without healing the invisible wounds of conflict, making psychosocial recovery a cornerstone of sustainable reconciliation and development. It is obvious that untreated distress blocks reconciliation by fueling fear, anger, and withdrawal. If people did not heal well, they avoid dialogue, mistrust others, and remain isolated and weakening social bonds. Lasting peace cannot grow where psychological wounds are ignored. These highlight that psychosocial support (PSS) is a precondition for the peace building process.

TEACHERS ARE ALSO HEAVILY AFFECTED: A Wide Horizon for Children in Ethiopia (WHFCE, 2025) study in Sidama, Addis Ababa, and Tigray found over one-quarter of teachers have severe or extremely severe PTSD (25.9%), with additional 25.5% moderate and 12.6% mild symptoms; only 36% reported normal functioning. Male teachers showed slightly higher severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder /PTSD rates. Similarly, UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (UNESCO/IICBA, 2024) documented widespread anxiety, anger, withdrawal, depression, fear, conflict sensitivity, and low self-confidence across Afar, Amhara, and Tigray highlighting the heavy emotional toll on educators and the urgent need for systemic mental health support in schools.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AS A DRIVER OF PEACEBUILDING: The AFSC (2025) study highlights the transformative role of psychosocial support (PSS) in Ethiopia's conflict-affected regions—Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Amhara, and Tigray. The cumulative evidence from conflict-affected regions of Ethiopia shows that mental health and psychosocial distress is not only a public health concern but a core peace building priority. When large segments of the population experience sustained distress, their ability to reconcile, rebuild relationships, participate in local governance, restore livelihoods, and contribute to community stability is significantly undermined. Investing in MHPSS services contributes directly to healing individuals, stabilizing communities, and creating the social foundations necessary for sustainable peace in Ethiopia's conflict-affected areas.

Psychosocial support (PSS) enables transitional justice and reconciliation by creating safe spaces for survivors to share their experiences, participate in community-based justice, and engage in culturally rooted healing rituals. Integrated into peace building efforts, PSS fosters dignity, trust, and sustainable social cohesion. These goes with the mandates of AFSC that include advancing peace building, social cohesion, transitional justice policy influencing and humanitarian support.

CULTURALLY ROOTED HEALING: Blending Ethiopia's traditional mechanisms—such as Jaarsummaa mediation in Oromia, Manga , Nemo, and Sher-Kesha in Benishangul-Gumuz, Abagar elders' councils and Shimgelena in Amhara, and Tigray's communal mourning practices—with trauma-informed approaches creates culturally grounded pathways for healing. When paired with psychoeducation, counseling, support circles, spiritual guidance, storytelling, and Iddir networks, these practices strengthen emotional recovery, rebuild trust, and enhance community-level peacebuilding. These trauma-informed counseling strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of protection and reintegration interventions. These culturally rooted practices carry social authority and community trust, while trauma-informed approaches ensure safety, dignity, and non-traumatization.

When these culturally rooted healings are combined with psychoeducation, counseling, support circles, spiritual guidance, storytelling, and Iddir networks, this blended model promotes emotional recovery, reduces stigma, restores social belonging, and supports community-level peacebuilding, contributing to sustainable reintegration outcomes.

WHY PSS FOR PEACEBUILDING?

Psychosocial support (PSS) has emerged as a cornerstone of sustainable peacebuilding because it addresses trauma, rebuilds trust, and strengthens community resilience. Global experiences demonstrate its effectiveness when integrated into peace processes. For example, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided counseling and safe spaces for testimony, transforming personal trauma into collective healing, and laying a foundation for reconciliation. In Colombia, PSS combined with community rebuilding and livelihood support helped displaced communities regain trust in institutions and reduced the risk of relapse into conflict. Uganda's reintegration of former child soldiers blended traditional rituals with counseling, enabling reintegration, reducing stigma, promoting forgiveness, and strengthening social cohesion (UNDP, 2022). Similar approaches in Liberia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Afghanistan have shown that combining trauma healing with community dialogues, traditional rituals, youth programs, and livelihood interventions fosters long-term resilience and reduces cycles of violence (ACAPS, 2024; ALLMEP, 2024; Child Protection Forum, 2023; Interpeace, 2023; MHPSS Network, 2023).

In Ethiopia, decades of inter-ethnic conflict and political instability have left deep psychological scars, creating urgent PSS needs. Recent studies emphasize that interventions such as trauma counseling, community dialogues, reconciliation workshops, and culturally adapted rituals are essential to address unresolved grievances and support transitional justice (AFSC, 2025). These interventions create spaces for victims and communities to process trauma, restore trust, and promote social cohesion. Incorporating youth-focused programs is particularly critical, as children and young people bear a high burden of trauma and are at risk of perpetuating cycles of violence if unaddressed.

Integrating Healing and Justice for Lasting Peace: Evidence from Ethiopia and globally shows that PSS is most effective when combined with justice, reconciliation, livelihoods, and culturally adapted practices like storytelling, communal rituals, and traditional mediation. Decentralized, participatory, community-driven approaches—involving elders, religious institutions, and youth networks—enhance acceptance and sustainability. Embedding PSS in broader peacebuilding and transitional justice initiatives heals trauma, builds resilience, and fosters inclusive, lasting peace. The cases of Rwanda and Sierra Leone, integrating trauma counseling with community justice, truth-telling, and traditional rituals supported reconciliation and reduced re-violence. In Colombia and Nepal, embedding PSS within transitional justice, reparations, and local peace mechanisms strengthened resilience and institutional trust. Ethiopian experience similarly demonstrates that combining PSS with traditional mediation, communal rituals, and faith-based networks enhances legitimacy, reduces stigma, and supports durable peace.

THE POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Ethiopia has developed mental health strategy and peacebuilding frameworks, including the National Mental Health Strategy (2020–2025), building on earlier plans (2012–2016), and the National Peacebuilding framework (2019). These policies aim to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (PSS) into community-based services, primary health care, education, and local governance, emphasizing accessibility, equity, stigma reduction, and gender-responsive approaches.

Multi-sectoral initiatives led by the Ministries of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Peace and Ministry of Women & Social Affairs, supported by humanitarian actors (e.g., UNHCR, WHO, IOM, UNICEF, UNESCO, World Vision, Plan International, Save the Children, etc.) have expanded training for community support groups, developed PSS manuals, and piloted interventions in conflict-affected areas. The African Union Continental Strategy (2025) provides a landmark framework for teacher wellbeing, highlighting the importance of integrating PSS into education systems. The AU’s efforts recognize that trauma, loss of trust, disrupted relationships, and other psychological impacts of conflict can undermine peace building if left unaddressed.

By promoting MHPSS, the AU aims to improve community resilience and peaceful coexistence and Support individuals' and communities' psychological recovery as part of broader peace and development strategies. Aligned with APSA, Agenda 2063, and the Transitional Justice Policy, integrating psychosocial support into conflict prevention, mediation, and post-conflict recovery enhances resilience, social cohesion, and trust in institutions. Trauma-informed interventions foster safe truth-telling, survivor participation, and reconciliation while reducing violence from unresolved trauma and exclusion, advancing people-centered and sustainable peace across the continent. Likewise, IGAD (2024) recognizes that sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa requires addressing the psychosocial impacts of conflict. Thus its youth policy (2023) sets a Strategic Actions to mainstreaming the promotion, prevention, treatment and care mechanism on mental health for the youth from the IGAD Region.

MHPSS strengthens resilience, reduces trauma-driven violence, and fosters social cohesion. Integrated into prevention, mediation, and recovery, it reinforces human security, inclusive peace processes, and long-term regional stability. Despite these efforts, gaps persist. PSS services remain under-resourced, fragmented, and largely NGO-driven, with limited coordination across sectors. Gender-specific trauma, particularly SGBV survivors, is insufficiently addressed, and psychosocial support is not fully embedded in justice, transitional justice, and peacebuilding programs. Ethiopia still lacks a dedicated national PSS policy defining service standards, entitlements, and institutional responsibilities. This leads to inconsistent services, unclear institutional responsibilities, and limited access for beneficiaries and weak integration with other systems, and challenges in monitoring and ensuring quality, undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of psychosocial support nationwide. Strengthening frameworks will require coordinated multi-sector strategies, sustained funding, workforce development, and robust monitoring systems to ensure psychosocial support effectively contributes to reconciliation, resilience, and long-term peace.

CROSS-COUNTRY PSS APPROACHES AND KEY LESSONS FOR ETHIOPIA

COUNTRY	PSS APPROACH	IMPACT	LESSONS FOR ETHIOPIA
SOUTH AFRICA	Truth & Reconciliation Commission: counseling and safe spaces for testimony	Transformed personal trauma into collective healing; laid foundation for reconciliation	Provide safe spaces for testimony to turn individual trauma into community healing
RWANDA	PSS integrated into Gacaca courts	Survivors processed trauma while engaging in reconciliation	Embed MHPSS into justice systems for holistic healing
UGANDA	Reintegration of former child soldiers using traditional rituals + counseling	Reduced stigma, promoted forgiveness, strengthened social cohesion	Blend traditional rituals with counseling for reintegration and social cohesion
LIBERIA	Community-based counseling, storytelling, traditional rituals post-civil war	Reduced revenge cycles; improved cohesion	Combine modern therapy with local traditions for legitimacy
SIERRA LEONE	Trauma counseling + vocational training for child soldiers	Reintegration and reduced stigma	Link psychosocial healing with livelihoods to sustain peace
COLOMBIA	PSS + community rebuilding + livelihood support for displaced communities	Regained trust in institutions; reduced risk of relapse into conflict	Link psychosocial support with community development and livelihoods
BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	Dialogue groups, trauma therapy, youth exchanges	Improved intergroup relations	Focus on youth to prevent future cycles of violence
ETHIOPIA	Integrating PSS with traditional rituals (Jaarsummaa, Manga, Nemo, Sher-Kesha, Abagar, communal mourning), storytelling, faith-based support, and livelihood programs	Builds trust, fosters reconciliation, strengthens social cohesion, and enhances community resilience	Blend culturally adapted traditional practices with trauma-informed counseling, participatory approaches, and livelihood support to promote healing and peacebuilding across conflict-affected regions

What Ethiopia Can Adopt? The takeaways for Ethiopia highlight the need to create safe spaces for testimony that transform individual trauma into collective healing, while blending traditional rituals with trauma-informed counseling to support reintegration, forgiveness, and social cohesion. Effective interventions should embed psychosocial support into justice systems for holistic healing, combine modern therapy with local traditions for cultural legitimacy, and link psychosocial healing with livelihoods and community development to sustain recovery. Targeting children and youth through counseling, mentorship, and participatory programs is essential to break cycles of violence, and engaging elders, religious institutions, women's networks, and youth groups ensures interventions are locally owned, accepted, and sustained. By implementing culturally adapted, trauma-informed, and participatory approaches, Ethiopia can strengthen individual and community recovery while fostering lasting peace.

PSS-PEACEBUILDING PATHWAY

The PSS-peacebuilding pathway integrates psychosocial support into peace efforts, progressing from immediate relief to long-term reconciliation and resilience. It begins with Crisis Response & Stabilization, where trained MHPSS professionals, community volunteers, faith-based organizations, and local authorities provide psychological first aid, safe spaces, basic needs, and emotional care, reaching vulnerable populations and reducing acute stress.

This is followed by Trauma Healing & Recovery, with individual counseling, group healing sessions, and youth engagement led by psychologists, community facilitators, and peer supporters, rebuilding trust and reducing trauma symptoms. Community Cohesion, Narrative Change, and Reconciliation strengthen relationships through dialogue platforms, traditional practices, and joint projects facilitated by elders, religious and cultural leaders, and CSOs, fostering cross-group interactions and reshaping communal narratives. Institutional Integration embeds trauma-informed approaches into justice systems, schools, health services, and support for peace workers, guided by government agencies and professional associations; ensuring psychosocial care becomes part of their routine operations. Finally, Resilience & Sustainable Peace combines livelihoods, youth leadership, policy integration, and monitoring by local governments, CSOs, and development partners to reinforce social cohesion, economic stability, and civic participation. By linking emotional healing with social and structural interventions at each stage, this pathway ensures and strengthens individual and community recovery while fostering lasting peace.



Immediate Relief



Social Cohesion



Sustainable Peace

ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy brief has forwarded the following actionable recommendations for addressing the miss link between PSS -Peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

- **Crisis Response & Stabilization:** This intervention is addressing the PSS-Peace building intermediations and shall have the goal of reducing immediate distress and protect vulnerable populations. Thus, interventions should include Psychological First Aid (PFA), safe spaces for women, children, and displaced groups, and provision of basic needs alongside emergency emotional support. This shall be coordinated by the Ministries of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, Ministry of Peace, together with NGOs, CSOs, and community-based organizations, ensuring immediate relief, protection, and stabilization.
- **Trauma Healing & Recovery:** The main focus shall be on rebuilding emotional stability and readiness for reconciliation once victims are stabilized. Key actions include culturally grounded individual and group counseling, group healing, youth engagement, strengthen community support system and culturally adapted rituals such as Jaarsummaa in Oromia, Shemgela and Abagar in Amhara, Manga , Nemo, and Sher-Kesha in Benishangul-Gumuz, and Tigrayan communal mourning. The expected outcomes are reduced trauma symptoms, strengthened coping, and restored trust within families and communities. The actions should be delivered through a coordinated, multi-actor approach and implemented by trained MHPSS professionals, community-based facilitators and peace builders, traditional and cultural leaders, religious leaders and faith-based actors, women and youth leaders/peer supporters, and local government and civil society organizations (CSOs/NGOs). Overall, this should be a locally anchored, government-supported approach with strong community ownership, ensuring emotional stabilization, readiness for reconciliation, reduced trauma symptoms, and restored trust within families and communities. This shall also address the conceptual understandings of peace and PSS as peace is not mere absence of violence but as the presence of justice, healing and community resilience.

- **Community Cohesion, Reconciliation & Narrative Change:** The goal here is to strengthen relationships, rebuild trust, and transform harmful narratives. It is a high level engagement which needs the coordination of Ministry of Peace and respective Regional Bureaus. Interventions include dialogue platforms, joint community projects, traditional reconciliation mechanisms, faith-based mediation, and narrative-change initiatives promoting shared identities. This result in enhanced social cohesion, reduced intergroup tensions, and improved reconciliation. Integrating PSS into mediation, reconciliation, and transitional justice prevents trauma-driven violence, rebuilds trust, and strengthens social cohesion for sustainable peace. The process shall include youth engagement, dialogues, community awareness campaigns, and reintegration ceremonies as the most effective in promoting healing and social cohesion.
- **Livelihood & Economic Recovery:** Reducing socio-economic stressors that exacerbate conflict has to be one key element to address the missing link. This can be by integrating vocational training, microfinance, and community-based livelihood programs with psychosocial support. Implementing such initiatives contributes for greater economic stability, reduced conflict triggers, and strengthened community resilience. These interventions need the engagement of Labor and Skill Bureaus, Financial Institutes, TVET colleges and the like.
- **Institutional Integration, Prevention & Resilience:** Embedding PSS within institutions for sustainable peace is a fundamental. Key actions include trauma-informed justice, school- and health-based PSS, peace worker support, youth leadership programs, early warning mechanisms, and monitoring and learning systems. This must ensure long-term structural resilience, prevent recurrence of conflict, and ensure sustainable peace as well as psychosocial well-being across communities. The embedment of PSS in other program, strategies and policy level needs institutional commitments where the respective Ministries and Regional Bureau are expected to give strategic directions.

CONCLUSION

The PSS-peace building pathway demonstrates that sustainable peace is not achieved through isolated interventions but through a holistic and layered approach. Beginning with crisis response and stabilization, communities are protected and given immediate relief. This foundation enables trauma healing and recovery, which restores emotional resilience and prepares individuals for reconciliation. As trust is rebuilt, community cohesion and narrative change foster unity and reduce intergroup tensions. Livelihood and economic recovery then address the structural drivers of conflict, ensuring that psychosocial well-being is reinforced by tangible stability. Finally, institutional integration embeds these practices into systems, creating long-term resilience and preventing the recurrence of violence.

Together, these approaches/interventions should inform a comprehensive pathway where psychosocial healing and peace building are interdependent, ensuring that affected populations not only recover from crisis but also thrive in environments of justice, dignity, and sustainable peace. The study (AFSC, 2025) has also empathized that PSS must be institutionalized as a core pillar of Ethiopia's transitional justice and peace building efforts. This requires strategic partnerships, integration of indigenous and modern healing approaches, gender-responsive programming, and sustained investment in community-based mental health services. Embedding PSS in these systems will support Ethiopia move beyond fragile political settlements toward a more inclusive, emotionally resilient, and culturally grounded model of sustainable peace.

Ethiopia must urgently institutionalize psychosocial support (PSS) as a core pillar of peacebuilding and transitional justice. This requires coordinated, multi-sectoral efforts that integrate trauma-informed interventions, culturally grounded healing practices, and youth- and gender-responsive programs. Ministries of Health, Education, Peace, and Women & Social Affairs, together with NGOs, CSOs, and community networks, should implement a holistic PSS-peace building pathway: from crisis stabilization and trauma recovery, to community cohesion, livelihood support, and institutional integration. By embedding PSS into justice, education, health, and local governance systems, Ethiopia can transform individual trauma into collective healing, rebuild trust, strengthen social cohesion, and create sustainable, inclusive peace.

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