Strategic superboards: improved network management processes for regeneration?

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Abstract

Purpose – Aims to present a critical discussion of two UK case studies through which a "third way" modernisation of regeneration policies has been identified as a world-wide trend.

Design/methodology/approach – Provides case studies that represent attempts at creating "strategic superboards": the first, local strategic partnerships (LSPs) is a national programme and the second, the regeneration zones (RZs), is peculiar to a specific region in the UK. Network management theory is used to analyse how regeneration partnerships, as networked organisations, are managed. The focus is on the institutional design rules used to achieve decentralisation, balance and joining-up.

Findings – Although the findings show that the programmes' institutional design was potentially improved, the partnerships' achievements fell short of their objectives. It is concluded that a key factor in this failure is the continuing partial approach by central government in managing the networks. As a result these partnerships found it difficult to operate within the new institutional designs.

Originality/value – Highlights that there has been an absence of attention to management in network situations by UK academics that is not shared by our UK and European counterparts.

Keywords Regeneration, Strategic management, Partnership, United Kingdom

Paper type General review

Introduction

Strategic approaches through partnerships in regeneration have long been the aim of the UK central government (Fordham *et al.*, 1999). In some programmes this approach has been extended in terms of partnerships being superboards: large in terms of the scale and scope at which they operate. City challenge, city pride and the new commitment to regeneration (NCR) are examples[1]. The latter influenced the development of the local strategic partnership (LSP) policy (Russell, 2001). It is recognised that superboards, likened to the traditional local authority, can impact more positively upon local economies and populations whether pursued at the regional, sub-regional or local level due to their superior resource base.

The New Labour government's regeneration policy has thus evolved and contains some sound policy ideas, the defining feature of which is joined-up government or coordination but in the context of decentralisation and broad participation. They have based their approach on a vast amount of research and consultation with academic, practitioner and deprived communities concerning how best to tackle deprivation. A joined-up approach was considered necessary, pursuing interventions that reinforce each other, and operate at a large enough scale to have substantial impact. A key finding in regeneration research is that it is not correct to argue policies have not had an impact but have not had widespread enough impact to stem the flow of deprivation

(Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Many regeneration programmes have thus attempted to turn this situation around through the use of superboards.

The case study research reported below focused on three regeneration partnerships, two of which represented the LSP and regeneration zone (RZ) programmes[2]. These had similar aims, to operate through superboards bringing together key players from across the community, in order to provide substantial impact over the long-term in regenerating their areas, thus replacing the tendency for smaller scale, area or single theme-based interventions epitomised by the SRB programme. The third partnership was an SRB scheme operating under the SRB's revised rules. This provides a comparator for the new programmes. All three partnerships were based in one area of the West Midlands region.

The paper is organised as follows: the first section discusses network management theory, its relevance and use in this research. It includes a summary of the impact of the institutional design on the original SRB programme. The second section discusses the outcomes of the case studies in relation to two key aspects partnership formation and the strategy and action plan development. Finally, a discussion and conclusions are presented.

Network management theory

The theory of network management can explain how policy networks both succeed and fail in the quest to gain the hoped for synergies between partnership members. Klijn and Koppenjan (1999) argue that network management is a form of public management. It is one way in which government can "steer" actors into dealing with societal problems. Drawing upon this approach, the techniques used by central government and local actors within regeneration are conceived of as forms of network management.

Two types of network management can be identified, the first, game management, deals with interactions within an existing network structure, for example, where a network member facilitates meetings within a partnership in order to improve interaction between members. The second, involves changing the institutional design or structure of a network, for example, where central government changes the rules around resource distribution. These basic categories include many individual interventions. Key interventions cited as game management include: activating a network, arranging, facilitating, brokerage, mediation, and arbitration. Network structuring includes influencing formal policy; influencing interrelationships, values, norms and perceptions, and including new members (Kickert and Koppenjan, 1997).

In the UK, changing the network structure is commonplace, for example, each time central government determine that a new set of actors should be involved in regeneration. Through doing this they hope to alter the interaction within the network. This is an important feature in regeneration partnerships that have changed from narrow central-local relationships to broad multi-sectoral networks where the level of interaction has necessarily increased. Although this paper focuses on the actions of central government in establishing the institutional design of the network, game management is also important since it is this aspect that explains how local actors implement programme rules into their particular partnership. However, the programme's institutional design appears to be the most important determinant of how partnerships operate (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000).

A feature of the new superboards is the appearance of increased autonomy over what they do and how they do it, as many of the rules concerning the micro management of partnerships, which were evident in the SRB programme, have been relaxed. Nevertheless, the overarching structure of the network appears to remain a key determinant of success or failure.

Network management and the SRB

Until New Labour came to power in 1997, the most important urban regeneration partnership programme was the SRB. This represented the amalgamation of 20 funding streams into a single holistic budget to which partnerships could bid for resources through yearly competitions. Partnerships were intended to collaborate to produce a bid that represented a coordinated approach to regeneration. Whilst the programme improved over time (Brennan *et al.*, 1998), it has not been perfect, and in the early years, it was particularly problematic. In terms of network management, central government operated a partial approach. Whilst the scheme was rooted in an interactive perspective in which synergy would be achieved through interaction between the various sectors in the partnership it resorted to instrumentalism as partnership formation was the prerequisite of funding. Local actors, responding to cuts elsewhere, simply formed a partnership to access funds which they often saw as their entitlement, previously provided through routine allocations (Environment Committee, 1995, 1996). Little was done to enforce, encourage or support the hoped for interaction through the institutional design of the programme.

The outcomes were disappointing. Partnership working was poor, spending decisions were made by those with power, particularly local authorities. Many partnerships had no voluntary or community sector representation and where they were involved, they were often expected to sign up to pre-made plans. Influence from the private sector was also weak as their inclusion was described as tokenistic (ibid). It has been argued that the institutional rules by which this programme operated led to less successful interventions since it encouraged poor partnership working and the focus of interventions tended to be biased towards what central government wanted rather than what was needed in the local areas (Hall and Nevin, 1999).

The institutional rules of the SRB undermined the primary goal of interactive partnership working in the following ways:

- open competition led to overbidding and too fierce a competitive process;
- competition was exacerbated as the challenge element of the SRB budget was small due to the top-slicing to fund existing programmes (Stewart, 1994);
- there was an absence of rules regarding the basis for the competition, bidders had no idea of the level of funding within each region. It has been described as a monopsonistic market in which central government held the purchasing power (Hall and Nevin, 1999);
- timescales were short in comparison to the task of forming a partnership and producing an outline bid for regeneration work; and
- whilst the management of the interaction in partnerships can be described as passive by central government, there was active management regarding the bureaucratic nature of the process in terms of "regularity, propriety and value for money" (DETR, 1998, p. 3).

An overall assessment of the SRB is that the level of strategic working between partnership members and the resulting synergy acquisition was poor. It can therefore be viewed as a weak exercise in network management. It succeeded in instigating partnerships but in general these did not function as intended.

The SRB during this phase is not unique in its failings, strategic planning has been regularly identified as weak within regeneration policy. The content of schemes have thus been an amalgamation of existing projects which were ready for implementation regardless of their suitability, usually drawn from a small group of public sector actors (for summaries of research findings see Higgins *et al.*, 1983; Wilks-Heeg, 2000). In partnership models, where all partners are supposed to influence such decisions in order to acquire the optimum mix of projects, such activity is problematic.

One outcome of this situation is the lack of integration between economic development and training for the unemployed in deprived communities that would allow them to compete for employment (Hambleton, 1981; Oatley and Lambert, 1998). Thus, the benefits of development are rarely gained by those in need.

This research sought to investigate the ways in which the New Labour central government were managing regeneration partnerships through the institutional design of new programmes. The substantive content of regeneration has changed little whilst more emphasis has been placed on process. The emphasis has been on aspects of increased co-governance or decision-making concerning appropriate development plans combined with joint work or coordination between organisations in terms of acquiring policy coherence and, where appropriate, in service delivery. The research was conducted over the 2001/2002 period. Key to it was the institutional design used by central government and the Regional Development Agency, and how local partners had interpreted these? Given that it was too early to assess the partnership's substantive impact, the focus was placed on processes: how the partnerships were established and their early attempts to develop strategies.

Network management under New Labour – the research findings
Two important characteristics of this phase of policy, which compare favourably against the SRB, are the aims of regeneration policy and how those aims would be fulfilled. In general, there was little tension created by central government's policy aims. The findings suggested that the policy community were in favour of the concept of strategic superboards and of increased joint work; better quality partnership and targeting attention on the worst deprivation. As such, this phase of regeneration is characterised by consensus. This is possibly due to the high level of consultation carried out by central government and the commitment to evidence based interventions. Thus, network management during this phase operates within a fairly uncontentious context. Therefore, it might have been expected that programmes would be more successfully implemented.

Partnership formation
A key aspect of New Labour's regeneration strategy has been to establish partnerships which are truly multi-sectoral and which demonstrate that inclusion in the partnership is matched by influence. This aims to reduce the occurrence and severity of the so-called paper partnerships (DETR, 1997). This objective was particularly clearly expressed in both the SRB and LSP guidance (DETR, 1998, 2001). Admittedly, less so

in AWM's Zone guidance[3], but the inclusion of the private and voluntary sector as full partners in order to gain synergy was evident (Advantage West Midlands, 2000).

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The LSP partnership
Both central government inspired programmes led to the development of broad inclusion in the partnerships. This aspect was particularly evident in the case of the LSP. The guidance required LSPs to form genuine multi-sectoral partnership boards in order to be eligible for funding through the neighbourhood renewal fund (NRF) and community empowerment fund (CEF)[4]. The NRF was allocated to local authorities in year one to use as they wished. This rushed process reflected the need to get spending from the treasury (Stone-Lee, 2001). The remaining funding from the NRF for years two and three was "earmarked" for partnerships to spend jointly, but they would have to fulfil the accreditation requirements as a quality measure to qualify (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2001). A less positive innovation was the refusal to allow the NRF to be used to support the management and running costs of the LSP. LSPs are thus novel, particularly in the degree of freedom over spending, what is in effect, a single devolved budget.

The outcome in terms of partnership formation was a model of what LSPs should be. Each sector had been provided with five seats on the board. The public sector numbered ten, reflecting the need to include the full range of public sector service delivery organisations. However, the overall balance between the 35 members, it could be argued, was on the side of the community broadly conceived. Each of the voluntary, community and private sectors had five seats each. Councillors formed another group, and a further five seats were allocated to ad hoc members with the intention that representatives from trade unions and religious groups would be involved. Without doubt it fulfilled the requirements of the accreditation process with only some minor criticisms of it voiced by the government office.

As this LSP was eligible to receive NRF, it also received the CEF. This led to the community sector being represented by community representatives who were paid wages to develop links with and represent communities through the operation of a community network. In principle, this represents an important institutional innovation which supports this sector's ability to be both included and influential. In principle, the institutional design led to an adequate partnership.

The SRB partnership
The SRB programme (DETR, 1998, 1999) reasserted the need for multi-sectoral boards; the need for partners to be influential as well as included; eligibility was based on deprivation criteria; and the level of competition was further reduced through an increasingly managed process at the regional level.

The SRB partnership had successfully involved the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. The theme based nature of this scheme allowed a highly focused approach to the various issues which face a particular group among the deprived, that of young people. It had been reasonably obvious, in this case, who should be on the board, in terms of those actors who had an existing interest in young people's services. Two young people were elected to the board from the local youth council to represent the interests of the young.

The established nature of the SRB, despite its innovations, meant that members of the partnership understood the system well and had learnt how to operate within the SRB "game". Indeed one private sector member argued that they would not be able to operate within new programmes since they did not have the same knowledge about these that had been acquired about the SRB over time. He saw this as being more or less the end of the flow of resources into the company's community programme. The voluntary sector had also been represented early in the process. These factors culminated in a coherent partnership board that had a clear idea of what it wanted to, and could, achieve.

The zone partnership

In contrast to the former partnerships, the institutional design for the zones suffered from conflicting aims which impacted upon the partnership's membership and functioning. AWM sought inclusive multi-sectoral boards, whilst reducing the influence of elected councillors, local authorities and other public sector bodies in general. The zones would, ideally, have boards comprised primarily of private sector representatives together with voluntary sector members and a few public sector representatives. Community sector representatives of any kind were not sought. A further aim was to adopt existing partnerships. This decision was made, in a pragmatic gesture, to avoid further partnership proliferation and the associated fatigue. Partnership's would also receive 50 per cent of the costs of developing the strategy and AWM were committed to funding the administration of the partnership (Advantage West Midlands, 2000).

The outcome, created through choosing an existing partnership, undermined other principles embodied in the guidance. The board, in fact, was weighted in favour of elected councillors and there were no private sector members beyond the chair, a retired business executive. The voluntary sector were included but it was described by a voluntary sector representative as "not one of the best partnerships I have been involved with". The public sector were sparse, but community representatives had been introduced by the partnership itself in an attempt to fulfil the aim of capturing the benefits of economic development for the deprived communities targeted for assistance. AWM's institutional structures were weak in relation to forming an appropriate membership, and this had significant ramifications for the development of the strategy.

Strategy development within the partnerships

A key feature of New Labour's policies has been its commitment to planning at all spatial levels, the purpose of which is to create higher levels of coordination in order that interventions would reinforce each other and provide better value for money. As such, the role of planning was exhorted within regeneration policy and it was implied that this would be carried out by all members of partnerships with the clear intent of including deprived communities themselves. Therefore, the existence of multi-sectoral boards should be demonstrated in the strategies themselves and in the process of production.

The superboards were primarily established to deal with the multiple causes of deprivation. Much store has been set on their ability to regenerate local areas through

adopting more inclusive ways of working between partnership members and the production of balanced and appropriate strategies.

The SRB partnership
The findings, from this admittedly small-scale study, suggest that in terms of strategy development, the SRB scheme was favourably positioned in comparison to the new superboards. This programme has attracted much criticism in the past but this case demonstrates that in its revised mature form it could address deprivation. This partnership took at least as much of a strategic role in local service development as the superboards and was supported by other innovations such as community planning[5]. The partnership was not perfect and did not resource all projects that were considered key in the area. A young carer's project in need of further funding was overlooked in the planning process and another member complained that the lack of Black and minority ethnic board members had led to a lack of resources for ethnic minorities.

The new superboards, however promising for regeneration in the longer term, suffered from many of the same problems as past initiatives including the SRB. This raises questions: to what degree should the institutional design change? Should we build minor amendments into existing programmes or discard previous attempts? Certainly academics working within the institutional perspective in network management argue that sweeping away existing institutions in favour of new ones can be counterproductive (Ostrom, 1990). New institutional rules take time to embed, and in the intervening period, the goals of the partnership may not be easily secured. This argument seems appropriate for explaining the outcomes of the SRB partnership that had developed a more coordinated approach within a largely existing institutional structure, certainly with regard to entering into a competitive process.

The LSP partnership
The LSP had been less than successful at generating a strategy formed by the partnership, despite the fact that the LSP extended an existing strategic partnership at the local authority level. The strategy was neither developed by the existing or new partnership, but was based on the existing community plan, devised largely by the council and other key public sector providers. Even the local authority officer argued that the system in use "had not been ideal". Ideally, she argued:

> I would actually work with communities and commission and be much more specific about where the money was going to be spent. We can do that once we have the strategy in place because we didn't have the strategy in place it was quite difficult.

The funding was used to address deprivation, however, the production of coordinated approaches was absent. There were several key targets for funding within the strategy, aimed either at communities of interest or geographic areas. Despite central government's interest in producing services which would reinforce each other and have a real and lasting impact on deprived populations, it was difficult to see how this would be achieved through following this particular strategy. Nowhere in the documentation was there any hint that such reinforcement or coordination was the aim.

The key difficulties responsible for creating this situation cannot simply be viewed in terms of the local council being keen to restrict access to the decision-making regarding spending. Other factors also contributed, such as the timescales for partnership development; the way that the funding was distributed for the use of the

local authorities in the first year and only in the subsequent years with the LSP; the lack of funding for a secretariat; the poor timing of the distribution of the CEF, which came too late to establish the community network and representative system on the board in time for year two planning and spending, where spending commitments for year three were also made. Thus, just as the partnership had developed in terms of members and systems, the opportunity for members to influence that spending disappeared.

A criticism of LSPs in general in the region, was that they had failed to focus spending on a single priority area in which the funding could have made a real difference through the reinforcement effects of integrated actions. It is unfortunate that the outcome of LSPs has led once again to some of the problems identified previously in regeneration partnerships, such as peripheral partners signing up to pre-made plans and a lack of coordinated action.

Another factor was the tendency for LSPs to introduce a bidding competition for projects through which to deliver the strategy. This occurred within this partnership and others too. Despite central government's dismissal of competitive bidding, local actors, in this case the existing partnership, forced the local authority into introducing this mechanism as a way of trying to ensure inclusivity. A government office representative argued that:

> There's been a knee jerk response, lets go and get people to put bids in and set up huge teams assessing bids ... They needed to decide where the problems were and then decide what the solutions might be and they were not that far in their thinking. The money was not intended to go into projects.

The bidding process seemed to fulfil neither the aim to create strategic coordinated responses or, realistically, that of generating a strategy that was the outcome of a co-governed approach.

In assessing the LSPs, we need to acknowledge the intended long-term nature of this development. Certainly, the partnership was adequately formed and its structures were beginning to work well within the confines of what was possible. It could be suggested that this particular partnership may be successful in the long-term. However, there is a need to consider the effects of the withdrawal of funding. The commitment to the NRF was for three years, and it is uncertain who will receive further NRF, whilst there are no plans to extend the CEF regardless of its important role in developing community networks. Therefore, how these partnerships worked in this early phase is important and it appears that if these outcomes are indicative of the general outcomes for LSP's then the institutional design has not worked effectively.

The zone partnership
The outcome of the zone case was also disappointing. In principle, the partnership produced a balanced strategy and implementation plan. Furthermore, unlike the documentation for the LSP, theirs was detailed, containing information about the key strands of the strategy and the reasoning behind them; each project's focus; who was involved; what funding it required and a full risk analysis. It aimed to be coordinated, and was, in relation to the coordination of funding sources from the EU and the RDA. It also attempted to integrate training within deprived communities with the new employment opportunities created within the zone reflecting the desire of AWM to explicitly link need and opportunity (Advantage West Midlands, 2000).

However, the various strands of the strategy were not equally well developed. In particular, the linking of training which would involve the voluntary and community sectors in service delivery was underdeveloped. By comparison, the strategy was most highly developed in the area of infrastructural developments creating an imbalance in approach.

Despite the partnership's experience and the investment by AWM to support strategy development, the outcome was poor. This can be explained, at least partially, by the membership of the partnership and the lack of full inclusion by the voluntary and community sectors. The absence of the private sector exacerbated this situation. With no real counterbalancing force within the partnership, it meant the core members, the councillors, were the key players in decisions regarding the strategy. In reality, it was not even the councillors who were key to developing the actual strategy, this work had been done by the council officers who formed a task group representing the two local authorities within the sub-region. As one officer commented about developing the projects:

> It was a last minute scramble to put bids together. We had a strategy we knew what we wanted to do but we did not have the projects. Given a clean sheet of paper they are not necessarily the projects I would choose, but these could spend in time. It is so difficult to tap into it, it may distance innovative bids from the private and voluntary sectors. I do have the concern about it being a clique. The big players are soaking up the year one money, we have to be careful, no one is kicking up a fuss yet that they're not just duplicating spending it has to be additional spend.

The outcome here appears to be remarkably like that of earlier schemes where partnerships endorsed pre-made plans. The officer continued on the subject of influence by the weaker partners upon whom the partnership relied to an extent to deliver the strategy:

> Some people can be outside the process and not have the opportunity to bid ... with [European Union Objective 2 funds] and AWM, you have to spend it quickly so its always the big boys, the local authorities who get the bids in ... the community and voluntary sector groups are always very late in our case its really dreadful we've sort of allocated all the money more or less.

The situation of the more peripheral members was weak in terms of influence. Despite the inclusion of two voluntary sector representatives on the board from early on in the process, they had little influence. The community sector representatives were included in the partnership only after some 18 months of development. To be fair to the partnership, their inclusion was not required for funding. However, having invited applications from would be community representatives, a process that they were only eligible to join if they were working in the community sector and had experience of a similar programme, the roles they could play were limited by the board's existing membership. The community representatives had found themselves rubber stamping decisions taken by others and despite their professional experience they had been forced to fight to gain access onto the theme groups where they felt their skills could be properly put to use. There was an impression that all the important work would take place in sub-groups in the same way that the Task Group had developed the strategy.

Conclusions

This paper has outlined the ways in which two new strategic superboard partnerships representing new programmes have failed to contribute to the aim of a more coordinated, co-governed and strategic approach to the regeneration of their areas. In comparison to the original SRB, all three cases reviewed showed substantial improvements in their institutional designs. However, of the three cases, the two superboards do not compare particularly well with the recent SRB case that appeared to be delivering the objectives sought by central government. Superboards, in reality, have offered little added value during this period. This is despite the possibility that LSPs, particularly, may bring advantages in the longer-term.

From a network management perspective the institutional designs used did not make sufficient allowances for the embedding and development of new partnerships working within new systems. This outcome suggests that central government should think carefully before introducing new systems and that they should pay more attention to the way new institutions will work in practice within institutional contexts that they often have little control over. This is not to say that the new programmes did not include some novel and potentially important innovations, they did, but we have yet to see the benefits from these. For example, in the LSP case the rewards of community involvement supported by the CEF investment have not been reaped. They may, of course, contribute more effectively over service provision in the future.

Neither should it be argued that we should avoid change at all costs, but if we do make radical changes, then we have to accept that early wins are unlikely to be gained, such ventures are truly long-term, which is, as we know a difficult concept within the political environment, but unfortunately necessary. It is sad to note that after such an extensive planning period, the LSP policy has been shown to be performing poorly and the recurrence of issues found in previous policies in both new programmes does suggest the need for greater continuity. To this end we must continue with the regeneration structures we now have, amending them incrementally as learning takes place about the ways in which they can be productive.

Methodologically, it might be argued that this series of case studies carried out in one area supplies insufficient evidence for generalisation. This could indeed be a valid critique, and more evidence is needed, however, given the impact of the SRB's institutional design reported by the extensive research carried out on the SRB programme, for example Mawson *et al.* (1995), which suggested very strong patterns of outcomes emerging from a flawed system, then it can be argued that we can be confident that these findings have a substantial degree of generalisability without suggesting that all LSPs and sub-regional partnerships, zones or otherwise, will produce exactly the same outcomes. The institutional design and the ensuing network management was partial in these new programmes, just as it had been in the SRB. Central government needs to find a better balance between renewing institutional structures and developing approaches that allow partners to work together more productively through more active management within existing structures.

Notes

1. These refer to policy programmes that encourage partnerships to develop proposals for the purposes of regenerating local areas through a combined social and economic approach. City challenge the NRF and CEF are the two components of the funding available to LSPs with

eligibility based on deprivation criteria. The NRF is a general fund for fighting deprivation through the provision of services whereas the CEF is designed to build capacity within the community in order to allow their full representation and involvement in the decision-making processes within the LSP process and the SRB challenge fund provided funding through a competitive process. City pride and new commitment to regeneration were unfunded programmes initially, designed to encourage joint work among the business, voluntary, community and public sectors.

2. LSPs and RZs are regeneration programmes, the former operate at the level of the local authority and in areas where high levels of deprivation exist have been funded by the UK central government in order to generate "superboards" through which regeneration activities can be more highly coordinated, long-term and strategic. RZs were designated by the West Midlands Regional Development Agency whereby funding was made available for multi-sectoral partnerships based on the sub-region. Neither programme was competitive but the RZs were not guaranteed a certain level funding as were the LSPs who qualified. Their remit is fundamentally similar to the LSPs but has a bias towards economic development rather than socially based regeneration.

3. AWM in constructing the ideal partnership aimed to reduce the power of elected members from local authorities in favour of dominance by business partners. They were also very keen to include the voluntary sector. However, community representatives were not highlighted in the guidance document as potential members (see Advantage West Midlands, 2000).

4. The NRF and CEF are the two components of the funding available to LSPs with eligibility based on deprivation criteria. The NRF is a general fund for fighting deprivation through the provision of services whereas the CEF is designed to build capacity within the community in order to allow their full representation and involvement in the decision-making processes within the LSP process.

5. Community planning is a process designed to allow full consultation of the community in local development matters. It is widely reported as being pioneered by Coventry city council in 1997 and later introduced as national policy as community strategies.

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