



KASAÏ CONFLICT ASSESSMENT

Causes, dynamics & current needs

10 JUNE 2019



Executive Summary

The violent conflict that broke out in Congo's Kasai provinces in 2016 caused more than 3,300 deaths and, at its peak, up to 1.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), has largely subsided, but it has left pockets of instability, deep grievances and acute ethnic tension, as well as widespread destruction and destitution that will continue to haunt the Kasai region, in particular Kasai and Kasai Central provinces. With this conflict assessment report, Mercy Corps would like to **draw attention to the current situation in the Kasai and highlight the significant challenges that remain** in not only rebuilding physical infrastructure, but in repairing a torn social fabric and rebuilding trust among communities who had lived together peacefully for decades prior to the conflict. This report is based on information from 66 key informant interviews with 95 individuals and 12 focus group discussions conducted mostly in Kasai and Kasai Central provinces in February and March 2019 in collaboration with the local NGO Travail et Droits de l'Homme (TDH).

The conflict assessment **aims to understand the root causes, proximate causes, and triggers** of violent conflict in the Kasai provinces. It also **assesses the impact of two years of violence** and remaining insecurity and ethnic distrust **on the population and the livelihoods of women, men, girls, boys, and vulnerable groups** with a focus on Kasai and Kasai Central provinces. The assessment provides detailed recommendations for policy makers, donor agencies, multilateral organizations, and implementing organization on how to tackle the devastating effects of the conflict by preventing future violence, mitigating conflict, rebuilding social trust, and starting to address not only humanitarian needs, but strengthening Kasaiens' resilience to future crisis and set them on a path of longer-term development.

Origins and evolution of the conflict

Origins: The Kasai conflict started as a local dispute over the nomination of a customary chief of Bashila Kasanga groupement in Dibaya territory, Kasai Central province, also known as the Kamuina Nsapu. The conflict was between chief Jean-Prince Pandi, designated as chief Kamuina Nsapu by the ruling family, and the provincial and national governments, who imposed a different



Picture 1: Focus group discussion in a village in Demba territory, Kasai Central

candidate. Incensed by his treatment by the provincial government and the security forces, JP Pandi started to give anti-government speeches and initiated local youth and mobilized them against the state. After attempts at negotiations failed, JP Pandi's fighters attacked local government officials and the village of his rival chief. After he ignored an ultimatum to give in, JP Pandi was killed by government security forces on August 12, 2016 and his body taken to Kananga. The heavy-handed military response motivated other Dibaya customary chiefs to organize further militias in the name of Kamuina Nsapu to pursue Pandi's anti-government agenda and to liberate the deceased's body. Kamuina Nsapu units then attacked the provincial capital Kananga on September 22, 2016, briefly occupying the airport, after which they were repulsed by the Congolese military (Forces Armées de la RDC – FARDC) and chased into different directions.

Expansion and fragmentation: The heavy-handed government response against Kamuina Nsapu contributed to the escalation of the conflict and the fragmentation of the rebellion after September 2016. The movement then spawned numerous local Kamuina Nsapu groups led by local chiefs or self-appointed warlords who were introduced to the initiation of fighters by Kamuina Nsapu emissaries or traveled themselves to Dibaya territory or other important ritual initiation sites (called “tshiota” by Kamuina Nsapu). Kamuina Nsapu saw itself as a mystico-religious movement that used the mystical power of initiation and traditional medicine as well as fetishes and amulets to mobilize and empower its mostly young fighters to take on state authorities, replace the Kabila regime, and, in their own words, to establish the rule of law. While Kamuina Nsapu troops

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originally attacked mainly state officials and security forces as well as their suspected collaborators and followed a strict code of conduct, which they also imposed on the populations in areas under their control, they increasingly targeted civilians as the conflict wore on. The armed uprising spread to all territories of Kasai Central province by late 2016 and to the Eastern and southern parts of Kamonia territory and parts of Luebo territory, Kasai province by early 2017. Intense fighting occurred in most of these areas between February and June 2017, with inter-ethnic tensions between Luba-speaking groups and ethnic Chokwe, Pende, and Tetela adding new virulence to the conflict in and around

Tshikapa and Kamonia territory (Kasai). After July 2017 active fighting decreased since FARDC troops had taken back control of major axes, killed numerous Kamuina Nsapu fighters, and Bana Mura militias made up of Chokwe, Pende, and Tetela members had pushed back Kamuina Nsapu and displaced many Luba-speakers from parts of Kamonia territory. Subsequently, tensions remained high in many areas but IDPs gradually returned to some areas and violence was limited to occasional Kamuina Nsapu attacks against government officials or clashes with security forces.

This low-grade conflict continued until early 2019, when the swearing in of Félix Tshisekedi, a “son of the Kasai”, as Congo’s new president was seen as a victory by Kamuina Nsapu groups and many of them decided to lay down their arms. While this positive dynamic opens up space for reconciliation, conflict resolution, reconstruction, and longer-term peacebuilding, the situation in parts of Kasai and Kasai Central remains fragile since none of the underlying problems that led to the violent conflict have been resolved.



Photo 2: Typical Kamuina Nsapu weapons – sticks, machetes, knives - handed in during demobilization of a Kamuina Nsapu group in 2017

Causes of the conflict

Root causes: At the root of the Kasai conflict were three factors: a) the extreme weakness of the Congolese state, where state institutions do not act in unison and individual actors are able to pursue private agendas; b) the decades-long underinvestment in the Kasai provinces and the high levels of poverty and food insecurity

even prior to the conflict, and c) the fact that political power in the Kasai has been seen as a competition between small and large ethnic groups or certain clans within ethnic groups.

Proximate causes: These three underlying causes interacted with proximate causes, which created a climate that became ripe for escalation in 2016. The weakness of the central state and the pursuit of private agendas by state actors led to hundreds of local conflicts in the Kasai provinces – created by the manipulation of chieftom succession struggles or conflicts over administrative boundaries and the exploitation of natural resources. The many years of neglect of the Kasai by the central government and the widespread poverty and lack of livelihood and professional opportunities led to a deep sense of neglect and grievances against the central state, which could be exploited by political entrepreneurs. Finally, the tense political climate related to the impending end of President Kabila’s second term in office (in 2016) and his and the presidential majority’s attempts to extend his rule raised the stakes of local power struggles and made for more brazen intervention in local politics by central or provincial regime loyalists.

Triggers: In this context, violent conflict could easily be triggered by small incidents. The conflict over the succession of the groupement chief in Bashila Kasanga groupement, Dibaya territory, provided such a trigger. An attempt to impose a chief against the will of the ruling family and to tie that nomination to pledges of loyalty to the central regime were met with resistance by chief JP Pandi. He escalated tensions by mobilizing a local militia against the state and against the rival chief favored by the Kabila regime. A heavy-handed response by the state and the security forces led to further escalation and triggered a broader uprising against the state.

Complex conflict dynamics

For an effective response and to build durable peace in the Kasai, it is important to understand its complexity and all the different dynamics and different types of conflicts that it fed off of. Among these dynamics were the following:

A conglomerate of multiple conflicts: The Kasai conflict was a collection of different conflicts at different levels. Although it was generally labeled the “Kamuina Nsapu” conflict, many actors got involved who had nothing to do with the original Kamuina Nsapu rebellion or the interests of the ruling family in Dibaya territory, Kasai Central.

Overlapping local, provincial, and national power struggles: Several dynamics of the conflict can be explained by an overlap between national, provincial, and local political agendas, which made local conflicts more intense and contributed to escalation. The original conflict around the chiefly succession in Bashila Kasanga groupement of Dibaya territory erupted into violence because it was used by provincial politicians allied with the Kabila regime to impose their rule and will at the groupement level, meeting resistance from JP Pandi and the Kamuina Nsapu ruling family. There was also a rivalry within the Lulua ethnic group between the two major clans¹, which contributed to conflict escalation. The interaction between national, provincial, and local politics led to the conflict turning into an inter-ethnic conflict in Kasai province as it fed off long-standing competition for control of political power in the province between smaller ethnic groups (Chokwe, Pende, Tetela) and Luba-speaking groups.



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¹ JP Pandi was seen as the leader of the Mutombo clan, while his opponent was a member of the Katawa clan. Mutombo and Katawa are the two main clans of the Lulua and have often competed for political power at the provincial level.

Local conflicts and agendas: Kamuina Nsapu was more of a “movement” than a structured, hierarchical rebel group. It was a loose collection of numerous localized armed groups. These local Kamuina Nsapu groups shared the trappings of JP Pandi’s original movement: red bandanas, the initiation of mostly young fighters and the use of wooden sticks and machetes as well as charms and amulets that allegedly imbued them with magical power and made them invulnerable to bullets. They also shared chief Pandi’s grievances against the Kabila regime based on decades of neglect and widespread poverty. However, the conflict spread so quickly across Kasai Central and Kasai provinces because it fed on unresolved local conflicts over chiefly succession, administrative boundaries, and the right to exploit land and natural resources, whereby one conflict party used Kamuina Nsapu to gain the upper hand in their local power struggle. Much of the local violence was then driven by two motivations – first, by grievances against the central state and attacks against government officials and security forces as well as the counterattacks by the security forces, but also, second, by local power struggles.

Rural-urban and generational divisions: Although many young people or rural residents in areas where Kamuina Nsapu was active had no choice but to join the movement, Kamuina Nsapu and the anti-government agenda it pursued was very popular throughout areas inhabited by Luba-speaking groups. This was due to the deep frustration and a feeling by much of the rural population, rural elites (chiefs, elders, teachers) or poor subsistence farmers, of being left behind compared to developments in other parts of the Congo. Young people in particular felt frustrated by a lack of opportunities for advancement in life and many of them fervently supported the uprising, which they saw as an opportunity to take revenge against elites in Kinshasa and the provincial capitals and to regain a sense of empowerment.

Current situation

As of mid- to late 2019, there were **positive dynamics toward peace**, notably the inauguration of the country’s new president and the surrender of a significant number of Kamuina Nsapu fighters in Kasai Central and Kasai. However, numerous challenges remain. First, a **sense of insecurity is still rife** in many parts of Kasai Central and Kasai and the **freedom of movement restricted, even though the risk for larger violent conflict has mostly subsided**. The potential for smaller-scale violent incidents remains high in certain areas due to the presence of **large numbers of ex-combatants** who have not formally been disarmed, gotten used



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to militia life, and have **few other livelihood options**. There is concern about increasing crime in Kananga and Tshikapa and other towns due to the presence of ex-militia members. Second, **inter-ethnic tensions remain high** in many parts of southern and eastern Kamonia territory in Kasai province and many of the displaced Luba-speakers from the area have not returned for fear of further ethnically motivated violence. If they do return, they may have a hard time recovering their property and agricultural land, which can further stoke tensions. Third, many of **the fundamental problems that contributed to the conflict** - chronic underdevelopment, political power struggles, the numerous localized conflicts –

remain unresolved and will require targeted attention to prevent conflict from recurring.

Impact of the conflict

The Kasai conflict led to large-scale humanitarian suffering with more than 3,300 direct, conflict-related deaths and 1.4 million displaced in 2017. As of early 2019, several hundred thousand displaced had still been unable to return home because of their livelihood situation or because of security concerns and ethnic tensions,

notably in southern Kasai province. Food insecurity, already high before the conflict, increased significantly as a result of conflict with an estimated 3.2 million people being food insecure in late 2017. Hundreds of thousands of Kasaien children saw their schooling disrupted because of insecurity and the destruction of more than 400 schools. Health care ceased to be provided at times during the conflict due to the ransacking of more than 200 health centers. Human rights violations were widespread, perpetrated by all armed actors, including unspeakable atrocities such as torture, beheadings, and the mass killing of civilians. According to human rights groups, most of the mass killings and exactions were conducted by the security forces as they used automatic or heavy weapons against young militia fighters armed with sticks and machetes or civilians suspected of supporting Kamuina Nsapu.

Multiple crises

To fully assess the impact of the violent conflict in the Kasai on the civilian population it is important to understand the confluence of multiple chronic and acute crises that households in the Kasai have had to cope with in recent years.

The impact of the conflict on regular households has to be understood against the **backdrop of a chronic crisis** due to decades of underinvestment in state, market, and transport infrastructure and in the agricultural economy in the Kasai. The widespread sense of isolation (“enclavement” in local parlance) among Kasaiens is very real, with goods taking days or weeks to arrive in Kananga and agricultural produce often rotting in rural areas due to a lack of affordable transport to major markets. There is almost no water and sanitation infrastructure in many parts of the Kasai undermining public health and the productivity of the population.



To fully assess the impact of the conflict on the civilian population it is important to understand the confluence of multiple chronic and acute crises that households in the Kasai have to cope with – a chronic crisis of underinvestment and poverty, a security crisis, a crisis of food security and livelihoods, a gender crisis, and a youth crisis.

As shown, the violence and proliferation of armed actors across the Kasai region caused widespread destruction and insecurity. This **security crisis** is far from over. Despite the surrender of some Kamuina Nsapu groups, security remains precarious in some areas due to the continued presence of militia-members from all sides (Kamuina Nsapu, Bana Mura), the availability of arms, and lingering ethnic tension in southern Kasai province. Even though some checkpoints have been dismantled, both militia members and security forces continue to harass the population at less visible, informal checkpoints or at their homes, extorting food, money, and goods and demanding sexual favors from women and girls. Freedom of movement is still limited in particular in areas of ethnic tension and there is deep distrust between the civilian population and the security forces in many parts of Kasai Central and Kasai.

The chronic **food security and livelihoods crises** the Kasaien population had been suffering for years has been deepened by the conflict. Agricultural production and productivity are very limited in many parts of the province due to a mix of geographical, economic, and cultural factors, with poor soils around the major cities, a preference for remunerated work or work in diamond mines, a focus on easy-to-grow crops that lack nutritional value, and limited access to markets. The conflict wreaked havoc on household’s already precarious livelihoods by disrupting agricultural production and making diamond mines in areas of conflict inaccessible. Many households missed between two and four agricultural seasons and access to fields remains limited in

many areas due to insecurity. Common sources of resilience that help households weather crises such as family and community relations, household assets, stocks of grains or seedlings for the following agricultural season, poultry and small livestock, or formal and informal savings and credit groups have been disrupted or destroyed by the conflict. Despite humanitarian assistance given for the displaced and many of the worst affected areas, many households continue to rely on negative coping strategies such as the sale of assets, eating fewer meals (often only one per day), relying on cheaper and less nutritious foods (mainly cassava), as well as marrying off girl children early or women exchanging sex for food or money.

There is a profound **gender crisis** in most parts of Kasai whereby women carry an undue burden in many households and where relationships between men and women are highly unequal with widespread polygamy and some of the largest family sizes (8.2 children per women – in some areas up to 14 children) of all DRC provinces. While men are nominally the heads of households, women carry a heavy workload and are ultimately responsible for the survival of the family and the children. Agriculture, the main source of subsistence, is almost entirely practiced by women, while men prefer paid work or work in diamond mines. Many women are de-facto heads of households and providers for their children since men are absent in diamond mines, where their income is irregular, and often have multiple other wives. Domestic and gender-based violence, common even before the conflict, has spiked and rape and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) were commonly used by armed groups on all sides as tactics of war. There are very limited health and psycho-social services for SGBV survivors.

Kamuina Nsapu also was an expression of a **youth crisis** and had aspects of a youth uprising against elites, in particular rural youth against government elites. Young people were at the same time actors and victims of the conflict, though. Their grievances against a lack of development, expensive and poor-quality schools, and a lack of options for livelihoods or a professional career were certainly deeply felt. However, they were also used by elites and political actors for their own purposes. Estimates suggest that the majority of Kamuina Nsapu fighters were youth or children and large numbers of young people were killed during the conflict due to their real or suspected adherence to Kamuina Nsapu. Many of them experienced violence and atrocities during the conflict and remain traumatized today, with few services available to deal with trauma.

Current responses

While the Kasai conflict was long neglected by the international community since most humanitarian actors had no presence in region, the rapid and massive escalation of fighting in early 2017 and the ensuing displacement prompted the United Nations to declare an L3 emergency in the Kasai for six months in late 2017 and early 2018, the highest level of international emergency classification. Since then, humanitarian assistance has been ramped up, although it is still relatively small in volume compared to what the eastern part of the country receives. International assistance is focused on addressing the most urgent humanitarian needs with almost 1.5m of the 1.7m people in urgent need having received some kind of assistance during the emergency period. The World Food Programme still treats the Kasai as an L3 emergency and has scaled up its food and cash assistance to IDPs and returnees significantly, even though, given the scale of the fighting and displacement, many needs remain unaddressed. Only few actors intervene with longer-term development or conflict resolution programs with recent initiatives by Interpeace (local conflict resolution), NRC (mediation of land conflict), and larger-scale World Bank investments into infrastructure and agriculture.

Recommendations

Given the 2019 surrender of some Kamuina Nsapu units and the arrival of a new national president and government, it is now an **opportune time to consider a comprehensive peace process** for the Kasai that tackles all the conflict dimensions at all levels while assisting the Kasai population to rebuild their livelihoods

and resilience. This comprehensive peace process should tackle all the multiple conflict dimensions and combine immediate violence prevention with medium- to long-term interventions.

Short- to medium term: Violence prevention

To prevent violent incidents from recurring, several measures will be needed. **Existing conflict early warning mechanisms** (by local and international NGOs and the Catholic Church) need to be reviewed for their effectiveness, strengthened and linked to early response interventions by key actors. They should also focus their efforts on volatile and tense areas where armed actors are still present or where inter-ethnic violence occurred. The information generated by these early warning systems need to be linked through communication



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and decision-making protocols to **crisis response interventions, which usually takes the form of** mediation efforts by local or provincial leaders, respected elders, or local authorities (mayors, territorial administrators, government officials). This should include efforts to counter incendiary rumors and false information, which often contribute to the escalation of local tensions. To deal with the large number of self-demobilized as well as non-demobilized armed actors, some kind of **disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program** that includes all armed groups, not only Kamuina

Nsapu, is needed. Given the loose nature of the armed groups, a broad community-based approach that targets all young people or entire communities might be more appropriate than a classic DDR program. This will help defuse remaining local tensions stemming from hundreds of idle local ex-combatants in urban areas or idle armed group units in rural areas preying on the population. A DDR program or community violence reduction program should not only address material needs, but also offer psycho-social support to young people involved in and traumatized by the conflict.

Medium to long-term: Conflict mitigation and resolution

At the **political level**, there is a need for **provincial peace dialogues** involving key national and provincial actors with stakes in the conflict to discuss existing grievances and publicly commit to building peace and reducing existing tensions. These dialogue processes should be facilitated by experienced and credible mediators. At the local level, the multitude of chiefly succession disputes, conflicts over village or groupement boundaries or over the exploitation of natural resources need to be tackled comprehensively to build durable peace.

Existing **conflict mappings** of all the localized conflicts by the provincial ministries of interior and civil society organizations such as TDH need the reviewed and updated by experts to identify conflicts at the highest risk of reescalation. **Mediated local dialogues** to deal with high-risk conflicts that had previously turned violence should be put in place and, if possible, agreements between the conflicting parties signed and reconciliation ceremonies held. In area of displacement and inter-ethnic tensions,



Photo 3: House destroyed by the conflict in Kamonia, Kasai province

mechanisms to deal with disputes over the recovery of land and property by returnees are required to prevent return processes to lead to renewed conflict. The **Consultative Commission for the Settlement of Customary Conflicts (CCRCC)**, which is formally tasked to facilitate customary disputes, should be strengthened and supported to effectively carry out its mandate. A **corps of skilled and respected local mediators** should be identified, trained, and given the means to deploy to the territories to advise local CCRCCs of customary chiefs and facilitate local dialogue processes.

Longer-term measures that contribute to rebuilding the social fabric include programmes to **improve civil-military** relations through trust building, local civil-military dialogues, effective complaints mechanisms and the dismantling of the many security checkpoints. Many actors interviewed also felt strongly that the **criminal prosecutions** of those responsible for the worst human rights violations are needed. To **rebuild trust between ethnic communities** that have been on opposite sides of the conflict will require time and deliberate efforts at reconciliation. **Dialogue processes between community leaders** from all sides could contribute to trust building, as well as reconciliation ceremonies, community theater, and joint economic projects or income-generating activities. All external interventions in conflict-affected communities should include reconciliation aspects. Many informants asked for better **“encadrement” of young people - structured and organized activities for youth** in urban and rural areas to prevent them from joining armed groups. Activities mentioned include recreational activities, youth leadership or peace education programs.

Strengthening resilience and rebuilding livelihoods

To rebuild household resilience and set Kasaiens up for sustainable livelihoods, externally-funded activities should adhere to good principles of humanitarian and development action. They should include Do No Harm analysis into their projects to avoid exacerbating tensions, base all activities on localized needs and context assessments, and work with existing local structures rather than creating new groups and committees. Any emergency humanitarian intervention should not only be one-off but be coupled with medium term investments that help individuals and households rebuild their resilience.

Short- to medium term: Cash-for-work projects are requested by the local population and by many humanitarian actors to keep self-demobilized Kamuina Nsapu fighters busy and inject cash in rural economies. Cash-for-work programs should not only target ex-combatants but entire communities, take vulnerability into account and ensure that women benefit equally. **Social networks** provide important safety nets in times of crisis but have been disrupted by the conflict and **need to be rebuilt** through joint agricultural activities, infrastructure rehabilitation or management projects, transport or agricultural projects that contribute to everybody's livelihoods. **Strengthening or rebuilding local savings groups** and **access to credit** is a critical step to both kick-starting livelihood activities and starting to build up resilience to prepare for future crises. **Interventions in agriculture** are critical to improving local livelihoods, notably the distribution to quality seeds and tools with a focus at first on fast growing crops (for example sweet potatoes), which provide quick yields and incomes as well as local seed multiplication schemes, seed banks, and local granaries. Agricultural assistance should stretch across agricultural seasons to allow households to build up seed stocks or be combined with cash. In addition, to livelihoods interventions, **health and psycho-social interventions** are equally required to ensure women, men, girls and boys can fully function and be productive members of society. Many Kasaiens have been traumatized by the violence witnessed during the conflict and will need **mental health or psychosocial programs** through the health system or through community initiatives. Generally, resources and expertise for **health and psycho-social interventions** to respond to the vast needs by **survivors of** conflict-related (and non-conflict-related) **SGBV** are urgently needed to help women cope with the trauma and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

Longer-term investments: In the longer run, **agricultural production needs to be reconstituted** in the Kasai through a **wide range of investments**, including the local production of reliable seeds and tools, a restoration of agricultural extension services, addressing cultural issues such as the male-female divide in agricultural work, dietary preferences for a limited number of crops, crop selection and varieties, exploring alternative sources of food (for ex. fish), and an expansion of growing and marketing cash crops. Significant **investments in infrastructure**, notably roads and bridges and transportation options, will be required to create positive incentives for Kasaien farmers to produce more and get produce to markets easily. Water wells and other water and sanitation infrastructure barely exist in many parts of the provinces and the more than 400 schools and 200 health centers as well as many government buildings damaged or destroyed will have to be rebuilt to resume minimum services for the population. Some of the most immediate needs could be tackled through cash-for-work projects, but others require heavy machinery and medium- to long-term investments. To create alternatives to agriculture and volatile diamond mining, **programmes to support a more diverse set of income-generating and professional opportunities** are needed, including vocational training programs and schools and business start-up support, in particular for entrepreneurship related to agriculture, food processing, and transportation. Environmental depletion can intensify conflict and affects livelihood options. Programmes for **joint resource management** between communities should complement conflict mediation attempts while in areas of serious environmental degradation or resource conflict a **comprehensive ecosystem approach** should be adopted that looks at the linkages between natural resource exploitation, livelihoods, and conflict. **Alternative fuels** to firewood and charcoal and a more economical use of firewood are needed to reduce wood consumption, one of the main contributors to deforestation.



Photo 4 : Due to extremely poor road conditions, bicycles are the main means of transportation to bring agricultural produce and charcoal from rural areas to towns and markets.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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