



SUDAN'S UNTAPPED LIFELINE:

YOUTH SPEAK OUT FROM THE FRONTLINES OF A COLLAPSED ECONOMY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sudan's youth are facing an unprecedented economic crisis, with their livelihoods, education and safety upended by the ongoing conflict, now in its third year.

Based on testimonies from young people in Kassala, North and South Kordofan, and Central Darfur, this report documents how young people – already struggling with unemployment and limited opportunities before the war – now confront near-impossible barriers to survival. Formal jobs have been decimated, forcing youth into insecure informal work that fails to meet basic needs. Displacement has severed social and professional networks, while discrimination, gender-based violence and exploitation lock many out of even meager economic opportunities. Entrepreneurs battle broken supply chains, a suffocating lack of capital, and bureaucratic paralysis. Education, once a pathway out of poverty and towards dignified employment, is now a casualty of war, as families prioritize food and shelter over schooling.

Despite these challenges, young people continue to demonstrate extraordinary resilience and play a vital role in responding to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Sudan. They support their families through precarious work, lead community-based mutual aid efforts, and innovate to fill gaps left by collapsed systems. Their role is not just critical for Sudan's future recovery; it is a humanitarian imperative today. When youth lack opportunities, families go hungry. When they cannot access safe and decent work, entire communities lose their safety nets. Investing in youth is not only about rebuilding tomorrow – it is about sustaining lives today.

Family and diaspora support for young people remain crucial. However, without urgent youth-centered interventions, this resilience risks being overwhelmed by deteriorating conditions. Donors, implementers, authorities, and the private sector are all critical actors in creating an enabling environment for Sudan's youth and must play key roles in providing adequate assistance, an inclusive market development, and accessible education and training pathways.





BACKGROUND

The conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which erupted in April 2023, has had catastrophic consequences – leaving over **30 million people in need of humanitarian assistance** and pushing more than half the population into acute food insecurity, with **5 locations already facing famine and another 17 locations at risk**. As the conflict enters its third year with no end in sight, the economic devastation is deepening: Sudan's real GDP contracted by 29.4 percent in 2023 and then 13.5 percent in 2024 according to the **World Bank economic update**. Unemployment surged from 32 percent in 2022 to 47 percent in 2024. Much of the deterioration was driven by widespread business closures, economic uncertainty, and a sharp decline in stable job opportunities due to the conflict, resulting in the poverty rate more than doubling from 33 percent in 2022 to 71 percent in 2024.

Amid this crisis, Sudan's youth¹ – who make up 35 percent of the population – are not just severely impacted but also vital actors in their communities' survival and resilience. Before the conflict, their energy and leadership fueled civil society and entrepreneurship, with nascent entrepreneurs rising **from 22% to 34% between 2018 and 2021**, and the formation of many **youth-led civil society groups**. Today, despite immense hardship, they continue to find ways to innovate and remain on the frontlines of mutual aid – organizing communal kitchens, delivering emergency support, and playing a critical role in maintaining the social fabric in fragile communities.

Drawing from interviews with youth from various backgrounds,² in Kassala, North and South Kordofan, and Central Darfur, this report examines how the conflict has reshaped their lives, how they are adapting to their new reality, and why targeted support is more urgent than ever and a lifeline for Sudan's survival and recovery.

¹ We define youth according to the African Union Youth charter as being those between the age of 15 and 34.

² Interviews were conducted with host communities and internally displaced populations across a range of industries.

CONFLICT-DRIVEN COLLAPSE: YOUTH LIVELIHOODS IN FREEFALL

Jobs vanished

Since the conflict began, many young people have lost their jobs due to the destruction of agricultural lands, industrial centers and city infrastructure.

“Most young people here are unemployed and are unable to afford travelling elsewhere in the country to look for work.” – Female entrepreneur in Central Darfur

Shift to informal and marginal work

Those who were dependent on wage-based employment for income are struggling, turning to part-time and informal work, marginal trade or casual labor to secure some income for themselves and provide for their family's basic needs. This is particularly true for the displaced who have lost their previous livelihoods and are unable to leverage their education, experience or social connections in their new environment. However, marginal trade cannot compensate for lost employment as demand – heavily affected by insecurity and loss of purchasing power since the start of the conflict – has decreased significantly.

“The impact is huge, as the number of customers has decreased significantly, and the working hours have become very tight due to the security situation, as I only work in the morning period, but in the evening period there is no longer any work.” – Female bridal stylist in North Kordofan

Shrinking job markets and rising competition

In conflict-affected areas, the lack of security has forced people to limit their activities to small windows of time, effectively reducing access to markets for both buyers and sellers. This feeling of insecurity is also a key driver of displacement, pushing populations to congregate in specific locations perceived to be safe and driving increased competition in those areas, with a smaller set of jobs available in a smaller number of industries.

“First, regarding my specialty, which is the veterinary field, 70% of people in the sector have left the market. Some institutions operate a small cadre of employees, with most currently not working. Also, many young people lost their jobs and went to other fields which increased the competition there.” – Male part-time pharmacist and marginal trader in Kassala

At the same time, both public and private employers face financial strain and cannot afford to hire additional staff or increase incomes. As a result, those who are still employed are operating under a much larger work burden with lower pay.

“In the public sector, salaries are irregular and untimely, and the workload has increased due to the emigration of a large number of colleagues. In the private sector, medicine is scarce, and its prices have increased due to high transportation costs and the decline in customer purchasing power, bringing my income to 40% of what it was pre-war.” – Female pharmacy owner in North Kordofan

Discrimination and inequality

What limited opportunities do exist are not fairly distributed nor equally accessible. For example, young women are more vulnerable to the impacts of insecurity due to serious concerns around gender-based violence, even in areas that have not seen conflict, making it more difficult for them to access existing job opportunities.

“There are many concerns in the region about armed groups violations against girls, so the psychological pressure is very high.” – Female cosmetics trader in North Kordofan

Young people we spoke to felt that while discrimination existed before the conflict, it has worsened since. Much of this is driven by favoritism in both the public and private sectors, where social connections and political alignment can often be a pre-requisite to even be considered for a job. But many we spoke to also raised concerns around discrimination along tribal or ethnic axes, as well as discrimination against those who were recently displaced.

“It has had a significant impact on the lack of job opportunities for young people due to favoritism, or racism, and it has worsened with the continuation of the war.” – Male day laborer in South Kordofan

“Usually in Kassala, strangers are not hired except through personal acquaintance or the acquaintance of one of his family members, otherwise you will not get a job easily. The reasons they tell you are that you are displaced and unreliable and may return to your original area at any moment.” – Female full-time employee in Kassala

Entrepreneurship in crisis

The conflict has not spared young entrepreneurs, with small and medium enterprises often facing complete losses, either due to violence and insecurity or indirectly as a result of the contraction of the economy.

“I owned a cafeteria in Khartoum State, in the Tuti area. Due to the armed groups actions in the area, the shop was destroyed, including the house, and the resulting violations led to my displacement to a less affected area.”
– Male marginal trader in North Kordofan

Conflict-induced business disruptions

Young and aspiring entrepreneurs we spoke to highlight the many challenges they face in opening and maintaining businesses, with instability being the most obvious one. Disruptions to supply chains, infrastructure and public services caused by the ongoing conflict limit small businesses' ability to provide goods and services at scale, reducing revenues and increasing the costs passed on to consumers. Those operating near frontlines or in rural areas face constant security fears. This climate of uncertainty has frozen investment, as entrepreneurs weigh every expenditure against the possibility of sudden displacement or violence.

“Some work supplies are unavailable, and some are difficult to obtain making them expensive, which increases the prices of product. My problem is that electricity and gas are completely unavailable. The lack of supplies, materials, and tools has forced me to decline many requests, which has reduced my income.” – Female baker in North Kordofan

“Firstly, there is fear of establishing businesses especially near conflict-ridden areas. Secondly, security in some areas is weak due to the lack of police stations in some peripheral areas. Thirdly, tribal conflicts may occur in some areas.” – Male part-time pharmacist and marginal trader in Kassala

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Capital shortages

The primary challenge that all the aspiring entrepreneurs highlighted was lack of access to capital for young people who are now facing the dual challenge of rebuilding their livelihoods and supporting their families and communities to cope with the impacts of the conflict. Many have lost access to private or familial assets that under normal circumstances could be used to finance entrepreneurial ambitions. This is at least partly due to the difficulty of engaging with financing institutions and the high administrative and financial burden of securing capital through them.

"The difficulty of banking procedures and transactions and the difficulty of obtaining capital is considered a major challenge for me and for young people to establish their businesses, which is why they resort to establishing small businesses that do not generate an income sufficient to cover their expenses." – Unemployed man in Kassala

Young women are particularly affected as they are less likely to have access to capital due to social and cultural norms that prioritize the role of men in the marketplace. Those who have been forced to end their projects or close their businesses almost always cite a lack of capital as a key cause, but even where they succeed, they face difficulties growing their business due to the limitations around capital.

"I thought about starting various projects, unfortunately, I gave them up due to the lack of funding. Also, family customs and values did not allow me to create my own business." – Saleswoman in Kassala

Bureaucratic barriers

Many of the challenges young entrepreneurs currently face existed before the conflict, but have all been greatly exacerbated since the start of hostilities. This includes high levels of competition in a limited set of viable sectors, difficulties in navigating financial and legal frameworks, as well as limited access to capacity-building or mentorship programs that could provide them with the appropriate skills.

“The key challenges are the lack of sufficient knowledge and awareness among young people of the laws and regulations that regulate work in the country, in addition to the limited income of young people and the insufficiency of capital, and the lack of business or project management skills.” – Female full-time employee in Kassala

Bureaucratic and administrative burdens play a major role in limiting entrepreneurship opportunities for young people. Disruptions to the state's administrative capacities, and the desire to strengthen government income by local, state and national administrators has meant that the costs of doing business have increased since the outbreak of the conflict. In addition, access to those government administrations requires many to travel long distances at significant cost and at personal risk in order to obtain the documentation they need.

“The major challenges are lack of capital to start a project, as well as the high government fees, the lack of licensing services in the region and the need to travel to obtain licenses.” – Male day laborer in North Kordofan

“A large number of government offices responsible for certain procedures have been closed due to the war, disrupting many procedures and potentially hindering youth projects.” – Female full-time employee in Kassala

Education disrupted

Since the conflict began, economic opportunities are most strangled for those still early in their careers who were dependent on jobs and internships to build their experience and capacities and by those who have lost educational opportunities as a result of insecurity and economic uncertainty.

“I was working as a trainee at Khartoum International Airport as I am a public relations graduate, but after the outbreak of the war I lost my training and educational opportunities.” – Saleswoman in Kassala

To learn or to survive

Despite speaking highly on the role of education and training, most of the young people we spoke to, across genders and ages, are prioritizing spending on household expenses such as food and medical expenses of family members, with the economic hardship limiting their ability to invest in their own education.

The young men we spoke to express deep desire to continue their education but overwhelmed by the duty to provide for their families in crisis, they prioritize food, medicine, and shelter over schooling—sacrificing long-term prospects for immediate needs. Young women, despite expressing the same sense of duty, are more prone to spending or saving money for education.

“All income goes towards basic expenses. After my father died, I had to work as a saleswoman in a clothing store to cover the family's expenses and provide diabetes treatment for my mother.” – Female saleswoman in Kassala

“All my expenses, despite the small amount, were spent on food, drink, and my study expenses, as I was studying at university and graduated in October 2024. Since then, the living situation at home was critical, so I felt responsible towards the home and myself.” – Female bridal stylist in North Kordofan

Education under fire and a generation at risk

Insecurity has had a direct impact on education as learning institutions have been physically damaged, looted or taken over by armed groups, leading them to close for 3 years and counting. Meanwhile students were forced to flee. Many learning institutions have reopened in safer parts of the country or even in other countries, but the mobility of young people is restricted by the prohibitive cost of transport and high levels of insecurity on roads.

“The country was unsafe and Um Rawaba College, where I worked as a teacher, was taken over by an armed group costing me my job.” – Female entrepreneur in North Kordofan

“Many educational institutions have been closed due to the war or opened in remote areas, so the challenge for young people is how to reach them.” – Female part-time employee in Kassala

As conflict protracts and economic challenges continue, many young people will be unable to return to their studies as they prioritize supporting their families. Interrupted studies have knock on effects on young people's ability to secure decent employment, especially when specific education levels or certificates are required by employers. The conflict may thus create a 'lost generation' of Sudanese youth.

“The conflict affected me because I left my studies and could not sit for the certificate exam. I tried to take the exam under the circumstances of displacement, but I could not take the exam because of the economic situation.” – Male day laborer in Kassala





From desperation to exploitation

Nearly one in three youths we spoke to reported workplace exploitation, including sexual exploitation, as desperation to secure an income pushes them to accept harsh or unfair conditions imposed by employers or clients.

Withheld remuneration was the most common form of exploitation reported, many of them working for wages that don't meet their basic needs, receiving those wages intermittently or not at all, with little recourse. This was most prominent amongst employees in the public sector as the war continues to strain public finances. These fiscal challenges are also visible at the local level, where small business owners are often targeted for additional fees by local administrators seeking to fill gaps.

"In the public sector, we are forced to work to maintain our jobs, despite the small and intermittent monthly salaries. We receive four salaries per year instead of twelve. As for my private work, I am forced to pay large sums to armed groups to ensure the passage of medicines." – Male day laborer in North Kordofan

"I was working in a shop, and the shop owner gave me a very small amount of money. I was forced to continue working due to circumstances, and sometimes the shop owner would change the salary agreement according to his mood." – Male day laborer in North Kordofan

The conflict is also raising protection concerns for many young Sudanese, with armed groups engaging in forced recruitment and the arbitrary detention of youth, particularly young men. Young women face different challenges, including sexual exploitation and harassment in workplaces and markets.

"Young people are exposed to detention and theft, in addition to unemployed young people being recruited to one side or the other in the conflict." – Unemployed man in Central Darfur

"We are harassed by people saying that we are women and that work needs men, and belittling us as women working in the market, even though most men have lost their jobs and women are more active in various fields of work now." – Female student in North Kordofan

YOUTH SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN A SHATTERED ECONOMY

Negative coping behaviors

The combined impact of the conflict on young people's livelihoods, safety and social ties is causing significant psychological stress, driving negative or destructive behaviors. This is compounded by the fact that little to no psycho-social support programs or initiatives currently exist, leaving youth to feel overwhelmed. Even those who were better placed to cope with challenges due to assets or savings are now seeing their limited capital exhaust as the war continues unabated.

"Yes, it affected me a lot, as I grew up in Khartoum, and we returned to Kassala because of the war, so all my connections were in Khartoum, but here I feel like a stranger." – Female Saleswoman in Kassala

The protracted conflict has led to widespread concerns around the engagement of young people in criminal behavior, particularly theft and the smuggling or trading of illegal or fraudulent goods, including drugs. Many of the criminal enterprises young people have found themselves engaging with are driven by militias or criminal actors, who recruit young people using the profits from illegal activities like smuggling.

"Young people are engaging in drug dealing or snatching personal belongings to make money, and this is due to unemployment and lack of work." – Female part-time employee in Kassala

"Yes, the spread of drugs was very clear to the point that it is affecting up to a third of young people. Despite the spread of drugs, the majority are remaining resistant." – Male marginal trader in North Kordofan

"Irregular migration and recruitment into armed groups is a result of young people being forced to reduce their basic expenses or abandon education due to the lack of affordability." – Male marginal trader in North Kordofan



Migration

Most of the youths we spoke to only considered migrating after the outbreak of the conflict. Time and time again young people spoke about their ambitions and the need to support their family, and how those goals clash with the economic realities they are currently facing, with emigration seen as an escape from those economic realities. For those who had been considering emigration before the conflict, either in search of work or educational opportunities, the conflict has only added urgency to that desire.

"I thought about working abroad because I am the eldest of my siblings and responsible for the family, so I thought about working abroad while completing my studies online or remotely." – Male day laborer in Kassala

"I want to emigrate to provide a better situation, develop my skills, add personal knowledge, start my university studies, become a productive individual and a real addition to society." – Female baker in North Kordofan

Migration however is a challenge for most; some speak of the security challenges they face moving within Sudan as a key limiting factor and others mention the bureaucratic challenges around securing a pathway for migration. However, the most common barrier cited was financial, with the costs of travel, housing and education prohibitively high, few can afford to emigrate, particularly considering the responsibility many feel to prioritize supporting their families' basic needs.

"I tried to migrate to Saudi Arabia, but the conflict prevented me from completing my procedures." – Unemployed man in Kassala

"Since the outbreak of the war, I have been thinking of traveling to Libya for work, but I don't have the money to travel." – Male brickmaker in Central Darfur





Community support and mutual aid

The primary source of support for youth coping with the impact of the conflict comes from family, friends and even employers, allowing them to mitigate the financial strain from conflict-induced losses. The diaspora plays a critical role in mobilizing financial support for Sudanese communities affected by the conflict, including young people.

“I see a lot of solidarity now, especially from people outside Sudan, who are working through groups and providing aid to people in need.” – Unemployed woman in Kassala

“I worked in a blacksmith shop with the shop owner. Because of the war, the shop owner migrated but left me the equipment that I work with now.” – Male blacksmith in Central Darfur

This communal support extends beyond financial aspects, with some able to secure employment after conflict-driven losses, even if the work does not align with their pre-war ambitions. The value of social capital is particularly salient for business owners, who have leveraged connections to access capital or to salvage assets, leaving them better placed to rebuild their businesses or start enterprises aligned with the challenges created by the conflict.

Very few young people mentioned receiving aid from formal aid organizations. Rather they were predominantly dependent on direct aid from their social networks, with communal kitchens and other initiatives from mutual aid groups – most of which are led by young volunteers – being lifelines for those whose networks are unable to provide that support. Despite the economic challenges, some we spoke to still spent their limited incomes on providing mutual aid, supporting the communities they live in. This can take the form of direct support to those in need in the immediate community through the sharing of food, cash or shelter, more targeted aid aimed at newly displaced families, or support to local mutual aid initiatives.

“Helping my mother and providing for the needs of my three children, as well as helping some poor families in the neighborhood because our concern has become food, drink and healthcare.” – Female trader in North Kordofan

“I do daily labor, which is not rewarding, and I have not received any support from any direction except the communal kitchens. If it weren’t for the kitchens, we would have lost a large number of people.” – Male day laborer in North Kordofan

Innovation and optimism

Despite the increasing prevalence of negative coping behaviors, the majority of young people we spoke to are actively seeking to better their situation, with the vast majority of those we spoke to optimistic about the future, believing that there will be improved opportunities over the next five years to strengthen their livelihoods and achieve their goals. **"I think things will improve as young people are working hard to change the situation, including by educating and raising awareness in their communities."** – Unemployed man in South Kordofan

"The economic conditions of young people will improve, especially after the war. Young people learned a lot because of the war, and it expanded their horizons and taught them how to broaden their businesses as a precaution if a disaster occurs in the future, which makes them resort to other options smoothly." – Male full-time employee in Kassala

Young people are learning new skills or trades to prepare themselves for that potential future, with vocational training largely seen as a valuable resource for young people. Online training and courses are also seen as valuable, despite internet availability and financial barriers limiting young people's access to these resources.

"Vocational training is easy and accessible for young people in Sudan, but training in entrepreneurship is very important but not widely available in Sudan." – Female full-time employee in Kassala

"There are no available development opportunities. We relied on training available over the internet, which is very expensive and we are unable to obtain it." – Male day laborer in North Kordofan

In the meantime, most are attempting to diversify their sources of income, with most of the young people we spoke to seeing entrepreneurial work as key to improving their livelihoods. The majority had attempted to start a new enterprise since the start of the conflict, as self-employment and entrepreneurship are seen as a more viable pathway to economic stability than other jobs options.

"The two most available options for youth are training and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is especially a great opportunity for young people who need to learn those skills from online institutes and universities." – Female full-time employee in Kassala

"I've recently opened a blacksmithing workshop where we manufacture troughs, trough holders, doors, and weld arbors." – Male blacksmith in Central Darfur

Often these new enterprises are small businesses, such as the setting up of stores, trading and transport of imported goods, small-scale production that can be done at home, or agricultural projects. Many of those seeking to start new businesses are innovating in order to find a niche in the market or to provide goods and services better suited to the current context.

"I have a project to charge phones using solar energy using the support I received from my brothers." – Male entrepreneur in North Kordofan

CONCLUSION

The crisis facing Sudan's youth is not just an economic challenge, it is a humanitarian emergency. Amidst unabated conflict, young people are bearing the dual burden of securing survival for their families and communities today while trying to salvage prospects for tomorrow.

Their struggles – with loss of livelihoods, unemployment, exploitation, disrupted education, and impossible choices – not only reflect the devastating impact of the conflict on Sudan's populations, but also the failures of an international response to the crisis that does not prioritize one of the country's most important lifelines: its youth.

Young people are already leading community responses, from mutual aid groups to small businesses that keep essential goods flowing. Supporting them is not just an investment in recovery; it is a lifeline for millions. The international community must recognize that empowering youth is both a long-term goal and an urgent necessity to address the catastrophic humanitarian crisis. Without intervention, the cost will be measured not only in lost potential but in lives. The time to act is now.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While only a sustainable and inclusive cessation of hostilities can ultimately resolve the crisis in Sudan, parties to the conflict should take all measures necessary to mitigate its impacts on youth, especially by ensuring the protection of civilians and the objects and infrastructure they rely on for survival and livelihoods, in line with international humanitarian law. At the same time, relevant authorities, donors, implementing organizations and the private sector can act now to support young people through the war and its impacts.

De-facto authorities should:

- **Ensure the proper functioning of food and market systems:** e.g. by lifting taxation at checkpoints, facilitating the movement of humanitarian and commercial goods, ending de-facto sieges, and ensuring that key supply routes and agriculture lands are deconflicted.
- **Reduce administrative barriers to education and livelihoods for young people:** this includes taking measures to improve young people's access to certifications and licensing, even amidst the conflict e.g. by reducing fees, opening more centers or providing electronic licensing services.
- **Foster public-private partnerships to incentivize youth economic inclusion:** this can include creating incentives for private companies to collaborate with youth-led startups and local businesses e.g. offering tax breaks to businesses that establish apprenticeship programs for displaced young people or meaningfully include them into supply chains.

Donors and implementers should:

- **Scale up cash assistance to alleviate youth' economic burden as responders to the humanitarian crisis:**
 - Direct cash transfers to youth will support them as they prioritize the basic needs and well-being of their families and communities, while also enabling them to invest in and secure sustainable livelihoods through education, skills training or small businesses.
 - Group Cash Transfers will maintain and strengthen youth-led mutual aid initiatives and ensure they have enough staff and supplies to cope with the dramatic scale of urgent needs.
- **Invest in and prioritize market systems development programs that address young people's need for employment and self-employment:**
 - Combine skills training (e.g. in agriculture, livestock management, digital literacy, entrepreneurship) with access to resources (e.g. business grants, agricultural inputs, land) and tailored protection, social and mental health support for vulnerable youth, including young women and other disadvantaged groups.
 - Boost private sector engagement with youth employment through incentives such as offering matching grants for companies that invest in youth-led businesses or create apprenticeship programs for displaced youth.
- **Establish youth entrepreneurship hubs servicing displaced youth:** These hubs can be physical and/or virtual and serve as centers for mentorship, networking, co-working and business training, creating a supportive community and countering the isolation and loss of connections experienced by displaced youth.

Private sector actors and financial institutions should:

- **Unlock the capital and tools young people need to kickstart new businesses:** e.g. by providing accessible financing instruments and creating and strengthening start-up incubators. Funding can be a combination of grants and low-interest micro-loans specifically designed for youth-led startups and business expansion. This should be paired with a mandatory financial literacy and business management training program for all applicants, ensuring they are equipped to manage their finances, grow their businesses, and successfully repay any loans.
- **Launch pathways supporting youth to transition to employment:** including mentorship programs, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training, to equip young people with practical experience while helping established businesses to build a skilled, work-ready talent pool aligned with market needs.

ABOUT CRISIS ANALYSIS TEAM – SUDAN

This document is intended for humanitarian purposes only. The Crisis Analysis Team - Sudan provides impartial analysis that does not necessarily reflect the opinion of Mercy Corps as an organisation.

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ABOUT MERCY CORPS

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