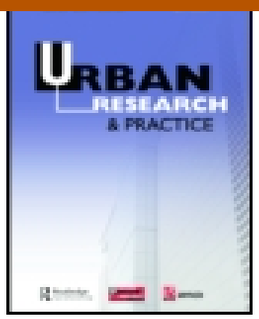

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The New Urban Agenda: key opportunities and challenges for policy and practice

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The UN-HABITAT III conference held in Quito in late 2016 enshrined the first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) with an exclusively urban focus. SDG 11, as it became known, aims to make cities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable through a range of metrics, indicators, and evaluation systems. It also became part of a post-Quito 'New Urban Agenda' that is still taking shape. This paper raises questions around the potential for reductionism in this new agenda, and argues for the reflexive need to be aware of the types of urban space that are potentially sidelined by the new trends in global urban policy.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; SDG 11; urban indicator; New Urban Agenda; global urban policy

1. Introduction

The 'New Urban Agenda' presented at the UN-HABITAT III Conference held in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016, was preceded by the establishment of the first urban sustainable development goal (SDG), known as SDG11. SDG11's definition is to 'make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' (UN 2016a), therefore covering most big urban buzzwords of the past two decades. The formation of a New Urban Agenda, and the more specific emergence of SDG11, has been the result of concerted lobbying and policy-making by cities, city networks, governments, policy-makers, NGOs and other actors. As Barnett and Parnell (2016, 89) note

> The approval of the Urban SDG is a product of what one might call a fluid alliance of interests and organizations that generated a coherent pro-urban discourse through which to assert the importance of cities in future development policy agendas.

Key questions arise out of the process of formation of SDG11. This brief article, collaboratively penned by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds but with an overarching interest in urban futures, represents an attempt to raise some of these

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questions. The concerns explored in the following can be summarized in two broad categories. First, the points for debate outlined later are focused on questioning the political, ideological and development implications of the increasing focus on the city as a 'measurable' entity, reducible to data streams and controllable through a range of new technologies. The urban SDG is heavily based on indicators and urban data: for example, UN Global Pulse and Twitter announced in 2016 that the latter would provide its data tools to enable the UN to provide support in the achievement of SDG targets (UN 2016b). How can a new 'neo-cybernetic urbanism' (Picon 2015) be integrated into broader analyses of urban trends? Following on from this, the questions raised later explore the issue of how urban policy-makers and scholars can recapture some of the aspects and facets of the city that do not fall into the remit given to current attempts to impose 'measures' and 'metrics' on the city.

Second, key issues arise around what aspects of urban life are potentially sidelined by the New Urban Agenda. What does the increasingly popular focus on 'the urban', however vaguely it is defined, do for places (from rural areas, to islands, suburbs, small states, small and medium-sized towns and villages) that do not readily 'fit' into the urban focus of today's global policy agendas? What do these agendas exclude? And following on from Barnett and Parnell's (2016) exploration of the formation of the coalition of actors that formed the SDG11 agenda, how can critical scholarship be more carefully focused on the increasing importance of coalitions of actors in city networks, consultancies and other non-elected groups that claim to represent 'the city' today?

1.1. Setting the scene: measurement, expertise and urban policy

The difficulties in translating SDG11's targets into Quito's New Urban Agenda exemplify how measurement becomes a challenge when it moves into the very practical realm of urban development: not just because of the lack of data and difficulties in measuring urban realities, but also because at the urban level measurement becomes entangled with people's lives and priorities. After three decades of structural adjustment, 'sustainable development' and the expansion of neoliberalism, the debate over the balance between political cultures and scientific and 'expert' knowledge in the management of environmental and other risks (Jasanoff 1986) is increasingly relevant as risks have gained global dimensions, responsibilities have become ever more diffused and demands for scientific explanations are stronger than ever. This tension can be seen at the heart of the New Urban Agenda.

One manifestation of this trend is the growing emphasis on evidence-based policy. This has permeated all realms of government policy, including urban policy. Take, for example, the work of the Urban Institute, a Washington, DC-based think tank and a leading institution in urban thinking. The Urban Institute portrays the production of knowledge as a process predicated on the synthesis of evidence that can be easily translated into clear policy recommendations (Turner 2013). These models assume that 'Credible Data and Analysis' is something that can be found, delimitated and delivered to navigate the political terrain. Arguably, these ideas about evidence-based policy-making as embedded in a continuous process of dialogue are more sophisticated than the instrumental views on deterministic science that scholars such as Jasanoff (1986) were concerned about in the 1980s. Nevertheless, even the most sophisticated views on evidence-based policy-making assume the exceptionality of the expert, their independence and their relatively objective stance in relation to different urban problems (Castán Broto 2012).

When thinking about SDGs and the array of targets and possible indicators, which will be deployed to measure improvements on well-being around the world, it follows that there will be a reproduction of the exceptionality of the expert in their role as defining, framing and measuring whatever matters in people's lives. This is when the role of the expert in defining people's lives becomes more explicit and, hence, controversial. As discourses of entrepreneurialism and neoliberalism impact on cities and become embedded in urban policy, local governments may lose hold of mechanisms of control in different areas of spatial and environmental policy. Not surprisingly, demands for more evidence, more data and more certainty have followed where local governments have suffered from power fragmentation (Jasanoff 1986). And yet, science and technology have never stopped being fundamentally political instruments, both because they shape politics and because they are open to political intent (Jasanoff 2004). Recognizing the realities of science and expertise does not mean a rejection of expertise as a source of ideas for policy, but an acknowledgement that scientists, technicians and experts should not be given the responsibility of arbitrating political debates, but rather should be invited to join them as recognized participants. SDG11's targets are not instruments that should be viewed as stopping conversations, but rather as opportunities to open broader questioning. These debates need to happen in specific places, with considerations of a range of local conditions and perspectives on what issues matter and why they matter. We would argue that the New Urban Agenda needs to be able to answer key questions that will have impact on the shape of urban futures across the global North and South. With this in mind, the following offers six questions for consideration in light of the upcoming materialization of the New Urban Agenda.

2. Six points for debate on the New Urban Agenda

2.1. How to standardize the (sustainable) city?

SDG11's focus on indicators, data, measurement and metrics points the way towards an understanding of cities specifically, and global urbanism more broadly, as a phenomenon that can be grasped through a standardized approach. In part, this is not new: much foundational work has over the years gone into defining the sustainable city as both a progressive normative proposition and as a creative experimental practice (Caprotti and Cowley 2016). Recently, this effort has taken a new, distinctive direction: namely, the attempt to define, in a systematic and technical manner, sustainable urban development through standardization (Joss 2015). This may well signal a paradigmatic turn in contemporary urbanism. Its significance lies in the twin perspective of the city viewed essentially in systemic terms and, consequently, urban governance defined as a principally technocratic undertaking. In turn, this may call into question the normative commitment and progressive agenda that many have come to expect of sustainable urbanism.

That sustainable urban development is increasingly subject to standardization efforts, of which SDG11 is the latest and perhaps the most high-profile example, is evident from the proliferation of variously styled indicator frameworks for 'eco', 'sustainable' and 'smart' city innovation: within the last decade, the number of such frameworks has grown from just a few to several dozen, promoted by a diverse range of organizations (for a global comparative analysis, see Joss et al. 2015). Typically, these frameworks comprise complementary indicators defining urban development targets and providing guidance on how to envision, design, plan, implement and evaluate sustainable city

initiatives. They are intended to be generic and replicable for use across various urban settings. What is more, some offer certification through third-party validation processes.

More recently still, national and international standardization agencies have moved one step forward by issuing official standards for smart-sustainable urban development. The UK was among the first country to publish a smart city standard (British Standards Institution 2014), and other national agencies and also recently the International Standardization Organization (2015) have followed suit. That this is done in the name of 'smart-sustainable city' is significant precisely because sustainable urban development has increasingly become subsumed within the emergent smart city paradigm (see De Jong et al. 2015). And there is no coincidence that the new smart urban agenda pursues a distinctly technocratic approach to urban governance, given its conceptual roots in system theory and its methodological basis in big data analytics and modelling. Early indications are that cities are beginning to adopt these standards in practice, as notably exemplified by the city of Peterborough (UK), the winner of the 2015 International Smart City Award (Opportunity Peterborough 2015).

The emergence of city standards as a new norm as well as new planning and practice tools raises several pertinent questions that deserve close attention and critical interrogation. For one thing, while there may be an obvious logic behind codifying and standardizing information and knowledge about urban development (to enable shared practice learning, scale up innovation and improve benchmarking), at the same time this comes at the risk of decontextualizing and devaluing the intrinsically local and social urban realities. Furthermore, standardization as a technical process risks rendering urban governance issues seemingly benign, when otherwise these can be expected to be inherently normative and occasionally contentious. In addition, while the case for urban standardization is typically advanced in the name of science and rational governance, the question of whose interests drive this approach deserves to be scrutinized. Again, there is no coincidence that the impetus for urban standards has to date mainly come from the business innovation side of government. Therefore, the promotion of standardization could be partly motivated by attempts to open up urban governance to greater business involvement and to render it compatible with international trade agreements.

2.2. How to reimagine the role of 'expertise' in the SDGs?

Over recent decades, one key function of the social sciences, broadly conceived, has been to challenge the epistemological assumptions of traditionally imagined 'engineers' and 'scientists'. The long-term shift away from positivist understandings of the 'scientific method' has been reflected in the rise of science and technology studies and the significant influence of various actor-network theory-inspired relational ontologies. For those wishing to critique policy- or technology-driven solutions to problems of different types, including environmental and urban issues, the supposedly detached scientific 'expert' is thus rendered an easy target. Expert pronouncements, particularly when mobilized in the service of state institutions or large corporations, can easily be reinterpreted as not only non-neutral, but also consciously obfuscatory.

In parallel, the rise of populist politics in the western Europe (Rooduijn 2014) and the United States (Oliver and Rahn 2016) is also characterized by a mistrust of 'expertise'. Such populism elides expertise with the 'elite' (set in binary opposition to 'the people'): it positions expert opinion as primarily shaped by the interests of the powerful, rather than embodying an ideal of objective scientific wisdom. Strikingly, public discourse surrounding the 2016 UK referendum on European Union membership was significantly shaped by

this discursive trend: the 'remain' campaign's mobilization of a wide range of international 'expert opinion' often fell on deaf ears.

This particular example may primarily reflect its own British context: that of a long-standing cultural tendency catalysed particularly by Thatcherite politics, which explicitly rejected the technocratic governance characteristic of the post-Second World War period (Moran 2011). A broader resonance, however, is suggested by Moran's diagnosis of an underlying 'anti-rational faith' in an imagined 'improvised natural order' (Moran 2011, 8) whereby utility is defined by the 'ultimate judgement of the market' (Moran 2011, 12) rather by the normative weight of expertise. More fundamentally, then, the popular rejection of the expert may reflect an ongoing collapse of faith in modernist policymaking, within what is widely narrated as widespread disillusionment with liberal government and public institutions, in favour of a worldview characterized by different forms of market-based pragmatism. The social sciences may not have worked actively to do the bidding of the populist demagoguery drawing on this malaise, even given their traditional role as 'handmaiden to the needs of power' (Chandler 2014, 220), but they may have served to underwrite it, or at least proven impotent as its counterweight.

Developing a more constructive, nuanced research agenda, extending beyond the identification of mismatches between contingent social realities and the SDGs' rhetorical presentation, may require a concerted effort to reject crude characterizations of 'technical experts' as either blind to, or deviously exploitative of, the social processes through which indicator sets are constructed and implemented. To this end, we should more clearly recognize that urban sustainability has always been a problematically interdisciplinary endeavour (Evans and Marvin 2006), mired in epistemological and ontological tensions and contestations. Within the pressing need, then, to 'acknowledg[e] the different theoretical traditions used to legitimize the new urban agenda' (Barnett and Parnell 2016, 97), a key objective should be to inoculate social scientists against the dangerous tendency to reject alternative framings without first questioning the parochiality of their own path-dependent disciplinary traditions.

2.3. How to ensure appropriate measurement and data for metrics?

To be effective, the HABITAT III agreement must be relevant to both urban governments and urban citizens (United Nations 2016a). It must provide a framework to help local governments and initiatives contribute towards international goals such as the wider SDGs as well as the Paris Agreement (Satterthwaite 2016). Indeed, we are told that the New Urban Agenda should be 'a concise, focused, forward-looking and action-oriented outcome document' (Evans et al. 2016, 86). Notwithstanding critical awareness of the role of 'experts', this policy and political focus require measurement that is useful, timely and relevant to urban dwellers and decision-makers. And yet, there remain three main challenges for conceptualizing, designing and collecting data for the SDGs in urban areas within the context of HABITAT III and the New Urban Agenda:

First, a key challenge exists around the issue of measurement of both SDG11 and its interaction with other SDGs that focus on urban areas. Cities have a central role in other SDGs. If tackling the SDGs in the New Urban Agenda focuses too narrowly on the Urban SDG, then a more holistic approach to urban development could be at risk. Nonetheless, beyond SDG11, the breadth and complexity of the SDG agenda create the potential for more interactions between the other SDGs (Waage et al. 2015) in urban areas than under the previous millennium development goals (MDGs). The complex interactions between

the SDGs are difficult to map out, but these must be taken into consideration to align the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in an effective way.

Second, data need to be disaggregated in order to be useful. Greater disaggregation of data was frequently requested during the SDG negotiations (Delegation of the United Kingdom 2015). This is essential for the New Urban Agenda. For example, experience during the MDG era showed that a lack of disaggregation of data on child malnutrition beyond binary 'urban' and 'rural' categories masked the fact that the malnutrition rates existing in poor urban areas were much higher than the urban average and similar to rural rates of malnutrition (Mboup 2005). Collecting 'urban/rural' statistics on various social issues may fulfil reporting requirements, but such statistics may not provide sufficient information about the needs of urban dwellers. City policy-makers need data that allow them to know where (and how many) people live in poverty, and what their needs are, so they can respond to those challenges effectively.

Third, there is a pressing need to move beyond existing data to more inclusive, alternative measurement approaches. These are required in order to deliver accurate, timely and, ultimately, useful information on the SDGs in cities. There should, for example, be a role for so called Big Data approaches, including citizen-generated data (Cornforth and Higgins 2015), earth observation data (Musakwa and Van Niekerk 2014) and transactional data (Georgeson et al. 2016). In turn, this will enable a better tracking of progress towards SDG commitments (Hsu et al. 2016).

2.4. Does the focus on data and metrics lead away from a focus on urban development?

The MDGs set in motion what Ilcan and Phillips (2010) termed a 'developmentality' predicated on calculative practices involving information profiling, responsibilization and knowledge networks. These have then operated to render certain spaces and populations knowable and amenable to the application of particular programmes or policy prescriptions. The MDGs' *relatively* simple collection of 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 technical indicators thus leant itself to a mentality of metrics-driven, performance-related report card governance so beloved of key proponents such as Bill Gates and Bloomberg (Sachs 2012, 2206). Yet, the failure of this developmentality to deliver 'a global class of straight-A students' (Sachs 2012) has spurred a search for a more holistic alternative capable of addressing the world's profoundly complex and interconnected challenges to sustainable development.

This search also dovetailed with an increasingly vociferous critique of the MDGs' failure to fully take on board the significance and role of the urban (Satterthwaite 2005; Parnell 2016). Thus, after several years of consultation, debate and development, the SDGs have emerged complete with an expressly urban goal and with no less than 169 targets and 230 indicators. This, very different and vastly more complex developmentality context is one in which 'data and metrics are essential if any public authority is to deliver on the promise of sustainable development for all' (UN-HABITAT 2016b, 194). It is therefore becoming ever closer to what might be thought of as an 'epidemiology of the urban', a mode of thinking that comes with its own consequences.

Epidemiology is the science of disease causation, which focuses on populations and risk groups (rather than individuals) and tries to identify the causal factors producing certain disease outcomes such that prevention efforts can be targeted towards certain people and places. Within this epistemology, however, data have generally eclipsed theory

(Krieger 2001). Instead, social epidemiology has tended to seek out the aetiological (i.e. causal) factors for disease without pausing to move beyond a situation where theory is a 'luxury' rather than a 'necessity' (Krieger 2001). Within this worldview, progress is often hailed in the language of advances in public health surveillance, where evermore metrics are equated to better evidence-based policy prescriptions and interventions (Adams 2016). Now, more than ever, this epidemiological mentality is being applied to an expanded range of settings, including the urban. The result is a new terrain of data, populations, risk groups, hot spots, diffusion and targeted interventions over a host of urban problems (Barnett and Parnell 2016). This movement towards an 'epidemiology of the urban' is co-terminus with an expansion of interest in the domain of 'urban health' (Herrick 2015), but it has not necessarily ensured the efficacious application of either domain to improved human outcomes.

Indeed with 230 indicators now earmarked for the SDGs (Costanza, Fioramonti, and Kubiszewski 2016), urban development and the revisioned 'developmentality' that accompanies it may now be as much about the genesis and refinement of data as it is about identifying and addressing the social determinants of urban problems (Marmot 2005). Indeed, the persistent myopia as to the 'spider' responsible for spinning the 'web of causation' (Krieger 1994) so beloved of epidemiological models of causation means that over-attention to metrics may well obscure the complex causative relations that drive the problems that undermine sustainable development. This helps explain why normative, rights-based approaches have been subjected to a 'pragmatic marginalization' in the SDGs for without a measurement, there cannot be a metric; without a metric, there cannot be a target; and without a target, there cannot be a programme of intervention (Brolan, Hill, and Ooms 2015, 9). Such 'epidemio-mentality' may be in the ascendant in addressing urban sustainable development, but we need to remain cautious about what this worldview hides as much as we must remain optimistic about what it might uncover.

2.5. How can the New Urban Agenda influence planning in the global south?

The inclusion of an urban goal in the 2030 agenda signals a hopeful departure from anti-urban discourses and policy neglect that have accompanied urbanization in parts of the global south (Parnell 2016). The need for meaningful urban interventions, as emphasized in the New Urban Agenda, includes an important role for the urban planning profession. Explicit references to the centrality of spatial planning are encouraging and signify a timely moment for the consideration of its professional parameters. However, an approach that assumes the combination of a strong state with industrialization, employment growth and the financial as well as institutional capacity to deliver on multiple plans will be limited in cities of Africa in particular, where some of the highest rates of urban growth take place. This penultimate reflection highlights the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach and the alternative opportunities offered by a sidestepping of this approach.

The production of urban space in developing countries often has little to do with the efforts of planners. Those living in informal settlements have to find their own ways to access housing, economic opportunities and social amenities, often rendered invisible and/or illegal in official policies. These circumstances are precarious and emergent and often impeded by formal planning structures. The proliferation of slums on unstable and unsuitable places, for example, is largely due to limited access to suitably located land for shelter. Land tenure is a complex terrain across Africa in particular, where different systems of tenure and uneven legislative parameters for the release of land for development can scupper even the most well-intentioned spatial plans. Lengthy systems of

registration, outdated land legislation, unrealistic policy parameters in relation to available capacity are all issues that impact in this regard. For the planner to make a meaningful contribution to the betterment of living conditions of those who need it most, a facilitative and enabling approach is necessary. This departs from the technocratic, plan-oriented approaches that often seek to formalize the informal.

The New Urban Agenda could signify a profound moment for the planning profession. Innovation and commitment to the initial 'public interest' ideals of the profession, combined with upholding the interests of the disenfranchised, can make the difference necessary to enable sustainable and resilient urban futures. There are promising signs that this is possible. Investment interest in many African cities, for example, if strategically managed, can open up opportunities for spatial targeting that is transformative and inclusive, not splintered and fragmented. Innovative approaches to transportation in Latin America show that political will combined with technical skills can produce transformative results.

Innovation can also be found in surprising places. Those operating in informal systems are particularly adept at creating geographic and livelihood spaces of their own making, without any plan to assist them. Without romanticizing the free flows of informality, these are nevertheless tangible clues to planners and policy-makers that the city is already being planned, and the best way to optimize livelihoods is by working with these systems, not shoving them aside to make way for exclusionary investment, or worse, undermining them through overregulation and/or neglect.

2.6. Where is the urban citizen in the New Urban Agenda?

What is largely missing from discussions of data, measurement, global urban agendas and urban policy is often the role of the citizen (or citizens) of the cities that will be affected by the materializations that will result from the putting into place of localized versions of the New Urban Agenda. And yet, this is not quite the case: for while the role of the urban citizen may be implicit in much scholarly and practice-based approaches to SDG11, it is nonetheless central inasmuch as data- and metrics-driven urban policies and politics rely on the ability to turn human and non-human actions and behaviour into data flows. As the example from India's smart cities programme outlined later shows, when governments grapple with urban policies that aim to refashion cities across a whole continent, the notions of urban citizenry that emerge can be so specific and exclusive as to present real problems to the deployment of a just urban politics.

In January 2016, the Indian government announced the first 20 winners of its 100 smart cities challenge. The challenge seeks to retrofit chosen neighbourhoods of 100 towns and cities with smart infrastructure, transport, housing and governance. As part of this challenge, each city developed specific area-based proposals to reflect their local context, resources and priorities of citizens. Popularized as one of its most ambitious national urban renewal programme so far, the Indian government claims that these 100 smart cities will mark India's preparedness for a new urban age. However, while the challenge has charted out clear policy and outcomes for transforming urban planning and governance through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Big Data, the construction of the 'smart citizen' who will occupy these cities has become its biggest urban fantasy so far. Publicly available proposals submitted by the nominated cities towards the smart cities challenge indicate how particular visions, imageries and fantasies of the smart city are represented through particular modes of citizenship. First, these cities seek to 'fast track' the

production of digital citizens through a focus on citizen 'engagement statistics'. This sees the near overnight production of a large base of digital 'populations' in selected cities: these are composed by citizens who participated in the mandatory citizen consultations required of the smart city challenge via social media, blogs, online competitions and questionnaires.

Second, these cities seek to embody ordinary citizens with particular modes of digital performance such as contributions to Open Data, engagement in government portals and dashboards and increasing 'civic discipline' via surveillance of social media for dissenters. The following example, from the *Smart City Mission Statement & Guidelines* issued by India's Ministry of Urban Development, illustrates this point:

> The Smart Cities Mission requires smart people who actively participate in governance and reforms. … Smart people involve themselves in the definition of the Smart City, decisions on deploying Smart Solutions, implementing reforms, doing more with less and oversight during implementing and designing post-project structures in order to make the Smart City developments sustainable. (Ministry of Urban Development 2015, 18)

This definition of 'smart people' presents them as active agents of urban transformation. However, instead of seeing smart cities as a test of citizenship, citizenship itself becomes an ally of state-private sector urban development-focused interactions.

Finally, this embodiment offers a new performativity of citizenship as code, which strips citizens of political subjectivity (Isin and Ruppert 2015) while simultaneously expecting them to perform as self-regulating individuals both online and offline. As Vanolo (2016) notes, the smart city seeks to 'speak about the citizens of smart cities, and speak in the name of them, but very little is known about citizens' real desires and aspirations'. In the Indian smart cities challenge, citizenship is presented as a benign problem space, seemingly resolved by mere access to digital space. At stake here is not just the idea of what makes a smart city, but rather the question of who or what, and how, the embodiment of citizenship is monitored, controlled and presented. These issues are key when considering the consequences of SDG11 on notions and visions of urban citizenship at a variety of scales. At the same time, the role of measurement and of the sourcing of data needs to remain central, if critically evaluated, in the production of the New Urban Agenda, as seen later.

3. Conclusion

The points presented earlier are meant as starting points for what we hope will be a much wider debate and shaping of the New Urban Agenda and of how SDG11 is operationalized in urban practice as well as theory. The article has underlined a need to critically engage with the role of experts, data, measurement and their implications for the production, performance and promotion of specific visions of what could be described as the 'new urban citizen'. Notwithstanding these critiques, the article treats the emergence of a New Urban Agenda as a temporally bounded moment of opportunity. In this vein, cautious arguments have been presented about the potential role of standardization in the contemporary city, as well as broader opportunities spanning north and south perspectives. Finally, SDG11 and the New Urban Agenda present, we argue, the opportunity for moving past a risky critical fetishization of the role of 'experts' in global urban policy and development agendas and towards a prospective re-evaluation and redrafting of their role in a more progressive context.

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