

THE WANGARI MAATHAI CASE AS A PANACEA FOR NON-STATE ACTOR INFLUENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND POLICY IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the transformative legacy of Professor Wangari Maathai and its influence on sustainable environmental management practices in Zimbabwe. Drawing on Maathai's environmental philosophy—particularly her advocacy for grassroots empowerment, afforestation, and the integration of gender equality into ecological conservation—the paper examines how her ideas have inspired similar approaches across Africa. It highlights key initiatives in Zimbabwe, such as the Environmental Management Act (2002), the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), and community-based forestry and conservation programs that embody Maathai's principles of sustainability, local participation, and ecological restoration. Through a review of

literature and policy analysis, the study demonstrates how Maathai's model has informed Zimbabwe's strategies for balancing environmental protection with socio-economic development. The paper concludes that Maathai's environmental ethos continues to shape policy and practice in Zimbabwe, offering valuable lessons on resilience, environmental justice, and sustainable development for the wider African continent.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental protection and policy is achieved through a holistic approach where different actors come in play with their resources and skills to reach a common goal of sustainability. Non-state actors are also part of the stakeholders who have a role to play in environmental management. In Zimbabwe, these actors are ensuring environmental protection and policy through poverty alleviation, women empowerment, education and awareness, advocacy and activism as well as partnerships. This has been helpful in controlling environmental problems faced by the country as a whole. However, environmental policy and protection by non-state actors has its share of loopholes ranging from lack of resources, dependency syndrome, and competition to mention a few, all these hindering maximum success of their intervention in environmental protection and policy.

Definition of Terms

Clapham, (2015) identified a non-state actor as any entity that is not actually a state and further posits that it could be an individual or entity, not acting under the lawful authority of any state in conducting their activities. Non-state actors are groups that while not affiliated with, directed by, or funded by any government, can exercise significant control over them and they include corporations, private financial institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as paramilitary groups, armed guerrilla warfare resistance groups, and terrorist organizations (Longley, 2022). In Zimbabwe, in terms of environmental management, non- state actors involved include, civil society, Non-Governmental Organisations ((NGOs), business community as well as environmental activists and all have a role to play in ensuring environmental protection and policy.

BACKGROUND TO THE WANGARI MAATHAI CASE IN KENYA AND BEYOND

Wangari, a Kenyan social, environmental, and political activist was born on 1 April 1940 and grew up in rural Nyeri, the Central Highlands of

Kenya. She pursued her primary and secondary education in Kenya before she got a scholarship to attend College in the United States (Shattuck, 2022). She expanded her knowledge in Sciences through taking courses in rural development where she developed skills and strategies that she later on employed in her environmental activism efforts. After acquiring a Bachelors in Biological Sciences from Mt Scholastica College and a Masters in Biological Sciences from the University of Pittsburg in 1966, Maathai returned to Kenya where she met her husband Mwangi Mathai and got married in 1969. Prof Maathai upon returning to Kenya worked as a research assistant at Nairobi University and before she continued with her studies in Germany making it possible for her to earn a PhD in anatomy at Nairobi University by 1971. This led her to become the first woman to earn a doctorate in East Africa. She continued working at Nairobi University as a lecturer in veterinary anatomy being a prominent advocate for women's rights and also became the first woman to chair a department in the region in 1976 (Shattuck, 2022; Taylor, 2016). In 1977, she was promoted to Associate Professor and her feminist work led to her marginalization by male counterparts at the University leading to her departing from Academia(Taylor, 2016) .

Adding to her work as a University Lecturer, Maathai also took part in multiple civic organisations across Kenya. These include the Kenya Association of University Women and Kenya Red Cross which she became director in 1973 (Shattuck, 2022). She was also invited to join the Environmental Liason Centre, a group that ensured participation of NGOs in environmental work. She then joined the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), an umbrella organisation which had a drive of joining other women's groups in Kenya both rural and urban areas in Kenya (Shattuck, 2022).

After Maathai had completed her studies and determined to empower women, she began to focus on addressing issues that affect women negatively. In her research, she observed that behind the known everyday hardships of environmental degradation, food security and deforestation were even deeper issues of disempowerment, marginalization and a loss of traditional values making it difficult for communities to protect their environment and to work together for shared benefits (Njagi, 2022). In response to the concerns of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was becoming less reliable, and they were having to walk further and further to obtain firewood for fuel and fencing, Professor Wangari Maathai established the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977 under the sponsorship of the NCWK (Uchil, 2021). The purpose of the movement as Maathai said was to help people "make the connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in their environment and society." (Mia, 2005).

The Green Belt Movement unlike many NGOs working throughout Africa, is an indigenous African organization, with its headquarters and registration in Nairobi, Kenya, and is run by Kenyans, many of whom are women (Shattuck, 2022). In its early years, the Movement focused on

several community-level projects, including food security and water harvesting at the family level, civic education, environmental activism, and training seminars (Shattuck, 2022). One of its most popular part was the tree planting campaign that spread to many districts as it was joined by many women's groups across the country. Women were encouraged to plant lines of trees, popularly known as "greenbelts" and the movement paid women for every tree planted which survived for over three months (Grassi, 2017). Maathai believed that "Women who start to plant trees on their farms influence their neighbours and their neighbours eventually become involved , now we see the government reacting" (Njagi, 2022). These belts of trees played a significant role in providing shade and wind breaks, facilitating soil conservation, improving the aesthetic beauty of the landscape and providing habitats for birds and small animals (Njagi, 2022).

According to Uchil, (2021) by 2021, over 51 million trees had been planted since Wangari started the movement in 1977 and over 30,000 women were trained in forestry, food processing, bee-keeping, and other trades that helped them earn income while preserving their environment. Additionally, men and women in Kenyan communities had united and demonstrated motivation to stop additional environmental degradation and repair already-damaged areas. Professor Maathai's work and the Green Belt Movement continues to stand as evidence to the effectiveness of grassroots organization and the impact that one person's simple idea can have in community development (Uchil, 2021). Her legacy still lives in the Movement, which is still at the forefront of environmental advocacy in Kenya and has made significant strides towards reclaiming and restoring forest land (The Greenbelt Movement).

As noted by Cockram, (2017), from 1977 to 1988 the strategy of Wangari Maathai and the GBM was twofold that is empowering women by paying them to grow seedlings and providing the same women with environmental education. In one of her statements, she said "You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them". This was made possible by making women key stakeholders of the Movement as Maathai said "African women in general need to know that it's ok for them to be the way they are to see the way they are as a strength, and to be liberated from fear and from silence." (Uchil, 2021) hence large number of participants in GBM were women. Maathai realised that rural women in Kenya were being directly affected by degradation therefore she worked to combat this by planting trees and employing women to do the work (Shattuck, 2022).

While getting a source of income, by planting trees, women simultaneously improved the environment as well as their quality of life as the money was used to meet family needs, paying for food, clothing, children's school fees and domestic utensils (Uchil, 2021). The visibility of the incentives encouraged more participation and increased interest in the movement such that by 1992, Maathai reported that "to date, some 10

million trees have been planted and have survived a survival rate of about 70-80 per cent. Up to 80,000 women are today involved in work at nursery sites” (Cockram, 2017). These women as their skills developed in forestry, they were nicknamed “foresters without diplomas” (Shattuck, 2022). In 1989, the GBM led by Professor Maathai protested against the government proposal of building a 60 storey building in Uhuru Park and a 34 acre public green space in Nairobi (Njagi, 2022). Mt Kenya Forest and a big portion of Karura Forest were to be given out for some government business in 1999 but the GBM led a protest against the destruction of these forests knowing the negative effects of such actions to the nation (The Green Belt Movement). Further, in 2002, Maathai was elected to Parliament and was appointed as an Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources by the then new President. She then helped in shaping Kenya’s Forest Act of 2005 which was designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, preserve biodiversity, promote environmental sustainability and to meet human needs (Taylor, 2016). When asked of her motivation for environmental activism, Prof Maathai responded and said “I don't really know why I care so much. I just have something inside me that tells me that there is a problem, and I have got to do something about it. I think that is what I would call the God in me”. (Grassi, 2017). This shows that environmental activism to her was inborn.

As a leading activist, Maathai travelled the world and encouraged people everywhere to take action through presenting talks about the key global issues surrounding the environment and social injustice. She received quite a number of awards for the key role of environmental rehabilitation and sustainable development, peace and democracy through tree planting (Njagi, 2022). She is one of the six individuals world-wide to be honoured with Goldman Environmental prize in 1991, the Hunger Project’s Africa Leadership Prize, and was featured on the cable news network CNN (Taylor, 2016). In 1992, Wangari Maathai played a major civil society role at the United Nations sponsored Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and drew significant financial support from Western environmental foundations and some European nations (Taylor, 2016).

In 2004, Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace and became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (Grassi, 2017; Njagi, 2022). After being awarded the Peace Prize in 2004, Prof Maathai and the GBM became prominent and she was then appointed Goodwill Ambassador for the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystem, the World’s “second lung” after the Amazon Rainforest (Uchil, 2021). The Green Belt Movement is currently a global movement evolving in the United States, United Kingdom, West India, Japan, South America, and throughout Africa organizing women to plant trees, combat deforestation, restore their main source of fuel for cooking, generate income, and stop soil erosion (Grassi, 2017; Uchil, 2021).

With the necessary support and financial aid from the NCWK and later the United Nations Environmental Program, the Green Belt

Movement grew and spread throughout Kenya and eventually to some African countries, the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Njagi, 2022). Additionally, it expanded its influence globally to promote and fight against climate change, highlight the value of Africa's rain forests in the Congo, and launch the Mottainai campaign, which aims to instil the principles of reduce, reuse, and recycle in Kenya and other countries. As a result of the movement, in the mid-1980s the Pan-African Green Belt Network was developed as an outreach to propagate the same model of development in neighbouring countries and it has since been adopted in Tanzania, Uganda, Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe etc. (Uchil, 2021).

NON-STATE ACTOR INFLUENCE ON ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND POLICY IN ZIMBABWE.

Poverty alleviation

It cannot be denied that poverty is the major culprit in environmental degradation as poor people are mostly reliant on natural resources for their day to day living. Faith-based organisations have significantly promoted poverty alleviation programs especially in rural areas. Unlike many governments which are overwhelmed and cannot provide for its rural poor, non-state actors reach out to the poorest people even in the most remote areas of the country to render assistance in provision of assets for instance implementation of projects such as the Small Livestock rearing which target vulnerable families in selected Hwange and Bubi districts by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) (Nyathi et al., 2020). This was upon realising that people in the district were resorting to fuel wood selling as a way to get income hence massive deforestation in the areas. From the project, these two districts received 1,634 goats, 10 pigs, 41 sheep, 3,103 chickens, 5,225 guinea fowl and 16 ducks ensuring livelihood security for poor rural people in semi-arid provinces of Zimbabwe (Nyathi et al., 2020).

NGOs have also been promoting income generating projects in rural communities. In Gutu District, (Matsvai, 2018) has noted that through assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), community members through beekeeping project managed to gain significant income through selling honey which also contributed a lot towards the health of the community since honey to some is considered among the best natural medicines for respiratory problems. UNDP also funded a horticultural project in the district resulting in increases in incomes through selling vegetables to the neighbouring communities increasing their ability recover from social, financial and health shocks as they could now send their children to school and meet their medical expenses (Matsvai, 2018). Kabonga, (2023), also noted that NGOs are still playing a significant role in poverty reduction through skills development as evident in Chegutu where organizations like Goal Zimbabwe and International Rescue Committee (IRC) have implemented projects like beekeeping, carpentry, horticulture and other off-farm

enterprises in a bid to alleviate poverty in the area. However, it has been noted that the effectiveness of NGOs poverty alleviation strategies remains questionable because poverty still persists in areas which they have been serving for quite some time as in the case of Binga. This is because of lack of appropriate evaluation strategies of their programmes, particularly when it is performed by donor agencies that might not be sensitive to the needs of the locals. Matsa *et al.*, (2023) has also noted that community involvement in decision making by NGOs remains limited as locals are only involved in identifying locations in the district where projects can be implemented and not necessarily the type of projects to be implemented. Kabonga, (2023) is also of the view that NGOs are failing to reach the poorest of the poor probably due to poor roads in most remote areas especially during the rainy season. This means that in most districts, NGOs are addressing the symptoms but not the root causes of poverty hence poverty persistence even after their involvement.

Donor dependency syndrome has also been cited as a culprit to sustainability of NGO projects in poverty reduction. Matsa *et al.*, (2023) have noted that there is a strong relationship between dependency syndrome and approaches by donors as after project handover by NGOs, communities lack funds to continue implementing the projects after donor withdrawal. They went on to say that NGOs mainly focus on implementing relief-aid projects mainly in the form of food distributions, propagating the syndrome of donor dependency among community members hence perpetuating poverty. Also, threats of sustainability of funded projects come from i natural hazards such as droughts which cause shrinking of water bodies and wetlands used to sustain irrigation needs in the case of Gutu community gardens (Matsvai, 2018). It has also been noted that income generating projects which are donor funded has less impact since some community members have a tendency of politicising them (Nyathi, 2012). Political interference has also hindered poverty reduction in Chegutu district as it emerged that political figures like councillors take advantage of their position to influence the selection process of would-be beneficiaries as well as the direction poverty reduction activities would take (Kabonga, 2023). Lack of monitoring and evaluation of projects by many NGOs means that there are high chances of not noticing their mistakes and hence they remain uncorrected (Nyathi, 2012).

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Non state actors have influenced environmental protection through women empowerment. Matsvai, (2018) has noted that women constitute 77% of participants in donor funded activities in all age groups as they are regarded as the most critical human capital in most communities. He further noted alluded that they constitute a huge percentage of the people who are directly involved in all areas of intervention so in this case, empowering them means there will be environmental protection at the end of the day. In Hwange district Ntengwe for Community Development is

working on women empowerment through Self Help Groups which is a paradigm into rural communities relying on women to create the necessary social capital needed to build confidence and capacity as active change agents of development (Nyathi, 2016).

The SHGs have given room to the most isolated sectors of the societies who are the women to work towards improving environmental management since they are the ones mostly involved in production activities in the rural areas particularly in the agricultural sector (Mulwa & Visser, 2020). As part of their meetings and interactions with communities, the women groups acted as key mobilizers for other women to respond to environmental challenges such as deforestation and environmental pollution. Due to the fact that they are already organized into groups, it has become easier to mobilize women for environmental activities collectively than appealing to individuals. In all the wards of operations, Self Help Groups conducted tree planting days and environmental clean-up campaigns as a way of ensuring that the environment is cared for (Siambombe & Isaac, 2018). Bowora, (2018) has noted that villagers (women included) in Tsholotsho district are collectively taking part in ensuring sustainable development through Self-Help initiatives by managing community boreholes and in the event of damages, locals are in a position to make and fit their own spare parts or raise money to buy new ones. They are also taking part as Self Help Groups in coming up with rules and regulations on the water supply system. It has been noted that in as much as the regulations are informal and unwritten, they are well known and enforceable within the communities (Shoniwa, 2024). The regulations are enforced through water committees and users found on the wrong side of the law are made to appear in village courts (Bowora, 2018). The committees are also responsible for conflict management whenever water related conflicts arise all this proving a point that indeed non-state actors are playing a significant role in environmental management through women empowerment.

On the other hand even though women empowerment has been yielding positive results, the impact however is not the same for all women. This shows that what is regarded as empowering to one person may not be the same to another. hence projects aimed at empowering women at times fail produce d the intended results as they do not address individual needs (Mandinyeya, 2014). Also, Zimbabwe is a highly masculine society, which places less value on women's activities outside the home so at the end of the day there is unwillingness to participate among the women due to fear of the unknown (Phiri et al., 2018). Maathai throughout her activism as a woman faced discrimination and marginalization including being subjected to patriarchal norms (Shattuck, 2022), thereby showing the extent through which gender bias affect women to execute their roles in environmental protection.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

As noted by Mia, (2005), Wangari Maathai' and the Green Belt Movement launched a civic and environmental education programme as she said "Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instil in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it". They also led campaigns of high profile to save forests and green spaces in Kenya for instance in 1991 the movement saved Nairobi's Uhuru Park from an enormous high-rise to be built by the ruling party. In Zimbabwe, non-governmental organizations, for example, Care International, Oxfam, Environment Africa, Zimbabwe Ahead work with groups and Local Authorities in Masvingo offering support in clean up campaigns and environmental education and awareness programmes in the area creating partnerships between communities and the government in local waste management (Bgwoni, 2015).

In a bid to restore degraded environments in Zimbabwe, NGOs are raising awareness and educating people about certified organic agriculture benefits and the dangers of using synthetic chemicals in agriculture (Chitiyo and Duram, 2019). They believe that raising awareness- can alter consumer perceptions on indigenous foods being viewed as sub-standard by many Zimbabweans by indicating the demand for it in other countries. This has led to them educating communities through demonstration plots to show the legitimacy of organic farming. To add on, NGOs are also undertaking trainings in communities to develop skills they can use for community projects and through the trainings it has been noted that there has been increased yields as a result of sustainable practises such as organic composting, water harvesting and crop rotation. These practises reduce soil erosion and improve soil fertility thereby minimizing environmental deterioration.

However, having NGOs to both the initiate and implement projects endangers long term sustainability of these projects since these NGOs are heavily reliant on donor funds and are often limited to address challenges such as the land reform especially in environments where the government doubts their intentions (Chitiyo and Duram, 2019). This then requires a multi- sectorial approach whereby different players including government departments are required to actively participate in developing sustainable projects. This is because efforts of a few non- state actors will not serve to bring the necessary change regardless of the networks and partnerships created without the government intervention.

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY

Non-state actors are playing a part in promoting environmental advocacy and activism in Zimbabwe. As there is An increase in e-waste due to technological advancements , activists such as Rodrick Moyo from Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA), expressed disappointment on the absence of legislative measures in the

management of e-waste in Matabeleland (CITE, 2021). He noted with concern that the available laws on waste only bans the discharge of hazardous waste into the environment without specifically regulating e-waste hence the need to revise and update or formulate new policies on e-waste management. It has also been noted that there has been unsustainable rate of water obstruction from Cleveland dam and activists such as Jimmy Mahachi of the Cleveland Action Alliance Trust and Mohammed Surtee, director of Haka Game Park have been making noise, seeking justice over the issue from the responsible authorities (Munjenjema, 2021).

A teen activist from Victoria Falls, Nkosilathi Nyathi won a grant from UNICEF and the G-20 backed Global Infrastructure hub to build a biogas digester at his school as a result of his continued activism on environmental protection (Ndhlovu, 2021). In the same view, some activists have also urged the country to act promptly and forcefully to combat environmental crimes such as veld fires which continuously destroy lives and property by establishing competent environmental courts to comprehensively prosecute those who commit environmental crimes (Harris, 2022). To add on, Zimbabwe climate change activist from Environmental Rights Advocacy Trust, Lisa Chitura has urged the government to use different ways of campaigns to involve youth on board to adapt to and fight against climate change (Bisola, 2022).

Wangari Maathai as an environmental activist also founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots organization that focused on empowering communities to take charge of their environment thereby promoting sustainable development (Mia, 2005). An emerging climate champion, Desire Nyagura based in Epworth is advocating for a clean and safe environment in urban areas. Advocating against unsafe and improper waste disposal, the teen activist through the Junior Council, managed to aggressively push for proper waste management and maintenance of dumpsites in Epworth. The activist also founded a youth-focused organisation called “Youth-Light Zim” which deals with climate change related issues and environmental management (Nyathi, 2023). Also a network called Insider Mediators consisting of 46 Zimbabweans from all over Zimbabwe, in Partnership with the Africa University hosted a workshop in Harare on how environmental peace building can help to combat environmental degradation in the nation (Berghof-Foundation, 2024). This clearly shows how non-state actors have influenced environmental protection and policy in through advocacy and activism in Zimbabwe.

On the other hand, environmental activism has been challenged by lack of resources. The activists may not be in a better position to deliver their duties due to lack of resources. This is the same with Maathai’s case as the Green Belt Movement often struggled with financial resources and depended on grants and donations to sustain its work. Also, some of the activists have been mistaken for political activists therefore counter activism policies have been put in place hindering them from executing

their duties. To add on, most activists are mainly centred in urban areas with limited reach to rural areas of which rural people are mostly in contact with the natural environment on a day to day basis so there is need for them to receive information from advocates. Even if the activists reach rural areas, their information is mainly in foreign language which can be hardly understood by local communities so language barrier remains a challenge in environmental activism. Since environmental advocates and activists are mainly young people, they face resistance from the elderly who feels they want to alienate them from their Indigenous Knowledge.

PARTNERSHIPS IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Non-state actors in Zimbabwe create far-reaching networks at local and national level in environmental protection. This is as a result of the fact that they specialize on a particular component each so at the end of the day, maximum protection is ensured. Chitiyo and Duram, (2019) have noted that partnerships between communities and different non- state organizations has facilitated expansion of certified organic agriculture initiatives in the country despite lack of government support. Through partnerships, NGOs have managed to avoid challenges in their countries of operation such as in Zimbabwe where their activities and programmes are not openly supported in policies. (Chitiyo and Duram, 2019).

In Binga, agencies with diverse focuses complement each other in delivering to rural communities. An example of these organizations include, but are not limited to Save the Children (children and youth development), World Wide Fund for Nature (human wildlife conflict management), World Vision (humanitarian work), and Ntengwe for Community development (women and climate change), which work on diverse thematic areas which all contribute to sustainable environmental management (PlanAfric, 2000). This shows that partnerships among non-state actors have contributed a lot to environmental protection. As noted by Shoniwa, (2024), NGOs have effectively participated in the development of Climate Change policy in Zimbabwe and in defining the country's stance in Climate Change international dialogues. Also, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) together with traditional leadership are playing a vigorous role in climate governance as partners. Since climate change is regarded as a major environmental threat, this shows that non-state actors are playing a collective role in ensuring climate governance as agents of change in the face of environmental demons.

On the other hand, it has been noted that the approaches used by NGOs are problem focused in such a way that they tend to see challenges faced by communities problems that require donor- funded efforts rather than efforts from communities themselves (Dube, 2021). In support of this, Kabonga, (2023) has noted that as NGOs are donor dependent, they cannot do anything outside of their agreement by donors and cannot divert from agreed budget and proposals. In addition, NGOs still compete among themselves for funding, for publicity, and for the

most attractive projects and sometimes tend to duplicate their activities thereby limiting networking and co-ordination. They are also unwilling to grant co-ordinating authority to their umbrella organization, and some are even unwilling to share information about their activities. Vivian and Maseko, (2014) noted that “even though NGOs talk a great deal about exchange of information and experiences and co-ordination, their actions show a certain amount of vagueness to this, especially amongst identical organizations”. There is need for the non-state actors to be transparent in their partnerships so that they achieve a common goal.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can never be denied that Wangari Maathai and her Green Belt Movement have impacted environmental protection and policy in Zimbabwe as non-state actors are imitating what Maathai did in Kenya through poverty alleviation, women empowerment, education and awareness, climate change adaptation and mitigation, activism and advocacy and creating partnerships. However they face quite a number of challenges ranging from resistance, lack of funds and other natural hazards as a result of climate variability. There is therefore need for the state and non-state actors to work together in order to achieve a common goal of environmental protection in Zimbabwe.

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