Business models that are inclusive of small farmers

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Summarized and adapted by Andrew W. Shepherd, FAO, Rome

Introduction

Small-scale farmers are faced with markets in an unprecedented state of flux. Domestic markets are undergoing rapid but uneven modernization, and higher value and export markets are increasingly the preserve of larger scale suppliers. The modernization of domestic markets, particularly in Latin America and Asia, has been driven by a wave of investments in emerging economies by domestic and transnational food manufacturers and retailers over the past two decades. Combined with rising urbanization, and changes in consumer preferences and purchasing power, these have led to a growth of modern organized food retailing which has outpaced the growth of per-capita GDP by a factor of three to five (Reardon and Huang, 2008).

We define inclusive business models as those which do not leave behind small-scale farmers and in which the voices and needs of those in rural areas in developing countries are recognised. The paper describes a range of business models for inclusive market development. It focuses specifically on models that improve the inclusiveness, fairness, durability and financial sustainability of trading relationships between small farmers on one hand and downstream agribusiness (processors, exporters and retailers) on the other.

1. Business models and inclusive market development

A business model is the way by which a business creates and captures value within a market network of producers, suppliers and consumers, or, in short, "what a company does and how it makes money from doing it".

For example, the modern retailing model is built on consumer assurance, high standards for food quality and safety, year-round availability, and, sometimes, lower prices. This model is highly sensitive to any addition of costs and risks. There are perceived to be high transaction costs and increased risks with purchasing from large numbers of fragmented small-scale farmers. Small-scale farmers are also perceived to be less reliable in honouring trading agreements, because they do not have the technical skills and technologies to produce the right products at the right time (quality, timeliness and consistency). Common business practice sees buyers typically seeking out large-scale suppliers (Box 1).

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1 This is a summary and adaptation of a longer paper commissioned by FAO for the Global Agro-Industries Forum, New Delhi, April 2008 and prepared by Bill Vorley (IIED), Mark Lundy (CIAT) and James MacGregor (IIED), which is due to be published by FAO/CABI in 2009.
Among the supermarkets in China, Carrefour is characterized by marketing fresh foods. With the rising consciousness of consumers on safety of food, the demand for high quality and safe food has increased. Carrefour started in 1999 to sell a “green” food supply line under its own brand with the “Quality Food Carrefour” logo. These lines represent an innovation in the purchasing system within the Chinese context, where Carrefour carries out integrated management of the entire supply chain, with full traceability. Other retailers are following suit. To date, co-operators of the Carrefour quality line are all larger-scale, rather than the small-scale farmers who account for more than 90 percent of the agricultural population in China.

Source: Hu and Xia (2007)

From the perspective of producers and their organizations, there may be good reasons to avoid trading with the modern agrifood system. With low and inconsistent production volumes, dispersed production, weak negotiation positions, limited capacity to upgrade and meet formal market requirements, and poor access to information, technology and finance, the transaction costs for farmers to link with the modern sector are daunting. And despite significant investments of time and resources, market access is still not guaranteed. It would therefore appear that business models are called for, where small-scale farmers can cooperate to compete as one single supplier, and where their customers are responsive to the realities of smallholder production.

### 2. What is the business case for adjusting business models in favour of smallholders?

While the business case for trading with small-scale producers is sometimes being called into question, experience in the field suggests that a convincing case for models that are inclusive of small-scale producers can be made. Securing consistent supply is especially critical. A diversified supplier base, including small-scale producers, can contribute to improved security of supply. Retail buyers and processors may also seek to by-pass markets where large traders appear to have a stranglehold. This was the situation in Pakistan where a milk processor, Haleeb Foods, worked around the large and well-established milk traders by securing a small-farmer supply base. An even stronger business case for linking with small-scale producers is where there is a scarcity of alternative suppliers.

In contrast to the centralized fresh produce procurement systems of South African retailers, who rely on preferred commercial suppliers, there are also innovative procurement schemes. Two rural-based supermarket chain stores in the Limpopo Province source fresh vegetables locally from small-scale farmers. By 2004, the Thohoyandou SPAR store was procuring approximately 30 percent of its vegetables from about 27 small-scale farmers. These farmers are supported by interest-free loans, a guaranteed market, farm visits, and training on required quality standards. The remoteness of the supermarkets from the central distribution centres, the stores’ operation in rural areas, reduced transportation costs, and meeting freshness requirements, as well as being seen to contribute to community development, were the drivers for supporting the development of this local procurement scheme (Bienabe et al., 2007).
Small-scale producers can also have a comparative advantage in terms of produce quality, innovation, costs and farm management. Indeed, in exports of fresh vegetables from Africa to the UK and from Central America to the US, it has been the premium quality products such as French beans and peas that are sourced from smallholders.

Working with small-scale farmers is also a means to build community goodwill, contributing to a company’s licence to operate. Buying locally from smallholders may be part of a company’s socially responsible strategy and become an advertising slogan in the highly competitive environment in which it operates. Customers are aware of and may value local procurement from small-scale farmers in the community as long as the produce is of a good quality (see Box 2).

Other examples of supermarkets working with small-scale producers include programmes by Carrefour in Indonesia, through which dialogue is established between farmers and buyers to ensure increased quality through the development of a “Best Supplier” prize. In Guatemala, Wal-Mart has recently initiated a programme with an International NGO, Mercy Corps, and the financial service provider AGIL to facilitate the entry of 600 farmers to its supply base over the next three years. The goal of this programme is to guarantee supplies of speciality products as Wal-Mart expands in the region. However, despite the increasing interest of buyers to work with small farmers, questions remain about the depth of this commitment due to the fragmentary nature of some of these programmes.

3. What are the various models that have emerged for linking small-scale farmers to agribusiness and changing markets?

The preceding section elaborates the business case for inclusion. However, this will be insufficient to trigger widespread adoption of inclusive business models unless the risks and costs are addressed.

Organization of production is central to overcoming the costs associated with dispersion of producers, diseconomies of scale, poor access to information, technology and finance, inconsistent volume and quality, lack of traceability, and management of risk. In view of lower transaction costs and the possibility of more effective capacity transfer, private companies often prefer to work with organized farmers rather than individuals despite the increased bargaining power that groups can enjoy. Production may be organised by the producers themselves, by the end customer companies, or by an intermediary such as an NGO, trader, wholesaler, or exporter (Table 1) in a range of direct or indirect market linkages.

Where market linkages are initiated by existing actors, they tend to build on informal structures in which traders or farmer-traders play a critical role not only to connect farmers to markets but also as de facto service providers. In many cases the trader is a member of the rural community and has specialized knowledge, information, assets and contacts to facilitate not only commercial ties but also social support in times of crisis. Informal linkage models are common throughout the world but little understood. Certainly, knowledge on how to develop business models that leverage these informal linkage systems is scarce. These models rarely receive support from development interventions or attention from researchers due to their informal nature and a strong bias against traders in many development organizations.
Table 1. Typical organization of smallholder production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Driver</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<tr>
<td>Producer-driven</td>
<td>Small-scale producers themselves</td>
<td>• new markets</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• higher market price</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• stabilize market position</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Large farmers</td>
<td>• extra supply volumes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buyer-driven</td>
<td>Processors</td>
<td>• assure supply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exporters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retailers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediary-driven</td>
<td>Traders, wholesalers and other</td>
<td>• supply more discerning customers</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>traditional market actors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NGOs and other support agencies</td>
<td>• ‘make markets work for the poor’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>National and local governments</td>
<td>• regional development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Eg via ‘Dragon Head‘ companies in China</td>
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A more documented approach is small farmer organization *induced* by external agents or a combination of external actors and small farmers. This starts from the assumption that existing market linkages are not effective either in terms of efficiency or in terms of equity and that new skills and knowledge need to be developed to facilitate favourable market linkages for smallholders. These interventions are often led by development organizations and supported by donors although examples of private sector initiatives of induced organization, such as contract farming and outgrower schemes, also exist. Recent work raises doubts as to the sustainability of these induced organizations supported by development actors, due to pressures to avoid failure (Berdegué, 2001), non-sustainable business practices (Hellin *et al.*, 2007; Shepherd, 2007) and inherent inefficiencies in the intervention model (Berdegué *et al.*, 2008a).

**Producer–driven models**

Producer-driven models such as cooperatives and farmer-owned businesses have had a mixed record of providing members with economic benefits in terms of access to dynamic markets. Research in eight countries (Reardon and Huang, 2008) found that membership of producer organizations was correlated with participation in modern markets in only half of the countries; in the rest the correlation was not significant or was negative. Marketing cooperatives are rare, and members typically remain oriented to the traditional commodity markets. In cases such as Honduras, where they do exist, agribusiness has been averse to purchasing from cooperatives due to slow decision-making and limited entrepreneurial focus (Agropyme, 2006).

But collective action remains an important potential strategy to increase small-scale producer participation in emerging modern markets and to generate sustained commercial flows of high quality products. Nevertheless, common limitations in farmer organizations include an excessive focus on democratic governance which, in many cases, leads to effective leaders being replaced every 12 to 24 months as stipulated by by-laws. This can be avoided by having a professional management team that reports to the elected Cooperative board but is not subject to annual or bi-annual elections. However, only sizeable operations can afford such management.
Buyer-driven models

Buyer-driven models seek efficiencies in the chain to the benefit of processing or retailing. There are some very promising cases where the necessity of organizing supply from a small farm base, often the case with milk procurement, has led to sustained inclusion of small-scale farms. The classic model is where the buyer integrates backwards and coordinates production. Both the producer and buyer ends of value chains usually want to “cut out the middleman” and want more competitive buying markets in order to make a shift from a dependency on traditional wholesale or spot markets. Improved information flow among the supply chain segments can also help reduce the marketing risk faced by both the company and farmers. Another reason for businesses to organize their own supply base is a general suspicion of cooperatives.

Contract farming can be successfully used by businesses to link small-scale producers to modern markets where capital, technology and market access constitute key limiting factors (Eaton and Shepherd, 2001; FAO, 2008). Contracts provide benefits to traders and processors by removing the risk of periodic shortages and volatile prices, which can be costly if they are servicing large sales contracts agreed in advance of a season. They also allow access to land which may not be available to expand plantation-scale production.

Organization of producers is just as important for contract farming, because management and enforcement of contracts with individual smallholders is not viable. Enforcement of contracts with small-scale producers is a thorny issue, especially when market prices exceed the contracted price. Often, having market ‘contacts’ with whom agreements can be brokered with a reasonable expectation of compliance is more important than a legally binding but difficult to enforce formal contract.

Intermediation-driven models

Despite the superficial attractions of “cutting out the middle man,” organizing direct procurement can have high transaction costs for private players, and have mixed outcomes. In Mexico, Wal-Mart recently tried to buy strawberries direct from the farmers, but withdrew due to high costs (Berdegué et al, 2008b). Given these costs, a business model that works with chain intermediaries, either traditional or new, can offer the opportunity to be profitable in, price-sensitive markets.

It is much easier for retailers setting up in emerging economies to procure from traditional wholesalers, and leave the wholesaler to grade for physical quality, unless there are strong market incentives to guarantee product quality, consistency, safety and traceability. In Chinese horticulture, where the market is characterised by 50 million autonomous producers, selling on spot terms through five million small traders, where the retail market is very competitive and few companies are making money, and where the majority of customers are not willing to pay for top-class produce, the economics of backwards integration are particularly daunting. Although many supermarkets profess to be putting vertical coordination in place, the majority of trade is via traditional traders.

There are, however, some very promising models of upgraded or new intermediaries that are introducing food safety, consistent quality, year-round supply and innovation, at a competitive price. Private companies are emerging as important intermediaries that enable small-scale farmers to supply to supermarkets, as exemplified by Bimandiri in Indonesia (Box 3) and Hortifrutí in Honduras (Box 4).
Box 3. Specialized wholesaler: Bimandiri in Indonesia

The Bimandiri company in Indonesia, which has changed from a traditional wholesaler to a supplier of vegetables and fruits mainly to Carrefour, is an example of a specialized intermediary. Bimandiri encourages farmers to cooperate in producer organizations and works with those groups on the basis of agreed quantities. The company has worked closely with its producer organizations, supplying technical assistance and credit, in order to assure quality standards and consistent volumes for its retailer client. Bimandiri has maintained preferred suppliers lists but moved away from a close extension role. It continues to implement transparent negotiated producer prices.


Models of intermediation usually include a strong dose of service provision, including finance – usually by the intermediary organization or specialized providers – to balance the needs of both small-scale farmers and the realities of emerging modern markets in terms of quality and volume. These new intermediaries are characterised by increased knowledge management (to improve chain coordination and quality), closer links to buyers, and incentives for product and process upgrading. This can be an important new role for NGOs, though there is a growing appreciation of the efficiency benefits of upgrading existing intermediaries.

Box 4. Lead farmer networks with Hortifruti Honduras

Hortifruti is the specialized wholesaler for fresh fruit and vegetable for Wal-Mart in Central America. The company works with a variety of suppliers for vegetables in Honduras and Nicaragua, often purchasing product from existing farmer cooperatives. However, it has experienced significant difficulties with these farmer organizations in terms of lengthy decision-making processes. As a result, Hortifruti Honduras has developed and promoted a ‘lead farmer’ model of organization through which it identifies and builds the capacity of farmers who can meet its quality needs in a consistent fashion. After demonstrating such capacity, lead farmers receive larger and larger orders for product or new products and are invited to work with neighbouring farmers to meet this demand. Lead farmers provide access to technology, technical assistance and market access to their network of neighbours as part of a bundle of production and marketing services. The cost of these services is recouped via the sales margin to Hortifruti. The expansion of this model depends on the identification of new lead farmers. Early results indicate that it is a low-cost, scaleable and sustainable approach.

Source: Agropyme, 2006; Lundy, 2007

Much more common at present is market-oriented but traditional traders taking steps to improve quality in their supply chains, where suppliers produce to the traders’ specifications (crop management, harvesting, packaging, etc), and where the traders invest in supplier training and other investments. A very interesting example of a butterhead lettuce supplier to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam has been identified by Cadilhon (2006). The farmer collectors who supply the intermediary train farmers to grow and harvest high quality lettuce. Through this collaboration, and through investments and forward planning with regular suppliers, the intermediary only gets high quality product.
Box 5. Normincorp in Mindanao, Philippines

Farmers of the Northern Mindanao Vegetable Producers’ Association, NorminVeggies, are able to successfully participate in vegetable chains primarily because of the organizational structure they chose. This involves a corporation, Normincorp, which gives them the agility needed for each development in the supply chain. Normincorp’s formation signified a new development in marketing for small farmers. While established as a stock corporation, Normincorp functions more like a cooperative and has a social enterprise character. As market facilitator, Normincorp saw to it that production was programmed by farmer clusters with their respective cluster leaders, according to marketing plans, that quality farm and postharvest management could be done by each farmer in the cluster, and that coordination could be provided for the sequence of activities that include order taking, outshipment logistics, billing/charging, collection and remittance to the farmers. For these services, Normincorp earns a market facilitation fee based on the value of the sale and uses the income to cover the marketing management overhead. Normincorp is not a trading company. Rather, it is a market facilitator linking the farmer through his or her cluster directly to the buyer.

Source: Concepcion et al., 2006.

4. How are these models impacting on smallholders?

Changes achieved through producer organization models can improve negotiating skills and enhance access to service provision. Models of producer driven vertical integration – either becoming co-owner of a supply chain or one of its segments in pursuit of value-added – can make sense when built on a business mentality. However, this farmer-ownership route may not always compare well to investments in building a network of specialized actors to achieve similar goals. For instance, research in Africa provides interesting evidence that many of the benefits achieved by relatively autonomous smallholder cooperatives can also be captured by more dependent, i.e. less highly trained and skilled, groups if appropriate links are developed with other market actors (Stringfellow et. al., 1997).

Models focused on intermediation achieve efficiency gains through greater organization along the whole chain through improved information flow and shared standards. The development of transparent pricing mechanisms is an important tool. In Indonesia, Bimandiri (Box 3), operates a transparent margin system to cover its participation. All actors know the final prices and the intermediary margin, thus avoiding windfall profits for the intermediary organization when market conditions improve and providing an incentive to increase volumes. In other cases, prices are set based on crop models on a yearly basis. Regardless of how prices are set, clarity on how prices reflect production costs, relative risks and returns is critical to assure greater equity along the chain and to minimise the chance of relationships breaking down.

Buyer-driven models affect smallholders through the application of (often strict) norms and standards relating to quality and volume. They tend to push processes of improvement up the supply chain, often with limited incentives for compliance beyond continued participation in the market. A further drawback for producers is the frequent demand for exclusivity. From a processor or retailer perspective, a supply chain is a source of competitive advantage, and they will seek to exclude competitors and prevent suppliers from ‘side selling’. Because a buyer has invested in the supply network, and because the buyer needs to able to fulfil contractual obligations for specific volumes to its customers, it will demand exclusivity from its smallholder suppliers. This can be frustrating for producers. The Kenyan supermarket Uchumi makes a point of not demanding exclusivity from its smallholder suppliers. Another way around this issue is to
have prices set weekly rather than fixed at the start of the season, in order to reduce discrepancies between contract and market prices.

Alternative trade models, especially Fairtrade, have demonstrated success in benefits-transfer and consumer acceptance. Nonetheless, an important percentage of the Fairtrade premium is taken by certification and coordinating agencies. Gross margin at retail level is much higher than at other levels of the value chain. Consequently it has been argued that consumers of Fairtrade products are supporting the shareholders of the international retailers more than the actual smallholder target groups. Incentives for product improvement and innovation have been traditionally weak, with limited feedback regarding consumer trends and demands beyond that covered by certification.

The selection of a specific model or elements from various models is highly dependent on market conditions, participating actors and their knowledge and skills and the existence (or not) of support agencies and policies. As market linkages evolve, models need to adapt to respond to changing market conditions as well as changes in the relationships between the participating actors. Approaches need to be piloted for specific locations, products, conditions and markets in order to better understand how to update current models, and which forms of best practice need to be adapted to help support sustainable impact for smallholders.

5. What do business partners have to consider and do in order to work successfully with smallholders?

We have seen in Section 1 that the biggest challenge for large businesses to work with small-scale farmers is that of organizing supply. Without a means to reduce transaction costs, ensure due diligence, and ensure that trading agreements are honoured, they will see smallholder suppliers as a threat to their ‘value proposition’. In Section 3 we saw that there are many examples of companies organizing their own supply base and setting up producer groups, especially where there is a lack of collective producer action. But organizing direct procurement is costly and such efforts are likely to remain as small Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) pilot projects.

Part of a commitment to inclusive procurement should look at alternatives to paternalistic supply systems and demands of supplier exclusivity. While it is tempting to want to “cut out the middleman”, chain intermediaries often are vital in linking smallholders to dynamic markets, and are of particular importance to the poorest farmers and to those located further away from the markets and the main roads. There is much for food processors and retailers to do to cultivate efficient intermediaries, including those set up through producers’ own initiatives, rather than seeking to eliminate them from the chain.
Box 6: Adjusting Payment terms: Vegpro in Kenya

In common with other leading exporters of fresh vegetables from Kenya, Vegpro divides production between its own farms and smallholder outgrowers, which it relies on for crops which are not well suited to plantation production, such as peas. In 2007 Vegpro was purchasing most of its snow peas from 3,500 smallholder farmers organized into 50 self-help groups. Despite the coordination offered by the self-help group structure, it is no small task to ensure consistent volumes, quality and standards across 3,500 farmers. Vegpro had previously been paying farmers a fixed year-round price that exceeded the average market price over the course of the year. When the market price was below the fixed price, farmers had been content to sell to Vegpro, submitting volumes that apparently included uncertified produce from their neighbours. But when the market price rose, farmers in need of cash would side-sell to local traders. Vegpro reduced side-selling by employing field supervisors and switching from annual fixed prices to weekly prices set in relation to the market price.

Source: Bell et al., 2007

Box 7. Adjusting contracts: Postobon in Colombia

One way to handle the problem of side-selling is through specific agreements that recognize opportunities and include them openly in negotiations. In Colombia, demand for tropical fruit pulp exceeds supply. As a result, the private firm Postobon began offering annual contracts to smallholder blackberry farmers that contained two market-condition related clauses. In times of high market prices, producers were allowed to sell up to 20 percent of their total volume to other buyers principally for the fresh market. In times of low market prices, Postobon was allowed to purchase up to 20 percent of its total volume from non-contracted suppliers. These agreements explicitly recognized the pressure for opportunistic behaviour and identified mechanisms to manage them.

Source: Espinal et al., 2005

6 What are the priorities for the public sector?

Innovative business models can make a positive difference in terms of inclusion. It is important to note the potential of pro-active policies – including infrastructure, finance and support services – to stimulate and support those types of business models that are more inclusive and that are also good business. There is a vitally important role for the public sector to facilitate successful alliances between smallholders and larger business, especially if successful small initiatives are to be scaled up.

The enabling environment

A priority area of intervention is that of the enabling environment. The consistent provision of key infrastructure services (roads, water, electricity and communications) is a central element of an enabling environment, as are relevant public policies to maintain a competitive market, oversee the working of contract laws and contractual enforcement, and oversee FDI and taxation.

Investment in traditional and wholesale markets is clearly an important priority for public policy. Where wholesale markets fail to keep up with changes in retailing – especially the supermarket revolution – they can fall into decay. Traditional markets can be a bridge for small-scale farmers to increase their capacity and to eventually link to modern markets (Shepherd and Galvez, 2007). Successful upgrading and modernization of wholesale
markets and their procurement networks also requires upgrading and modernizing of their primary clients - the traditional retail sector.

Donors are increasingly interested in facilitating the bridge between the majority of small-scale producers and modern markets. Businesses can develop effective initiatives in partnership with governments, donors and NGOs, and can learn as much from the successes and failures of development agencies and NGOs as the latter can learn from business. For example, cash & carry operator METRO is working with the Viet Nam Ministry of Trade and the German development agency, GTZ, to support development of Viet Nam’s distribution network. However, until these donor-supported initiatives are scaled up and become self-supporting, the question of tokenism and long-term sustainability remains.

At some point governments must balance equity and efficiency, despite the compelling case to support the huge numbers of small- and micro-scale farms. The costs of inclusion and exclusion must be evaluated in considering policy options. Evaluation of future scenarios should attempt to include estimates of these costs in order to provide additional insights to the real costs and benefits of the policy options. Case study evidence suggests that inclusion into restructured markets may be unsustainable for the “poorest of the poor”.

Promoting chain collaboration

Not all aspects of business models are competitive. Much can be achieved through industry collaboration to create an environment for more inclusive markets. The development of collaboration among actors requires linking actors in ways that facilitate discussions and information exchange among them. Examples of how this can work include chain-wide committees facilitated by ministries of agriculture, and “inter-professional” or commodity associations formed by the chain partners (Shepherd and Cadilhon, forthcoming). Difficult issues such as power and knowledge asymmetries need to be carefully managed to avoid excluding weaker members of the chain.

References


Shepherd, A.W. and Galvez, E.

cooperation and the role of the Donor Community. ODI Natural Resource Perspectives, Number 20, June 1997.


**Suggested selected web resources**

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