

THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE INDEX 2009



Whose Crisis? Clarifying Donor's Priorities

DARA



The Humanitarian Response Index 2009

Whose Crisis?

Clarifying Donor Priorities



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DARA – Development Assistance Research Associates – is an independent, international, non-profit organisation, which works to improve the quality and impact of development and humanitarian interventions. We do this through research, evaluations, promoting learning and knowledge sharing.

DARA aims to enhance global efforts to reduce human suffering and inequity and encourage prevention. Our focus is on the improvement of humanitarian action, the promotion of international stability and development, and the reduction of disaster risk.

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Crisis Reports

Afghanistan



Afghanistan at a Glance

Country data

- ▶ Population (2006): 33 million
- ▶ Under five mortality rate (2006): 257 per 1,000
- ▶ Human Development Index Ranking (2005): 174
- ▶ Life expectancy (2006): 43 years
- ▶ Official Development Assistance (2007): US\$3.9 billion

The crisis

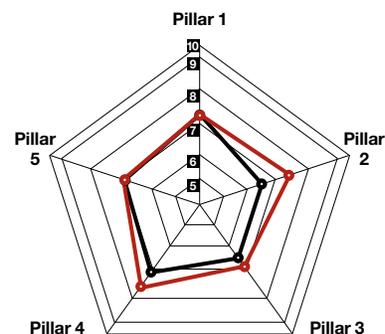
- ▶ Grave human suffering caused by more than three decades of warfare, with rising insecurity and civilian casualties in 2008;
- ▶ Food insecurity heightened by recent rise in food prices, nationwide drought and pressure on resources from return of more than five million refugees since 2001;
- ▶ Access to affected populations is increasingly restricted by conflict, targeting of aid workers, and political, military and security concerns;
- ▶ Focus on security and state-building may be overshadowing humanitarian needs.

The response

- ▶ Afghanistan is the second-largest recipient of ODA, with 36 percent of its Gross National Income (GNI) coming from international development assistance;
- ▶ Top five donors in 2008 were the US, Japan, ECHO, Germany and Norway – but US military spending versus humanitarian spending is greater than 200:1;
- ▶ 2008 Joint Emergency Appeal for Afghanistan only 49.9 percent covered, though 2009 CAP appeal currently 68 percent funded;
- ▶ Aid organisations' performance hurt by limited access, dangerous conditions, politicised funding, inexperienced staff and overall failure to coordinate assistance.

Donor performance

- ▶ All OECD-DAC donors, except Switzerland and Ireland are parties to the military conflict, prioritising security over a neutral, independent, needs-based humanitarian response;
- ▶ Donors scored highest in Prevention, risk reduction and recovery (Pillar 2), and lowest on working with humanitarian partners (Pillar 3);
- ▶ Donors criticised for lack of flexibility and transparency, though perceived to hold aid agencies to high standards of good practice.



HRI 2009 scores by pillar

- Pillar 1** Responding to needs
- Pillar 2** Prevention, risk reduction and recovery
- Pillar 3** Working with humanitarian partners
- Pillar 4** Protection and International Law
- Pillar 5** Learning and accountability

- Afghanistan
- All crisis average

Sources: ICRC 2009, UNICEF 2008, UNDP 2005, OECD 2007, ICRC 2007, UN 2008, FAO/WFP 2008, GoA & UN 2008, UNHCR 2009, OECD 2008, OCHA FTS 2009, UN News Centre 2008, Minear 2008, UN Millennium Development Goal Gap Task Force 2009.

Afghanistan

The Need to Decouple Humanitarian and Security Agendas¹

Riccardo Polastro²

Afghanistan has been devastated by more than three decades of intense armed conflict involving domestic, regional and international parties, and today faces significant political instability and human suffering.

A landlocked country vulnerable to recurrent slow and fast onset disasters, such as droughts, earthquakes, floods and landslides, Afghanistan is in need of a significantly improved humanitarian response framework capable of meeting the needs of a population at risk from both violent conflict and natural hazards³. In order to achieve this improvement, the donor community must first admit the existence of a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and acknowledge its failure to respond to it.

Since 11 September 2001, the foreign relations agendas of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) countries have been dominated by a new security paradigm that integrates defence, diplomacy and development activities. This year's HRI field mission to Afghanistan⁴ indicates that humanitarian organisations face serious limits on their capacity to deliver, as well as threats to their neutrality, impartiality and independence. This stems from the subordination of the fundamental principles of humanitarian action to political and military objectives, by the OECD-DAC governments.

Such poor donor practice has damaged humanitarian action. A continued failure to respect the *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship (GHD)* will cause further harm unless donors reform. The main challenge will be to separate humanitarian activities from post-conflict, peace-building, counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts. Donors should grant humanitarian work a higher priority, implement a needs-based response, and recognise fully the *GHD Principles*.

An escalating conflict

Afghanistan has been labelled a 'post-conflict country' since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 and its replacement by an internationally-supported government. This has led donors to shift their focus to development and state-building, despite the fact that conventional and unconventional warfare continues throughout the country. The conflict in Afghanistan remains intense—and actually escalated in the second half of 2008, with security conditions reaching their worst levels since 2001 (Waldman 2009).

Today the country is the theatre of regular fighting between armed groups and joint national-international forces. There is also a growing number of insurgent and counter-insurgent groups as well as a rise in targeted killings, suicide bombings and deliberate intimidation of civilians (ICRC 2008 and 2009). During the HRI field mission, 31 of the country's 34

provinces were experiencing asymmetric warfare, with nine of these (mainly in the south and east) experiencing intensive insurgency and counter-insurgency attacks. Conflict has progressively diminished only in Badakhshan, Bamiyan and Daikundi. Civilian casualties had risen since 2007 and direct attacks on soft targets had doubled (ANSO 2009). The operational environment throughout much of the country had deteriorated to such a point that only the ICRC retains access to rural areas in the south and east of the country.⁵

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) (2009): "In several areas the [Afghan] Government is unable to establish a continual operational presence and the population still does not perceive the state as capable of delivering security, good governance and the rule of law." The tribal structure of Afghan society, which is composed of some 20 different ethnic groups, has further complicated the establishment and recognition of a secure central state, allowing corruption and lack of governance to prevail.

Additionally, the current conflict has eroded both formal and traditional forms of justice and allowed rampant corruption to impede effective governance. The situation has led donors to focus on geopolitical and security concerns, especially in the wake of September 11th, as Afghanistan is considered a threat to regional stability and a base for trans-national terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

One of the world's poorest nations

The donor community's focus on security, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and nation-building has drawn attention away from the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and constricted the space available to humanitarian agencies. In fact, despite recent economic progress, Afghanistan remains among the world's poorest nations. More than 42 percent of its population lives on less than 45 cents per day, and the nation ranks among the lowest six countries on the Human Development Index (UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and World Food Programme (FAO/WFP 2008); UN Development Programme (UNDP 2007). The predominantly informal Afghan economy produces more than 80 percent of the world's opium (UNODC 2008).

Rising insecurity and civilian casualties highlight the government's lack of control across much of the country and its inability to provide basic services to its population. Though prospects are improving for 2009, dwindling land and water resources, food insecurity,⁶ and land mine infestation have increased basic humanitarian needs exponentially over the past three years, and for most of the population the economy continues to deteriorate as the conflict persists (WFP 2009). While illegal sectors of the economy, such as poppy production, people smuggling and arms trafficking are thriving, a 200 percent increase in the price of wheat flour, the most important staple in the Afghan diet, has caused considerable hardship for the poor, especially casual labourers (Afghanistan Government and UN 2008a). The recent drought, which caused a poor harvest nationwide and devastated rural incomes, worsened standards of living already jeopardised by limited access to essential services, including safe drinking water and health care.

The population of Afghanistan has also experienced one of the world's largest forced migration crises since World War II, with a peak in 2001 of eight million refugees and more than one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Margesson 2007). The establishment of a fragile and localised peace, combined with external political pressure, has since fostered a historic 'voluntary'⁷ return of more than 5.2 million Afghans – a fifth of the present in-country population (UNHCR 2009). Yet returnees enter a fragile and war-torn social fabric ill-equipped to handle their demands for scarce land and water resources. As many as three million Afghans remain refugees in Pakistan and Iran, though many face recurrent deportations (UNHCR 2007).⁸

All these factors have combined to significantly increase Afghanistan's dependency on foreign aid. Yet violent conflict over scarce resources, including the specific targeting of aid workers for kidnapping and assassination, has created severe problems of access to the affected populations. Due to the growing insecurity and limited access in most of southern and eastern Afghanistan, the real dimensions of the crisis there are unknown.

Security concerns hinder international response

In Afghanistan, the OECD-DAC donors are parties to the military conflict. This type of involvement has blurred the lines between military, development and humanitarian work – and unlike in Iraq⁹, where the international presence has recently diminished – the resurgence of violence in Afghanistan has brought about a troop surge on the part of the United States and others.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the predominance of the security agenda and the military nature of the donor presence in Afghanistan has deeply undermined aid policies, repeatedly violated international humanitarian law (IHL), and impeded neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action. Though the OECD-DAC donors are signatories to the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, both aerial and ground military operations in Afghanistan have been marked by a failure to distinguish between combatants and civilians. Donors have also violated the rights of prisoners of war in sites of forced detention such as Bagram and Guantánamo.¹⁰ Moreover, the military strategy of trying to win 'hearts and minds' by building schools and health clinics fails to address the root causes of violence in the country and causes the local population to associate aid workers with military actors. Though the new US administration is working to address several of these issues, the impact on humanitarian action has yet to be seen.

Furthermore, because donors have tended since 2001 to view Afghanistan through a security lens, the country has been labelled a post-conflict zone and development agencies have progressively taken over humanitarian organisations. Meanwhile, warfare activities have actually flared up throughout most of the country, increasing humanitarian needs. Yet today only a few core humanitarian organisations are still present in Afghanistan; most organisations are multi-mandate or development-oriented and often ignore fundamental humanitarian principles. Working predominantly through government channels¹¹ and/or through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), development agencies depend on resources that are heavily tied to political and military objectives and geographically earmarked for priority areas. Together, the type of actors present in Afghanistan, and the way in which funds are allocated, limit the ability of humanitarian aid organisations to respond to the needs of the population.

The humanitarian response to the conflict should be distinguished, however, from the response to the drought in the north and west of the country. The latter has been timely and effective, and has helped to deter a large-scale internal displacement from rural communities to urban areas (ICRC 2009a). The response to conflict-affected areas, on the other hand, has been limited and generally ineffective, primarily because most of the aid community present in the country has not made the effort to engage with local power structures. Humanitarian action has been severely constrained by growing insecurity and limited access to most of the east and south, as well as to portions of western Afghanistan.

A band-aid approach

When Afghanistan became the first frontline of the War on Terror, it also became an ‘aid cherry’.¹² In fact, since 2002, when the international community embarked on efforts to stabilise and reconstruct the country and to support political reform, this fragile state has been the second-most important beneficiary of international assistance. Official Development Assistance (ODA) rocketed from US\$323 million in 2001 to nearly US\$3 billion in 2007. This corresponds to 36 percent of the Afghan gross national income, a figure which highlights the nation’s level of aid dependency. Over the same period, however, the proportion of the total ODA marked for humanitarian aid diminished drastically – from one half to one tenth (OECD 2008 and 2009).

Given that the costs of Operation Enduring Freedom have risen from US\$21 billion to US\$36 billion (Belasco 2009), the overall budget for humanitarian action in Afghanistan now represents just 0.8 percent of the US military budget. US military expenses for the global War on Terror are 12 times higher than the OECD-DAC ODA budget, a clear indication that the donor community has primarily focused on peace and security objectives.

According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ Financial Tracking Service (OCHA’s FTS), the top five donors to Afghanistan in 2008 were the US, with a commitment of US\$156 million, or 29 percent of total contributions; Japan, with US\$86 million, or 16 percent; the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) with 9 percent; Germany with 7.4 percent; and Norway with 6 percent (OCHA 2009). As of 1 June 2009, these numbers had changed: the US again ranked first with a contribution of US\$208 million, or 57 percent of the total; Japan came second with US\$65 million, or 18 percent; Germany came third with US\$19 million, or 5 percent; and India and the UK followed in fourth and fifth place. Interestingly, the Afghan Government itself is the seventh largest donor, and other non-traditional donors such as Kazakhstan and the Czech Republic also rank among the top 23 donors to the consolidated appeal (OCHA FTS 2009).

In spite of its ranking, the US’ military expenditure is more than 200 times higher than its humanitarian aid contribution (Belasco 2009 and OCHA FTS 2009). Aid is becoming simply a ‘band aid’ in its political strategy, and its ‘anti-terrorist stance offers less alternative for humanitarian action’ (Grünewald 2009). Until now, aid organisations reliant on US funding have increasingly fallen into the trap of playing an instrumental role in the conflict, pressured to provide ‘aid for victory’ rather than needs-based and neutral assistance. For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) requires its aid partners to ‘hold and build’ areas that have been ‘cleared and shaped’ by the military. Major aid organisations have even been asked by United States AID to distribute food and non-food items only in areas under government control. These restrictions violate the *GHD Principles*.

“The use of humanitarian action as a tool to achieve political or military objectives leads to failure.”



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Donors lose sight of the Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship

All OECD-DAC countries except Switzerland and Ireland are both donors and parties to the conflict, but the primary objective of most is to contribute to national, regional and global security by preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven for terrorists.¹³ As Larry Minear (2009) points out: “The United States is not the only government whose security agenda infiltrates humanitarian activities characterised by human need, neutrality, impartiality and independence.” Despite the fact that Afghanistan has more OECD-DAC donors on the ground than any other current crisis, their presence is problematic because they subordinate humanitarian to military agendas. Only ECHO maintains a clear humanitarian mandate and presence that fosters a neutral, impartial and independent needs-based response; even the UN is perceived to be allied closely with government and foreign troops. This privileging of security and foreign policy objectives over the humanitarian imperative has deliberately overridden the donors’ GHD commitments.

The aid system is highly fragmented, with relief often delivered piecemeal and on an ad-hoc basis. Though there are sufficient resources, there is no political will to map the vulnerable population or to coordinate relief efforts. Such an uneven and politically-driven response has compounded the problems of limited access and limited absorption capacity that exist especially in southern and eastern Afghanistan. OCHA re-established a presence in Afghanistan in January 2009 with the aim of coordinating effective and principled humanitarian action (OCHA 2009), but it has thus far been unable to negotiate access for the humanitarian players or to collect or analyse information on the humanitarian crisis as a whole. During the HRI field mission, therefore, there was no up-to-date system providing information on the overall emergency response.

The struggle to maintain independence

According to an aid representative interviewed during our field mission: “[Aid organisations] are pushed to work in the path of donors and where they want us to work. If you want to maintain independence then you find that your portfolio of donors and projects is very thin. If you are operating according to humanitarian principles then you find very few donors because they focus mostly on the regions where they have troops, where the incumbent has to work in their military area of operations.

“Working with government means taking sides in the conflict and we think that we have to maintain neutrality.¹⁴ Donors are pushing [for aid organisations] to support the government. Let me be clear: if you want to get involved in government-sponsored programmes then you get millions and millions of dollars.”

Unsurprisingly then, most organisations interviewed tend to work where OECD-DAC donors’ troops and PRTs are present, and to compete for available resources. The wealth of the PRTs tends to promote an asymmetric level of response, while the lack of coordination among PRTs aggravates the fragmentation of aid. According to both donors and aid organisations, there is also a high pressure to deliver. This means that large amounts of resources are spent in short timeframes, which fundamentally reduces transparency and accountability to beneficiaries. Partly as a result of this problem, only one fifth of the resources allocated reaches Afghan recipients.¹⁵ The response in Afghanistan has thus become supply-driven rather than needs-based. Even though OECD-DAC governments adhere to *GHD Principles*, only donor agencies such as ECHO and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) apply them coherently;¹⁶ as a result, efforts to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity are severely constrained.

Limited access and incomplete information

Access to much of Afghanistan has been severely limited due to the growing impact of deteriorating security conditions, non-conventional warfare and coalition ground operations and air strikes on the civilian population, as well as on the assets and personnel of humanitarian organisations. From 2007 to 2008, civilian and humanitarian aid worker casualties doubled (ANSO 2009). In fact, Afghanistan ranks among the world’s most hostile environments for aid workers, who face extremely high rates of abductions and killings.

To make matters worse, the prevailing insecurity and difficult living conditions in Afghanistan fuel staff turnover, thereby reducing the quality and level of expertise available. Seasoned workers often consider the country a ‘no-go’ duty station, and the majority of aid organisations are forced to recruit inexperienced staff.

Deteriorating security and limited access also impair the capacity of humanitarian organisations to target aid based on valid needs assessments (UN News Centre 2008). They cannot respond in proportion to the protection and assistance needs of affected populations. The reliable data and figures necessary to determine the most vulnerable groups are very hard to obtain and essentially depend on secondary or tertiary sources. The nature and scope of the information available is becoming increasingly inaccurate, incomplete and ‘impressionistic’ rather than evidence-based. This complicates decision-making and limits overall efficiency, effectiveness and strategic coordination.

Coverage of needs has become even more irregular due to the increasing number of 'no-go' areas. Most aid is delivered to district or provincial capitals, rather than at the community level, causing tension with traditional power relations; some communities prosper on aid distributions while others' needs remain unaddressed. Often, aid organisations cannot even directly involve beneficiaries in their planning processes or in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the humanitarian response.

Consequently, 'remote-control' operations are proliferating. Many groups have placed international staff in Kabul and rely on national teams or partner organisations to maintain operations. By default, this causes the response to become supply-driven rather than needs-based and damages the quality of response and the efficiency of service delivery. Together with limited access, inexperienced staff and incomplete information, it prevents the allocation of funds in proportion to the actual needs of local populations.

Lessons learnt and recommendations for the future

- 1 Afghanistan is experiencing a complex humanitarian emergency. It is critical that all organisations present there understand the implications of associating exclusively with one of the parties of the conflict – or in this case, of associating only with the government and the US-led coalition.
- 2 The aid community, with the support of donors, needs to return to the *GHD Principles* and the provision of basic services. If it accommodates the overriding military and political objectives prioritised by OECD-DAC donors, its humanitarian principles and work will increasingly lose significance. Donors, meanwhile, should recognise the neutrality and independence of humanitarian organisations and strive to guarantee them access to affected populations. In this vein, donors should pursue strategies that seek acceptance from all parties to the conflict.
- 3 The present set-up of the international community in Afghanistan does not allow for proper identification of needs or for a principled response. To address these issues, there is a need to improve independent humanitarian capacity among both donors and humanitarian organisations. In essence, life-saving and protection activities should be fostered and decoupled from military agendas. Humanitarian aid should not be linked to political or military action.
- 4 In line with the above, OECD-DAC donors should minimise tied and earmarked funds, and engage in covering the costs of 'remote-control' operations. Their response in Afghanistan should shift from an area-based to a needs-based approach allocating aid more evenly across the most vulnerable and neglected regions.

Conclusions

Despite the huge amounts of bilateral and multilateral aid that have been provided to stabilise, democratise and reconstruct Afghanistan, the operating environment for humanitarian aid organisations throughout the country is deteriorating. Equally troubling, interviews have revealed that aid resources are difficult to trace, as most of the population of Afghanistan remains without medicine, doctors, or other basic services. This both calls into question the accountability, transparency and efficiency of aid flows and casts serious doubt on the overall effectiveness and impact of the international humanitarian response in Afghanistan.

The use of humanitarian action as a tool to achieve political or military objectives leads to failure. In humanitarian crises, it is essential to respect the principles of neutrality and impartiality and to maintain a needs-based response. Yet in Afghanistan, donors' demonstrated intention of "overriding or disregarding such principles is likely to lead to reduced access to at-risk populations and endanger the lives of humanitarian aid personnel" (OECD 2001). With elections coming up and an ongoing major military offensive underway, the intensity and complexity of the Afghan crisis could increase. In this context, the humanitarian enterprise will fail if aid organisations are even perceived as taking sides in the fighting, discriminating when protecting or assisting affected populations, or engaging at any time with political or ideological agendas.

About the Author

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Riccardo Polastro heads the Evaluation Department of DARA. He has 16 years of experience in humanitarian assistance and development aid in more than 50 countries for the International Movement of the Red Cross, the UN, NGOs and donors. Mr. Polastro lectures in several universities on development-related topics. He has led HRI missions since 2007. He has carried out policy and operational evaluations for the Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid of the European Commission, the Inter Agency Standing Committee, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Swedish International Development Agency. He holds an MPhil in Peace and Security, a Master's in International Relations, and is a Maîtrise of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris.

Notes

- 1** Information based on field interviews with key humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan from 13 April 2009 to 20 April 2009, and 200 questionnaires on donor performance (including 163 OECD-DAC donors).

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- 2** The author would like to thank Antonio Donini, Senior Researcher from Tufts University, and Manuel Sanchez Montero, member of the HRI Peer Review Committee, for their helpful comments, as well as HRI team members Sergio Molinari and Gabriel Reyes.
- 3** According to the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC 2008), between 1998-2007 more than 10.6 million Afghans were affected by disaster.
- 4** This is the second HRI survey mission to Afghanistan. Due to time and security constraints, interviews were conducted only in Kabul, with 40 aid organisations and donor representatives. It was not possible to consult the population directly. The findings below are based on both the interviews and on a literature review.
- 5** The Taliban has a chain of command in some locations but not in others, making it very difficult to negotiate with them for safe access.
- 6** In 2008, food security deteriorated in 22 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan due to drought and conflict (GoA and UN 2008b).
- 7** Forced return of Afghan refugees from Iran is being reported by several organisations on the ground.
- 8** In June 2009, as the fighting between the Government of Pakistan and the Taliban intensified in the SWAT Valley and other tribal areas, this trend was reversed and many sought refuge in Afghanistan.
- 9** Iraq sees higher levels of violence but fewer actors on the ground, which allows for improved coordination.
- 10** For more information on the treatment of prisoners of war, refer to Geneva Convention III, ICRC (1949).
- 11** For instance, at least 50 percent of DFID's annual aid to Afghanistan (GB£127.5 million) will be channelled through government systems (DFID 2009).
- 12** After the Cold War period, Afghanistan became an aid orphan where aid allocations fuelled the civil conflict. As Minear and Weiss (1993) point out, "In the Afghanistan civil war, aid allocations by the West among the various mujahidin contributed to jockeying among them that continued even after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. Moreover, channelling aid through these groups at the expense of directing aid through Kabul made assistance an extension of the war rather than a contribution to peace."
- 13** See Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence (2008).
- 14** As Donini (2009) points out: "Neutrality is not an end in itself; it is a means to fulfil the humanitarian imperative. And the perception of being associated with a belligerent carries potentially deadly consequences for humanitarian workers, as well as for vulnerable groups who are denied assistance because of this association."
- 15** In fact, an average of between 15 and 30 percent of aid money is spent on security for aid agencies, and 85 percent of products, services and human resources used by agencies are imported, thus providing few jobs for Afghan workers (Hemming 2008).
- 16** During the field mission, Switzerland was the highest-scoring donor.

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