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SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY – UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT AND KEY CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract. This research article presents sustainable model system based framework derived from the scholarly investigation into the existent research literature on social entrepreneurship. The social entrepreneurship is emerging as a viable alternative to the traditional institutional setups for making a sustainable impact and reach towards the underserved needs of the low-income population living in the developing economies. The existing research on social entrepreneurship lacks focus on creating an integrated framework thereby posing a limitation to the entry, growth and penetration of the social entrepreneurship based market setup. The sustainable model system comprises a combination of the constraining conditions and key choices. The constraining conditions include the environmental and firm-specific constraints like need addressed, mission type and socio-economic objectives. The relative impact and significance of the key choices vary for different social enterprises depending upon the applicable constraining conditions.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, base of the pyramid, sustainability, literature review

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1. Introduction

Prahalad and Hammond (2002) argue that the base of the pyramid (BoP) segment living in the developing economies poses an unmet opportunity for the global organizations (Esposito *et al.* 2012) to design and implement inclusive business models for solving the real problems (energy, healthcare, education, water, sanitation, information, finance, housing and transportation etc.) of the 4 billion people (Hammond *et al.* 2007). The individuals in this socio-economic segment earn less than \$8 (Year 2002 PPP levels) per day. The persistence of the poverty challenge impacting the BoP segment highlights the complexity of the BoP market despite the extensive presence and philanthropic efforts of the traditional institutions like non government organizations (NGOs), government and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives of the commercial enterprises (CEs). The limitations of these different market based institutions have led to the evolution of a new category of entrepreneurship known as ‘Social Entrepreneurship’. The social entrepreneurship involves

the focus on setting up the self-sustainable social enterprises that target the real needs of the BoP segment by implementing the market-based self-sustainable business models, which are unique and differentiated from the traditional approach in terms of value offerings, value creation, value delivery and socio-economic outcomes. The objective of this research article is to review the social entrepreneurship related literature across the multiple dimensions including the understanding of the research trends, methodological orientation and research paradigms.

2. Social Entrepreneurship – Literature Review

There are increasing numbers of research articles highlighting the different ways and means to target the underserved population in these developing economies. The developing economies comprise the majority of the population living across the world (Figure 1). The predominant market segment in these developing economies is characterized as an uncertain, informal, rural and heterogeneous ecosystem having people lying at the bottom of the socio-economic category (Esposito *et al.* 2012). This low income segment is referred to as the Bottom of the Pyramid (also known as Base of the Pyramid or BoP). The BoP segment differs from the non-BoP segment in terms of the lack of paying capacity, lack of market awareness, and increasingly prevalent market imperfections like information asymmetries, market fragmentation, weak legal institution, weak infrastructure, resource scarcity and poverty penalty (Viswanathan *et al.* 2007; Goyal *et al.* 2012). This implies that the traditional forms of entrepreneurship (CEs, NGOs and government institutions) and their associated business models from the developed economies do not provide a sustainable fit into the BoP context of the developing economies. There is a need to redefine these business models suited to the context of the BoP (Prahalad and Hammond 2002; Dahan *et al.* 2010; Thompson and MacMillan 2010). These differences have led to the emergence of social enterprises, which are adopting the market-based logic to design the sustainable business models (Nidumolu *et al.* 2009) targeting the primary needs of the BoP segment across the developing economies. Sustainable development involves, “*meeting the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (WCED 1987). The concept of sustainable development embodies three inextricably connected principles: environmental integrity, social equity and economic prosperity (Goyal *et al.* 2012). The level of performance in one area affects the other two areas. Sustainable business models explore the synergy between the social, economic and environmental benefits (Ashley 2009).

The review of the research literature highlights the multiple dimensions contributing the sustainability of the social enterprises aiming for an effective socio-economic impact at the BoP.

2.1. Understanding the Context

The social need is defined as the gap between the socially desirable condition and the existing reality (Guclu *et al.* 2002). The term ‘social’ implies the different interpretation for different people depending upon their personal and cultural backgrounds (Seelos and Mair 2005). One of the alternatives to resolve this ambiguity involves studying social enterprise through the lens of a widely recognized and global goal of achieving sustainable development, that integrates the social needs to which many institutions and businesses have committed themselves (Seelos and Mair 2005). Sullivan *et al.* (2002) argue that the context of social entrepreneurship is influenced by the dynamics of the macro-environment, globalization trends, and role of the respective governments. Weerawardena and Mort (2006) argue that the social mission, need for sustainability and the prevailing environmental dynamics shape the behaviour of the social enterprise.

The literature review highlights the role of three main dimensions in determining the overall context of a social enterprise (Figure 1). These dimensions are also referred to as the constraining conditions, which shape the contextual business model and strategic actions of the social enterprises. These dimensions include (1) identifying the social need to be addressed; (2) defining the social mission; (3) and understanding the environmental dynamics.

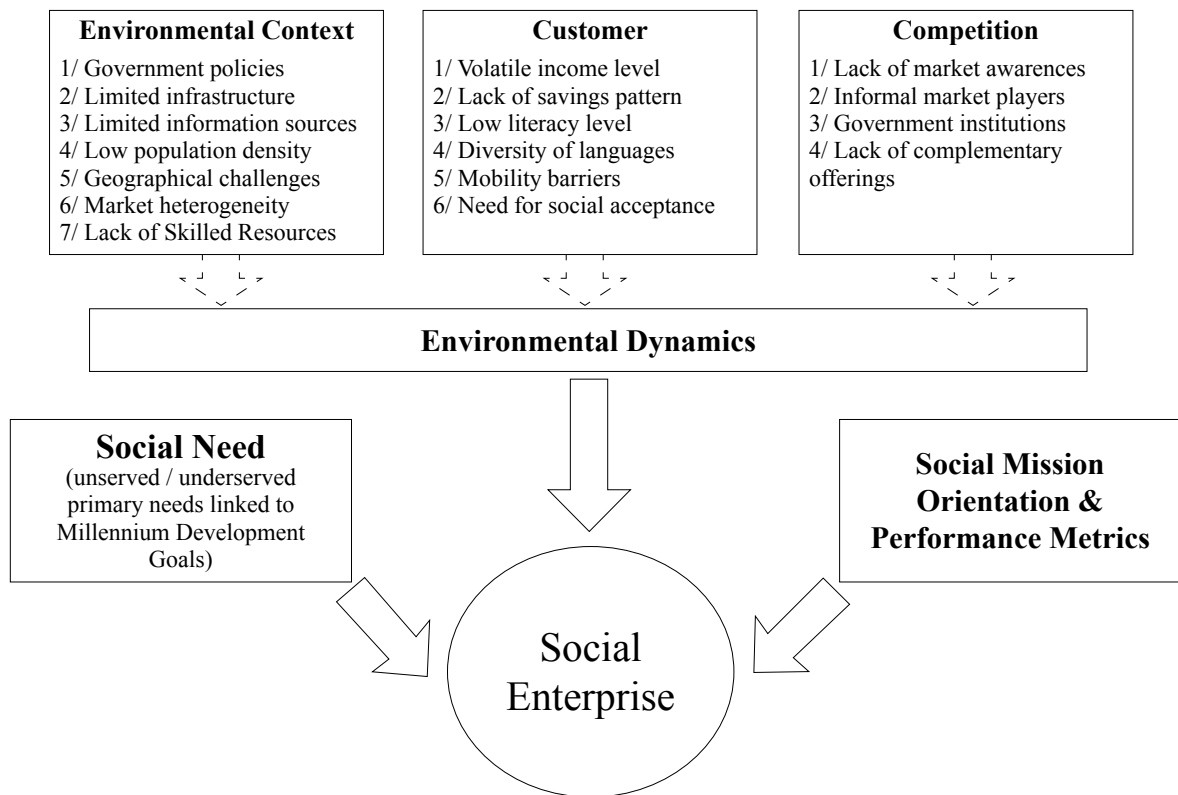


Fig.1. Understanding the Context

Source: authors

The first two dimensions of identifying the social need and defining the social mission refer to the static constraints. These constraints define the scope and boundaries of the social enterprises (Kapoor and Goyal 2013). The behavioral characteristics of the social enterprises are determined on the basis of the congruence to the social mission context. The performance evaluation on the mission requires setting up the socio-economic metrics. This poses a big challenge for the social enterprises due to the lack of quantification, multiple causal attributes and varying perceptions regarding the creation of the social impact (Austin *et al.* 2006; Moskvina 2013).

The third dimension involves understanding the environmental dynamics faced by the social enterprises while targeting the low income segment at the BoP (Shukla and Bairiganjan 2011). The environmental dynamics is determined on the basis of the understanding of the challenges pertaining to the environmental context, customer and competition at the BoP (Goyal *et al.* 2014b). The key challenges pertaining to the BoP environment include (1) ineffective government policies; (2) lack of market infrastructure (electricity, water, roads, transportation etc.); (3) scarcity of reliable data sets; (4) low population density; (5) geographical limitations; (6) market heterogeneity; (7) and limited availability of skilled resources. The customer related challenges include (1) income volatility; (2) lack of savings pattern; (3) low level of literacy; (4) diversity of languages; (5) mobility barriers; (5) and need for social acceptance. The competition related challenges include (1) lack of market awareness; (2) dominance of informal market players; (3) presence of government institutions; (4) and lack of complementary offerings.

2.2. Understanding the Key Characteristics

Dees (2001) argues that the key characteristics of social enterprises involve (1) focus on the social mission; (2) identifying the new opportunities to serve the mission; (3) focus on the continuous innovation, adaptation and learning; (4) managing resource constraints; (5) and holding accountability for the social outcomes and

impact on the target segment. Guclu *et al.* (2002) emphasize the significance of an effective resource strategy in enabling the sustainability of a social enterprise. The access to skilled resources is critical for the success of the social goal and objectives. This is especially important, when access to skilled resources is a big challenge for the social enterprises in the context of the operating environment. Peredo and McLean (2006) argue the need for an added support in the form of legislation and other forms of social policy to sustain at the BoP. Mair and Marti (2006) put emphasis on the embedded organization culture and leadership in ensuring the success of social enterprise. The BoP context poses challenges in terms of the operating environment, socio-economic profile of the customer and informal market based competition. This makes it necessary for the social enterprises to design the customized business model, which ensures financial sustainability while remaining socially relevant.

The research literature reflects divergent views regarding the key characteristics of a social enterprise targeting the BoP segment. The key characteristics involve (1) focus on segmentation; (2) offering end to end solutions; (3) undertaking experimentation and innovation; (4) focus on local embeddedness; (5) developing non-traditional partnerships; (6) type of leadership and organizational culture; (7) and focus on scalability. Regarding **segmentation**, Pitta *et al.* (2008) argues that the success at the BoP requires the clear understanding of the target segment. BoP is terra incognita in terms of segments and their needs. The basis for segmentation involves segmenting by income level (low income, subsistence, and extreme poverty), role / engagement type (consumers, producers, employees, and clients), and other socio-economic factors like gender and occupation (Rangan *et al.* 2011). The value offering and delivery approach differs across the different sub-segments within a BoP.

Regarding **design of end to end value offerings**, there is a need to adopt a solution based approach at the BoP (Viswanathan *et al.* 2008). The end to end solution should target the real need of BoP segment (Letelier *et al.* 2003; Eyring *et al.* (2011) argue that the value offerings by the social enterprises must solve the real need of the BoP customers more effectively, simply, accessibly, and affordably than the alternatives available in the informal market ecosystem. This includes looking at the other complementary aspects of the social needs like fulfillment of the aspirational value, customization as per the paying capacity, financial accessibility, usability, durability, and access to after-sales support (Letelier *et al.* 2003; Grootaert *et al.* 2004; Prahalad 2004; Jose 2008b; Pitta *et al.* 2008).

Regarding **experimentation and innovation**, the non-availability of the reliable data sets, lack of market infrastructure, limited cash flow and the prevalence of socio-economic complexity at the BoP mandates the need for prototyping and ‘trial-and-error’ approach in the BoP market. This is needed to learn the radical and unconventional ways of doing business (Yunus *et al.* 2010) in the uncertain markets. The ability to undertake the low cost probes minimizes the risks of failure while maximizing the rate of learning, thereby pushing the ability to design solutions suited to the local context (Simanis and Hart 2006; Yunus *et al.* 2010). The common understanding is that innovation is a dynamic but critical attribute required for a sustainable business model at the BoP. The enterprises targeting the BoP segment need to undertake continuous product, process and business model innovations (Andersen and Markides 2007; Jose 2008a,b). These innovations at the BoP has less to do with finding new customers than addressing issues of product acceptability, affordability, availability and awareness (Andersen and Markides 2007). The process of innovation requires systemic mode of idea generation, evaluation and value co-creation (Hart and Sharma 2004; London 2009; McGrath 2010). The disruptive innovation at the BoP requires focus on leveraging technology to bridge the accessibility, affordability and availability barriers (Hart and Christensen 2002; Chesbrough 2010; Teece 2010).

Regarding **local embeddedness**, Miller (1996) defines embeddedness as “*the extent to which a company’s strategy reflects or is influenced by its social and institutional connections*”. The emphasis lies on designing the indigenous business model that builds upon the grassroot learning, local customs and conditions. The embedded business model lifts psychological and cultural barriers and develops a local presence within people’s everyday life. The actions involve (1) training and hiring the representatives from the local community as employees and micro-entrepreneurs, who could also be made co-owners of the local business (Gibb and

Adhikary 2000; Goyal *et al.* 2014 a); (2) developing the non-traditional partnerships with government institutions, local market players and local communities (Hart 2005; Hart and London 2005; Goyal *et al.* 2014 a); (3) and setting up a process for grassroots learning and feedback (Goyal *et al.* 2014 a). This requires focus on systematically identifying, exploring and integrating the views of the stakeholders on the fringe, and co-creating new business opportunities and business models with marginalized groups and communities (Hart and Sharma 2004).

Regarding **non-traditional partnerships**, there is a need to address the environmental challenges by creating a market-based ecosystem (Prahalad 2004). This requires focus on developing the non-traditional partnerships with NGOs, CBOs, local institutions, informal market competitors, and government bodies (Prahalad and Hart 2002; London and Hart 2004). Prahalad (2004) argues, “*Such an ecosystem consists of a variety of institutions coexisting and complementing each other. ... [It] allows private sector and social actors, often with different traditions and motivations, and of different sizes and areas of influence, to act together and create wealth in a symbiotic relationship.*” The partnerships with the local institutions and individuals enable the social enterprises to gain local trust, build market acceptance, and enable last mile reach and connectivity. This leads to the setting up of the physical infrastructure, social infrastructure and social legitimacy at the BoP (London and Hart 2004; Brugmann and Prahalad 2007; Dahan *et al.* 2010; London *et al.* 2010). However, the non-traditional partnerships are primarily driven by the social contracts rather than the legal contracts (Soto 2000; London and Hart 2004; Hart 2005).

Regarding **leadership and organizational culture**, there is a limited focus and attention in the literature regarding the same for the social enterprises. The leadership qualities involve a mix of unique behavioral and strategic capabilities. The behavioral capabilities involve equality for all, patience, passion and optimism towards the goal. The strategic capabilities involve ability to take up an orbit shifting challenge, focus on experimentation and innovation, building collaborations and partnerships, build a learning organization driven by the social mission. The leader should be able to balance the speed, cost, and impact of execution (Seelos and Mair 2005; Munshi 2009; Chesbrough 2010). Yunus *et al.* (2010) argue that the key leadership attributes required for targeting the BoP segment include focus on process efficiencies and innovations. Yunus *et al.* (2010) say “*questioning the current rules of the game was at the very heart of Grameen Bank’s foundation. One of the key leadership qualities at BoP involves ability to understand the inefficiencies in the current process and ability to challenge the conventional wisdom and mindset.*” Rangan and Thulasiraj (2007) argue that the key leadership qualities, which are being needed for a sustainable and scalable business model at the BoP include focus on alignment with mission, developing the management systems, building a learning organization, leadership capacity, and designing an integrated value-chain driven by continuous innovations, experimentation (learning by doing) and strategic choices.

Regarding **scalability**, social enterprises need to make a provision for expanding quickly, effectively, and efficiently to ensure sustainable socio-economic impact for all the stakeholders. The decision to scale or not requires the identification and articulation of the preconditions for success (Prahalad 2004). The economies of scale at the BoP are driven by higher volumes resulting from geographic expansion of particular product/service offering. The economies of scope are driven by using the same distribution network for offering multiple product/service offerings effectively (capacity to expand without loss in performance and quality) and efficiently (capacity to expand with decreasing cost and efforts) across the target segment. The economies of learning are driven by setting up a learning and feedback process which involves inputs from the ground involving local partners and target segment. One of the key drivers for scalability at the BoP is to manage the cash flow efficiently. The availability of capital is scarce and expensive at the BoP, and tends to be concentrated in the hands of a few large enterprises (Khanna and Palepu 1997; Arnold and Quelch 1998). It is the efficiency of capital use rather than the profit margins that determines the profitability at the BoP (Prahalad 2004). There is a need for augmentation of managerial capacity, firm capabilities and standardization of operating procedures (SOPs) to drive the scalability (Prahalad 2004; Rangan and Thulasiraj 2007). Rangan *et al.* (2011) argue, “*Indeed, decent profits can be made at the base of the pyramid if companies link their own financial success with that of their constituencies. In other words, as companies make money, the communities in which they operate*

must benefit by, for example, acquiring basic services or growing more affluent. This leads to more income and consumption— and triggers more demand within the communities, which in turn allows the companies' businesses to keep growing. A corollary of that principle is that from the very beginning, scale is critical: Tentative forays into the base of the pyramid do not yield success." The scalability at the BoP require a s-curve orientation, which involves significant investment of time, capital and resources in creating market awareness, trust and acceptance before aiming for growth in volumes.

3. Discussion and Results

The analysis of the social entrepreneurship related literature brings forth the conceptual framework that highlights the constraining conditions and key characteristics. The constraining conditions include the static and dynamic factors, which determine the scope, boundary and behavioral characteristics of the different types of enterprises. The static factors include the need type, mission orientation and performance metrics setup of the enterprise. The dynamic factors include the macro-environmental challenges pertaining to the limitations and complexities related to the operating environment, socio-economic profile of the customer and type of competition. In the case of social enterprises, the need type is related to the availability of a formal market ecosystem for basic requirements of the day-to-day life like access to food, energy, healthcare, education, technology etc. The mission is social, which is driven by the ability to make a social impact in the lives of the underserved segment while remaining self-sustainable. The socio-economic outcome is measured by the social metrics comprising different attributes like numbers impacted, extent of outreach, and type of social impact. The operating environment comprises the attributes like infrastructure, market information, socio-economic profile of the dominant customer segment, level and type of competition etc.

Regarding the key characteristics, the relative importance and focus vary for the different social enterprises targeting different social needs, particularly in terms of the criteria for segmentation, design of value offerings, undertaking experimentation and innovation, creating local embeddedness, building partnerships, leadership and cultural orientation, and scalability approach (Figure 2). The segmentation is based upon the sub-income levels and role type. The sub-income levels classify the BoP segment as a low-income or subsistence poor or extreme poor. The value creation and delivery models differ based upon the income levels and buying capacity. The role type involves engagement of the BoP segment as a customer or supplier or employee or micro-entrepreneur. The value offerings require the design of end to end solutions in terms of solving the real need of the target segment more effectively, simply, accessibly, and affordably than the alternatives available in the informal market ecosystem. This also involves integrating the access to financing and after-sales support considering the lack of availability of complementary offerings at the BoP. The focus on undertaking experimentation and innovation at the BoP is needed to learn the radical and unconventional ways of doing business at the BoP. The capacity to perform low cost probes minimizes the risks of failure while maximizing the ability to design solutions suited to the local context. There is a need for creating an embedded organization culture and social mission focused leadership. The focus on local embeddedness enables the social enterprises to remain congruent with the local customs, real needs and context while designing the offerings. This lifts the psychological and cultural barriers. The actions required for creating local embeddedness involve localization of resources by training and hiring the locals, and developing local partnerships. The focus on developing local partnerships involve collaborating with the local stakeholders like non-government organizations, community based organizations, government institutions, local communities and social institutions. This enables the social enterprises to gain local market knowledge, build local acceptance and develop delivery channels for last mile connectivity and reach. Finally, the focus on scalability involves adopting the 'S-curve' growth model rather than the vertical growth model. The 'S-curve' model requires significant investment of time, capital and resources in creating market awareness, trust and acceptance before aiming for growth in terms of social impact volumes.

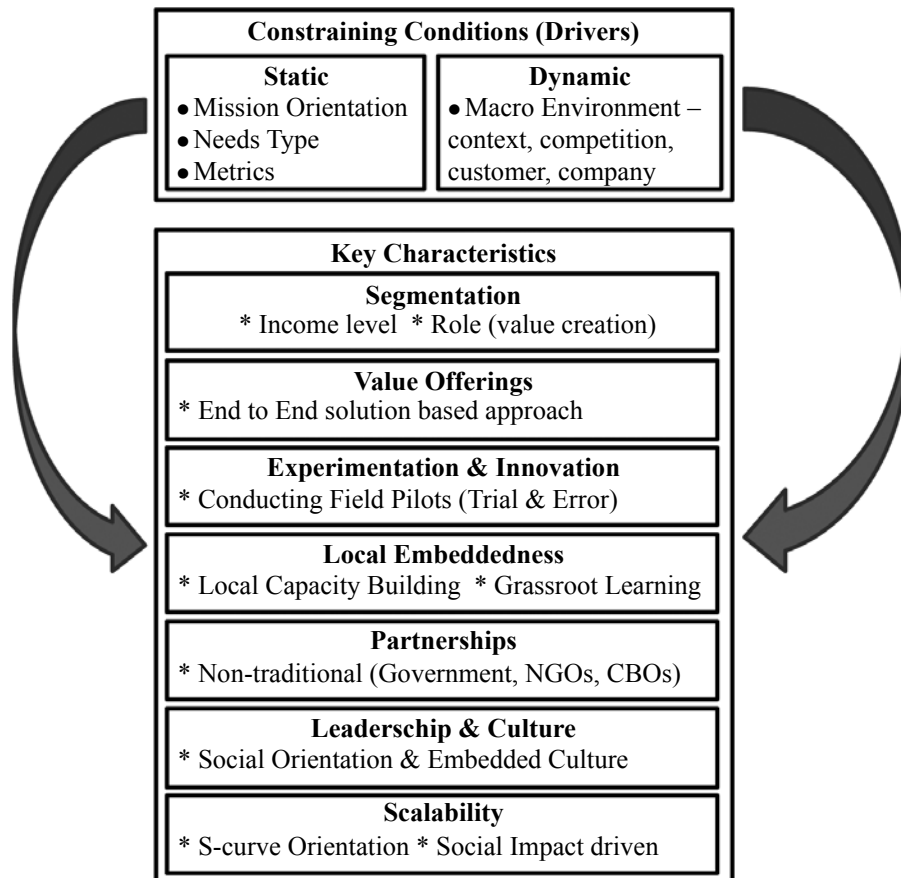


Fig.2. Model – Constraining Conditions and Key Characteristics

Source: authors

4. Research Implications

This research holds implications both for the research community and the practitioner community. The contribution to the practice involves highlighting the emergent patterns including the constraining factors and the key characteristics necessary for the design and implementation of the business models at the BoP. This research is an attempt to provide support to the practitioners, who wish to enter the BoP market but face challenges in conceptualizing the market information and learning. The contribution to the theory involves identifying the existing patterns from the research literature and developing an integrated logic among those patterns. This holds significance from the two perspectives. The first perspective involves shaping the recommended course of action for the future research. The second perspective involves recommending a shift in the future course of the research from unique case based experiences to broad qualitative and quantitative studies. This shift is needed to make an orientation towards developing the social entrepreneurship theory.

Conclusions

The research article conducts a review of the existent scholarly literature. This article is an original attempt to stimulate a reflective introspection in the research community and formulate a model for the practitioners willing to take up the for-profit social entrepreneurship route towards the BoP market. The dominant logic of the market economy focuses on the economic returns as a basis for the success or failure of the organization. However, the review of the scholarly literature highlights the significance of social entrepreneurship as a means for targeting the BoP markets. This perspective recommends the shift in orientation from the economic growth towards the socio-economic outcomes as the basis for designing and evaluating the business models of the social enterprises entering the BoP markets.

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