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Working Paper

Charity-based Voluntourism Versus 'Lifestyle' Voluntourism: Evidence from Nicaragua and Malaysia

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Charity-based voluntourism versus ‘lifestyle’ voluntourism: evidence from Nicaragua and Malaysia.

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Abstract.

Although conventional international tourism to Less Developed Countries has a growing literature, volunteer tourism – or more recently ‘voluntourism’ – is currently under-researched. This Working Paper examines this growing area using case studies from two Less Developed Countries, Malaysia and Nicaragua.

Students and early career professionals from developed countries travel to the less developed world on tourist visas to work as volunteers on long-term placements with either non-profit organisations or commercial tourism businesses.

Voluntourists have been observed in various charitable projects ranging from rural electrification to indigenous rights or ecotourism. In addition, as expected, individual participants’ motivations are varied. Some volunteers see it as an affordable way of travelling in a foreign country for a longer period, some need the field experience for later careers, some use it as a legitimate way of taking time out to reconsider career choices, and others simply want to do something useful during their university holidays. It is this last image that is often portrayed in commercial voluntourism experiences, and is a common public perception when individuals talk about their volunteering overseas. However, despite this image, a second group of longer-term voluntourists is less visible: ‘lifestyle’ voluntourists.

They do not work for a charitable cause but instead chose to travel the world as volunteers working **in** tourism. They can be found working as volunteer hotel caretakers or volunteer dive instructors. This paper compares the two types of voluntourists, and draws on fieldwork in Nicaragua and Malaysia that used a combination of participant observation, direct interviewing and informal questioning. The study revealed striking similarities between the two groups of voluntourists in terms of living conditions, cross-border 'visa runs', socio-cultural impacts and tensions consequently created in the local communities. Finally, the study also showed the similarity in personal motivations to embark on the voluntourism experience. Whilst the expected charity factor was often found missing from the non-profit-based voluntourists' motivation, the 'lifestyle'-voluntourists often became involved in environmental projects once at their destination.

Key words: volunteer tourism; dive tourism; less developed countries; tourism development; tourist motivation

1. Introduction.

Students and early career professionals from developed countries enter destination countries in the less developed world on a tourist visa to work as volunteers on volunteer placements with non-profit organisations that work on environmental or social projects. This was initially termed volunteer tourism, before the term was shortened to 'voluntourism' and defined as 'those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that may involve the aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment' (Wearing, 2002: 240).

The volunteer tourism literature has so far principally examined short-term volunteer tourism activities, typically designed as breaks of a number of weeks' work on a charitable, social or environmental project in a less developed country, largely targeted at young adults from the developed world and promoted as alternative to a classic backpacker trip (Brown and Morrison, 2003; Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2004; McGehee and Santos, 2005; Mustonen, 2005). In this Working Paper however, it is argued that based on its definition a broader

understanding of volunteer tourism can be achieved by incorporating time variations and lifestyle choices of individuals who go beyond the short charitable project work and indeed volunteer for longer periods of time and even without a clear altruistic agenda – although the results may still contribute to poverty alleviation or an increase in environmental awareness.

Two fieldwork case studies were conducted amongst long-term volunteers during 2009. One examined the motivation, lifestyle and living conditions of long-term volunteers in a rural development project in Nicaragua. This group will be termed ‘VOLUNtourists’ as it is assumed their main motivation for undertaking a longer term commitment in a development project is based on altruistic motives to help the local communities in question. The other case study focused on volunteers in the tourism industry itself. Besides volunteer hotel managers in Nicaragua, scuba diving professionals in Malaysia and their motivation, living conditions, lifestyle and broad socio-economic and environmental impacts were studied. This group will be referred to as ‘volunTOURISTS’ for the purpose of this paper, as it is assumed that the tourism activity itself is the main driver for them to accept a long-term volunteer work situation. Furthermore, advertisements in the *Caretaker Gazette*, an internet publication on volunteer caretaker jobs around the world, were analysed for content, notably type of positions offered, the remuneration or compensation entailed and the advertised duration of volunteering.

2. Literature Review.

According to Tomazos and Butler (2008), the origins of volunteering abroad seem to go back to projects set up by organisations such as the Service Civil International in Europe in the 1920s and the International Voluntary Service and Peace Corps activities of the United States after the Second World War (Brown 2003). It was not until the 1990s however that volunteering abroad started to become a popular and now, a mass activity. This has to do with the increasing popularity of the gap year, i.e. young adults taking a break between high school and university, and with reciprocal effect the growth in organisations and now companies who offer gap year activities. In the US, it can also witness the development of the ‘alternative’ spring break with organisations and companies offering volunteering projects abroad as an alternative to the traditional party-centred spring break.

For immigration purposes the majority of volunteers will declare tourism as reason for entering a country to avoid work permit issues. This makes it nearly impossible to indicate the current volume of volunteer tourism (Tomazos and Butler, 2008). In August 2009 over six million hits were registered on an internet search portal for the phrase 'volunteer projects abroad', which gives us a clear confirmation of its popularity.

The expectations of participants and their motivation to embark on volunteer tourism activities have been of some interest to researchers. Wearing (2004: 215) states that by understanding the images and attitudes of volunteer tourists 'we may be able to address the managerial implications for organisations operating in the realm of volunteer tourism'.

Motivational factors have traditionally been separated into 'push' and 'pull' factors (Coghlan, 2007). As 'push' factors we can list altruistic motives such as the desire to travel with a purpose, helping to improve the environment, working with communities and in less developed countries. Non-altruistic motives to volunteer abroad are self-enhancement, enhancement of one's curriculum vitae (Callanan and Thomas, 2005), the sensations of accomplishment and belonging, and the desire for social interaction (Gilmour & Saunders, 1995). In addition to this, the development of personal skills and the increase of knowledge, self-confidence and independence were also found to be important to many voluntourists (Wearing, 2004; Webb, 2002).

As 'pull' factors we think of an individual's desire to travel and explore other parts of the world. Gunn (1988) described the importance of images used in tourism destination marketing and their power to create perceived images within the potential tourists. Coghlan (2007) showed that the volunteers were heavily influenced in their decision-making by the images of destinations portrayed in the promotional materials.

3. Methodology.

The three sources.

The study was based on three sources: a case study within a rural development NGO in Nicaragua, a study on dive tourism in Malaysia, and the analysis of an online publication for job advertisements, *The Caretaker Gazette*.

The case study in Nicaragua was based on participant observation, with one of the authors spending several weeks with a rural development NGO that works mainly with international volunteers. Informal qualitative interviews with the individual volunteers were carried out (n=16 out of a total of 20 current volunteers) and several group discussions developed around the subjects of remuneration, housing, 'visa runs' and travels linked to that, whilst the researcher was present. Prior to undertaking this study, complete anonymity was guaranteed to the organisation and the individuals. Further qualitative interviews were carried out with two volunteer managers of a hotel.

The case study in Malaysia was part of a wider project on the socio-economic and environmental impacts of scuba diving on local communities. Qualitative interviews (n=19) were carried out with international volunteer dive professionals, with dive instructors, dive masters and dive master trainees.

Advertisements in *The Caretaker Gazette*, an internet publication of job offers in the tourism and hospitality as well as social and animal care sector, were analysed for their content, with the main focus being on volunteer posts in tourism and hospitality.

Methods.

The different research techniques for both fieldwork parts were chosen based on the requirements of each group of individuals to be studied. Standard qualitative semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate for the dive professionals, who can be described as easy to talk to and often available to sit down for a long enough period of time, at least in the off season, between their diving commitments. The interviews were conducted in the dive shops, which acted as central hubs for the dive professionals to return to between dives or teaching sessions.

The volunteers of the NGO however, were more difficult to approach. A certain level of trust was needed for them to talk freely about some of the aspects in question, particularly their motivations behind the volunteering, as will become clear when this is discussed later. In logistical terms, their operation was more spread out, with volunteers being based in different remote rural communities, an office building, a workshop and several separate living quarters spread out across a whole suburb in the nearest town. The volunteers would move around between the

locations, often in groups, depending on the work they were carrying out, which would have made it impossible to schedule longer interviews. The logistics and above all the level of trust needed made a participation of the researcher in the project essential to obtain the data.

The Caretaker Gazette, a piece of ‘grey’ literature, was consulted as it constitutes a popular tool for the advertisement of volunteer jobs in tourism and hospitality. It underlines the growth of an offer of longer term volunteer jobs within the sector itself.

Survey details and living conditions

A profile of VOLUNtourists and volunTOURISTS is offered in Table 1, further details are now discussed.

Table 1: Profiling the Volunteers

Aspect	VOLUNtourists – those in development project	VolunTOURISTS – those in diving and hospitality
Legal Status in Country	- on tourist visa - need for visa runs	- on tourist visa - need for visa runs
Costs	- travel to country - costs for visa runs - nominal rent & food	- travel to country - costs for visa runs - rent & food
Duration	- min. 3 months, most 6 – 12 months	- min. 3 months, most 6 months per location

Source: fieldwork notes, 2009.

At the time of the study in Nicaragua, the organisation had twenty volunteers from four different countries, of whom sixteen were interviewed for this research.

Excluding the researcher in this count there were eleven volunteers from France, seven from the USA, one from the UK and one from Australia. They were all aged between 23 and 38 and without exception had at least a first university degree. The minimum length of stay was three months, but typically a volunteer would stay for six to twelve months. Two of the volunteers had already extended their stay for another year and two were there on a repeat stay and had been working for the organisation remotely from their home countries throughout several years in the meantime.

The volunteers were funded from varying sources. The French volunteers used their governmental VSI scheme (volontariat solidarité internationale), which allows them to take time away from paid employment to volunteer overseas, whilst their pension and social security contributions are paid for by the French government. The scheme furthermore regulates the compensation the organisation has to pay to the volunteer with a minimum amount of €154 per month in the first year to be paid to the volunteer. The rest of the volunteers were self-funded. The NGO has a special section for the volunteers on its webpage that enables future and current volunteers to advertise for funds. They are encouraged to fundraise to pay for their transport to and from the country and the journeys required for 'visa runs' during their stay every three months. As part of the Central America Border Control Agreement (C-4), the volunteers have to leave the C-4 area, which comprises El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, and re-enter in order to obtain a new visa.

For their costs of living the volunteers are required to pay a small rent and food contribution, which, in the case of the French volunteers uses up almost the entire token remuneration the organisation is obliged to pay them under the VSI scheme. Their living conditions are basic, with shared rooms in local standard housing, cold water and frequent power cuts. The organisation employs local staff for cleaning and as kitchen personnel who are in charge of cooking basic communal lunches. Breakfast and dinner are prepared by the volunteers themselves in their own accommodation. The volunteers have four weeks holidays per year, one each for Christmas and Easter and two further to be taken in agreement with the NGO director. The volunteers have to plan them around the necessary 'visa runs'. The volunteers have Saturdays and Sundays off, but most visits to the remote communities are arranged to comprise a weekend, often lasting three or four days. Those weekends are frequently lost to the volunteers as no official rule for time in lieu is in place.

During the fieldwork in Malaysia, 22 dive professionals were interviewed. This included dive instructors, dive masters and dive master trainees from Canada, the UK, Finland, the USA, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland. They were aged between 18 and 39, with the majority being between 21 and 28. The majority had a university degree. Often the dive professionals started out as regular backpackers, who took up diving during their trip. They work the tourism

seasons between the West coast of Thailand and the East coast of Malaysia, which differ due to the monsoon, or change locations, in the South-East Asian region and beyond, at six months' intervals. Their living conditions are very similar to the NGO volunteers. They often share rooms above the dive shop or live in simple beach bungalows, both with limited generator-powered electricity. They have no prescribed holiday allocation, and need to take time off to do 'visa runs' every three months.

The dive professionals fund their own stays. The dive instructors work based on commission and so need to sell dive courses to tourists. These commissions cover their basic living costs and costs of transport to their next work location, but do not allow for real savings or luxuries. Dive masters and dive master trainees are entirely self-funded and have often saved up prior to a long backpacking trip. Especially during the peak season the dive shops get very busy and it is not uncommon that the staff are forced to work many days in a row without a break.

The *Caretaker Gazette* confirms the existence of a volunteer market in the hospitality sector. Initially set up for finding employees for the care of houses and properties, more and more advertisements are placed by hotels, guesthouses, bars and restaurants for volunteer managerial staff. These posts are promoted as enabling the caretakers to 'live where others holiday', thus drawing on a similar imagery as can be found in the volunteer tourism project market. Similar to the two other groups in this comparative study, these volunteers get room and board in exchange for their work, in some cases in combination with a small stipend to cover initial travelling costs. Two such volunteer caretakers were interviewed for this research and their answers were similar to the other interviewees.

3. Findings and Discussion.

Motivation.

Table 2 highlights the similarities and differences in the volunteer motivations stated by the interviewed volunteers. The rankings were determined by first of all counting the frequency of the statements. As the interviews were informal and unscripted by nature, some of the volunteers indicated their reasons prior to being asked explicitly. Any repeat statements in the same subject area of the same

person were not counted again. A mentioning of ‘my main reason’ or similar emphasis on one of the motivations, was given additional weighing.

Table 2: Volunteer Motivations

Aspect	VOLUNtourists – those in development project	VolunTOURISTS – those in diving and hospitality
Motivation I	- CV and self-enhancement	-escape the ‘rat race’
Motivation II	- travel the world and live abroad for longer	- holiday lifestyle; extend backpacking trip
Motivation III	- don’t know what else to do”	- travel the world and live abroad for longer
Motivation IV	- do something useful	- don’t know what else to do

Source: fieldwork notes, 2009.

For the volunteers in Nicaragua, the main driver was the enhancement of their Curriculum Vitae (CV), gaining new skills and field experience, in order to find employment within their desired sectors. Many of them stated that they endeavoured a career with an NGO or as an engineer in rural development. One of the volunteers needed the experience as a credit in his university degree, and one was doing it as part of his doctoral research. Work-related motivation was ranked highest amongst the volunteers in tourism and dive professionals as well, with the exception that they were not doing the work in order to enhance their CVs for improved chances in the job market, but to get away from a job or career that had left many of them with a sense of frustration. This same sense of frustration could be noticed amongst the Nicaraguan volunteers, many of whom had previously worked in regular careers. Yet, rather than turning their backs completely on the professions that they were trained to work in (with one exception), they attempted to gain additional skills and experiences to build on their existing training in order to achieve a career change or a change from the private into the NGO sector.

The second most frequently stated reason by the Nicaraguan volunteers for undertaking their long term commitment was the desire to travel the world and live abroad for an extended period of time, a motivation which ranked on third place with the dive professionals. However, the latter’s second motivation, the holiday lifestyle or to extend their backpacking trip, is not dissimilar to the wish to travel. As stated previously, many of the dive professionals entered the profession during

a long backpacking trip. As part of the trip they took up diving and in order to continue diving they decided to enrol in professional dive training whilst working for a dive shop. One dive instructor summed it up as ‘the best and easiest way to get paid and tour the world.’

For the Nicaraguan volunteers on the third place and for the dive professionals on the fourth place ranks possibly the most striking of motivations, the fact that the interviewed young adults did not know what else to do with their life. When talking about this, particularly with the Nicaraguan volunteers, the same sense of frustration was revealed as with the motivator career enhancement. The respondents felt that despite a solid university education, and often several years of work experience in their profession, they found themselves at an impasse. As one volunteer, who was completely disillusioned with her original career and work in the private sector, stated ‘I am taking this year to find out what I really want to do with the rest of my life.’

Only as fourth ranked motivator the Nicaraguan volunteers stated that they wanted to ‘do something useful’. This altruistic motive was only mentioned by eleven of the sixteen interviewed volunteers. And not one of them gave it as their principal motivator. This is striking, showing clear discrepancy with what we might expect when thinking of volunteers going to less developed countries. In several cases it was even considered a consoling factor. As one volunteer said ‘at least this way I am doing something useful’, which he felt had not been the case in his previous professional career.

The desire for young adults to travel and explore the world is, in itself, not surprising and has a long history dating back to at least the European ‘grand tour’ in the eighteenth century and more recently in the hippy overland trail of the 1960s and the more recent flows of young backpacker tourists in South-East Asia and elsewhere (Hampton, 1998, 2003). The high level of frustration and general sentiment of unhappiness with what we might term a ‘traditional’ professional life in the West however, is alarming, especially as it concerns well qualified individuals, who chose not to be part of it.

Overall Impacts.

One aspect of the voluntourism definition according to Wearing is ‘aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of

certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment’ (2002: 240).

Table 3 offers a brief overview of the positive and negative impacts relating to the VOLUNtourists and volunTOURISTS. The details are now discussed.

Table 3: Impacts.

Aspect	VOLUNtourists – those in development project	VolunTOURISTS – those in diving and hospitality
Positive Impacts	- projects for local development	- unintentional impacts
Negative Impacts	- filling jobs locals could fill - cultural tensions between volunteers and hosts	- remove pressure on dive shops to train locals - cultural tensions between dive professionals and locals

Source: fieldwork notes, 2009.

The VOLUNtourists in this study, i.e. the NGO volunteers in Nicaragua, worked on projects for rural development. Through their work several communities in the area now possess alternative energy sources and water purification systems. In case of the volunTOURISTS, i.e. the dive professionals, there is no broad intended positive impact, although there was mention of the international dive instructors being able to help in the training of local dive masters. There are however positive impacts that can be noted as a consequence of actions undertaken by international voluntour- dive professionals. It was noted during the research that in general they tended to be more passionate about environmental issues and were often the drivers behind local environmental action, such as beach or reef clean-ups. The stronger environmental awareness was particularly visible in the question of shark consumption, with many international dive professionals boycotting restaurants serving shark. Another positive impact is the spending of the volunTOURISTS, who like other tourists, often stay in beach bungalows, providing a longer term income to the bungalow operators than regular tourists would. They also eat in the tourist restaurants. However, none of the interviewed international dive professionals frequented the local shops in the communities on a regular basis. Instead they sourced their supplies from the mainland.

Negative impacts were similar in both groups. Even though the organisation claimed it was unable to undertake their work without free labour and despite some paid jobs being created, locals accused the NGO volunteers of stealing work. On a similar note, the availability of international volunteer dive professionals means that dive shop owners have no pressure to train locals. As one Malaysian dive shop owner pointed out “I’d prefer more local dive masters and local instructors but they are hard to get. Locals can’t afford the instructor course.” It seems to be a vicious circle as the businesses claim they cannot find trained local staff, so they hire the volunteers, which in turn makes the training of new staff unnecessary.

Both groups furthermore stated cultural tensions between themselves and the locals, often as a result of what we can term ‘typical tourist behaviour’, i.e. excessive alcohol consumption, partying and sexual liberty. In both cases, interviewees stated that problems started to arise when local friends joined their parties or imitated their behaviour, which lead to a clash with their own societies, notably family and elders. As a Malaysian interviewee described, “when foreigners come here the locals copy their style. For example, the bar is for foreigners but the local people join them and consume alcohol”, which causes particular offence to the traditional Muslim population of the village on the island. Several volunteers in Nicaragua mentioned the isolation several local young women faced after they had been involved with international volunteers. Their liberal behaviour was unacceptable to the predominantly Catholic and conservative society in town. As a consequence, in both locations the international volunteers were blamed for corrupting and influencing the local youths.

The volunteer caretakers also stated impacts similar to the dive professionals. Their positive impacts were raising environmental awareness as they were the key drivers of several local environmental projects together with several expatriate hotel owners. They also implemented a new environmental policy in their own establishments and were recruited to provide training in hospitality to local staff. Negative impacts were conflicts with the local population as they were considered intruders, heavily criticised for doing a job for free, which a local person could have been paid for instead.

The voluntourism component.

Within the emerging voluntourism debate, the tourism component of these international volunteers is of significance. We have already seen that the motivation to travel and, for the dive professionals, to lead a holiday lifestyle ranked high amongst the list of motivators. Besides these personal statements, the volunteers are officially designated as ‘tourists’ in the two countries in question. They obtain tourist visas on arrival, stay the allotted three months, then travel to a neighbouring country, often Thailand and Costa Rica respectively, and then re-enter to be issued with a new three month tourist visa.

Both groups however feel offended when they are referred to as ‘tourists’. The dive professionals consider themselves as backpackers, who in their eyes are different from tourists. They have no problem being referred to as ‘backpackers’. The Nicaraguan volunteers on the other hand, have a strong volunteer-identity. They appear to have a similar definition of ‘tourists’ in their minds as the dive professionals had, that is individuals who sunbathe on the beach all day long, and are very quick to emphasise that when they go abroad they are *travellers*, not tourists. When it was pointed out to them that they actually also hold a tourist visa and travel extensively during their stays, especially for the visa runs in their holidays, they still hold firm that they are there as volunteers and do not want to be considered as being tourists, which confirms similar statements in research by Scheyvens (2002) and Mowforth and Munt (2009).

Despite the individuals’ own attitude towards tourism, especially mass tourism behaviours and attitudes, the groups in question still match the image of voluntourists. The tourism component is confirmed as travel is a major motivator and their official status is that of a tourist, and they carry out work as a volunteer during their stay and have an impact on social development or environmental awareness. This was to be expected in the case of the NGO workers, as their main difference to traditional voluntourism participation is the duration of their stay, whilst the undertaken activities are comparable. For the volunteer dive staff and caretakers in the hospitality sector however, this is more of a surprise. Nevertheless, their volunteering also shows comparable impacts on local social and environmental issues. The voluntourism definition, i.e. ‘those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that may involve the aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society,

the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment' (Wearing, 2002: 240) is fulfilled in both cases.

4. Conclusions.

The results showed that both groups of long-term volunteers that were studied had similar motivations to undertake the work in question, were faced with almost identical basic living conditions, and had similar positive and negative impacts on their surroundings. The main difference could be found in their self-perception with one group firmly negating the use of the term 'voluntourist', and there particularly the tourist component, often associating themselves with the locals and wanting to be accepted as such, whilst the other group clearly saw itself as a group of outsiders and commented on the chosen lifestyle as enabling them to travel permanently.

The analysis of the motivation and the impact of participants in both types of volunteer activity clearly showed that Wearing's (2002: 240) definition of volunteer tourists applied to the two groups. Both, the volunteer dive professionals and the volunteer NGO workers stated travel abroad or a holiday lifestyle as key motivators and both have an impact on local communities, be it intentional as in the case of the NGO workers or as a side effect in the case of the dive staff. This is important to note, as it widens the group of volunteer tourist activities not only to longer term stays, but also to a new set of participants: the volunteers working in the tourism industry itself. This is significant, not only because of increased numbers of voluntourists overall, but furthermore because it sheds light onto a new group of worldwide volunteer worker.

Whilst in traditional voluntourism NGO organisers can only carry out the projects with free labour and commercial organisers use at least part of the money they are paid by the participants to fund the projects, the volunTOURISTS in this study occupy actual jobs that would have to be remunerated were it not for their free work. In the case of this research, the dive shops and the hotels with the volunteer caretakers would actually have to employ paid local staff if no volunteer workers were available. The lack of qualified local staff, especially in the dive tourism sector, but also in hospitality, was often put forward by interviewed business owners. Be that as it may, it is clear that as long as these volunTOURISTS are available, there is no real push for employers to train locals.

Not only does this mean a lost opportunity for the economic strengthening of a local community, but in real terms also a tax revenue loss for the countries in question, as local staff would receive regular remuneration and as a consequence would be liable for income tax.

The study raises a number of questions that will require further research. Initially, the study needs to be tested on a larger sample of long-term volunteers, and should particularly include more volunteers working in private tourism companies, as these have so far not been researched at all. It needs to be explored what management implications the different motivations of the volunteers have and how management can address this in order to optimise both the day-to-day running and long-term sustainability of projects and businesses. The impacts of volunteers on local communities also need to be examined. This is an area that has so far been mostly neglected by researchers in voluntourism. It will be of particular interest to see whether there are any differences between the two groups and between long-term and short-term voluntourists in general. Falling into this aspect the most important question to be raised is the one about the long-term volunteer tourists in the tourism sector itself and their impact on local job creation.

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