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Third Sector Trends Study

# Measuring Impact: easy to say, hard to do

## A think-piece to stimulate sector debate from the Third Sector Trends Study

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# 1 Introduction

At one time, local and national government bodies rarely required third sector organisations (TSOs) to show evidence of the impact of what had been achieved from grant funding. Over the last twenty years, this has changed. More emphasis is now placed on evidence-based policy[1] and upon practice which focuses on 'what works', or more recently – 'payment by results'.

Currently, there are tensions, even within the public sector, around approaches to evaluation of impact. The coalition government has indicated that it wants to abandon burdensome approaches to performance management in order to help the 'Big Society' flourish. On the other hand, the government also wants to be assured that if they invest in organisations to deliver public services, the expected outcomes will be achieved.[2]

The 'Big Society' agenda is controversial and it is not yet known whether government ambitions can be met. For those TSOs that get behind the agenda and deliver public services it is likely that they will be expected to show how well they have done in achieving their outcomes.

Third sector responses to such demands have, characteristically, been diverse. Many have taken umbrage at the idea that their judgement should be questioned – as a senior figure from a national TSO recently let us know: 'you don't *need* to research how good we are, we *know* we're good.' Many TSOs attempt to strengthen this position by drawing upon well rehearsed lines. Some claim that they can 'reach the parts other sectors can't reach'– the so-called Heineken effect. Others say that they do more for their money than the private sector or public sector could ever do by 'adding value'. And many are affronted by the demand for such scrutiny because it constitutes a threat to their independence.

Not all TSOs are resistant to the idea of assessing the impact of what they do. Particularly so when their organisation was established with, or evolved

[1] Evidence based practice (EBP), which originates from the 1970s primarily in the health professions, is an attractive and popular idea because it carries with it the common sense assumption that there is a 'best way' of doing something. There is a wide ranging critical and enthusiastic literature on this topic, see, for example: Anderson and Dees (2006), Black (2007), Davies (1999), Grayson, (2002), Laforest and Orsini (2005), Nutley and Davies (2002), Packwood (2002) and Tenbensel (2004).
[2] The broad philosophy underpinning Big Society can be found in extended polemical writing by Norman (2010) and Blond (2010). Conservative Party policy is best summarised in *Big Society not Big Government* (Conservative Party 2010) Policy statements have been emerging on this issue on a regular basis. See for example: Office for Civil Society (2010a/b/c), Cabinet Office 2010. A useful assessment of emerging policy is provided by Alcock (2010). A wider range of non-academic responses from a range of practitioners and commentators to the Big Society are usefully collected together in Stott (2010).

a mission to deliver public services under contract. But even here, there are worries about the best way to assess impact. This is not surprising because there are a lot of academics, consultants and think tanks out there offering a range of methods to show their worth.[3] These range from quick fixes which apply more or less flattering multipliers to the value of the income invested by clients, to extremely complex, time-consuming and expensive methodologies to assess the social return on investment.

We want to take a step back and show what third sector organisations currently do to find out if they are meeting the needs of their clients and beneficiaries. We show that most TSOs don't do this very well, so it is also important to explain why many organisations play lip service to impact assessment; or worse, interpret data on impact in imaginative ways to produce the answers they want. Stretching the meaning or credibility of data in the evaluation process can happen in many ways: by including successes which should have been attributed to other funding streams the TSO has gained; by making exaggerated claims about reaching socially excluded people; by 'inadvertently' claiming the benefits from other interventions; or, by making claims about causing benefit when it would have happened anyway.

Following a very brief discussion of the aims and methods of the study, we present some data from the Northern Rock Foundation Third Sector Trends study to show the extent to which TSOs prioritise impact assessment. After that, we try to explain why most TSOs are relatively interested in impact assessment. In the section that follows, we address the question – what should be done about this situation? Instead of weighing up which methodology should be used by whom and for what purpose, however, we ask more fundamental questions about why TSOs are unwilling to invest resources to assess impact. Following this we speculate about whether this is the right course of action for many TSOs. We conclude with some suggestions on what we think TSOs might do as a first step in deciding how and if they want to invest in impact assessment. These comments are speculative and conclusions cannot yet be reached until the longitudinal research we are doing has been completed.

[3] There is a very large and growing literature on social measurement and social impact. See, for example: Alexander (2010), Arvidson, *et al.* (2011); Burns and MacKeith (2006), Cabinet Office (2008), Davies (2004), Holden (2004), Lim (2010), Morris (2003), Nicholls (2009), New Economics Foundation (2009a, 2009b), Sinclair and Taylor (2008).

# 2 Methodology and scope

The Third Sector Trends study is a wide ranging longitudinal assessment of the local third sector in North East England and Cumbria. The study has several elements including quantitative analysis of sector trends and qualitative work on how third sector organisations operate in a complex, changing and competitive social market. As the project comes to the end of its first phase, we draw on evidence from: the TSO50 (Chapman, *et al*. 2010a provides in-depth case studies on organisational practice); quantitative analysis from the TSO1000 survey on organisational foresight, enterprise, capability and impact (Chapman, *et al*. 2010b); and, qualitative analysis from our Foresight Panels with key stakeholders from all sectors in North East England and Cumbria (Bell, *et al.* 2010).[4]

# 3 'We know we're good'

Asserting that 'we know we're good' is all very well, but for those who fund the third sector, such as officers in the public sector, demonstration of impact is important. They need to be confident of a TSO's capability to deliver a service, and that this will be done within budget. Producing anecdotal evidence to highlight 'exceptional' achievements, or flattering evaluation reports to position TSOs favourably may not convince sceptics. Many practitioners in the third sector are aware of this – but continue to express real reticence. As one of our Foresight Panellists told us just before the last general election:

***'Obviously if you are going for big contracts you need to have the all singing, all dancing monitoring and evaluation... but in actual fact it is a very time consuming and resource wasting exercise for not much output...Why on earth do [we] need to constantly monitor and evaluate, when at the end of the day the service [we] provide is vital.'***

Others adopt a more positive viewpoint.

***'We can't have our cake and eat it all the time…. We need to have a clearer picture of how the voluntary and community sector play a key role in the delivery of services and what are they doing to provide added value to public services… and if we can better understand that, then the sector will have a better understanding of what their position is.'***

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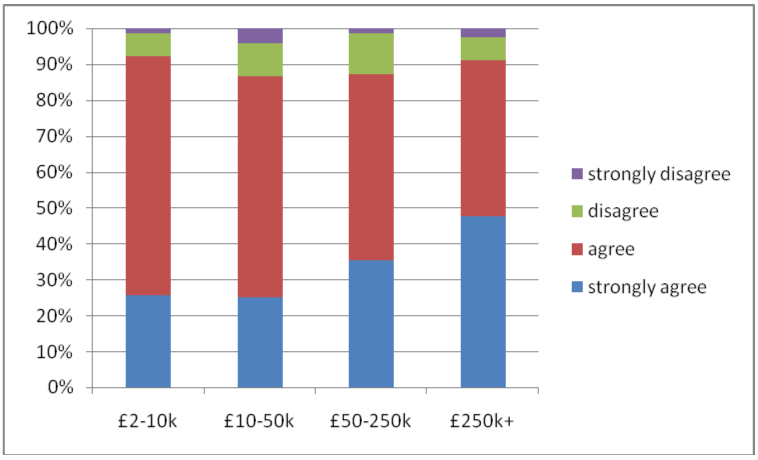
[4] Full details on the methodology and scope of the study is available from a range of reports which are can be downloaded at no cost from http://www.nr-foundation.org/thirdsectortrends.

For many, such practices seem to pay dividends. As one of our Foresight Panelists revealed:

***'My organisation spent quite a lot of time in the last couple of years...setting targets and measuring things that we haven't had measures for before, because they are too hard to measure...And one of the things that we have found is that, by actually setting quite clear measures and targets, it has really galvanised staff, and volunteers, to be able to see quite clearly where the organisation wants to go...'***

The third sector often complains that it lacks influence in strategic development and the decision making processes of local and national government. Counter-intuitively, the evidence from our research shows that TSOs *do* feel valued by the public sector. As Figure 1 indicates, this sense of being valued increases the larger the organisations are – most probably because the bigger TSOs work more closely through contracts and SLAs. Fundamental to this good relationship is a belief that the third sector is particularly good at reaching into communities and involving beneficiaries. As Table 1 shows, most TSOs (and especially the larger ones) claim to be good at these things. But are these perceptions matched by reality?

Figure 1 **Do the public sector value the work of your organisation?**




Data from the TSO1000 study shows that 'actual involvement' of beneficiaries in shaping organisational practices and objectives was often not a high priority. As Table 2 shows, there is a strong relationship between the size of organisation and perceptions of effectiveness at involving beneficiaries. However, we suspect from qualitative analysis that these differences may be exaggerated. For example, larger organisations seem to understand the rhetoric of beneficiary involvement and have some mechanisms to show that it happens, but we remain unconvinced that all of these organisations are as fully engaged in its practice as they may claim.[5]

[5] In many public sector tenders for service delivery there is a requirement to demonstrate user engagement or involvement as part of the process and assurance that user involvement will be an integral part of programme delivery. The extent to which this is actually delivered is open to question. More research needs to be done on the extent to which users/beneficiaries are genuinely involved in programme strategy, approaches to practice or review of impact. Perhaps as importantly, not much is known about whether users of services are *interested* in being involved.

Table 1 **Impact on and involvement with beneficiaries** (mean scores)

| | We are effective in the delivery of community support and development | We are effective at reaching into communities | We are effective at involving beneficiaries in decision making |
|---|---|---|---|
| £2,001- £10,000 | 1.96 | 2.04 | 2.32 |
| £10,001-£50,000 | 1.92 | 2.03 | 2.21 |
| £50,001-£250,000 | 1.66 | 1.85 | 1.90 |
| £250,001+ | 1.54 | 1.75 | 1.98 |
| All TSOs | 1.80 | 1.94 | 2.11 |
| N= | 705 | 693 | 682 |

The mean response is on a scale from 1='strongly agree to 4= 'strongly disagree'. A score of 2.5 is the mid point in the scale, so a score of 2.5 or below suggests that the organisation believes that it has a positive impact

If TSOs *feel* that they exist to 'serve' beneficiaries, but don't actually involve them very much, this is of interest analytically. In one sense, this ingrained culture of service reveals something about intentionality - about helping the world to become a better place. In another, it may represent an interest in shaping the world in a particular way - that is, defining what it is that people need in order to improve their lives, rather than asking them what they want.

Our case studies from the TSO50 show that some organisations do listen to, involve and empower beneficiaries and this seems to have a significant impact upon their approach to practice. In some organisations, user engagement is structured and integrated and ingrained in the culture of the organisation – often seeking practical solutions to allow 'different voices' to be heard. But many organisations, by contrast, fail to take seriously the practice of assessing the value of what they do. As one of our Foresight Panelists told us:

***'People on the whole are not doing stuff like measuring outcomes with the [people] they are working with, and they are not doing it because they don't think is important, it's nothing to do with the systems, it's nothing to do with technology, it's to do with they don't think it's important. If you look at it, that is just insane.'***

The consequences of such a position are clear:

***'If we are expecting to get money, whether it's public money, whether it's from charitable trusts [and] we say we are doing this work but we've no idea really what we're doing, they're going to say forget it, we'll go to the private sector, we'll go to other people to deliver this.'***

Data from the TSO1000, listed in Table 2 suggests that these comments are well founded. Collecting data on outcomes and impact is very limited, especially in smaller TSOs. Similarly, undertaking audits of social impact at organisational level are clearly very rare.

Table 2 **Percentage of organisations prioritising beneficiary involvement and impact assessment**

| | Organisation size (by income) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **£2-10k** | **£10-50k** | **£50-250k** | **£250k+** |
| **Methods adopted to involve beneficiaries** | | | | |
| Phone interviews | 1.1 | 2.9 | 4.9 | 13.6 |
| Participatory appraisal procedures | 2.2 | 5.0 | 10.4 | 18.1 |
| Focus groups | 3.0 | 5.8 | 11.6 | 21.7 |
| Participatory events | 11.1 | 10.8 | 21.4 | 26.8 |
| Surveys | 3.3 | 8.3 | 23.7 | 36.4 |
| Individual discussions | 13.0 | 20.1 | 35.3 | 41.4 |
| Complaints procedure | 3.3 | 12.2 | 29.5 | 50.0 |
| **Methods adopted to assess impact** | | | | |
| Social audits | 1.1 | 2.9 | 9.1 | 4.4 |
| Collect data on outcomes for funders | 4.5 | 10.4 | 31.8 | 52.3 |
| Collect data on impact for funders | 3.7 | 8.4 | 31.2 | 5.0 |
| | 269 | 278 | 173 | 198 |

Qualitative evidence from the TSO50 shows that most TSOs measure the benefit of what they achieve for their clients in a piecemeal way, if at all. Many organisations simply did not know how to answer the question, or grasped for any evidence that came to mind. One respondent told us that ‘we get lovely letters and cards', another said 'well, they keep coming back for more'. Others argued that 'we know if they're not happy because they ring up and tell us.'

Many TSOs thought that they 'ought' to do better in finding out how well they are doing and recording that information, but they do not prioritise it. Instead, they do what they are obliged to do by funders as a condition of contract. At the other end of the spectrum, as shown in the TSO1000 study, only about 4 per cent of organisations put a high priority on undertaking social audits. These few TSOs recognised the importance of external independent evaluation to show its credibility to external stakeholders. A key motivation for doing this was to position itself well for potential funding bodies. But, they were also driven by a genuine interest in finding out where practice could be improved. Organisations which had undertaken audits were amongst the most secure, competent and confident in the TSO50. This is a lesson to be learned by many TSOs, but they need a method to determine what they *need* to measure, how to do it, and how to communicate the results.

We cannot yet say whether heavy commitment of time and resource in user involvement and assessment of impact is a worthwhile investment for all TSOs. Our longitudinal research will reveal this. The indications are, however, that such investment is more worthwhile for some organisations than others. In the TSO1000 we found that the larger, longer established and more entrepreneurial TSOs are more likely to measure their impact and are more likely to engage with their beneficiaries. This may be partly due to the requirements of the kinds of funding they receive, but we doubt that this is the only explanation. It seems, instead, that these organisations are more aware of the importance of such activity to justify their claims about the quality of their practice and often develop their evaluation work well beyond the requirements of others.

The more traditional and locally embedded organisations, by contrast, seem less concerned about such activity. This could be because they are generally smaller organisations which have stronger inter-personal association with beneficiary groups. They tend to be funded from a variety of sources and rely heavily on volunteer support, so contracts are not a very high priority. It could be that they have a strong sense of belief that they take the right approach simply because they have been doing it for a long time – so assessing the impact of what they do is low on their priority list.

The latter group, so often well positioned to represent the 'voice' of the local third sector, are often the most vocal in complaining about demands for evaluation impact. But in reality, most of these organisations have little interest in playing the contract game. Making a noise about resisting demands to show impact really does not help those more enterprising TSOs which want to or are already working to contract. Simply put, it provides ammunition for sceptical councillors and local authority commissioning and procurement officers who have doubts about the legitimacy and capability of the third sector to deliver. [6]

[6] We have explored, as a preliminary to the Northern Rock Foundation Third Sector Trends study, the relationships between public sector offices and third sector CEOs in a sub region of North East England; see Chapman, Brown, Ford and Baxter, 2010

# 4 Easy to say, hard to do

It seems to us that the local third sector is generally not ready to measure its impact. In many cases, TSOs have not begun the journey and do not involve their beneficiaries in making decisions about their practice. This may, on the positive side, suggest a strong sense of self confidence amongst practitioners about their continuous practice and an old-fashioned view of professionalism, where judgement is believed to be more important than measurement. A more sceptical account may be that such TSOs simply don't know how well they are doing with their beneficiaries, or even whether they are reaching those whose needs are the greatest.[7]

Finger wagging by commentators on poor practice on impact measurement by TSOs is not uncommon. The importance of demonstrating impact is, however, easy to say but hard to do. The recent report of the Funding Commission, *Funding the Future*, has produced an honest and well-judged assessment of what the third sector needs to do to weather the storm of a fast changing funding and policy environment. Its recommendations are generally sensible and are well founded in evidence. The section of the report which deals with 'increasing and demonstrating impact' is, however, less strong. It is not our intention here to give the impression that we are criticising the report – because we are not. But we use the example to demonstrate why impact assessment is easy to say and hard to do. The Funding Commission has this to say about the need for impact assessment:

***'Thinking about, measuring and reporting on impact needs to become part of the natural way CSOs[8] do things, especially as service users and supporters become more demanding in their relationships with those they engage with. CSOs can then learn how best to increase the difference they make for their beneficiaries. Ensuring current resources are being used to maximise effect is just as important as trying to bring in new resources' (2010: 18).***

Few would argue with this good advice. It is clear, however, that there is no bedrock of established and accepted practice which can be drawn upon to achieve this. As noted above, there are plenty of organisations which are involved in the impact assessment industry, and there are as many methodologies as there are players. Recognising that much remains to be done, the Funding Commission states:

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[7] We are indebted to an experienced practitioner for helping spot this. This practitioner observed that many organisations in the network within which they practice, make strong claims to be good at reaching into excluded communities, but in actuality most TSOs just carried the same beneficiaries along with them from project to project – whilst those who were 'most excluded' were left out in the cold. This is an issue which needs to be explored in much more detail by researchers who are concerned with impact assessment.

[8] Government has abandoned the use of the term Third Sector and TSO, and instead uses the terms Civil Society, and Civil Society Organisation (CSO). Many commentators are currently sticking with the term Third Sector (for a justification, see Alcock, 2010), but practitioner organisations and umbrella bodies seem to be adopting the new terminology more readily – many having never become fully accustomed to or comfortable with the term Third Sector.

***‘CSOs still tend to try to develop their own outcome frameworks rather than build on pre-existing models. An initiative to work with (or, where necessary, help develop) sub-sector ‘trade bodies’ to bring together a set of common outcome frameworks across all the different parts of the sector would not only save fruitless invention, but would also have huge potential for shared learning and knowledge management. Over time it should then also be possible to develop sets of costed outcomes for particular types of interventions’ (2010: 18).***

These observations are well intentioned and seem to offer sound advice. But, as the Commission recognises, this is a process which has hardly begun.

Discussion of the benefits of competing methodologies that external organisations have been keen to develop to help the sector measure impact can be set aside for the present, because more important preliminary questions present themselves, such as: why has the process hardly begun; and, what factors have produced organisational cultures where impact assessment is not valued? Our answers arise from the brief analysis we have presented above on the way that the local third sector operates.[9]

- Organisational diversity (by structure, culture and mission) is such that producing a ‘one model that fits all needs’ would be very difficult to do even when TSOs are, ostensibly, serving the interests of similar beneficiaries in similar ways. We find that TSOs beliefs about *what kind of organisation they are*, often does not fit all that closely with *what they actually do*. This makes it hard for TSOs to use methodologies of impact assessment because they clash with organisational values and culture.
- Competition between organisations over resources, favour and beneficiaries make it difficult to achieve ‘shared learning and knowledge management’, or ‘common outcome frameworks’.  Even when TSOs are doing the same things in more or less the same ways – they feel that they must distinguish their practice from others to win a competitive edge.

[9] Given the constraints of space, we could not present many of our findings, however, our reports from the Third Sector Trends study are all available, free, from this website http://www.nr-foundation.org/thirdsectortrends.

# 5 Competition in the social market

Organisations generally operate in any given industrial sector in particular ways due to the market conditions within which they work. In some sectors, organisations are more able to control market conditions, whilst in others, they are much more likely to be subject to pressures beyond their direct control.

In the established 'professions' such as law, medicine, engineering, accountancy (within which there are often large numbers of small or large businesses) practitioners operate in a market where they have a high degree of control over market conditions.[10] They do so by limiting access to the profession by, for example, imposing pass quotas on professional society examinations. Because members of the profession practice in similar ways, it is possible to produce standards and ethics of practice and establish disciplinary procedures for members of the profession who fail to meet expectations.[11] Working in stable market conditions such as these, where demand for services is more or less guaranteed, professionals can maintain social status, professional autonomy and command high salaries providing that the service they provide meets public expectations.

Micro-businesses, SMEs and larger businesses, similarly, operate in a particular market sphere where collective interests are shared. Federations and confederations of businesses bring themselves together to influence market conditions. Competition then ensues between businesses and those which fail go to the wall. Failure in such markets is easy to define. When a business is not sufficiently profitable owners must either decide whether to continue trading (before they lose everything), or banks foreclose forcing businesses to cease trading. The 'bottom line' is the measure of success, but this is not to say that such businesses do not bring social or environmental benefit. The corner shop can be a social location which increases community cohesion, and its position saves people from driving – so helping the environment. Public benefit, however that is defined, can therefore be an issue of importance to businesses. A pub without a conducive environment for customers will close, just as a corner shop with an uncooperative service ethos is likely to fail.

TSO's market situation is more complex because it is located between the market, the state and private life.[12] Unlike the market, TSOs are often not directly dependent on beneficiary demand for their products and services to

[10] See Johnston (1971), Elston (1991), Evetts (2003) for discussion of the maintenance of professional power. For a further discussion in relation to the Northern Rock Foundation study, see Chapman, *et al.* 2010c)

[11] Similar arrangements have also been adopted by a number of trades, such as plumbers, electricians, decorators, builders, and so on. Boundaries are less strongly internally regulated and therefore market entry cannot be fully controlled. Trades adopt kite marks to suggest to consumers that the quality of service is assured, but 'cowboy' practitioners can continue to work – unlike the professions where licenses can be revoked and miscreants 'struck off'.

[12] See Evers and Laville (1999) for a useful and well respected discussion on the market position of third sector organisations.

maintain their market position.[13] Instead, they rely on resources from individuals and organisations which *choose* to support the cause they pursue. Consequently, TSOs must invest energy in persuading people that their cause is worthy; and further, they need to persuade people that their approach to tackle problems is the most effective. The need to win arguments becomes, of itself, a characteristic of competition which is endemic to the social market.

TSOs have to position their product or service in such a way as to win plaudits at the expense of others. Their 'brand' of service must appear to be distinctive (even if the practices entailed may not actually be very different from competitors'). Sometimes, those who could support a TSO's work need to be persuaded that there is a problem which needs to be dealt with. Rather like business enterprises, therefore, TSOs need to 'produce consumers' for the product or service through political lobbying or campaigning. The third sector, we argue, is a relatively unstable market environment because TSOs are subject to powerful and sometimes fast-changing external political, social, cultural and economic forces and as a consequence, have significant impact on the funding environment. This affects the mind-set of the third sector particularly in relation to the way it manages competition.

The consequence is that TSOs will always find it difficult to accept common frameworks for their practice because they compete over the best approach. This raises serious questions about how can they start the journey of assessing their impact.

# 6 Conclusion

This paper calls into question the extent to which the third sector can be expected to adopt common methodologies of assessing the impact of what they do. It can be argued that many organisations do not need to assess impact in formal ways. Small, community embedded organisations which rarely get involved with delivery of public services do not generally need to assess their impact formally. We can, more or less, cross them off the list. Those larger TSOs which do (or aspire to) deliver public services (or work for foundations which demand that they demonstrate their impact) will have to accommodate to the demands of the funder.

To assert that groups of TSOs which work in similar areas of practice can develop commonly accepted methodologies to demonstrate impact is probably a pipe dream. This is because of endemic competition between organisations which results in TSOs working hard to distinguish their approach to practice from that of others. But even if TSOs could agree, it is

[13] Beneficiary demand (or perceptions of beneficiary demand) is inevitably greater than the resources the sector as a whole can command. Arguably, there is no end to the amount of good work which could be done if resources were made available.

by no means certain that funders would accept such evidence as legitimate – depending upon their own values, expectations and local political, economic and social circumstances.

The likelihood is that TSOs will, instead, continue to focus on measuring impact (or at least 'communicating' impact) with a more pragmatic objective in mind – to position themselves more successfully in the social market. There are many ways of achieving this – ranging from building relationships to establish trust in the competence of the organisation, to the employment of consultants or researchers to do social audits to provide evidence of efficacy.

Such practices will continue to leave doubts in the minds of those who support and fund the third sector – so encouraging them to impose methodologies and strictures upon organisations with which they work. These impositions will, in turn, challenge many third sector practitioners' beliefs about their professional capability to make effective judgements on what needs to be done and how beneficiary needs should be met. Funders and third sector practitioners, in such circumstances, remain on something of a collision course.

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