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ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN PROMOTING TRADE, INVESTMENT, AND INDUSTRIALIZATION FOR SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Adult education has become increasingly important in promoting sustainable economic development in Africa, particularly in the areas of trade, investment, and industrialization. This paper examines how adult education contributes to human capital development by equipping adults with vocational, entrepreneurial, financial, and digital skills needed for productive economic participation. Using a conceptual approach based on relevant literature, the paper explains that adult education strengthens trade through improved business, financial, and digital competencies; promotes investment by enhancing entrepreneurial capacity and workforce quality; and supports industrialization through technical and vocational skills development. The paper also identifies major constraints affecting the effective use of adult education for economic transformation, including inadequate funding, weak policy implementation, poor access, and insufficient integration of market-relevant skills into adult learning programmes. It concludes that strengthening adult education systems in Africa is essential for improving productivity, attracting investment, supporting industrial growth, and achieving sustainable economic development.

Keywords: Adult Education, Trade, Investment, Industrialization, Sustainable Economic Development.

Introduction

Sustainable economic development remains a major goal for nations across the world, especially in developing economies where unemployment, poverty, and low industrial productivity persist. Countries like Nigeria continue to face structural challenges such as weak industrial bases, low participation in global trade, and insufficient investment inflows. These challenges are largely linked to inadequate human capital development and limited access to functional education among the adult population. Adult education has been identified as a critical strategy for addressing these challenges by equipping individuals with relevant knowledge, vocational skills, and entrepreneurial competencies. According to UNESCO (2016), adult learning and education are essential for empowering individuals and promoting inclusive economic growth. Similarly, World Bank (2022) emphasizes that skills development is a key driver of productivity and global competitiveness. From a theoretical perspective, Schultz (1961) and Gary (1993) argue that investment in education improves workers' productivity, thereby enhancing economic performance. In line with this, adult education contributes to economic transformation by upgrading the skills of the labour force and promoting innovation. Furthermore, the role of education in facilitating trade, attracting investment, and promoting industrialization has gained increasing attention in global development discourse. UNCTAD (2021), notes that human capital development significantly influences foreign direct investment inflows, while international Labour Organization (2020) highlights the importance of skills development in driving industrial growth.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Trade

Trade refers to the exchange of goods and services between individuals, firms, regions, or countries for the purpose of satisfying needs, generating income, and stimulating economic growth. It may occur within domestic markets or across international borders. In contemporary economies, trade has expanded beyond the physical exchange of goods to include services trade, digital trade, and participation in global value chains. Trade remains a vital component of development because it promotes market expansion, specialization, competition, productivity, and access to foreign exchange. The World Trade Organization (2023) explains that trade plays a critical role in economic development by enabling countries to access wider markets, improve efficiency, and benefit from technological transfer and innovation. Similarly, the World Bank (2020) notes that trade contributes to economic growth by promoting specialization, increasing productivity, and enhancing national income. In developing economies, trade can stimulate local production, improve employment opportunities, and support small and medium-scale enterprises when the workforce possesses the necessary skills to compete effectively. In the African context, the contribution of trade to development depends not only on access to markets but also on the quality of human capital, entrepreneurial capacity, and production systems.

The National Bureau of Statistics (2022) shows that weak industrial capacity and low productivity continue to limit Nigeria's competitiveness in international trade. In addition, Aremu and Ogunyemi (2021) further argue that trade expansion in developing economies is strongly influenced by entrepreneurship, vocational competence, and human capital development. This implies that adults engaged in trading activities require business management skills, financial literacy, digital competence, and vocational knowledge to compete in both local and global markets. Trade also promotes development through market integration, innovation diffusion, and investment stimulation. By participating in trade, producers gain exposure to new ideas, technologies, and production standards that can improve the quality of goods and services. Open and competitive markets can equally attract investors who seek profitable environments for production and exchange. Consequently, trade should not be viewed merely as buying and selling; it is a dynamic economic process that requires knowledge, innovation, and skills for meaningful participation.

Concept of Investment

Investment refers to the commitment of financial, human, or material resources into productive activities with the expectation of generating future returns. It may take the form of domestic investment, foreign direct investment, infrastructure investment, business expansion, education and training, or technological development. Investment is a major driver of economic growth because it provides the capital, equipment, innovation, and productive capacity needed for employment generation, industrial development, and long-term economic transformation. UNCTAD (2023), states that investment is central to development because it supports infrastructure, enterprise growth, technological upgrading, and participation in global production systems. The International Monetary Fund (2022) similarly emphasizes that investment enhances productivity, improves economic resilience, and contributes to structural transformation. In developing countries, the ability to attract and sustain investment is influenced by a number of factors such as institutional quality, infrastructure, market size, political stability, and the availability of a skilled workforce. From an educational and economic perspective, investment is closely connected to human capital development.

Olayiwola and Adeleke (2021) found that workforce skills and educational attainment significantly influence investment growth and foreign direct investment inflows. Likewise, Okeke and Eze (2022) argue that weak technical and vocational education systems can reduce a country's attractiveness to industrial and technological investors. This suggests that adult education can contribute to investment promotion by developing entrepreneurial, managerial, technical, and digital competencies among adults, thereby improving the quality of labour and enterprise performance. Investment also has an individual and community dimension. Adults who acquire financial literacy, business planning skills, and entrepreneurial knowledge are more likely to save, invest in productive ventures, manage risks effectively, and expand their businesses. Thus, investment should be understood not only at the macroeconomic level but also as a process that requires knowledge, confidence, and competence among individuals and communities.

Concept of Industrialization

Industrialization is the process through which an economy moves from primary production, especially agriculture and raw material dependence, to manufacturing, mechanized production, technological innovation, and large-scale value addition. It is a key component of economic transformation because it enhances productivity, creates employment, supports technological advancement, and promotes economic diversification. Industrialization enables countries to process raw materials locally, develop manufacturing capacity, reduce import dependence, and expand exports. According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (2022), industrialization is essential for sustainable development because it drives innovation, job creation, poverty reduction, and structural economic change.

Similarly, the World Bank (2023) emphasizes that industrial growth depends on skills development, innovation, and infrastructure. In addition, the international Labour Organization (2020) highlights that industrialization requires a skilled workforce capable of adapting to technological changes. The National Bureau of Statistics Nigeria (2022) shows that manufacturing contributes less than expected to GDP due to inadequate skills and weak infrastructure. Akinwale (2021) argues that industrialization in Nigeria requires a skilled workforce capable of operating modern technologies. Furthermore, Bello and Yusuf (2023) found that technical and vocation education significantly improves industrial productivity and employment generation in Nigeria. This confirms that industrialization is strongly dependent on continuous skills development. Furthermore, Alhalbul (2023) also show that technological competence and continuous learning are key determinants of industrial productivity.

Sustainable Economic Development

Sustainable economic development refers to a pattern of growth that improves economic well-being and living standards without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It combines economic progress with social inclusion, environmental responsibility, and long-term institutional stability. Sustainable economic development is not only concerned with increasing income or production; it also emphasizes employment creation, poverty reduction, equitable opportunities, environmental protection, and the empowerment of citizens to participate meaningfully in development processes. The United Nations (2015) explains that sustainable development involves the integration of economic, social, and environmental goals in order to ensure inclusive and lasting progress. In the same vein, the United Nations Development Programme (2021) stresses that sustainable economic development requires human capital investment, innovation, institutional capacity, and equal access to productive opportunities.

In Africa, sustainable economic development is particularly important because of the region's persistent development challenges, including unemployment, poverty, inequality, low industrial productivity, and weak access to quality education and skills. Adult education contributes to sustainable economic development by promoting lifelong learning, employability, entrepreneurship, social inclusion, and productive citizenship. It empowers adults with the knowledge and skills needed to improve their livelihoods, participate in business and industry, manage resources, and respond to economic change. UNESCO (2022) further notes that adult learning plays an important role in promoting inclusion and resilience, especially among marginalized groups such as women, rural populations, and informal sector workers.

Role of Adult Education in Promoting Trade

Adult education plays a significant role in promoting trade by equipping adults with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for productive engagement in commercial activities. Trade in contemporary society goes beyond the traditional exchange of goods and services; it now involves digital transactions, financial management, customer relations, market analysis, record keeping, product branding, and cross-border business communication. For many adults involved in petty trading, small-scale enterprise, agro-marketing, and informal business activities across Africa, the ability to participate effectively in trade depends largely on access to relevant education and practical training. Adult education serves this purpose by providing literacy, numeracy, vocational, entrepreneurial, and digital skills that strengthen business performance and improve market participation.

One major contribution of adult education to trade is the development of functional literacy and numeracy skills. Many adults engaged in buying and selling, especially in rural and semi-urban communities, operate businesses without adequate reading, writing, and calculation skills. This often limits their ability to keep proper business records, interpret market information, understand contracts, calculate profit and loss, and communicate effectively with customers and suppliers. Through adult literacy programmes, learners acquire the ability to read invoices, maintain sales records, understand market prices, and carry out basic financial calculations. UNESCO (2022) explains that adult literacy enhances employability, economic participation, and access to opportunities by improving the capacity of individuals to function effectively in modern economic systems. In the same vein, Nwosu and Eze (2021) found that literacy education improves the business efficiency of small-scale traders by enhancing record keeping, communication, and decision making. Trade requires more than the ability to sell products; it demands planning, market analysis, customer service, product development, negotiation skills, and financial discipline. Entrepreneurship-oriented adult education programmes help adults understand how to identify market opportunities, manage risks, improve product quality, attract customers, and expand their businesses. This is particularly important in African economies where a large proportion of adults depend on self-employment and small enterprises for survival. According to Akinyemi and Bamidele (2022), entrepreneurship education contributes to enterprise growth by improving business knowledge, innovation, and market competitiveness among adult learners. Similarly, the International Labour Organization (2020) notes that entrepreneurship and skills training are essential for strengthening micro, small, and medium enterprises, which are major drivers of trade and employment in developing economies.

Another important area is financial literacy, which adult education promotes as a tool for improving trading activities. Financial literacy enables adults to understand savings, budgeting, pricing, credit management, investment decisions, and responsible borrowing. Traders who lack financial knowledge may mismanage capital, incur avoidable debts, or fail to separate business finances from personal expenses. Adult education programmes that include financial literacy help learners make informed business decisions, manage cash flow, and improve profitability. The OECD (2020) emphasizes that financial literacy is central to inclusive economic participation because it strengthens the ability of individuals to plan, save, invest, and manage economic risks. In Nigeria, Adeoye and Lawal (2023) report that financial education significantly improves the performance and sustainability of micro-businesses operated by adults in the informal sector.

Adult education further supports trade through digital literacy and e-commerce participation. The expansion of digital technologies has transformed trade by making online marketing, mobile payments, social media advertising, and digital customer engagement increasingly important. Adults who acquire digital skills are better positioned to advertise products online, communicate with customers electronically, use digital payment systems, and access wider markets beyond their immediate communities. According to UNESCO (2023) notes that digital skills have become essential for economic inclusion and enterprise development, particularly among populations previously excluded from formal education and modern business systems. In practical terms, adult education can train market women, artisans, youth entrepreneurs, and small-scale business owners in the use of smartphones, online platforms, and digital financial tools for trade expansion.

Promotion of Digital and E-Commerce Skills: In the digital economy, trade increasingly occurs through online platforms and electronic commerce systems. Adult education provides training in ICT and digital tools, enabling individuals to access wider markets beyond their immediate environment. The International Telecommunication Union (2022) notes that digital skills are essential for participation in modern trade systems, especially in emerging economies.Olawale and Ojo (2022) found that digital skills training significantly improves the ability of Nigerian small-scale entrepreneurs to engage in online trade and expand their customer base. Improvement of Product Quality and Market Competitiveness: Adult education enhances technical and vocational skills, which improve the quality of goods and services produced. Higher product quality increases competitiveness in both domestic and international markets the UNESCO (2021) highlights that vocational education contributes significantly to productivity and market readiness. According to Bello and Yusuf (2023) technical skills acquired through adult education programmes enhance productivity and enable traders and producers to meet market standards, thereby increasingly competitiveness in both domestic and international. Finally, Adult education promotes innovation and adaptability, enabling trader to respond effectively to changing market conditions. Ezeani (2022) argues that continuous learning is essential for small business survival and expansion in competitive market such as Nigeria.

Role of Adult Education in Promoting Investment

Adult education contributes meaningfully to investment promotion by improving the knowledge, skills, productivity, and entrepreneurial capacity of individuals and communities. Investment, whether at the household, enterprise, national, or foreign level, depends heavily on the availability of a skilled and competent population capable of using resources productively. Where adults possess relevant knowledge in business planning, financial management, technology use, and vocational production, they are more likely to establish viable enterprises, expand existing businesses, attract support, and contribute to a favorable investment climate.

One of the major ways adult education promotes investment is through human capital development. Human capital refers to the stock of knowledge, skills, health, and competencies that individuals possess and apply in productive activities. Human capital theory, advanced by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993), maintains that investment in education improves workers' efficiency, productivity, and economic value. In the context of investment, a skilled labour force makes a country or community more attractive to investors because businesses are more likely to succeed where workers can operate effectively, learn quickly, and adapt to changing technologies. Adult education contributes to this process by upgrading the skills of adults who are already in the labour market or outside the formal education system. Through vocational training, continuing education, digital learning, and entrepreneurship development, adults become more capable of participating in productive ventures and supporting investment growth.

Adult education also promotes investment by strengthening entrepreneurial competence. Entrepreneurship is central to domestic investment because it involves the creation, expansion, and management of business ventures that generate income, employment, and productive assets. Adults who receive training in entrepreneurship are better able to identify investment opportunities, assess risks, mobilize resources, and manage enterprises effectively. Entrepreneurship education exposes learners to business planning, feasibility studies, market analysis, pricing, customer relations, and growth strategies, all of which are necessary for sound investment decisions. Okafor and Ibe (2022) observe that entrepreneurship education improves business sustainability and increases the capacity of adult learners to initiate and manage profitable enterprises.

Another important contribution of adult education to investment is the promotion of financial literacy and savings culture. Investment decisions require knowledge of budgeting, capital formation, savings, credit use, interest rates, and risk management. Adults who lack financial literacy may struggle to manage funds effectively, access credit, or make sound investment choices. Adult education programmes that include financial education can improve the ability of learners to plan expenditures, save regularly, use loans responsibly, and channel resources into productive ventures. The OECD (2020) explains that financial literacy enhances economic resilience and empowers individuals to make informed decisions regarding savings, borrowing, and investment. In developing countries where access to formal financial advice is limited, adult education remains a practical means of strengthening financial capability among adults.

Adult education further supports investment by improving workforce quality and productivity, which are key considerations for both domestic and foreign investors. Investors are generally attracted to environments where workers possess relevant technical, managerial, and problem-solving skills. A poorly trained labour force increases production costs, reduces efficiency, and discourages business expansion. Conversely, a workforce with adequate vocational, technical, and digital competence supports innovation, productivity, and profitability. Adult education contributes by reskilling and upskilling workers to meet the demands of modern business and industry. This is particularly important in Africa, where rapid technological change requires continuous learning beyond initial schooling. The World Bank (2020) emphasizes that workforce skills development is central to investment competitiveness because it enhances productivity and supports structural transformation.

Role of Adult Education in Promoting Industrialization

Adult education is a critical driver of industrialization because it develops the technical, vocational, entrepreneurial, and adaptive skills needed for industrial growth and productivity. Industrialization requires more than machines, factories, and infrastructure; it also depends on the quality of human resources available to operate equipment, manage production processes, innovate, solve problems, and respond to technological change. In many African countries, weak industrial development is closely linked to shortages of skilled manpower, low technical competence, inadequate training opportunities, and limited investment in lifelong learning. Adult education helps to address these gaps by equipping adults with the knowledge and practical skills necessary for meaningful participation in industrial production and value addition.

A major role of adult education in industrialization is the provision of technical and vocational skills. Technical and vocational education enables adults to acquire practical competencies in trades and occupations such as welding, electrical installation, machine operation, garment production, building technology, agro-processing, metal fabrication, automobile repair, carpentry, and information technology. These skills are essential for manufacturing, maintenance, construction, processing, and other industrial activities. Adults who receive such training can contribute directly to industrial labour, establish production-based enterprises, or support local manufacturing and repair services. According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (2022), industrialization in developing countries depends strongly on the availability of technically competent workers who can sustain production, innovation, and maintenance systems. In the Nigerian context, Akinwale (2021) notes that technical and vocational skills development is fundamental to building a productive industrial workforce and reducing dependence on imported expertise.

Adult education further supports industrialization by improving productivity, innovation, and problem-solving ability. Industrial growth requires workers and entrepreneurs, who can identify inefficiencies, adapt to new methods, maintain quality standards, and solve technical challenges. Through adult learning, individuals can develop critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and operational competence that enhance productivity in industrial settings. Education also exposes learners to quality control, safety practices, environmental responsibility, and efficient resource use, all of which are necessary for sustainable industrial development. Bello and Yusuf (2023) found that technical and vocational training contributes positively to industrial productivity and youth employment by improving job performance and production skills. In addition, adult education promotes industrialization by supporting technology adoption and digital competence. Adults who lack digital literacy may find it difficult to function in such environments. Adult education programmes that integrate digital skills, basic engineering knowledge, and technology use can prepare workers and entrepreneurs to participate in modern industry. As Africa seeks to position itself within the global digital economy, adult education becomes indispensable for preparing a workforce that can engage with modern industrial technologies.

Challenges in Using Adult Education to Promote Trade, Investment, and Industrialization in Africa

Despite the significant contributions of adult education to economic transformation, several challenges continue to limit its effectiveness in promoting trade, investment, and industrialization across Africa.

1. One of the major challenges is inadequate funding. Adult education programmes in many African countries receive limited budgetary allocation, resulting in poor infrastructure, inadequate instructional materials, insufficient training facilities, and a shortage of qualified facilitators. This weak financial support reduces the quality and accessibility of adult education programmes needed for economic empowerment and workforce development (UNESCO, 2022; Lawal, 2018).

2. Poor policy implementation: Although many African countries have policies that recognize the importance of adult education, implementation remains weak due to poor coordination, inadequate political commitment, and weak institutional capacity. Consequently, adult education is often excluded from broader economic development strategies, thereby limiting its contribution to trade, investment, and industrialization (UNESCO, 2016; Oduaran, 2020).

3. Low digital literacy and inadequate technological infrastructure: The increasing digitization of trade, business, and industrial production requires adults to possess digital competencies. However, inadequate ICT facilities, unreliable internet access, and low digital literacy among adult learners reduce their ability to participate effectively in the digital economy (Selwyn, 2016; UNESCO, 2022; Ajadi & Salawu, 2020).
4. Limited access to adult education programmes: Access to quality adult education remains low, particularly among rural populations, women, unemployed youths, and workers in the informal sector. Factors such as poverty, distance to learning centres, inadequate facilities, and competing family responsibilities discourage participation in lifelong learning programmes (UNESCO, .2022; United Nations, 2015).
5. Low public awareness and motivation: Many adults are unaware of the economic benefits of adult education or perceive it as being limited to basic literacy. This negative perception reduces enrolment in vocational, entrepreneurship, and continuing education programmes that could improve productivity, employment, and income generation (Oduaran, 2020; UNESCO, 2016).

Strategies for Strengthening Adult Education for Trade, Investment, and Industrialization in Africa

To maximize the contribution of adult education to trade, investment, and industrialization in Africa, deliberate and sustained efforts must be made to strengthen the structure, content, funding, delivery, and relevance of adult education programmes. Since adult education is expected to equip learners with practical competencies for productive engagement in modern economies, it must be repositioned as a strategic instrument for human capital development, entrepreneurship promotion, workforce upgrading, and economic transformation. The following strategies are essential for strengthening adult education in this direction.

A major strategy is increased and sustained funding for adult education programmes. Governments, development agencies, private organizations, and community stakeholders need to invest more substantially in adult learning and education. Adequate funding is necessary for the construction and renovation of adult education centres, provision of training equipment, supply of instructional materials, payment of facilitators, integration of digital technologies, and support for vocational and entrepreneurship training. Adult education cannot effectively contribute to trade, investment, and industrialization when programmes operate without the basic resources needed for quality delivery. Funding should therefore be viewed not as a social expenditure alone but as an economic investment in productivity, employment, enterprise growth, and industrial development.

Another important strategy is the provision of modern vocational and technical training facilities. If adult education is expected to support industrialization, learners must have access to practical training environments where they can acquire hands-on skills. Governments and institutions should establish or strengthen vocational training centres, skills acquisition hubs, fabrication workshops, agricultural processing units, and community enterprise centres. Equipment should be functional and aligned with current industry needs. Practical exposure is essential for building competence, confidence, and employability.

Monitoring and evaluation should also be strengthened. Adult education programmes need clear performance indicators, outcome monitoring, and evidence-based planning. It is important to track not only enrolment but also skill acquisition, employment outcomes, enterprise development, income improvement, and learner progression. Monitoring systems will help policymakers and programme managers identify what works, where gaps exist, and how programmes can be improved for better economic impact.

Implications for Adult Education Policy and Practice in Africa

Implications for adult education policy and practice in Africa. First, it suggests that adult education should no longer be viewed narrowly as a remedial programme for non-literate adults alone. Rather, it should be recognized as a broad lifelong learning system that contributes directly to economic productivity, enterprise development, industrial growth, and sustainable livelihoods. This broader understanding has implications for how adult education is planned, funded, implemented, and evaluated. From a policy perspective, adult education should be mainstreamed into national economic development frameworks. Ministries and agencies responsible for education, labour, trade, investment, industry, youth development, and women affairs need to collaborate more intentionally in designing adult education programmes that address labour market demands and economic transformation priorities. Adult education policy should emphasize entrepreneurship, vocational skills, digital competence, financial literacy, cooperative development, and continuous workforce learning as central objectives. Such integration would ensure that adult learning is aligned with broader goals of trade expansion, employment generation, industrialization, and poverty reduction. If adult education is expected to contribute to sustainable economic development, then public expenditure and donor support must reflect its strategic value. Funding decisions should support infrastructure, technology integration, practical training facilities, facilitator development, and learner support services.

Another implication concerns curriculum reform and programme design. Adult education practitioners must adopt more market-responsive and learner-centred approaches. Programmes should be designed around the actual needs of traders, artisans, farmers, entrepreneurs, industrial workers, unemployed youths, and women in the informal sector. This means using practical, competency-based, flexible, and context-sensitive approaches rather than relying only on traditional classroom methods. Learning should be connected to real-life tasks such as business planning, product marketing, machine operation, cooperative management, digital transactions, and income generation. Finally, the paper implies that adult education practice in Africa must increasingly embrace technology and innovation.

Conclusion

Adult education remains a vital instrument for promoting trade, investment, and industrialization for sustainable economic development in Africa. The paper has shown that adult education contributes to trade by improving literacy, numeracy, entrepreneurship, digital competence, financial literacy, and vocational productivity among adults engaged in commercial activities. It also promotes investment by strengthening human capital, improving entrepreneurial capacity, enhancing financial management, and increasing the quality of the workforce required for productive enterprise and economic growth. In the area of industrialization, adult education supports technical and vocational skills development, workforce re-skilling, innovation, technology adoption, and local value addition. Despite these contributions, the paper has also identified major constraints such as inadequate funding, weak policy implementation, shortage of facilities and qualified personnel, poor curriculum relevance, poverty, exclusion, and weak linkages between adult education and economic sectors. These challenges reduce the capacity of adult education to respond effectively to the needs of modern African economies. The paper therefore concludes that repositioning adult education is essential for sustainable economic transformation in Africa.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion in this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. Governments in African countries should increase funding for adult education in order to provide functional learning centres, modern vocational facilities, digital tools, instructional materials, and adequate remuneration for facilitators.
2. Adult education curricula should be reviewed and modernized to include entrepreneurship education, digital literacy, financial literacy, vocational competence, cooperative education, and market-relevant skills that support trade, investment, and industrialization.
3. Adult education should be fully integrated into national economic development policies, especially those related to employment generation, poverty reduction, industrialization, entrepreneurship development, trade promotion, and digital economy strategies.
4. Governments and institutions should strengthen the training and retraining of adult educators so that they can deliver practical, competency-based, and technology-supported learning relevant.

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