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**Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**

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**Wednesday, September 13, 2023**

(Break for direction.)

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Good morning, good afternoon and good evening. My name is Kate Davidson and I’m a member of the Media and External Relations team at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We’re delighted to have you join us for approximately 45 minutes to learn more about the foundation’s Grand Challenges Program and what to expect at next month’s annual meeting in Dakar, Senegal. Whether you’re planning to listen in on the live stream or joining us in person, my job is to work with colleagues in connecting you to the information and experts you’re interested in.

Before we get going just a few quick notes of housekeeping. This briefing is on background and designed to be informational. It will be recorded, and we’ll be sharing the recording back with you following the call, and for anyone who wasn’t able to join us live. We will not be making any news announcements today, but we will preview announcements that we expect to make at the conference, with additional details to come under embargo.

Should you experience any technical difficulty during the call, please email our tech support. I’ve included their email in the chat. You’ll see the agenda pasted also in the chat ,and we’ll have approximately 20 minutes for remarks and then we’ll open it up for Q&A.

While we hope this session will be helpful and orienting you to Grand Challenges, the agenda for next month’s meeting is still being confirmed, and so we’ll do our best to share any updates as they become available. Your lines will be muted until the Q&A, so please hold your questions until them.

Without further ado, I’m pleased to introduce our expert speakers today. First up Kedest Tesfagiorgis, who leads the Grand Challenges and Global Partnerships Program within the Global Health Division at the Foundation.

Next, you’ll hear from Dr. Zameer Brey, who directs Technology Diffusion at the foundation, which includes our efforts to support equitable access to AI.

And finally, Dr. Jennifer Gardy, who directs Surveillance, Data, and Epidemiology efforts within our Global Health Division and is a member of our malaria program team.

We’re also lucky to have Hannah Cameron from from our Program Advocacy and Communications team, who is involved in planning the mainstage agenda, in case she can help out with answers to questions.

So over to you Kedest.

**KEDEST TESFAGIORGIS:** All right, thank you, Kate, and thank you everyone for joining us. We’re incredibly grateful that you’re interested in the work that we do, and I’ll just jump right in.

So to understand our Grand Challenges, it helps to try to turn your mind back to 2003. When the program started, the HIV, TB and malaria epidemics were completely out of control. Those three killed almost 5 million people that year, I believe. But the amount of money being spent on health research for those diseases was super tiny, compared to things like cancer or diabetes that also affect people in rich countries.

So it’s that disparity that shocked our cochairs, Bill and Melinda Gates, and inspire them to start investing in wearable health. They were coming from Microsoft where the business model was to give lots of smart people the support they needed to do cutting-edge work and accomplish a really big goal, which at the time was to put powerful software on every desk.

So they believed that scientists trying to develop a new solution for global health needed more support as well, so they could do cutting-edge work and save millions of lives. So the Grand Challenges was the vehicle they created to encourage more ambition and provide more resources to breakthrough research and development in our space.

The thing that always sets Grand Challenges apart is the challenge structure. We issue regularly open requests for proposals, which means that instead of telling our partners or grantees and researchers what we think they should be doing, we ask them to tell us what they can do to make make the biggest difference. To me, that’s one of the things that sets the Grand Challenges program apart.

We specify a goal. For example, incapacitate or deplete the disease-carrying insect population, which my colleague Jennifer Gardy will tell you about. And we invite anyone in the world to propose ingenious ways to meet that goal, and then we fund the most exciting ones.

For example, for this challenge that I told you about, about the disease-carrying insects, we got some fascinating ideas. For instance, Tom proposed eliminating mosquitoes’ sense of smell, so they can’t detect us humans, and then they can’t bite us, or dialing up their sense of smell, so they’re completely confused and miss humans. Or modifying mosquitoes, so their offspring from generation to generation are predominantly male, and eventually means they can’t reproduce.

That last one actually is called Target Malaria. It’s become a global program, with teams in Burkina Faso in Ghana and the UK who are still working on this.

So we started with a list of 14 challenges back in 2005. We’re sharing this slide, which lives on grandchallenges.org, and you are welcome to take a look at it, but it shows you the progress that we have made in the last 20 years from 14 challenges. We’ve run a number of challenges since then and have made about 3,600 grants, but also have a presence in about 118 countries.

Although the basic idea is still the same, to challenge the global scientific community to solve big problems, Grand Challenges has changed a lot over the course of the two decades. We had the luxury of learning and making the work we do a little bit better.

We don’t have a ton of time, so I want to focus on one important evolution.

What started as a program run by the Gates Foundation has become a global family of programs run by many funders from many parts of the world. I’ll draw your attention to the second half of my slide, specifically looking at countries in low-and-middle-income countries who are running their own Grand Challenges Program, which means they’re participating in their own innovation space and in their own research and development space.

I find that very exciting. The photo that I’m sharing is a sales meeting that we had in the Brussels Grand Challenges meeting with all these managers of the local Grand Challenges programs. We’ve got about a dozen of them. I keep thinking, to me, that this should be at least the face of the new global health leadership.

It’s inclusive, it’s local, its regional, it’s globally connected, and it makes the ideas in the innovation that our scientists are working on, even more precise, because it has local insights. So for anyone who’s interested in the future, I would love to talk a little bit more.

So in a few moments, my colleagues, Zameer will also tell you a little bit about the equitable AI use for the Grand Challenges that he has run, which means, for Zameer, in addition to having many really exciting individual projects to learn about and support the innovators, we will also have a large international community of innovators who can build on one another’s idea, a group of funders from around the world, who are hoping to set an ambitious shared agenda in this new technology of AI and how to make it work for global health and make it equitable.

This also links a wide range of policymakers and private sector companies, and most importantly, local communities through these Grand Challenges funding partners who will eventually regulate new technologies, invest in them and use them in their clinics.

So our words like "system" can get confusing sometimes, but to me, this is what Grand Challenges (GC) is all about, and this is what we are hoping to build and strengthen, a system that continues to seek innovation, continues to seed them in supports the important work on key priorities, connects the innovators to each other and to other stakeholders who need to be involved, to make sure the innovation actually reaches people as fast as possible.

So this example is just AI. In Dakar, we have 14 scientific tracks, with various topics like drug discovery, vaccine discovery, and another area, which Jennifer will talk about, which is pathogen genomics, and sickle cell disease, which is incredibly important for Africa. They are all parallel sessions, and they are run with stakeholders, just like the ones I just told you about on AI.

So the Grand Challenges Annual Meeting gives time and dedicated space for these communities to come together, once a year, and talk about how to accelerate progress and how to support each other. This is predominantly a scientific meeting, right? Eighty percent of our attendees are scientific researchers and innovators.

It started in 2005, and so this is our 19th year. And so we had the luxury of time to continue to tweak and make it better and better each year. It also has become a powerful advocacy platform.

We come together once a year with all the scientists and the stakeholders, but more and more, in the last 10 years, we’ve added up political voices to invite them to grace our stage, telling us a little bit about how they think about global health, and how they can support their researchers in their own community, but also how they can work globally, so that the global health agenda can progress fast. This is genuinely a scientific diplomacy and a scientific advocacy platform, and we’re quite excited about that.

So the Grand Challenges meeting moves from one country to another. And that is because we are interested in continuing to expand the pool of talent that works on global health. Every time we go to a new country, we meet new people. We learn about new areas, we learn about new institution, we invite them to the meeting, and we learn about them. We are quite excited about that.

This is our fourth time in Africa. We’re going to West Africa, and we’re quite excited, as this is a new place for us, in a Francophone country, again, expanding the work that we do in in every way.

So Dakar, we’re quite excited, and we hope you all join us October 8th to the 11th. It will be held in the historic CICAD Conference Center. It’s a beautiful facility outside of Dakar, and we’re expecting a little over 1,300 guests coming into town from about 75 countries.

It’s over three days, as I said, with 14 Scientific tracks, poster session, one-hour-long roundtables, 150 side meetings that my team is organizing, and I’m sure a hundred more bilateral that folks are organizing themselves that we don’t know about, and the plenaries across the three days, ranging from the malaria agenda to the AI agenda, learning from a lot of the plenary speakers, which by the way, any information that I’m going to share so far, after this, is going to be confidential and not intended for public use.

And then Kate and team will share additional information under embargo ahead of the meeting, but our speakers are still being confirmed. We’re excited about those. It’s going to be all – you know, if you look at all the bullet points, it would cover the power and the promise of science and innovation to deliver on the things that we care about.

We have some significant announcements that we’re expecting from the foundation. There’s a new commitment to improve global health equity, for bolstering vaccine manufacturing capacity in Africa and other low-income countries, and I will tell you, this one in particular is important and very personal to me. I was born and raised in Ethiopia. I now live and work in the U.S. I got my COVID vaccine and booster twice, before my little brother could get his hands on a COVID vaccine. The only difference is I live in Seattle. He lives in the Horn of Africa. Inequity is real and continues to be a problem, which is very personal to all of us, the COVID experience to all. And so this announcement particular is incredibly important and will make a difference.

Other announcements are also expected around AI, a supportive new African-led artificial intelligence platform. My team is working on a set of Grand Challenges RFPs to continue to challenge new communities to innovate around AI in women’s health and a variety of other important areas, and we’re excited to announce those as well in in Dakar.

So I want to show you a really good map, if you want to move to the map. Dakar is a beautiful city, and I hope you will join us. You can see the little sign of the International Airport. From the International Airport, as you go into your hotel, which is probably going to be in the city center, in Dakar, where you see all the hotel names indicated, you’re going to pass the International Conference Center.

So it’s an hour, or at least one hour of commute time, from and to your hotel to the conference center. We intend to use them wisely. Myself, I’m scheduling a lot of side meetings on the bus. I don’t want to waste any time since we are only there for four days, and so hope to use every single time to make progress on our agenda. And we hope that you will join us because we want to expand the world, the community as problem solvers. And we hope you can come and join us, and we hope to meet you there.

So thank you for your time. And Kate, back to you.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Thanks Kedest. We’re going to invite Zameer on next. Zameer, your first slide will come up.

**ZAMEER BREY:** Super. Thanks, Kate. Thanks, Kedest. Yeah, we are really excited to share a real, live example of how effective the Grand Challenges platform has been at responding to new and promising innovations and technologies.

So just briefly before I get into the Grand Challenges that we launched, and we’ll share some results with colleagues on the call here, our AI journey, which is a learning journey for the Gates Foundation, is informed a set of principles that foregrounds local codesign and inclusion, making sure we move forward responsibly and transparently.

At the Gates Foundation, we really see our AI portfolio as a portfolio of powerful tools that advance not only our program strategies, but give us an opportunity to accelerate progress against the SDGs and ultimately reduce inequality.

We want to lead our journey with building out an evidence base by supporting local scientists, innovators and governments to identify challenges, propose solutions, and this is exactly what you will be able to see in Dakar.

And so what we have over a year is just some of the results of our first Grand Challenges that we launched in June. We did that in record time, but what was really exciting to see was that, even though the call was only open for 14 days, we received 1,300 applications, averaging one every 15 minutes from 103 countries, where 85% of those applications came from low-and-middle-income countries, which is a very clear explanation of the energy, excitement and creativity around using AI for development, and as a force multiplier to reduce inequality in low-and-middle-income countries.

From these, through a robust and rigorous review process, we ultimately selected 50 grantees, and the breakdown of these grantees came from 17 countries, as you can see on the left, and from several program areas including health, education, financial inclusion and gender.

Now, I just want us to pause for a second. You will have the opportunity to engage with these teams. There are 50 teams, coming from across the world, to share the lessons learned, share the challenges and the progress that they’re making against some of the objectives they set in Dakar.

So I’m just going to touch on a couple of examples because I know we are pressed for time, but the grantees you will be able to interact with are addressing significant and substantial challenges in the communities around quality of care, around access to healthcare or education, and are working with large language models in this situation to provide tailored solutions to students as they embark on the education journey, or to support community healthcare workers in rural parts of the country to provide speed to diagnosis, faster and more accurately, and refer them appropriately.

Or you may be able to engage with teams that are creating electronic health records by recording the engagement of healthcare workers, both at the community level and in hospitals, and then using the power of algorithms to organize large language models to organize that information in a way that’s easily accessible for the clinician the next time and provide a higher level of care.

You will also hear from a Professor Nabini(ph) from Macquarie University who’s doing some phenomenal work on supporting smallholder farmers in Uganda to provide them with timely advice around threats to crops, pests, and how to optimize for crop yield. And so you get a real kind of variety of problems that our teams are working on.

So if we could go to the next slide, I can give you a sense of what’s to come.

On Sunday afternoon, we have a Behind the Innovation session, where you will hear firsthand from the innovators and the scientists that are working on these projects, as to what have been some of the most significant accomplishment and challenges that they’ve experienced.

Our mainstage event on Tuesday with Bill Gates, David Sengeh, Juliana Rotich, Rachel Adams, and a couple of other thought leaders in this space, will be a riveting discussion on how AI can reduce disparities and be a force multiplier in health and other key development areas.

Also, on Tuesday, we have a roundtable that’s focused on Humans at the Heart of AI and attacking some of the ethical considerations. What does responsible AI look like in the development space in Africa, in India in Pakistan? And we will have the president of our global health program leading this discussion with a number of other thought leaders in this space.

Then we have another roundtable. And I will say, colleagues be prepared. This is going to be a high-energy, high-paced roundtable, on Wednesday, where we have some of the most promising high-impact, high-potential projects that will be showcased by the grantees themselves. And they will share the stories of how far they’ve come with the existing projects, but also provide an illustration of what the potential is, as these projects get scaled up over time.

With that, it gives me great pleasure to hand over to my colleague, Jennifer, who will take you through some of the scientific decks.

**JENNIFER GARDY:** Thank you so much, Zameer, and everybody online. Please cross your fingers that my internet holds out for the next five minutes. I’m in South Africa today, and we’ve got some loadshedding issues. So hopefully the hotel Wi-Fi serves me well.

It is my distinct pleasure to take you on this little whirlwind tour through some of the scientific tracks that are happening this year’s Grand Challenges meeting. And you can think of tracks essentially, as conferences within a conference. They are are little deep dives into very, very specific areas that we at the Gates Foundation are really interested in.

Five of those tracks are going to be open to you as the media, including the track that I have helped put together this year on malaria. So I thought what I would do in the next four-and-a-half minutes is give you a little glimpse into the thought process around how we build out one of these tracks.

As you probably heard from Kedest, Grand Challenges, it’s really a meeting that helps us see where the future of the field is headed. It’s a really useful conference to us, at the foundation, our individual teams as we’re starting to shape the (audio drop).

And so, when a track lead is assembling a track and putting this mini conference in a conference together, what we are thinking of is it’s the leading edge thinking in this space. It’s as much about the cool science as it is what do we, as Gates Foundation staff, need to know in order to ensure that our work in a particular area is having max impact. So, it’s a great way of connecting scientists with each other, amazing learning. But it is also incredibly helpful for us as we do our jobs.

When it comes to malaria, and when it came time to deciding what to cover in our track this year, we know that there’s a lot of malaria R&D, research and development, covered in other parts of the meeting. There are things like new drugs, diagnostics, new vaccines that are being talked about. With our little slice of the agenda, what we wanted to do was really tackle some of the big picture topics, things that are really going to influence how those new tools and the tools that we have now are being brought to bear on the malaria fight.

We landed on two big topics for our sessions. The first is around innovations in malaria intervention delivery. How can we get more creative with how we deploy the tools that we have at our disposal?

In this session, we’re going to have three talks. One of them is going to be on the role that data science and modeling, and maybe even AI, can play in helping us to understand how to roll out the interventions we have today, and the interventions that we’re going to have in the future. We’ve got another talk on the role that civil society can play in helping us understand the local and community contexts for how to best rollout interventions more effectively. And we’ve got a really cool talk from India’s (eGA?) Foundation on how digital tools can be leveraged in the fight against malaria for things like digitizing, say, a bed net distribution campaign.

The second session that we’re doing is one on looking at malaria through different lenses. We know if we want to get to malaria eradication, zero malaria worldwide, we have to be able to recognize that it’s a very, very intersectional space. We’ve got four really incredible speakers in this session.

We’re really, really excited to have Dr. Daniel Ngamije with us. He is the newly appointed Director of WHO’s Global Malaria program. And prior to that, he was the Minister of Health in Rwanda. And Daniel will be speaking on the importance of African leadership in the fight against malaria.

We have two speakers on gender in that session. One is going to be talking about how do we understand malaria epidemiology and malaria service delivery through the gender lens. And one is going to be speaking on the role of women’s leadership in that fight.

And we are closing with a super, super interesting talk from Susan Rumisha at the Malaria Atlas Project. She is going to be talking on the many different intersection points between malaria and climate.

And at the end of the day, these talks are all really meant to inspire attendees to see the malaria fight through fresh eyes, to realize that malaria is highly intersectional, and that it’s going to take a range of talent and skills to get to eradication. And I’m really proud to say that all of our seven speakers in that session are from malaria endemic countries, and six of those are from Africa.

That is malaria in a nutshell. Each of those tracks has their own origin story. Each of them has their own themes, their own amazing stories and amazing speakers. When it comes to navigating the tracks, just follow your heart. If a top title looks interesting, check it out, move from track to track as much as you like. And while the talks themselves are off the record, these tracks really are a fantastic chance to connect directly with those speakers, and really explore other opportunities for telling their stories.

And lastly, I would encourage you to visit the posters that Kedest mentioned. There’s even more incredible science on display there, and it’ll give you a chance to talk one-to-one with presenters. And I also think they kind of make a nice little amuse bouche to help you identify some of the science that you might want to follow up with by attending a track on a related topic.

Thank you so much. With that, I will turn it back to Kate.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Thanks, Jen. And thank you to Zameer and Kedest. Clearly a lot going on, and I think we can take the slides down now as we transition to opening it up for Q&A.

(Break for direction.)

**KATE DAVIDSON:** With that, I am going to move to our first question. (Tulip?), go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hello, can you hear me?

**KATE DAVIDSON:** I can. Hi, Tulip.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Thank you for all of that, all that overview, really helpful. Sounds very exciting, the event.

I think if I heard you correctly, Zameer, you were talking about some sort of practical sessions, some things we’ll be able to see from some of the Grand Challenges projects that are coming, a few of the 50. Did I understand that correctly? When is that session and what physically will we be able to see at that point?

**ZAMEER BREY:** Sure. Thanks, Tulip, and good to reconnect with you.

Tulip, there are two sessions where grantees themselves will be presenting the projects. The first is on Sunday, and there’s a special side meeting all of Sunday, but we’ve opened up part of that meeting for grantees to share their stories. And so, what you will be able to see there is a kind of a glimpse inside the projects, the processes for the last three months that they’ve been working on. They’ll share some of the workflows, how this works in practice. And also, I think they’ll start discussing the art of the possible. Part of the reason we are convening the group over here is to talk about what are the scaleup opportunities going forward.

The second session that you’ll see is on Wednesday, where there’ll be a roundtable. This is kind of a curated set of subsets of the grantees that have come some way in the project, have either completed the validation, they’re pretty close to publishing something that’s been peer reviewed. And these will be the ideas that have kind of the game-changing potential.

In terms of what you’ll be able to see, I think there are a couple of grantees that have physical things that they will potentially be bringing to the meeting. For example, our grantee in Mali, Tulip, is working on using large language models to create children’s books in local languages, a really exciting project to engage with.

But in the space of AI and large language models, one can imagine that quite a bit of this is happening through cell phones, online, etcetera. And I think part of the appeal there, and I think you and I’ve spoken about this very briefly, is being able to kind of at least walk through that. And if there’s interest, I’m sure Kate and team will try and arrange some one-on-one time to do some more in depth engagement with grantees on what does today look like before the implementation of LLMs, and what does the future look like if these projects work and show promise in the field?

**QUESTION:** Okay, and just very quickly, are those two sessions being streamed, as far as you know, for those that can’t make it to the actual event?

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Go ahead, Zameer.

**ZAMEER BREY:** Kate, I think the Wednesday session is being streamed. I don’t know about the Sunday session, to be honest.

**KEDEST TESFAGIORGIS:** I can answer that. Yeah, I can answer that. The Scientific Sessions, I mean, some of them will be streamed. You can listen into, so one way. The roundtable is not. Obviously, the plenary will be.

**QUESTION:** Okay. All right. Thank you very much.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Thanks, Tulip. Let’s see, does anyone else have questions? I’m not seeing any hands. You can go ahead and unmute your line and ask a question directly if you’d like.

Okay, (Lee?), go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Kate. Hi, Zameer. Thanks for organizing this event. Can you hear me?

**KATE DAVIDSON:** I can. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, so I’m just wondering can we, as journalists, have details like a schedule of the different sessions and who’s going to attend, so maybe I can make sense in my reporting.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. I can take that one. What we’re hoping to do, first of all, for everyone who’s been able to join today, we’ve seen people kind of come on and off the call, we’ll make sure you have a full recording of this session. And then we are working closely with Kedest’s team in creating the draft agenda and program, so you can begin planning your timeout.

I will also add that a whole team of us are going to be on the ground. There is a working press room. There will be somebody there, and we will make every effort to help you make connections and find the folks and the information that you’re looking for. So hopefully, that answers your question.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thanks. Thanks.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Sure. Anyone else? I know we’re kind of coming up on time, but anyone else have a question? Looks like (Zana?), maybe. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Hi, Kate. Can you hear me clearly?

**KATE DAVIDSON:** I can. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Fine. You just mentioned a press room. I just wanted to find out, are there any planned media briefings or press conferences, where we’d have access to particular grantees with exciting projects, or anything of that like?

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Thank you for bringing that up. Yes. The answer is yes. In the conference center, there is a dedicated working press room. Right next door is an actual briefing room. And so, what we are planning, Kedest had mentioned, there’s a couple of news announcements. One, we expect on day one, shortly on the main stage of the plenary, and then one on day two. The press briefings will be shortly after that. We’re giving everyone about a 30-minute break for lunch. And then we will have experts, a few foundation leadership, and others come into the briefing room. And you’ll be able to ask questions about the news or about the issues that were discussed on the plenary stage. So, we’re planning one for day one, and one for day two.

That said, we’re also looking to make opportunistic connections happen. We’re also in discussion with a couple of our partners in Dakar for a potential site visit to learn more about their work and the organization. All of this information will be coming to you, as you prepare to travel and figure out your schedule.

Tomas?

**QUESTION:** I think you just answered my question about site travel visiting. What kind of tours do you plan?

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Kedest, do you want to speak to that, or do you want me to take that one?

**KEDEST TESFAGIORGIS:** I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear. Can you repeat? The question was coming in and out for me.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** The question from Tomas (Yan?) was about those potential site visits, and what they might see and some of the partners that we’ve been in discussion with.

**KEDEST TESFAGIORGIS:** I think that, Tomas, we owe you a bit more information on that. They’re still coming. We’ve got a list that we are working towards, but we haven’t arrived to the final one. But there will definitely be a site visit to some of our partners, who have a lab, and they’re doing a lot of the work on the ground. We owe that information to Kate, and she’ll pass it on to you. But definitely plan on seeing some of those for sure.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Thanks, Kedest. Anyone else? Go ahead, Tomas. Do you have a follow up?

**QUESTION:** No, I just want to thank you. And yeah, I would enjoy that very much and looking forward.

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Fantastic.

(Break for direction.)

**KATE DAVIDSON:** All right. Any other questions? And I will add that in the chat, I have put our media alias on e-mail. It’s media@gatesfoundation.org. Please use that early and often, if you have any questions as you prepare your travel. And as we start to confirm the agenda, what will be livestreamed and available virtually, we will get that information to you.

(Break for direction.)

**KATE DAVIDSON:** Any other questions before we close out? We really appreciate this time today.

Okay, well, we are going to close it out. You can expect a follow up e-mail in the coming days with the recording and additional information. Please let us know how we can be helpful, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your day.

Thanks to all our speakers, and thanks for joining.

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