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A SOCIAL AGENDA FOR GENERATIONAL RENEWAL IN AGRICULTURE

Foresight Paper on Social Policies in Agriculture

European Council of Young Farmers
www.ceja.eu





INTRODUCTION

By 2050, young farmers aspire to a future where their social rights are built on predictable policy environments that reduce uncertainty and administrative burden. They aim for fair, secure incomes that allow for a real work–life balance. In rural areas, they expect reliable transport, childcare, and healthcare, with mental health receiving equal attention as physical care. They look forward to robust farm relief services that enable them to take holidays, parental leave, and training without risking the farm’s viability. They anticipate safe, skilled, and fairly valued seasonal jobs, with young people playing an active role in shaping social dialogue to raise safety and wellbeing standards. They envision a future where equality is a given, and farming is not just a profession, but an attractive, forward-looking career choice.

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate policies in the short term, nor to question Member States’ primary competence for designing and implementing social policies, beyond the common framework provided by the European Pillar of Social Rights^[1]. Its focus is intentionally forward-looking. We do not claim to predict the future, as the next twenty-five years will offer an almost endless range of possibilities for the farming sector; but we do want to describe the future young farmers would like to see, and to outline the policy choices that can help bring it closer.

[1] For additional details on the links between the CAP and social policies, see CEJA’s position paper A Common Agricultural Policy post-2027 for Generational Renewal, section 4.1, “A social CAP without overlapping Member States’ duties”: <https://wordpress.ceja.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/CEJA-position-paper-A-CAP-post-2027-for-generational-renewal.pdf>

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CHALLENGES

Among the many social dimensions that affect the attractiveness of farming, we have chosen to focus this foresight paper on four challenges that, in our view, will be especially crucial for young farmers' success between now and 2050. We prioritise them because:

1. they cut across most national contexts;
2. they are directly connected to the European Pillar of Social Rights;
3. there is already a policy movement in the EU that can be leveraged in the coming decade, but only if the agricultural sector is clearly heard.

CHALLENGE 1: MAKING WORK–LIFE BALANCE POSSIBLE IN RURAL AREAS

The future of farming will partly depend on whether people can live well in rural territories. This involves access to farm relief services, affordable and quality childcare, nearby health and mental health services, and flexible schedules that allow for caregiving, training, and civil society participation. Without this, young people will leave, farm transmission will be more complex, and the mental health crisis in agriculture will continue.

CHALLENGE 2: ENSURING SOCIAL PROTECTION THAT FOLLOWS FARMERS FOR LIFE

Many young farmers still encounter fragmented, inadequate, or poorly tailored social security schemes. Old-age pensions for self-employed farmers, coverage for illness or accidents, and maternity and paternity benefits are essential for making farming a sustainable long-term career. Farmers should be able to maintain their social protection regardless of where or how they farm.



CHALLENGE 3: SECURING FAIR, SAFE AND FUTURE-PROOF FARM WORK

Decent income, safe and healthy workplaces, and secure, adaptable employment are essential for retaining young people in farming and attracting skilled labour to rural areas. This involves addressing occupational health and safety risks specific to agriculture and excessive working hours during peak seasons, as well as ensuring that value-chain imbalances do not lead to unfair pressure on farm workers.

CHALLENGE 4: CLOSING OPPORTUNITY GAPS ACROSS THE AGRI-FOOD VALUE CHAIN

Gender equality and non-discrimination along the agri-food value chain remain unfinished priorities in Europe. If these gaps persist, the sector will lose talent, legitimacy, and social support. Ensuring that opportunities, services, access to entrepreneurship, and representation are accessible to women, third-country nationals, young people without land, and farmers with disabilities is therefore an investment in the resilience and cohesion of European agriculture.

These four challenges do not fully address the social agenda in agriculture, nor do they replace national specificities. Instead, they highlight areas where CEJA can present a European perspective, propose goals for 2050, and compile a set of levers and best practices that can be adapted, scaled up, or negotiated in future contexts.





CHALLENGE 1

MAKING WORK–LIFE BALANCE POSSIBLE IN RURAL AREAS

Farming shortens time. Long seasons, animals that cannot wait, and weather windows leave little space for rest, care, or community life. In many rural areas, services are far away, so a simple task can take half a day. The result is time poverty, chronic stress, and a talent drain, strongly felt by people with caregiving responsibilities (mostly women) and young people. Making rural life compatible with family life is therefore essential for a credible future for farming.

Work-life balance involves redesigning the ecosystem surrounding farming. This redesign requires two approaches: 1) creating reliable farm-relief services that free up time on the farm; and 2) providing rural services that make everyday life manageable.

PATHWAY 1: ESTABLISHMENT OF RELIABLE FARM-RELIEF SERVICES THAT FREE UP TIME ON THE FARM

Time off for health, care, and recovery is a precondition for safe, attractive, and family-friendly farming. When a farmer or family worker cannot be present on the farm, a trained and skilled substitute must be able to step in quickly to ensure animals are cared for, and the business keeps running. This approach should be practical and cost-effective; otherwise, taking time off simply becomes an additional expense for farmers.

CEJA proposes a minimum benefit package for farm-relief services, applying all Member States, while respecting national competences, in order to avoid first and second-class farmers: (1) immediate short-notice replacements for sudden sickness or accidents (without a certificate), (2) extended cover with a medical certificate and during temporary disability (including longer support for special-care or rehabilitation periods), (3) cover while attending medical or occupational rehabilitation paired with income protection, (4) cover during childbearing and parental leave, (5) short-notice cover to care for a sick child or other dependent family members, (6) participation in trainings and EU-funded projects, and (7) holidays and similar life events that support wellbeing and work-life balance.

Recommendations:

- Member States must establish or strengthen farm-relief services as part of their social protection architecture for the self-employed farmers and family workers, and ensure these services are known, accessible, and financially feasible.
 - The EU should back coordination, skills development, and funding incentives, and facilitate the exchange of good practices.
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GOOD PRACTICES



MELA

(FARMERS' SOCIAL INSURANCE INSTITUTION OF FINLAND - MAATALOUSYRITTÄJIEN ELÄKELAITOS)

In Finland, MELA runs a nationwide farm relief service that sends trained replacements to the farm so core daily work, especially in livestock, continues while the farmer is away. One attractive feature is **26 days of annual leave provided free of charge**. Farmers can also request relief for holidays, sick leave, or time with family.

ETKL, ASTE

(ESTONIAN FARMERS' FEDERATION),
(ASENDUSTEENISTUS)

In Estonia, ETKL runs a nationwide farm-relief service (Asendusteenistus/ASTE) that sends trained replacements, so daily farm work continues when the farmer is away for holidays, sickness, or childcare. The service operates in all counties and targets small farms (≤ 7 employees). Farms can replace up to **two workers for up to 90 days per worker per year** (including around 28 days for annual leave; longer for maternity). Most costs are publicly funded via PRIA, with a **20–50% farmer co-payment** scaled to turnover. Livestock farms (≥ 5 livestock units) are eligible, and crop farms can also use the service.

PATHWAY 2: ENSURING RURAL SERVICES THAT MAKE EVERYDAY LIFE WORKABLE

Everyday services, especially primary healthcare and early childhood education and care (ECEC), are essential for long-term prospects in rural areas. When access is distant, fragmented, or unaffordable, care falls back on families (mostly women), driving up fatigue and stress. Young people in rural areas should never be forced to choose between their right to stay in their community and their right to form a family.

This pathway focuses on bringing core services closer to home and farms, making them flexible and affordable, and using digital tools to reach every last hectare. In this line, reliable mobile coverage and high-quality broadband are also key for modern farm life. Connectivity “dead zones” undermine both safety and competitiveness and closing them must be treated as a core objective of rural services. In line with the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, public authorities are responsible for ensuring that rural territories across Europe are not left behind.

GOOD PRACTICE

MOBILE HEALTH HUBS AT LIVESTOCK MARKETS

(NHS & LOCAL PARTNERS, UNITED KINGDOM)

In the United Kingdom, NHS organisations and rural partners run mobile or pop-up health hubs that rotate through livestock markets and other rural events. The hubs provide primary care and targeted specialist support, offering free drop-in checks, vaccinations, and confidential mental health advice, with on-the-spot referrals to GPs or counselling. Clinics are scheduled on market days with minimal paperwork, and results are explained immediately. The model reduces travel time and stigma, improving uptake among farmers and seasonal workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Member States should:

- Recruit and retain rural health professionals through rural tracks in training, housing support, and rural allowances.
- Guarantee 24/7 urgent-care pathways and integrate telemedicine/e-consultations.
- Adopt a minimum primary care standard in rural areas by expanding a network of multidisciplinary health houses, clinics, and mobile units.
- Expand affordable and farm-friendly ECEC, aligning opening hours to farm realities (early drop-off, late pick-up, harvest-season flexibility).
- Recognise social farming as a multifunctional agricultural activity that deliver community-based services, supporting them through dedicated national measures.
- Solve the transport bottleneck with on-demand shuttles to healthcare and childcare centres, and distance vouchers.
- Map and eliminate connectivity “dead zones” and unreliable broadband in farm workplaces, setting minimum signal.

EU should:

- Back rural primary-care and ECEC infrastructure and workforce via Cohesion Policy and ESF+ funding and rural proofing.
- Develop and maintain an EU-wide monitoring tool on access to rural services, including data on connectivity “dead zones” in rural areas. Coordinate and enable cross-border recognition of childcare and health qualifications to ease shortages.
- Promote exchange of evidence-based knowledge and best practices, including EU-funded projects tackling social farming.



CHALLENGE 2

ENSURING SOCIAL PROTECTION THAT FOLLOWS FARMERS FOR LIFE

Farming careers are long, unequal, and often multi-status (self-employed, family worker, seasonal workers, part-time employees). Too many young people face gaps in coverage, high thresholds, or rules designed for standard wage work. Old-age pensions remain inadequate and often penalise interrupted or low-income careers; sickness, accidents, and care-related leave can still result in income loss or complex bureaucracy. Social protection must accompany the farmer throughout their career to make farming a viable long-term choice.

This challenge tackles two parallel pathways: 1) intergenerational fairness in old-age pensions, ensuring decent retirement for farmers while promoting farm succession; 2) agriculture-specific social protection schemes, simplifying access and tailoring prevention and benefits to the realities of farm work.

PATHWAY 3: INTERGENERATIONAL FAIRNESS THROUGH DECENT OLD-AGE PENSIONS

A fair pension deal is key to generational renewal. Many farmers delay retirement because retirement pension entitlements are insufficient, which hinders farm transfers and causes older farmers to work longer than they want. With this, CEJA is not seeking to exclude active farmers from the sector but believes that individual farmers should not receive CAP direct payments once they are drawing a retirement pension^[2]. In countries with specific agricultural schemes (e.g., ENASP countries), coverage usually includes family members working on the farm, with public co-financing that acknowledges agriculture's income volatility; these design choices help make retirement achievable and facilitate succession.

Recognising the unique features and national contexts of each Member State's pension scheme, European young farmers propose an EU Fair Farming Pension Baseline:

- Establish a pension-adequacy floor: a guaranteed minimum pension for self-employed farmers, indexed to prices and wages, provided as a top-up so that no eligible retiree's total pension drops below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.
- Include credited periods: time that counts toward pension rights during care, sickness, or other types of leave, without requiring repayment by the insured farmer.
- Recognise all family members who work on the farm as full individual contributors, with adequate contributions and pension entitlements in their own name, so that years of work do not disappear into coverage gaps or poverty-level pensions.
- Enable partial and phased retirement linked to succession, combining part-pension with mentoring and oversight roles.

[2] For additional details on this idea, see CEJA's position paper A Common Agricultural Policy post-2027 for Generational Renewal, section 2.1.1 "A stronger and stricter "active farmer" principle": [CEJA-position-paper-A-CAP-post-2027-for-generational-renewal.pdf](#)

PATHWAY 4: TAILOR-MADE SOCIAL PROTECTION SCHEMES FOR AGRICULTURE

Farming faces distinctive risks (seasonality, family labour, multi-activity, health exposures, and volatile income, among others). Dedicated agricultural schemes, like those operating in ENASP countries, share risks across a diverse sector, keep access simple and close to people, and invest systematically in prevention. Notably, these countries tend to have a lower age profile among farm managers.

Public authorities and social-protection institutions should:

- Take responsibility for ensuring that adequate infrastructure and services are available to workers.
- Establish or strengthen agriculture-specific social protection schemes (or dedicated windows in general systems) that cover self-employed farmers, together with their assisting family members, with individual rights for all contributors.
- Adjust contribution bases to agricultural income cycles (seasonal schedules, lump-sum options, postponed payments aftershocks) and recognise multi-activity so short contracts accumulate rights alongside self-employment.
- Integrate risk-management complements to smooth shocks that otherwise lead to unmet contributions or lost coverage.

EU should:

- Improve the coordination of the social protection mechanism for cross-border workers.
-

GOOD PRACTICE

SVS (INTEGRATED SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR FARMERS)

AUSTRIA

Austria's SVS is a single public institution that runs health, pensions, work accident, occupational disease and family benefits for all self-employed people, with a dedicated BSVG branch for farmers; it covers around 370,000 people in agriculture and pays about €3.2 bn in benefits each year through a dense territorial network. The scheme is tuned to farm realities: farmers may choose their contribution base (either the insured value of farmland or taxable farm income), and multi-activity is insured separately, so rights build up across farm and off-farm work.



A photograph of a farmer operating a tractor with a sprayer in a field of young crops. The tractor is yellow and red, and the sprayer is emitting a fine mist. The field is filled with rows of young green plants in dark brown soil. In the background, there are trees and a house under a clear sky.

CHALLENGE 3

SECURING FAIR, SAFE AND FUTURE- PROOF FARM WORK

Decent income, safe and healthy workplaces, and secure, adaptable employment are preconditions for keeping young people in farming and attracting skilled labour to agriculture. Farming faces sector-specific risk (machinery, livestock, chemicals, climate change, solitary work) and seasonal time pressure, which raise injury rates and hurt wellbeing. This challenge focuses on two pathways: 1) tightening occupational health and safety through; and 2) improving mental wellbeing with awareness raising, early support, and enhancing advisory capacity.

PATHWAY 5: BUILDING A DATA-DRIVEN PREVENTION CULTURE

A safe and sustainable farm sector depends on prevention by design, turning safety, health, and well-being into core business values rather than compliance exercises. Reliable data, visible leadership, and participation at all levels are prerequisites to achieving “zero harm” across European agriculture. Yet, current Eurostat datasets underestimate the actual magnitude of farm accidents because they often exclude self-employed and family workers, who represent almost 90% of the EU farm labour force.

Member States should:

- Close data gaps by extending reporting systems to include self-employed and family workers, harmonising occupational health and safety definitions, and aligning reference populations.
- Use data for learning, not punishment, by ensuring that control authorities give much higher priority to delivering high-quality advisory services and promoting a prevention culture.
- Offer financial incentives for farms implementing certified safety improvements, and ensure training covers emerging risks such as fatigue, psychosocial stress, and digitalisation.
- Promote farm-level safety plans integrating risk assessments, workload management, and mental health considerations as part of farm advisory services.
- Update trespass and intrusion provisions to discourage unlawful entry into agricultural workplaces (where intrusion put in risk safety of farmers, employees and animals) through proportionate but effective penalties.

- Ensure that labour and safety inspections are fair, impartial and respectful towards farmers, free from ideological bias or abuse of power, with clear conduct rules for inspectors, simple complaint channels and access to legal assistance where needed.

EU should:

- Create an EU Agriculture Safety and Health Data Platform, ensuring interoperability between Eurostat, Eurofound, and national accident insurance systems.
- Invest in research and innovation pilots demonstrating how smart farming solutions can remove workers from the most hazardous tasks.
- Develop a “EU-wide Vision Zero in Agriculture” initiative, without creating new rules or penalties.

GOOD PRACTICE

7 GOLDEN RULES FOR VISION ZERO

ISSA (INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SECURITY ASSOCIATION)

“Vision Zero” is a transformational approach to prevention that integrates the three dimensions of safety, health and well-being at all levels of work. The ISSA’s Vision Zero concept is flexible and can be adjusted to the specific safety, health or well-being priorities for prevention in any given context. The seven golden rules for Vision Zero are: (1) Take leadership – demonstrate commitment; (2) Identify hazards – control risks; (3) Define targets – develop programmes; (4) Ensure a safe and healthy system – be well-organized; (5) Ensure safety and health in machines, equipment and workplaces; (6) Improve qualifications – develop competence; (7) Invest in people – motivate by participation.

PATHWAY 6: STRENGTHENING FARMERS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

A healthy mind is a prerequisite for a sustainable farm. Yet around 30% of farmers report stress, depression, or anxiety caused or made worse by their work, one of the highest rates among all sectors in the EU. Farmers face a unique combination of chronic stressors: long working hours, financial uncertainty, market volatility, climate events, administrative burdens, and social isolation. For many, these pressures hurt well-being, leading to burnout, depression, substance misuse, and in the most tragic cases, suicide.

Stress, psychosocial risks, and mental health are identified as major emerging challenges, worsened by climate change, digitalisation, and the ageing of the farming population. Furthermore, stigma and distrust toward institutions remain key barriers to help-seeking. Addressing these issues requires normalising conversations about mental health that include all types of farmers, regardless of their background, and acknowledge their specific vulnerabilities, integrating psychosocial risk prevention into farm management, and ensuring accessible, tailored support services in rural areas.

Member States should:

- Guarantee access to 24/7 confidential support, including helplines and advisory, staffed by professionals familiar with agricultural life.
 - Integrate psychosocial risk assessment into occupational health and safety plans.
 - Strengthen peer networks by funding farmer-to-farmer support groups.
 - Improve monitoring and data collection by including mental health indicators in national surveys.
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EU should:

- Develop a Mental Health Action Plan for Agriculture and Rural Areas: design agriculture-specific mental health action plan based on the EU Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health with sector-specific interventions.
- Include mental health in certification curricula for trainers and farm advisors – ensuring mental health is a core part of certification curricula for trainers and farm advisors by including modules on awareness, support techniques, and referral processes, enhancing their capacity to address farmers' mental health needs.
- Fund cross-border pilots for digital and mobile outreach models to reach isolated farmers and evaluate their uptake and impact.
- Encourage research and innovation on the links between work organisation, economic insecurity, and farmer wellbeing, as well as on effective early-warning systems for prevention.

GOOD PRACTICE

FARMRES APP

(ERASMUS+ PROJECT, CEJA)

The [FARMRes App](#) is a digital platform designed to support farmers' mental health and wellbeing by providing accessible tools and resources tailored to their unique challenges. It includes features such as prevention, detection and first-aid tools. Its primary goal is to reduce stigma, promote resilience, and offer practical solutions to improve mental health in the agricultural sector. FARMRes was developed under CEJA's coordination and supported by Erasmus+ funding.



CHALLENGE 4

CLOSING OPPORTUNITY GAPS ACROSS THE AGRI- FOOD VALUE CHAIN

Despite solid legal frameworks in many Member States, gender equality and fair treatment across the value chain continue to fall below Europe's farming standards. Gaps in ownership, leadership, and working conditions are persistent. Ensuring that opportunities, services and representation are accessible to everyone, regardless of their background and circumstances, is therefore an investment in the resilience and cohesion of European agriculture.

This challenge focuses on two pathways: 1) advancing gender equality in leadership, entrepreneurship and land ownership; and 2) ensuring fair recruitment and decent living conditions for seasonal and migrant workers, through shared responsibility across the value chain.

PATHWAY 7: GENDER EQUALITY IN LEADERSHIP, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND LAND

Women are under-represented in farm decision-making, entrepreneurial roles, and control of agricultural land. Tackling these gaps strengthens business performance, diversifies leadership, and brings more people ready to take over. The priority is to remove structural and behavioral barriers to land, finance and networks, while normalising women's presence in representative bodies. However, legal and financial tools will not close the gap: tackling persistent cultural norms and stereotypes is part of opening pathways to women's leadership and entrepreneurship.

Member States should:

- Increase women's representation in governance bodies.
- Guarantee maternity and parental social protection for self-employed farmers.
- Link leave to farm-relief systems, creating a statutory right to replacing labour during pregnancy, maternity and parental leave and early childcare periods.

The EU should:

- Fix gender bias in machinery and occupational health and safety tools design, requiring public procurement and farm-advice programmes to favour equipment and personal protection equipment designed on female as well as male body data.
 - Funding awareness raising campaigns, leadership programmes, and mentoring for women in agriculture.
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GOOD PRACTICES

NATIONAL WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE ACTION PLAN (IRELAND)

Ireland's Department of Agriculture launched in 2024 a government-backed, 12-point plan to raise women's participation and leadership in farming. Built from a National Dialogue and overseen by a multi-stakeholder Working Group, the plan combines cultural and structural measures: demand-led local events and webinars that build leadership; promotion of farming as a career for girls; flexible routes into training with Teagasc and universities; inclusive language in communications; normalising female succession (including policy/tax reviews); addressing tax barriers; a national award for women's innovation; gender-proofing all support schemes with better gender data; recognition on herd numbers; a one-stop website hub; and targeted research. The plan is paired with practical levers such as a dedicated TAMS grant rate for women and progress toward 40% female representation on State Boards.

LA JAIRA DE ANA (SPAIN)

In the Canary Islands, La Jaira de Ana combines goat farming with support for rural women who have faced domestic violence, offering workshops and psychosocial help on the farm. Through hands-on activities, mentoring and links to producer networks, the project builds skills and confidence for entrepreneurship and community leadership. By making women's roles in farming visible, it challenges cultural norms about who farms and who leads. In 2021 it supported about 79 young women and 99 children, working with universities, public bodies and NGOs to keep services reliable.



PATHWAY 8: SAFE RECRUITMENT AND ADEQUATE LIVING CONDITIONS FOR SEASONAL AND MIGRANT WORKERS

Young farmers recognise that the situation of seasonal and migrant workers, which varies considerably between countries and subsectors and is generally positive across Europe, still faces remaining issues that need to be addressed; these challenges should be understood as a problem for farmers too, not caused by farmers, and they are a shared responsibility across all actors in the agri-food value chain. Our goal is to strengthen safe recruitment channels, transparency and institutional support (especially to address skilled labour shortages^[3], housing and access to services) so that compliant employers can recruit reliably, and workers be treated fairly.

Member States should:

- Create advice-first recruitment support through farm advisory services, so authorities don't only "control" but also help farmers comply.
- Strengthen institutional support for accommodation, funding seasonal housing programmes with clear minimum standards (e.g., supporting building renovations), promoting partnerships with municipalities, and facilitating access to housing allowances and loans for compliant employers.
- Develop joint agreements with farmers' organisations and other social partners to tackle gangmasters and undeclared work, promoting direct recruitment channels where all workers are formally declared.
- Crack down on gangmasters and severe labour exploitation, with rapid rehousing and protection for victims.

The EU should:

- Run EU-wide awareness campaigns so farmers can comply without over-legislation, and workers know their rights before departure.
 - Support pre-departure cooperation with countries of origin to reduce misunderstandings and abuses.
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GOOD PRACTICE

GHETTO OUT – CASA SANKARA

(ITALY)

In Apulia, the association Ghetto Out–Casa Sankara runs a farm-based community that offers a lawful alternative to caporalato (gangmastering), pairing legal recruitment with dignified housing and integration services. Residents access safe accommodation (about 100 modular units and shared facilities), socio-legal and psychosocial support, literacy classes and driving licences, plus on-farm training; around 500 young people live and work there under formal contracts. Managing the regional Azienda Agricola Fortore and partnering with cooperatives and retailers, the project markets ethically produced tomatoes under the R'accolto – Terra della Libertà label, showing how transparent supply chains can replace exploitation and benefit local communities.



[3] In line with CEJA's Position Paper Smart farmers for smart farming, chapter 1 "Developing the right knowledge and skills": [CEJA-policy-paper-Smart-farmers-for-smart-farming-May-2023.pdf](#)



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