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CULTRAIN – CULTURAL ORIENTATION TRAININGS AN INTEGRATION MEASURE IN AUSTRIA TACKLING ADAPTION PROBLEMS OF YOUNG REFUGEES

INTRODUCTION

How do I start a new life as young person in a completely new surrounding without parents or guardians by my side? How can I orient myself in a new country with different habits and sometimes unknown manners, and even more importantly, how can I connect with the people living here?

These are some likely questions of an Unaccompanied Minor Refugee who recently arrived in Austria. These and other concerns are dealt with in the project “CulTrain – Cultural Orientation Trainings for (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees” implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Austria¹.

The aim of this article is to outline the CulTrain project and to offer insights into its development and implementation, and also its contents and methodologies. The project description is embedded in a short analysis of the broader framework concerning the general situation of Unaccompanied Minor Refugees in Austria. Furthermore, the authors discuss why the CulTrain project might be classified as

¹ The project is co-financed by the national European Refugee Fund (ERF) and the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (MoI).

a valuable integration measure tackling the difficulties of this vulnerable group. Thus, other countries might be encouraged to implement similar projects or, if appropriate, make use of certain tools applied by CulTrain in different contexts.

The first section of this article gives an overview of relevant topics related to (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees in Austria, with a particular focus on the reasons for the project as well as IOM Vienna's competences in this regard. The article then provides insight into the project's implementation, including topics and methodology of the Cultural Orientation Trainings as well as challenges and lessons learned. The article then concludes by pointing out measures to extend some project components in a national and international context.

UNACCOMPANIED MINOR REFUGEES IN AUSTRIA – AN OVERVIEW

Definition of key terms

There are many different terms describing Unaccompanied Minor Refugees, such as Unaccompanied Minors, Unaccompanied Children, Separated Children, Undocumented Children and so forth. In line with the diversity of terms, the definitions of the term "Unaccompanied Minor Refugee" vary as well.

Separated children are children, as defined in article 1 of the CRC [Convention on the Rights of the Child]², who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members." (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005: para. 7)

[A] child as defined in article 1 of the Convention [means] every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005: para. 8)

For the purpose of this article, the definition of the Austrian Settlement and Residence Act applies, where an "Unaccompanied Minor Refugee" is defined as "a foreign minor who is non-accompanied by an adult person responsible for the legal representation of the former" (Art.2 para 1 (17) Austrian Settlement and Residence Act). The Austrian Civil Code (Art.21) defines every person under the age of 18 as being a minor. Moreover, a distinction is made between under-age minors (*unmündige Minderjährige*) who are 7-14 years of age and minors of age

² The CRC further defines minimum standards regarding the treatment of children in their respective territories and is the most widely ratified human rights treaty (Crépeau 2013: 2).

(*mündige Minderjährige*) who are 14-18 years old. Further, the authors refer to the terms (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees, also using the abbreviation (former) UAMs, since the target group of the project also includes persons older than 18. Nevertheless, it must be noted that UAMs are not a homogenous group – there are big differences in national or ethnic background, individual experiences, gender, religion and so forth. Therefore, we strongly recommend not to think in rigid categories, since those categories are generally fluid and context-bound.

In general, it is necessary to use accurate terminology in order to explain concepts and to counteract discrimination tendencies often resulting from criminalizing discourses, which is especially noteworthy when talking about vulnerable children. This fact is also highlighted by PICUM (Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants): “[T]here is an on-going need to contest broad generalizations and crude stereotyping that contributes to the dehumanization of migrants and threatens their fundamental human rights” (PICUM 2013: 15). The usage of correct terminology also prevents external labeling which would deny the right of dignity and self-respect of this specific group (cp. Council of Europe and European Commission 2003:13). Hence, this is stressed by Crépeau within an IOM publication: “no child is illegal, and all children have rights, regardless of their migratory status” (2013: 3).

Statistics

In 2012, 1,781 Unaccompanied Minor Refugees lodged an asylum application in Austria, which for the first time corresponded to more than 10 per cent of all asylum applications.

Since 2006, the number of UAMs seeking asylum in Austria has been steadily rising (with the exception of 2010), growing from 488 persons in 2006 to 1,781 persons in 2012. The majority of Unaccompanied Minor Refugees who applied for asylum were male, between 14 and 18 years of age, and the main country of origin was Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the number of UAMs under 14 years of age lodging asylum applications is steadily increasing – from 34 applications in 2010 to 84 applications in 2012. The number of Unaccompanied Minor Refugees from Afghanistan has risen significantly since 2007 (with a small decrease in 2010). In 2012, the most important countries of origin of Unaccompanied Minor Refugees seeking asylum in Austria were Afghanistan (1,035), Pakistan (160), Algeria (75), Somalia (45) and Morocco (45) (MoI 2013).

Living conditions of (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees in Austria

This chapter provides a short overview of daily life issues of (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees in Austria. It covers key fields, such as legal

procedures, accommodation and daily life matters, as well as related challenges. This article does not offer a comprehensive overview but only provides small details which are important to understand the project implementation of CulTrain³.

Unaccompanied Minor Refugees are a particularly vulnerable group: most of them have undergone traumatic experiences before and/or during their journey (Crépeau 2013, Petzl/Temesvári 2009: 6, PICUM 2013: 5, UNHCR 2010: 18-20)⁴. Their situation is predominantly characterized by an insecure environment (concerning their legal status, reception, accommodation, perspectives and so forth) and they often receive only limited individual and emotional care (UNHCR 2010: 22). They have to face these circumstances without parents or other family members and often have poor or no relationships with their legal guardians⁵. Thus, the Council of Europe speaks of a “triple” vulnerability of Undocumented Children “as migrants, as persons in an irregular situation and as children⁶.”

Their vulnerability is also recognized in some aspects within the asylum procedure and the respective living situation in Austria. Once they have arrived in Austria and following the clarification of the admission procedure, it is decided during the asylum procedure whether the applicants are granted asylum status in Austria in accordance with the Geneva Convention of Refugees or subsidiary protection status or none of both. Regarding the granting of international protection, a case-by-case assessment is carried out. During the decision making process of the asylum procedure, there are no specific regulations taken into consideration the minority of the applicant (Blecha 2012: 18, Petzl/Temesvári 2009: 26). In many cases, an age assessment is conducted in order to determine the age of the applicants if they report to be minors, which is usually a very unpleasant experience for UAMs, sometimes creating a feeling of mistrust

³ For a more comprehensive analysis please look at Blecha 2012, Petzl/Temesvári 2009 or Fronek 2010.

⁴ An overview of possible threats faced by unaccompanied children was compiled by “Payoke”, a Belgian NGO assisting victims of human trafficking and is documented by the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (FRONTEX) in the document “Unaccompanied Minors in the Migration Process” on pages 21-22: www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Unaccompanied_Minors_in_Migration_Process.pdf. Further, the Separated Children in Europe Program (SCEP) mentions shortcomings and challenges for Separated Children: www.separated-children-europe-programme.org/about_us/separated_children.html

⁵ In Austria, a guardian is appointed by the courts within the asylum procedure (after the clarification of the admission procedure) (Art. 213 Civil Code). Nevertheless, in most cases UAMs and their guardians do not have a vivid communication (Blecha 2012, Fronek 2010).

⁶ <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta11/EREC1985.htm>

(Fronek 2010: 64-85)⁷. Overall, the asylum procedure is often experienced by UAMs as being very harsh, due to various reasons: many feel insecure due to a lack of information on the asylum procedure in general, but also on their responsibilities, rights and duties. UAMs also often experience shortcomings i.e. concerning the quality of translation during the interviews and uncertainty regarding the length of the asylum procedure. These factors often result in frustration and stress (Blecha 2012: 18-22, Petzl/Temesvári 2009, Fronek 2010, Netzwerk Kinderrechte).

Further, after admittance to the actual asylum procedure the Unaccompanied Minor Refugees are transferred from the reception centers to accommodation facilities, which are located in all federal provinces in Austria. These are organized by Austrian NGOs like Caritas, Diakonie, SOS Childrens Village, Verein Menschen.Leben or private service providers, which is especially the case in Styria⁸. The care facilities differ in terms of childcare quality, composition of inhabitants, privacy and individual space, as well as infrastructure (Blecha 2010: 31-36, Fronek 2010: 118-130). The regional Youth Welfare Authority is in charge of the legal representation of minors in the asylum procedure and workers also often provide legal guardianship (Petzl/Temesvári 2009: 26). Nevertheless, many UAMs tend to bond with social workers of the care facilities rather than with their legal guardian, with whom they usually do not have much contact (Blecha 2012: 24, Fronek 2010: 131-141).

In addition to the asylum procedure and accommodation facilities, Unaccompanied Minor Refugees have to deal with many other topics like education, employment, health, culture and religion, search for family members and family reunification, leisure time, interaction with and integration into their host society, as well as simply growing up. Most of these broad areas are characterized by a restricted access to services as long as UAMs are still in the asylum procedure process and have not yet been granted subsidiary protection status or asylum. Another issue which is broadly and critically discussed by Austrian experts⁹ is the point at which UAMs turn 18, as their majority causes major changes. Former UAMs are required to move out of their child-specific accommodation facilities, usually to accommodation facilities for adults or private accommodation (depending on their legal status) where less money and care is provided (Fronek 2010: 179-187).

⁷ For more information on age assessment see: Position Paper on Age Assessment in the Context of Separated Children in Europe (SCEP 2012).

⁸ This is because Styria is the federal province with the biggest share of UAMs and thus capacities of public accommodation centres are mostly exhausted.

⁹ Cp. Fronek (2010), Netzwerk Kinderrechte (www.kinderhabenrechte.at/index.php?id=25)

All these challenges underline the vulnerability of (former) UAMs in addition to the traumas that many (former) UAMs experience before, during and after their journey and which always have to be taken into account.

Life circumstances and resulting challenges were taken into account in the development of CulTrain and are considered in the project's implementation. The next part of this article provides a detailed description of the CulTrain project.

THE PROJECT CULTRAIN

Introduction – Facts and Figures

CulTrain started as a pilot project in 2012 and was prolonged for another year in 2013. The project team constitutes of two full-time staff members (one project coordinator and one project assistant). Target group of the trainings consists of (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees, who have to be between 15 and 22 years of age, hold refugee or subsidiary protection status in Austria, and speak German at level A1 or higher.

Since the beginning of the project in 2012, 17 trainings with 128 participants have been conducted altogether. The main country of origin of the beneficiaries is Afghanistan, covering 85 per cent of the participants, followed by Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, Armenia and Guinea-Bissau. Furthermore, only 4 per cent of the participants were female. This can be traced back to the fact that a large majority of (former) UAMs are male. The vast majority of the trainings was provided to beneficiaries with subsidiary protection status.

Before analyzing the concrete content and methodologies of the CulTrain project, the following section provides an insight in the project's history and IOM's competencies for implementing the project.

Background

For several years, the IOM has paid increased attention to providing assistance to (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees, especially in strengthening and supporting coherent approaches in various areas like data collection, programmatic information, awareness raising or capacity building (IOM 2011: 11-15). The importance of integration measures for UAMs is also highlighted in the EU Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minor Refugees (2010-2014), where it is stated that "given their [Unaccompanied Minor Refugees] particularly vulnerable situation, measures to support their integration into the host society are essential" (European Commission 2010: 14). In accordance with these initiatives, IOM Vienna has placed an emphasis on the situation of Unaccompanied Minor Refugees by carrying out several studies on this subject.

Among other things, the studies demonstrate that many asylum seekers and young refugees lack sufficient knowledge of Austrian culture and society. In particular, it was found that “all [sic] of the adolescents and young adults [...] unanimously expressed a strong wish for getting to know Austrians, for making Austrian friends and for feeling like being part of the Austrian society” (Blecha 2012: 49). Thus, there is significant demand for support and information about Austria’s cultural and social life in order to facilitate successful integration into Austrian society.

Since the 1950s, IOM has also gained substantial expertise in Migrant Trainings¹⁰. Programs and workshops on cultural orientation are offered by IOM in different contexts and countries. Most of the time, those courses are implemented as a pre-departure measure, i.e. in the framework of resettlement programs¹¹.

CulTrain was developed as a post-arrival measure based on the experiences and contents of Cultural Orientation Trainings in the frame of resettlement, meaning that the training programs are offered only after the target group’s arrival in Austria.

Project goal

The project goal is to provide the target group with comprehensive information about Austria in the framework of Cultural Orientation Trainings. To reach this goal, UAMs are supported through knowledge accumulation in order to reduce fears of contact and also to reduce or prevent cultural misunderstandings. Thus, tendencies of exclusion are supported counteracted while participation and independency are encouraged. This again seeks to facilitate contact between the beneficiaries and the host society and consequently eases sustainable integration.

On the one hand, the CulTrain project tries to take into account the vulnerable situation of the target group and on the other hand, the participants are seen as “agents” in line with the CRC:

The framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires us to recognize and celebrate the agency of children, who, as is the case for any moral being, are never and should never be treated only as victims of circumstances, but

¹⁰ IOM (2012): Migrant Trainings Overview: 2010–2011: www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/facilitating/IOM_Migrant_Training_Programmes_Overview_2010_2011.pdf

¹¹ Resettlement programs are inter alia implemented by IOM Australia, IOM Norway and IOM United Kingdom. Those combine Cultural Orientation Trainings with language courses as pre-arrival integration measure to facilitate the integration of refugees upon arrival in the country of destination.

always also as agents of their own future. We must understand and celebrate the agency of migrant children, many of whom have independent migration projects of their own. (Crépeau 2013: 2)

As underlined in this quotation, the empowerment of (former) UAMs is another important goal of the project, which is constantly being worked on. The following section is about how this goal should be achieved and analyzes the concrete project implementation.

Structure and methodology

The curriculum and the contents of the trainings were developed specifically for UAMs and young refugees in Austria based on the IOM's experiences with such trainings. The trainings are divided into three modules, all with a pool of possible content:

Module 1: Austria and its people

The first module focuses on geography, history, national and regional holidays, different dialects and Austrian food or sports.

Module 2: Living together

In this module, social interactions, behaviours and forms of conduct as well as the topic of family and different forms of living together plus gender roles and gender equality are discussed.

Module 3: Politics and daily life

Module 3 approaches topics such as democracy (in politics and society); employment and education, contracts or housing.

In the *concluding session*, the UAMs play a game with questions on the topics of the trainings in order to repeat and thus deepen the knowledge gained; all participants win a small prize (i.e. sweets). The trainings are then evaluated¹² by the participants and the outcomes are constantly incorporated into the curriculum of the trainings. Finally, participants receive a certificate and a voucher (worth 20 Euro) as a sign of appreciation for their interest and participation in the training.

During the course of the training, each participant is provided with an accompanying booklet containing all training materials and one leaflet with addresses and information on various service providers in the fields of politics, health and social issues, education, work, housing and free time. These booklets

¹² Evaluations are conducted in two ways: first, the beneficiaries are asked to verbally communicate aspects of the training they liked and those they did not like. In a second step, the participants are asked to fill in a simple questionnaire by ticking the appropriate box. Of course, the participants receive support when needed by the project staff.

are incorporated into the training procedure to make the participants familiar with their usage.

The contents were conceptualized to show a diverse picture of Austria, rather than drawing a homogenous picture of the country and its people. This is achieved by presenting not only regional differences concerning landscapes, holidays, history or dialects but also different behaviours and cultural patterns shaped by gender, social class, race, religion, age and so forth. The project team considers the additional value of CulTrain not only in teaching school knowledge but also in creating a protected area allowing the young people to ask questions for which there is not always enough time during daily business. Moreover, the participants' backgrounds and their experiences are also incorporated in order to establish an environment of mutual appreciation and respect. Appreciation at eye level is very important throughout the whole training as it creates a warm and welcoming atmosphere where topics can be discussed openly.

The project staff is facilitating such an environment by using welcome signs in different languages (and a friendly room decoration in general), small-scale catering during the training, having lunch together as well as expressing strong interest in the background and language of the training participants. Appreciation at eye-level also concerns the possibility of evaluation of each training, giving the beneficiaries the opportunity to validate (and also change or enhance) contents and methodology. Therefore, the trainings aim to find the "right balance between the young people's interests, their skills and their limits" (Council of Europe and European Commission 2003: 19).

In order for the trainings to be effective, they are interactive and action-oriented, with a low-threshold for enabling experience-based learning.¹³ For this purpose, the literature on intercultural pedagogy was reviewed. The selected methods enable the participants to make formal learning experiences in a non-formal environment, which makes them "feel attracted to active workshops and events that give them a kick and can be seen as an extension of their normal pastimes" (Council of Europe and European Commission 2003: 23, 24). In practice, this means that the trainers use different games (role games, memory and puzzle) and work with pictures rather than written language ("look and feel") throughout the trainings. After each thematic block, a game is played during which the contents are repeated and reflected interactively.

¹³ To give some examples of relevant toolkits and methods: Series of t-kits: Council of Europe and European Commission (2000, 2003); Jugert (2006); Österreichische Bundesjugendvertretung (2007); Österreichischer Integrationsfonds (2004); Osuji (2010); Wohlesser (2007).

The staff works with rather small groups of only five to twelve participants, taking into consideration the participants' sometimes low German speaking abilities as well as their age and vulnerability.

The training participants may appear to be a homogenous group (85 per cent are male Afghans), but they differ in terms of education status, German speaking ability, former experiences and so on. In order to match the training content to the needs of the target group, caregivers of the respective accommodation centres are consulted in advance. At the beginning of the training, the participants are asked which topics they find especially interesting. Many back-up topics, prepared in advance, enable the trainers to spontaneously respond to the needs of each group.

Concerning the organizational aspects, most of the trainings are conducted on weekends, as the participants are often involved in other educational activities during the week. In general, trainings are offered in a highly flexible frame both in terms of time and venue in order to enable as many beneficiaries as possible to participate. Another important fact is that participation is free of charge both for care facilities as well as for the training participants. Each training programme lasts eight to twelve hours in total. Furthermore, the trainings are offered in all federal provinces of Austria.

As an additional component, *Intercultural Events* have been organized together with Austrian youth organizations since the beginning of the project year 2013, following the feedback of participants in 2012, who expressed a desire for increased contact with Austrian society. These events aim to improve exchange between (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees and Austrian young people, and to reduce fears of contact on both sides. The overall long-term goal is to positively shape the interaction process with the host community and to facilitate integration. In order to provide individually designed events, the project team developed a broad pool of applicable methods to be chosen from, such as creating posters on certain topics together, quizzes with drawings, pantomime, creating sculptures and so forth.¹⁴

The feedback of the training participants has been consistently positive, as shown by the following quotations taken from the evaluation sheet¹⁵:

- "I'd like to thank you for implementing such a project. Such projects bring foreigners like us together with Austrian people."
- "Thank you for providing us with all the information about Austria."
- "I'd wish you could visit us again."

¹⁴ To give some examples of relevant toolkits and methods: Council of Europe and European Commission (2000); Kuss (2010); Steindl M., Helm B., Steininger G., Fiala A., Venus B. (2008).

¹⁵ The quotations were made in German and have been translated by the authors.

Challenges and lessons learned

Several challenges have been encountered during the project's implementation. The project staff has responded to them in several ways. Challenges and lessons learned are elaborated in the following section.

First, reaching the target group was difficult. Reaching excluded young people is generally considered to be difficult by many actors (Council of Europe and European Commission, 2003). Effort is taken to enhance contact with care facilities and relevant stakeholders as they build bridges to potential beneficiaries; however, it is also difficult to establish contact with care-takers and the target group. Consequently, building mutual trust in order to motivate the beneficiaries to participate in the trainings is also difficult. It should be considered that the above mentioned networking activities are very time-consuming.

A Facebook page of the project was created in order to communicate more easily with potential beneficiaries and to promote the project within the community. Moreover, the staff fosters contacts with diaspora associations, as they function as multipliers. Former participants are now also functioning as multipliers promoting the project within their communities. Finally, an invitation letter to registered participants is sent out in order to formalize the process. All in all, the combination of these measures have resulted in excellent contact with stakeholders and beneficiaries' deep trust towards CulTrain.

The second major challenge is that the eligible target group of the project is limited due to external criteria of the funding authorities, as only persons with a recognized refugee status are potential beneficiaries. In general, once a person holds recognized refugee status, he/she is eligible for a broad variety of employment or education measures; much more than during the asylum procedure. These measures are usually offered from Monday to Friday. Therefore, the project staff facilitates access to training as much as possible by offering trainings on weekends, which has been highly successful.

Third, every training group includes people from different (national) backgrounds, with different former experiences, German speaking abilities and so forth. This results in the need to react very spontaneously to each respective training group, especially when it comes to methods or course content, which was difficult to do in the beginning. With growing experience of the trainers, this challenge was met increasingly well. Consequently, each training is individually tailored according to the needs of the particular group, in order to ease access for potential beneficiaries. This implies content, methodology and organizational aspects such as time frame and venue. Therefore, the training methods were conceptualised in an especially low-threshold and interactive way and focused on experience and action-oriented learning. Tailoring the trainings according to the beneficiaries' needs is also very important, considering their heterogeneous

backgrounds in terms of individual experiences, social class and level of education in their respective countries of origin.

However, it is also vital in terms of encouraging and facilitating the integration process of the participants from the very beginning (cp. Council of Europe and European Commission 2003: 19). This can be achieved by asking the participants about their expectations at the beginning of each training session and by inviting (former) UAMs to expert group meetings, during which stakeholders are continuously consulted in order to gain expertise from a practical point of view. It is highly important “to recognise [...] the tremendous knowledge and insight that young people facing exclusion on a daily and long-term basis can bring to youth work [...]. Their contribution will enrich any youth initiative or project.” (Council of Europe and European Commission 2003: 11). Of course, this also applies to the development and implementation of Intercultural Events where young refugees and members of Austrian youth organizations are invited to get to know each other.

CONCLUSION

This article seeks to provide an overview of the general situation and of the challenges UAMs face in Austria, as well as to present the CulTrain project – Cultural Awareness Trainings for (former) Unaccompanied Minor Refugees – as an integration measure that tackles adaptation problems of young refugees. Since those adaptation problems are, among other things, caused by a lack of knowledge about the current country of residence, providing the beneficiaries with knowledge about Austria and its people reduces fears of contact and potential cultural misunderstandings and hence supports them in their integration process. This aim is also fostered via Intercultural Events, during which young refugees and members of Austrian youth organizations get to know each other.

Using learner-centered teaching methods combined with a mutually appreciative approach and individually tailored training content, CulTrain proves to be highly valuable and successful. This post-arrival integration measure strives to serve as a sign of welcome and thus provides the beneficiaries with a protected space where questions can be raised and responded to without being condescending. In the future, the project staff is determined to make CulTrain accessible to a broader target group, such as young refugees in general, since a lack of knowledge and resulting integration obstacles are not a phenomenon limited to (former) UAMs. Furthermore, as integration challenges due to knowledge deficits are reported to exist in a great number of countries, adapting a valuable integration instrument like CulTrain, which has already been successfully tested

in practice, to various national contexts could facilitate the integration process of many more refugees and migrants.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CO	Cultural Orientation
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
EC	European Commission
EC	European Commission
EMN	European Migration Network
ERF	European Refugee Fund
FRONTEX	European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
MoI	Ministry of the Interior
NGO	Non governmental organization
PICUM	Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
SCEP	Separated Children in Europe Program
UAM(s)	Unaccompanied Minor Refugee(s)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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