# TWO-YEAR REPORT

Taking Root, Powering Transformation: Reflections on the Second Anniversary of the UVM Institute for Agroecology







## A Message from the IFA Co-Directors

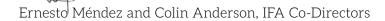
Dear Friends and Colleagues,

As we reflect on the second year of the <u>UVM Institute for Agroecology</u> (IFA), we're struck by how much has taken root and begun to flourish. What began over a decade ago as the Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative (ALC) has grown into something deeper and broader, thanks to the community of people who have joined, supported, and walked with us on this journey. We are grateful to all of the farmers, activists, organizers and community partners that we collaborate with and that are driving agroecology transitions around the world.

Since officially launching in early 2023, we've been focused on building a strong foundation for the Institute by assembling a dedicated team, strengthening our partnerships both locally and globally, and shaping the internal culture and systems that will sustain us for the long haul. We have worked hard to secure support from the University of Vermont, philanthropic allies, and other funders, all while continuing to grow and deepen our programmatic work across Vermont, New England, the U.S., and internationally.

As we look ahead, our focus is on fine-tuning – growing in thoughtful ways, building out new programs, and solidifying the work we've begun. In our most recent news, we're excited to announce that Food Solutions New England is moving from the University of New Hampshire to the IFA, providing an incredible boost to our capacity to contribute to the New England region. We've also assembled our inaugural IFA Advisory Board to help us dream big, stay accountable, and deepen our impact. In the pages ahead, we invite you to explore the progress we've made and the path we're walking. Thank you for being part of this work.

Warmly,









Institute Team: Molly Anderson, Emily Baker, Gabriela Bucini, Amaya Carrasco Torrontegui, Martha Caswell, Carlos Andres Gallegos Riofrio, Katie Horner, Emily Hoyler, Vic Izzo, Anisah Madden, Becky Maden, Nils McCune, Maryam Nouri Aiin, Karen Nordstrom, Reid Parsons, Shane Rogers, Madison West, and Andrea Van Hoven. Institute Collaborators: Faris Ahmed, Fletcher Beaudoin, and Georgina McAllister.



## **Our Foundations**

**Vision**: We envision thriving, equitable food systems that promote human and ecological wellbeing and support dignified and meaningful livelihoods for all.

**Mission**: Through participatory, holistic, and equity-driven approaches to learning, research and engagement, we will co-produce and mobilize knowledge to support just transformations in food systems.

**Three Pillars:** We are grounded by three pillars to guide our work:



**Deep Transformation:** Many sustainability approaches emphasize technical fixes that tweak the existing food system without fundamentally changing its structure. In contrast, we focus on deep transformation through systems analysis, identifying leverage points for change and action steps that integrate ecological, economic, social and political dimensions.



**Co-creation of Knowledge:** We prioritize Participatory Action Research (PAR) and transdisciplinary approaches, which place the needs and agency of civil society partners (e.g., communities, smallholder farmers, organizations) at the heart of the research process and recognize the value of diverse forms and sources of knowledge.



**Centering Equity:** Today's food systems are fraught with inequity and reflect deeply exploitative land and labor relations, gender and racial inequality, and an extractive relationship between the global north and south. We actively work to shift those power dynamics towards reciprocal relationships that include and uplift marginalized communities.







Left: Work brigade during the <u>2024 Short Course in People's Agroecology</u>, Berlin, Vermont, October 2024. Center: Gertrude Pswarayi leads a grounding exercise at the <u>IFA Global Forum</u> in Starksboro, Vermont, September 2023. Right: Participants of the IFA <u>Regional Food Systems Gathering</u> at Knoll Farm in Waitsfield, Vermont, July 2024.

## Approach Nets That Work

As engagement and interest in agroecology grows amongst scientists, civil society partners, and policymakers, so too does the need for collaboration. We aim to build "nets that work" that strengthen the collective capacity through deep, reciprocal community-university collaborations.

This term, used by Professor Devon Peña at the 2023 National Agroecology Summit, alludes to networks that go beyond connecting and information-sharing to ones actively working together to build **collaborative action**, **learning**, **research and change**. These nets form the infrastructure though which we build and transfer power, allowing us to achieve that which would be unattainable alone.

The IFA is working to anchor three interconnected nets at the global, national, and regional levels. These webs are made up of aligned partners and focus on leveraging know-



Training-of-trainers course for the <u>Agroecological</u> <u>Corridor</u>, Cloud Forest Community Conservation Center in Coban, Guatemala, May 2025.

ledge and science - from within and outside of academic institutions- to power agroecological transformation. This infrastructure fortifies our capacity and amplifies the work of our partners to transform agroecology through community-university partnerships.



Map representing a selection of the IFA's "nets that work," made up of aligned partners from universities and communities.

## Why Agroecology?

The IFA grounds its work in agroecology, aligning with a global community committed to fostering just and transformative changes within food systems. Unlike top-down technical interventions that often neglect complexity and local realities, agroecology focuses on place-based strategies that build power and capacity in local communities and have proven effective across diverse agroecosystems worldwide. A growing body of evidence demonstrates the ability of agroecology to confront the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, diet-related health challenges, and social inequality. Agroecology offers a holistic, systems-based approach to building just and resilient food systems. Drawing on transdisciplinary science and diverse knowledge systems, it is gaining momentum among farmers, scientists, policymakers, and global institutions.

## The IFA in Numbers Our First Two Years



<u>Current team members</u>, fourteen of whom are full-time, a six-fold increase over two years.



Connected departments across the University of Vermont, comprised of 17 affiliated faculty and 17 graduate students.



Events and 9 international scholars hosted over two years, bringing together over 800 people.



Active <u>research projects</u> supported by the IFA. In 2024, the IFA sponsored an additional 6 projects led by UVM faculty.



<u>Current IFA Programs</u>, a 3.5x increase from the six original programs.



Publications from IFA researchers, including an article in Nature Food.

## Local and Regional Programming

## Rooting the Institute in Vermont and New England

We aim to support the transition to sustainable and just food systems in Vermont and New England. In line with UVM's mission, we integrate research, education, and community engagement in close collaboration with our partners to advance agroecological transformations in the region we call home.

## **On-Farm Reciprocal Research: V-PART**

Farmers need practical and science-informed solutions to challenges in the field. Likewise, scientists need grounded insights to guide their research. The Vermont Participatory Action Research Team (V-PART) bridges this gap by bringing together farmers and researchers from across the Northeast to co-develop ecological pest management strategies using a participatory action research approach. Examples include delayed planting for potato pest management and biological strategies for root crop and allium pests. The team also provides critical data on pest and disease trends through the popular Vermont Pest & Disease Scouting Report in collaboration with the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Grower's Association.

#### Just Transitions in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont

Vermont's Northeast Kingdom exemplifies climate, socioeconomic and political struggles that play out in small rural towns across the country. IFA researchers co-led a participatory analysis research project in the region with the <u>Center for an Agricultural Economy</u>, <u>Northeast Kingdom Organizing</u>, and <u>Rural Vermont</u>. The team applied the lens of Just Transitions to understand approaches to supporting food and farm businesses, addressing housing insecurity and social isolation, organizing flood recovery efforts, and working toward food sovereignty in the region. We explored community-led solutions modeling the alternative futures we urgently need and practiced with adjusting strategy in response to changing contexts.

## **Exploring the Regional Governance of Food Systems in New England**

With support from the <u>UVM Food Systems Research Institute</u>, the IFA has launched a <u>new initiative</u> to explore how food systems are governed in New England: where and how decisions are made, by whom, and how we can reshape governance to uphold food sovereignty. This project analyzes efforts across New England to build more equitable, ecological, and just food systems through the lens of agroecology, food sovereignty and the right to food. In collaboration with <u>Food Solutions New England</u>, the project explores how regional governance can leverage multi-actor and cross-sector coordination to build new institutional arrangements, visions, policy change, and markets, while simultaneously fostering democracy, innovation, and strengthening civil society.

## **National Programming**

## Advancing Agroecology in the USA

While agroecology has long emphasized participatory action research, farmer-led innovation, and collaboration between communities and universities, academic institutions in the U.S. are still far from fully embracing and advancing these approaches. The national program is still in its early stages, but in these challenging times, the need for agroecology to build grassroots power in the U.S. is more urgent than ever.

## Convening Agroecology Leaders in a National Agroecology Summit

In 2023, the IFA played a leading role in co-organizing the <u>U.S. National Agroecology Summit</u>, which brought together 100 researchers, activists, and policymakers to support the growth of agroecology in the U.S. We focused on grounding agroecology in U.S. contexts, identifying and addressing structural barriers, and aligning research with movement needs. Most importantly, it ignited a new, coordinated push to shape U.S. policy, expand funding for agroecology, and prioritize support for communities most impacted by today's dominant food and agricultural systems.

## Looking Forward: Building a National Knowledge Network for Transformative Agroecology

The IFA is launching a new initiative to unite agroecology-focused academic centers and institutes in a shared effort to catalyze transformative change within higher education. This program aims to forge strong, collaborative partnerships that prioritize co-creation of knowledge and align research with the needs of frontline communities. A key takeaway from the Summit was the critical importance of involving civil society partners from the outset, ensuring relationships are built on trust and designed for real impact. We also see an exciting opportunity to connect our work with global counterparts, learning from and contributing to regions where agroecology is already deeply rooted.



## **Global Programming**

## International Collaboration and Solidarity for Transformative Agroecology

Our global programming reaches across the Americas, South Asia, Africa, and Europe and in global policy-making and social movement spaces to train emerging agroecologists, support knowledge co-creation, and influence international policy. From cross-regional research on enabling conditions for agroecology to fostering international learning communities, we connect local action with global movements.

#### Strengthening Global Agroecology

We collaborate with NGOs, researchers, donors, governments, and other allies to embed transformative agroecology into their work. Our support ranges from long-term partnerships with grassroots movements and networks to targeted consulting for governments, funders, and NGOs. This is hands-on, action-oriented work, helping to drive real transitions in organizations, communities, and food systems. One key example is our long-standing partnership with the McKnight Foundation's Global Collaboration for Resilient Food Systems (CRFS). For the past ten years, we've worked alongside McKnight to support agroecological research and practice in South America, Africa, and beyond, contributing to their broader mission of global food systems transformation.

#### Building an Agroecology Corridor in Mesoamerica

The IFA has worked to support grassroots social movements in the development of an agroecological corridor: a mosaic of smallholder farms where knowledge, resources, and labor flow among communities to drive regional transitions toward agroecology and conservation. This participatory action research process examines grassroots efforts to create a Mesoamerican agroecological corridor between Mexico and Colombia. The team includes social movement leaders and researchers in agroecology, forest ecology, soil science, education, geography, and policy. The process is carried out in partnership with Stanford University and the University of Oregon.

#### Let's E.A.T. (Educate For Agreocological Transformations)

The IFA launched Let's E.A.T. (Educate for Agroecology Transformations) as a community of practice made up of dozens of educators and programs committed to transformative agroecology education from around the globe. In its first year, Let's E.A.T. hosted a recorded seminar series featuring five leading agroecology programs, including the IFA's own Certificate of Graduate Study in Agroecology, drawing over 350 international participants. We are now working towards a program to support the proliferation of higher education programs in agroecology, with a focus on supporting emerging initiatives through mentorship and co-learning. This will create rich opportunities for faculty and students to strengthen their pedagogy and for universities to become more effective mechanisms of agroecological transformation.

















1: Solidarity Brigade of Agroecological Reconstruction in MST Agrarian Settlements in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, July 2024.

2: IFA tour of Shelburne Farms Creamery, September 2023. 3: Innovation activity at the IFA's Seeding Transformation global forum, Starksboro VT, September 2023. 4: VOCES team along with students and educators at the Latin American Institute of Agroecology (IALA). 5: IFA team members on a tour of Black Dirt Farm, Stannard VT, February 2023. 6: Terraced fields in Caliata, Ecuador, part of Agroecology and Planetary Health research, 2025. Photo by Santiago Cornejo. 7: IFA team and collaborators with co-created education posters, Chiapas Mexico. 8: IFA Intro to Agroecology course at The Farm Between, Jeffersonville VT, 2019.

## **Research Initiatives**

## Co-creation of Knowledge through Transdisciplinary and Participatory Action Research

At the IFA, we conduct community-engaged research that is collaborative, justice-oriented, and grounded in real-world challenges. We often say we do "research with people, for people", co-creating knowledge across academic, geographic, and cultural boundaries. From Vermont to the Global South, our participatory approach seeks to uncover root causes of food system inequities and support transformative solutions.







Left: Indigenous farmer standing beside an amaranth plant on her traditional farm in the Ecuadorian Andes. During Spanish colonization, amaranth was labeled a "plant of the devil," and its cultivation and use were suppressed. Today, it continues to be a resilient and culturally significant crop for many Andean communities. Credit: Amaya Carrasco Torrontegui. Center: Regional Food Gathering at Knoll Farm, Waitsfield VT, July 2024. Right: Soil analysis on a smallholder shade coffee farm in Chiapas, Mexico.

## **Highlighted Research Areas**

#### Agroecology and Planetary Health

This research program focuses on examing the relationship between agroecology, and the interconnected pathways to individual, community, and planetary wellbeing. Ongoing projects include a participatory study across the Andes that examines good living as a culturally grounded health paradigm; a contemplative study on *pacharuna* (being mindful within the realm of *pachamama*, Mother Earth), mental health, and agroecology in Kichwa communities; and transdisciplinary research on ancient cultivation terraces, linking ancestral design, climate resilience, and health. This IFA program engages faculty, students, and global partners to foster dialogue across disciplines, including public health, nutrition, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and Indigenous studies.

#### Enabling the Shift: Policies, Tools and Knowledge for Agroecology Transitions around the World

This action research program examines societal transformations necessary to enable agroecology as a model for sustainable and just food systems. Projects in this program are based in Eastern Europe, Vermont, and Latin America, where we work on developing policies, redirecting financing towards agroecology, generating new ways of thinking, and building new tools to support on-the-ground efforts to transform food systems. For example, through our work in the European Union funded Agroecological Transitions for Territorial Food Systems (ATTER) project, we carried out collaborative action research in Eastern Europe to understand the role of community networks in supporting agroecology transitions.

#### Regenerating Environments and Livelihoods through Coffee Agroecology

For over two decades, the IFA and its partners have worked alongside smallholder shade coffee farmers and cooperatives across Latin America, including in El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Our participatory action research supports these communities in advancing food sovereignty and developing more resilient, diversified livelihoods. For example, since 2022, we've been collaborating with two coffee cooperatives in Mexico and Guatemala to better understand soil health in coffee agroecosystems. Together, we're investigating how the structure of these systems influences soil health, coffee productivity, and cup quality, generating practical knowledge that supports both ecological sustainability and farmer well-being.

#### Teaching for Change: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Transformative learning is essential to advancing food sovereignty and sustainability. At the IFA, we study how education itself can become a force for change, focusing on the methods, practices, and learning environments that foster critical thinking, collective action, and deeper understanding. This work draws inspiration from radical grassroots educators and social movements who have developed powerful models of transformative pedagogy. We explore how these approaches can be integrated into both formal and informal education systems to shift mindsets and build capacity for systemic change. Carried out in Vermont and with partners around the world, this research contributes to the growing field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), linking educational innovation to broader efforts for agroecological transformation.

#### **Seed Grant Research**

Through a cohort model of learning, the IFA led a group of six UVM faculty on a year-long seed grant program, funded through the UVM Office of the Vice President for Research. Project teams were awarded \$15,000 grants to support community-based food system research and were provided with guidance and co-learning through facilitated workshops. Project teams, including community partners, UVM collaborators, and graduate students, gathered to share skills and learn from peers.













The participatory breeding trials project gives a tour of a mungbean plot at the UVM Horticulture Research and Education Farm, August 2024. Participating faculty, students and community partners took part in a learning cohort to deepen relationships and co-learn on community-based research.

REPRESENTED SCHOOLS AND DEPARTMENTS: COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCES, RUBENSTEIN SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES, GROSSMAN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, EXTENSION, GRADUATE COLLEGE, FOOD SYSTEMS GRADUATE PROGRAM, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND APPLIED ECONOMICS.

LEARN MORE

## **Education and Learning Initiatives**

## Cultivating the Next Generation of Researchers and Practitioners

We expanded our learning programs, which foster critical inquiry, cross-cultural exchange, and transformative learning experiences rooted in agroecological principles. Through undergraduate, graduate, professional and community-based learning, our programs reach diverse learners here in Vermont and around the world.

#### **Education in Numbers**

- 17 graduate students from 5 departments supported in IFA Agroecology Lab.
- 8 IFA Graduate Courses taught, including 5 core classes every year, to over 150 students worldwide.
- 4 praxis training courses taught in 3 languages, reaching over 200 student-practitioners.
- 80 undergraduate students participating in high-impact fellowships through the IFA.

#### Certificate of Graduate Study in Agroecology

Since 2017, the IFA's <u>Certificate of Graduate Study in Agroecology</u> (CGSA) has equipped graduate students and professionals to drive meaningful change in food systems. Rooted in participatory action research, the five-course program skills up learners and helps them identify key questions and practices to support on-the-ground work with farmers, Indigenous peoples, academics, activists, and policymakers to affect real world change. Graduates emerge with a strong foundation in transformative agroecology, ecological foundations, social movements, and participatory action research, prepared to lead transformative agroecological action.

## IFA Agroecology Lab

The <u>IFA Agroecology Lab</u> meets weekly during the academic year in a program of co-learning, peer mentorship and group development. Made up of IFA staff, students, faculty and alumni, we engage through a constructive, collaborative and caring approach based on an ethic of mutual support to cultivate our capacity as researchers, teachers and agents of change







**Left**: Visit to Diggers Mirth Collective Farm during the Global Forum, Burlington VT, September 2023. **Center**: CGSA students take part in a fermentation workshop at Pitchfork Pickle, Burlington VT, November 2024. **Right**: Graduate student Juliana Neira gets ready to strip fruit off the bunch in the juçara harvest in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, as part of her PhD field work, July 2024.

#### **Agroecology Praxis Training Program**

#### Building Skills and Critical Consciousness on the Ground and in the Fray

In the pilot year of this program, we have trained over 100 development practitioners, researchers and grassroots organizers in different topics related to transformative agroecology around the globe. Through the generous support of our funders, we have provided no-cost online training to support co-learning for practitioners of agroecology working in a variety of contexts. This training is designed to inspire, inform and train participants to become more effective agents of change in creating a more just and sustainable food system. In our most recent course on Agroecology and Innovation, taught in collaboration with partner organization Schola Campesina, we had 31 participants from 16 countries with enthusiastic feedback from students, including:

My vision of innovation in agroecology has expanded significantly. The experiences in different countries have been particularly enlightening, as they show how, despite different contexts, we face similar challenges. This learning has enriched my perspective, providing tools to analyze and adapt innovative solutions to diverse realities.

- Praxis Student

#### The Agroecology and Extension Undergraduate Fellowship Program

Over the last four years, the USDA-funded <u>Agroecology and Extension (AX) program</u> has connected over 40 undergraduate student-leaders from across the country to develop their capacity as agents of change. This fully-funded ten-week agroecology experience provides an opportunity for fellows to contribute to research and extension projects. Working alongside UVM Extension and faculty mentors, these students have gained skills, deepened their understanding of agroecology, and made lasting connections to UVM, their peer-group and to the Vermont community. In 2025, fellows assisted with soil sampling in riparian buffer zones as part of the <u>IFA's agroforestry initiative</u>, scouted cucumber beetles for <u>V-PART</u>, and managed the experimental plots at the apple orchard and vineyard at the <u>UVM Horticulture Research and Education Center (HREC)</u>.

Meeting all of the mentors, guest speakers, and college partners expanded what I feel is possible going forward in a field related to food system change... I will look to AX in my future endeavors as the place that connected me to the necessity in building networks in food systems work.

- Nora B., 2024 AX Fellow









**Left**: Aura M. Alonso-Rodríguez, IFA Lab member. **Left Center**: "Boer Bricoleur," a farmer network in Belgium, with their modified farm equipment, studied in IFA "Agroecology and Innovations" praxis course, spring 2025. **Right Center**: Leslie Spencer, IFA Lab member, with native pollinator, Shelburne VT. **Right**: IFA team member Vic Izzo and AX fellows scouting for pests, summer 2023.

## **Global Influence Program**

## Shifting Power: Influencing Policy, Governance, and Investment for Agroecology

The IFA works strategically to transform the policies, institutions, and governance systems that entrench corporate control and obstruct the transition to just, agroecological food systems. Through our Global Influence Program, we serve as expert advisors, facilitators, and research partners, offering strategic guidance and generating policy-relevant research for advocates, funders, and policymakers. Our work has helped elevate agroecology in key global forums, including a pivotal role in securing its inclusion in Target 10 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. We also contribute to shaping international food governance through leadership roles, such as Co-Director Colin Anderson's co-authorship of the Building Resilient Food Systems report as part of the UN Committee on World Food Security's High-Level Panel of Experts.

We have also partnered with institutions like the McKnight Foundation, the International Development Research Centre of Canada, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN to deepen long-term investment in agroecological research and practice. Our contributions to the work of the Global Alliance for the Future of Food have foregrounded the importance of democratizing knowledge in agroecology. Together, these efforts reflect the IFA's commitment to systemic change, rooted in equity, biodiversity, and the health of people and planet.

## Publications Produced by the UVM Institute for Agroecology



## Magazine: Lifting Frontline Voices And Stories

IFA is a founding member of this collectively published magazine. Rooted connects science, practice and movement, shifting narratives and strengthening agroecology for food sovereignty. It brings insights from grounded experiences in agroecology.



## Blog: Critical Analysis and Perspectives

Agroecology Now! is an international platform co-developed by the IFA that shares new perspectives, analysis, and ideas on politics, power, and action, aimed at driving the deep societal transformations needed for agroecology and food sovereignty to flourish.



## IFA Book Series with CRC Press

Titles in this series with CRC Press, "Just Transformations in Food Systems: Through Agroecology, Food Sovereignty and the Right to Food", will put forward provocative ideas, outcomes of transdisciplinary research, and new visions for shifting from extractive end exploitative economies and cultures to ones that are regenerative and just.

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## IFA Brief Series To Inform Practice And Policy

This series of short publications explores different aspects of agroecology transitions. Available in French, Spanish and English, these articles are intended to be used by agents of change in agroecology transitions (including farmers, activists, researchers, policy-makers and others).

#### **Finances**

The Institute for Agroecology has maintained financial stability through a diverse portfolio of funding sources, including philanthropic partnerships, research grants, and support from the University of Vermont. We are committed to stewarding our resources sustainably and maintaining financial health while delivering meaningful work across our programs.

The Institute for Agroecology is generously funded by a combination of university support, foundations, individual gifts and grants. Thank you to the UVM Foundation for their skillful support to our fundraising efforts, in particular, Emily Lapatt, Jay Caporale and Ashley McLeod. We also extend gratitute to the UVM College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and its Department of Agriculture, Landscape, and Environment, as well as the UVM Sponsored Projects Administration, whose people and resources support the IFA every day.



IFA members engaged in co-learning through "Image Theatre" where

participants formed images with their bodies that represented issues of power and equity in food systems, followed by group discussion,

Burlington Vermont, November 2021.

#### Our Funders

#### Internal

- UVM Office of the Provost
- UVM Office of the President
- UVM Office of the Vice President for Research
- UVM Food Systems Research Institute
- UVM College of Agriculture and Life Science and UVM Department of Agriculture, Landscape, and Environment
- Gund Institute for Environment
- Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships

#### External

- McKnight Foundation
- 11th Hour Project, a program of the Schmidt Family Foundation
- An Anonymous Donor
- Burroughs Wellcome Fund
- Ceres Foundation
- Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation
- Elmina B. Sewall Foundation
- Henry P. Kendall Foundation
- Mind & Life Institute
- Nancy Deren
- REI Cooperative Action Fund
- Stanford University
- Thread Fund
- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- USDA Hatch Fund
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation





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