

Governance and Infrastructure Development in Resource-Rich Regions: Assessing the Role of Political Elites in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Resource-rich regions often possess substantial fiscal resources yet continue to experience infrastructure deficits, raising concerns about how resource revenues are translated into public goods. This study assessed infrastructural development in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, identified major constraints, and examined the role of political elites in infrastructure provision. The study was guided by the Marxian Political Economy Approach, which emphasizes the influence of resource control, political power, and resource distribution on development outcomes. A survey research design was adopted using primary and secondary data from all eight Local Government Areas. A sample of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, with purposive sampling employed. Data were collected through questionnaires, key-informant interviews, government appropriation records, and relevant literature and analyzed using descriptive statistics, percentages, and content analysis. Findings indicate improvements in infrastructure, particularly in education and healthcare, although provision remains uneven and concentrated around Yenagoa. Government-related factors were identified as the leading constraint by 217 respondents (55.1%), followed by environmental/topographical factors (157; 39.8%) and community-related factors (20; 5.1%). Key challenges included policy discontinuity, political and bureaucratic corruption, difficult terrain, inadequate skilled personnel, weak internally generated revenue, and limited community participation. The study concludes that political elites significantly influence infrastructure outcomes through prioritization, resource allocation, implementation, and accountability. It recommends stronger accountability, policy continuity, decentralized planning, improved fiscal management, and inclusive community participation.

Keywords: Governance; Political elites; Infrastructure development, Resource-rich regions, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

Infrastructure underpins economic productivity, human development, and social wellbeing, as roads, electricity, potable water, schools, healthcare facilities, transport systems, housing, and communication networks enable effective participation in socioeconomic activities. Infrastructure provision therefore serves as a key indicator of how governments convert public

resources into measurable improvements in citizens' living conditions (Diene, 2024). Nevertheless, resource abundance does not guarantee equitable development. Resource-rich regions may generate significant public revenues while still experiencing infrastructure deficits, poverty, inequality, and inadequate public services (Feng et al., 2023). In Nigeria, evidence from the petroleum sector demonstrates that resource dependence can promote rent-seeking, with political actors exerting substantial control over resource revenues and reinforcing conditions associated with the resource curse (Asiegbu et al., 2024). Patronage, influence peddling, and political corruption also present significant governance risks in the implementation of large-scale infrastructure major. These challenges are evident in the Niger Delta, where petroleum resources contribute significantly to Nigeria's economy. Yet, many producing communities still lack adequate roads, electricity, potable water, healthcare, education, and environmental services. The gap between resource wealth and socioeconomic outcomes has fueled ongoing debates about resource control, political representation, environmental justice, and governance. Research on Nigeria's oil politics indicates that political manipulation, marginalization, and institutional weaknesses shape the distribution and use of oil-related resources (Onah *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, development outcomes depend not only on resource availability but also on the institutional and political processes that govern the allocation and transformation of resources into public goods. Bayelsa State offers a relevant context for analyzing the relationship between resource wealth and development. Established on 1 October 1996 from the former Rivers State, Bayelsa was created in response to longstanding demands for increased political representation and socioeconomic advancement. The state's creation raised expectations for improved infrastructure and more responsive governance, particularly in roads, electricity, water supply, healthcare, and education. Successive administrations have implemented a range of infrastructure and human development projects, including roads, bridges, educational institutions, hospitals, water schemes, and other public facilities. Despite these efforts, infrastructure provision remains uneven, with development concentrated in Yenagoa and other urban centers, while many rural and riverine communities continue to face deficits in essential services. The persistence of infrastructure deficits despite significant public expenditure raises critical questions about political elites' role in shaping development outcomes. Political elites hold strategic positions in policy formulation, resource allocation, budgeting, procurement, project implementation, and accountability, and their decisions can significantly affect the scale, location, quality, and sustainability of public infrastructure. Evidence from Bayelsa links political corruption and state capture to weaknesses in development and resource management (Monday, 2023). However, attributing infrastructure deficits solely to elite behavior risks neglecting the structural challenges posed by Bayelsa's physical environment. Extensive wetlands, creeks, rivers, and flood-prone terrain increase construction costs and the logistical complexity of land reclamation, transportation, and service delivery. Therefore, infrastructure outcomes should be understood as the result of interactions among political, environmental, and community-level factors. In this context, the present study examines governance and infrastructure development in Bayelsa State, focusing on the role of political elites, the main constraints to infrastructure provision, and the extent to which elite governance contributes to ongoing infrastructure deficits.

2. Theoretical Framework: Marxian Political Economy Approach

This study is anchored in the Marxian Political Economy Approach, which explains development outcomes through the interplay of material resources, economic interests, political power, and

resource distribution. Its intellectual foundations are rooted in the works of Karl Marx, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo, and were further developed in the social sciences by scholars such as Ake (1981), Ekekwe (1986), and Acemoglu and Robinson (2012). The approach views the state as an important arena in which competing interests shape decisions concerning the allocation and utilization of public resources. Applied to Bayelsa State, this perspective suggests that the availability of substantial oil revenues does not automatically translate into equitable infrastructure development. Rather, development outcomes depend largely on how political elites and state institutions prioritize, allocate, manage, and account for these resources. This perspective is consistent with evidence from Nigeria indicating that institutional arrangements governing petroleum revenues can sustain rent-seeking practices and excessive political discretion, thereby undermining development outcomes (Asiegbu et al., 2024).

Within this framework, political elites are conceptualized as key actors in the allocation and management of public resources, given their strategic influence over budgeting, procurement, project implementation, and accountability. Their decisions can consequently affect the scale, geographical distribution, quality, and sustainability of public infrastructure. This perspective is particularly relevant to Bayelsa State, where substantial public allocations coexist with persistent deficits in roads, potable water, and electricity, while government-related factors were identified as the leading constraint to infrastructure development (Amos & Idoniboye-Obu, 2024).

The adoption of the Marxian Political Economy Approach is therefore justified by its capacity to explain the relationship between resource wealth, political power, resource allocation, and infrastructure development. It provides a basis for examining how the state's natural-resource revenues are converted, or fail to be converted, into public infrastructure and how political decisions influence development priorities and outcomes. The approach is also useful for explaining the contradictions and uneven development evident in Bayelsa State, where resource abundance and substantial public expenditure coexist with persistent infrastructure deficits and spatial inequalities. Consequently, the framework provides a critical, holistic, and historically grounded perspective for analysing how power relations and control over resources shape infrastructure development in Bayelsa State.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a survey design to gather residents' and stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of infrastructure development and governance in Bayelsa State. Data collection included questionnaires, interviews, and documentary analysis, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study covered the eight Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State. The study population was estimated at 2,277,961 persons based on the population of Bayelsa State. Bayelsa is predominantly riverine and contains extensive wetlands, creeks, rivers, swamps, and flood-prone areas. These physical characteristics have important implications for the cost and feasibility of infrastructure provision.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

A sample size of 400 respondents was calculated using the Taro Yamane formula at a 5% margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

where n represents the sample size, N the population size and e the margin of error. With a population of 2,277,961 and an error margin of 0.05, the calculated sample was approximately 400 respondents.

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents with expertise in governance and development in Bayelsa State. Participants comprised community members, former and current political office holders, senior civil servants, academics, development experts, civil society representatives, and youth leaders. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, but 394 was returned.

3.4 Data Collection

Primary data collection involved structured questionnaires and key-informant interviews. The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended items to assess perceptions of infrastructure provision, development constraints, and political responsibility. Of the total, 120 questionnaires were allocated to specialized stakeholders, and 280 were distributed across the eight Local Government Areas, with 35 questionnaires per area.

The researcher and other specialists conducted face and content validation of the questionnaires. Reliability was assessed using a test-retest procedure, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70, which meets the criterion for acceptable internal consistency established in the original study. Secondary data were sourced from government appropriation documents, academic publications, books, reports, and other documentary materials. The study also examined budgetary evidence to evaluate the relationship between public expenditure and infrastructure outcomes.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and simple percentages. The researchers analyzed qualitative responses and documentary materials using content analysis. This approach integrated respondents' perceptions with documentary evidence on government expenditure, infrastructure projects, and development challenges.

4. Results

4.1 State of Infrastructural Development

The findings indicate that Bayelsa State has experienced measurable infrastructure expansion since its creation in 1996. However, development varies significantly across sectors and geographic locations.

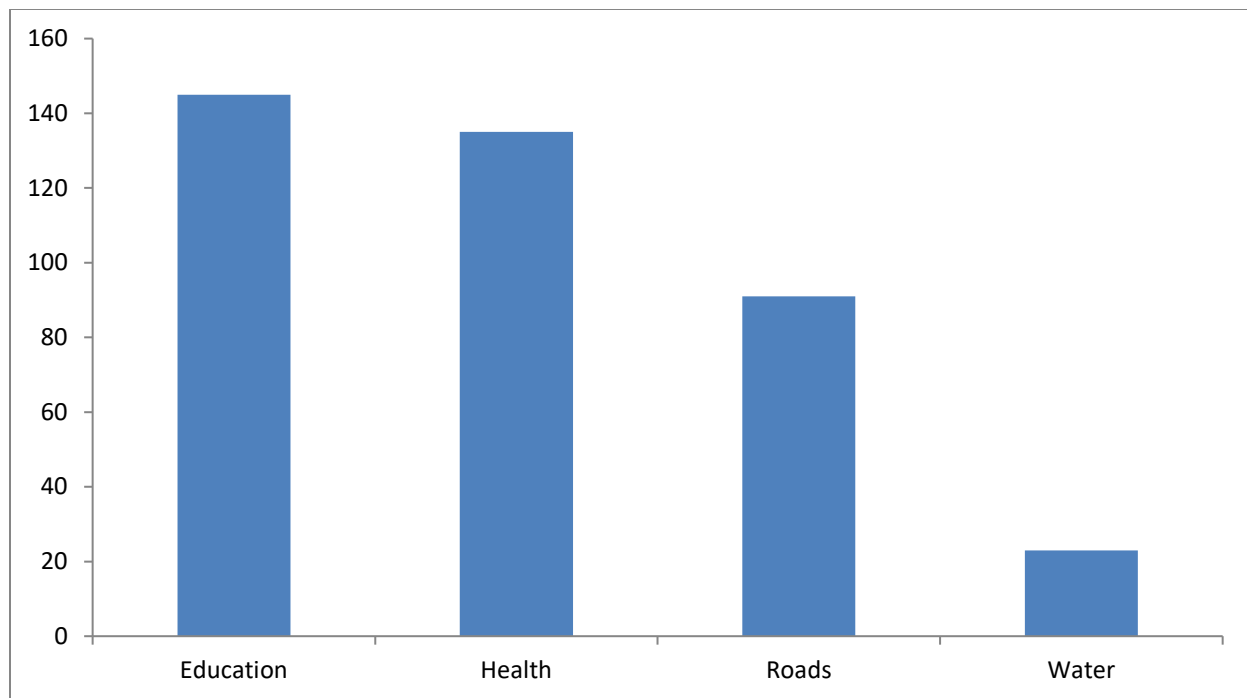


Figure 1: Respondents' Assessment of Infrastructure Development by Sector

Source: Author fieldwork, 2021.

Education received the most favourable assessment, with 145 respondents (36.9%), followed by health infrastructure with 135 (34.4%) and roads with 91 (23.2%). Water infrastructure received the least favourable assessment, with only 23 respondents (5.9%) identifying it as an area of significant improvement. These findings indicate that government infrastructure interventions have been more visible in education and healthcare, whereas potable water provision remains a major infrastructure deficit. Road development has recorded some progress but remains spatially uneven, particularly across rural and riverine communities. The results therefore suggest that infrastructure development in Bayelsa State has produced sectoral gains but has not yet achieved balanced and geographically equitable service provision.

4.2 Major Challenges to Infrastructure Development

The study identified three broad categories of constraints: government-related factors, environmental/topographical factors and community-related factors.

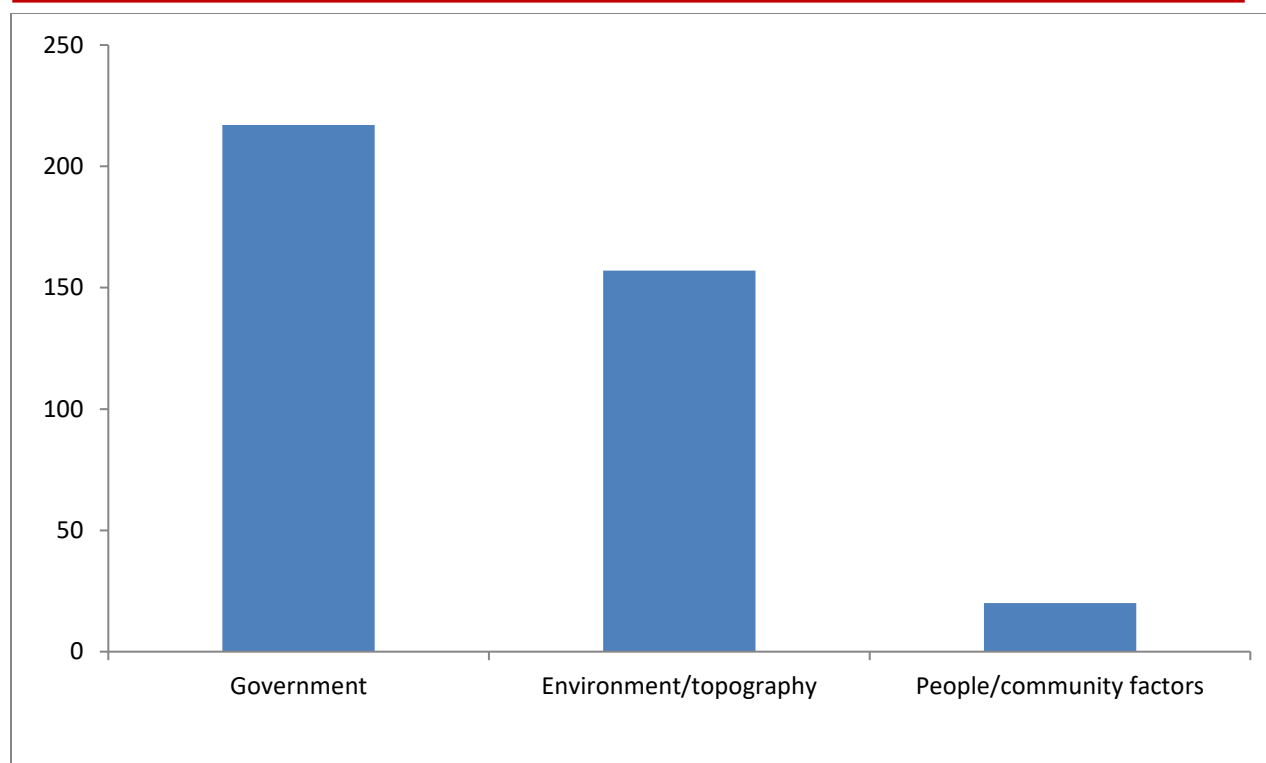


Figure 2: Perceived Factors Constraining Infrastructure Development in Bayelsa State

Source: Author fieldwork, 2021.

The findings indicate that government-related factors constituted the most prominent perceived constraint to infrastructure development in Bayelsa State, accounting for 217 respondents (55.1%). Environmental and topographical conditions ranked second, with 157 respondents (39.8%), highlighting the substantial influence of the state's riverine, swampy and flood-prone terrain on infrastructure provision. In contrast, only 20 respondents (5.1%) identified people or community-related factors as the principal constraint. The results therefore suggest that respondents perceived governance-related factors as more influential than community-level factors, while also recognizing the structural challenges imposed by the physical environment. This pattern supports the interpretation that infrastructure deficits in Bayelsa reflect an interaction between institutional/governance weaknesses and geographical constraints, rather than a single causal factor.

4.3 Governance, Public Finance, and Infrastructure Deficits

Table 1: Bayelsa State Appropriation and Expenditure Structure

Year	Total Appropriation (₦ billion)	Recurrent Expenditure (₦ billion)	Capital Expenditure (₦ billion)	Recurrent (%)	Capital (%)
2012	238.16	142.46	95.70	59.8	40.2
2014	332.83	178.83	154.00	53.7	46.3
2018	732.22	417.37*	314.85*	57.0	43.0

Source: Bayelsa State appropriation records

Table 1 shows a substantial increase in Bayelsa State's total appropriation across the selected years, rising from ₦238.16 billion in 2012 to ₦732.22 billion in 2018. Recurrent expenditure exceeded capital expenditure in all three years, accounting for approximately 59.8%, 53.7%, and

57.0% of total appropriations in 2012, 2014, and 2018, respectively. Although capital expenditure increased from ₦95.70 billion in 2012 to approximately ₦314.85 billion in 2018, its share remained below recurrent expenditure. This expenditure structure suggests that a relatively larger proportion of public resources were committed to recurrent obligations than to capital investment, potentially limiting the resources available for sustained infrastructure development. The finding is particularly relevant to Bayelsa State, where persistent infrastructure deficits coexist with substantial public-sector allocations.

Despite these allocations, both respondents and documentary evidence indicate persistent deficits in roads, water, electricity, and other infrastructure. The recurrent expenditure bias identified in the study raises questions regarding the extent to which available public resources are converted into durable capital assets. The original analysis contends that the relatively higher recurrent expenditure in several years may have constrained infrastructure investment.

4.4 Responsibility of Political Elites

Table 2: Perceived Areas of Political Elite Responsibility for Infrastructure Deficits in Bayelsa State

Infrastructure/development area	Perceived responsibility of political elites	Evidence from the study
Road infrastructure	High responsibility	Respondents attributed poor road infrastructure to political elites, particularly the inadequate completion and implementation of major road projects.
Potable water supply	High responsibility	The non-availability of potable water from state-owned facilities was attributed to political elites. The study further reports inadequate prioritization of the water sector in budgetary allocations.
Electricity and power supply	High responsibility	Respondents associated poor electricity infrastructure and unreliable power supply with the performance of political elites.
Healthcare infrastructure	Significant responsibility	The study identifies political elites as responsible for weaknesses in healthcare provision, particularly in rural communities.
Educational infrastructure	Significant responsibility	Political elites were associated with weaknesses in the educational system, with the study linking this partly to inadequate prioritization in state appropriations.
Human-capital development and empowerment	Significant responsibility	The study identifies inadequate political attention to skills acquisition, youth empowerment and human-capital development as contributing to underdevelopment.
Public-resource management	High responsibility	Documentary evidence suggests that substantial public allocations did not correspond with commensurate infrastructure outcomes, raising concerns about resource

		utilization and governance.
Policy implementation and project continuity	High responsibility	The study links political leadership to incomplete and abandoned projects and argues that political elites influence development priorities and implementation.

Source: Bayelsa State appropriation records

Table 2 indicates that political elites bear substantial responsibility for infrastructure deficits in Bayelsa State. Their perceived responsibility is particularly high in road infrastructure, potable water supply, electricity, public-resource management, and policy implementation, reflecting concerns about inadequate project delivery, weak prioritization, and inefficient resource utilization. Responsibility is also significant in healthcare, education, and human-capital development, where inadequate investment and weak policy attention have constrained service delivery. The evidence suggests that infrastructure deficits are closely associated with the decisions and actions of political elites, particularly their influence over resource allocation, development priorities, project implementation, and accountability. The findings therefore highlight the importance of transparent governance, effective public-resource management, policy continuity, and stronger accountability mechanisms for improving infrastructure outcomes and ensuring that public investments translate into sustainable development.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that infrastructure development in Bayelsa State cannot be sufficiently explained by resource availability alone. Despite being resource-rich, Bayelsa exhibits uneven infrastructure distribution, and essential services such as potable water, reliable electricity, and rural roads remain inadequate. This reflects a broader governance challenge in resource-dependent economies, where resource revenues do not necessarily translate into inclusive development. The expansion of educational and health infrastructure constitutes a significant achievement. The establishment of universities, hospitals, and other public institutions demonstrates that successive administrations have made meaningful contributions to state-building. Thus, describing Bayelsa as entirely underdeveloped would neglect genuine infrastructure progress since 1996. A more accurate assessment is that development has been partial, spatially uneven, and has not resulted in universal access to basic services.

The pronounced concentration of infrastructure in Yenagoa is particularly significant. Urban concentration increases political visibility, as projects in the capital are easier to observe and may yield greater political benefits for governing elites. In contrast, rural and riverine communities encounter higher infrastructure costs and often possess limited political and institutional access. Without deliberate efforts to address these structural disadvantages, governance models risk perpetuating spatial inequalities. The environmental dimension warrants careful consideration. Bayelsa's physical geography imposes substantial constraints on infrastructure delivery. According to the findings, 157 respondents identified the environment as a major obstacle. Flood-prone terrain, wetlands, creeks, and unstable soils increase construction costs and complicate transportation. Therefore, infrastructure planning in Bayelsa necessitates engineering and financial strategies tailored to wetland environments, rather than replicating models from other Nigerian states. However, environmental constraints alone do not fully account for the infrastructure deficit. Government was identified by 217 respondents as the primary factor. This is significant because political elites are responsible for prioritizing and managing scarce public resources. Allocating public funds predominantly to recurrent expenditures, rather than durable

capital infrastructure, can hinder long-term development. Additionally, discontinuity between administrations may lead to abandoned projects, duplicated initiatives, and inefficient resource utilization. Asiegbu et al. (2024), supporting the governance perspective, contend that Nigeria's resource governance frameworks have institutionalized rent-seeking practices, undermining development-oriented investment. Studies of large infrastructure projects in Nigeria also identify patronage and influence peddling as significant forms of political corruption that affect project governance (Oluseye, 2024). These findings indicate that the issue extends beyond individual corruption to include institutional incentives that allow political discretion to supersede development priorities. The Bayelsa case also illustrates the importance of accountability in resource-rich settings. States that depend substantially on transfers from centrally collected resource revenues may face weaker incentives to develop sustainable internal revenue systems. The World Bank has recently highlighted how Nigerian states' dependence on federally shared revenues can weaken incentives for stronger accountability and fiscal systems (Oguche & Umoh, 2026). Strengthening Bayelsa's internally generated revenue while improving public financial management could therefore reduce excessive dependence on external transfers and strengthen the link between taxation, accountability and public service delivery.

Community participation represents another critical dimension. The study found that some respondents attributed infrastructure challenges to community behaviors, such as demands for compensation and project-related benefits. Although these demands should not shift responsibility from government, they show that infrastructure projects are embedded in local political economies. Recent research on Bayelsa demonstrates that stakeholder participation can affect the viability and sustainability of public projects (Avendei, 2026). Effective infrastructure governance should therefore engage communities throughout project identification, design, implementation, and monitoring. These findings also inform the broader resource-curse debate. The challenge in Bayelsa lies not in resource abundance itself, but in the institutional mechanisms that convert resource revenues into public goods. Resource wealth can facilitate infrastructure development when political incentives, fiscal institutions, accountability mechanisms, and project management systems align with long-term public interests. In contrast, weak governance can turn resource abundance into an opportunity for rent-seeking and elite accumulation.

6 Conclusion

The study concludes that although infrastructure in Bayelsa State has expanded since its creation, particularly in education and healthcare, provision remains uneven, with significant deficits in potable water, electricity, and rural transportation. Government-related factors emerged as the most prominent constraints, alongside difficult terrain, policy discontinuity, political and bureaucratic corruption, inadequate skilled human resources, weak internally generated revenue, and limited community participation. Political elites therefore play a significant role in shaping infrastructure outcomes through their influence over budgetary priorities, procurement, project implementation and accountability. However, infrastructure deficits cannot be attributed solely to elite behaviour, as political governance interacts with geographical constraints, high construction costs and community-level challenges. The study therefore emphasizes the need to shift from project-driven political development to transparent, institutionalized, and geographically equitable infrastructure planning. Strengthening public financial management, ensuring policy continuity, decentralizing infrastructure investment, improving internally generated revenue, enforcing accountability, promoting transparent procurement, and involving communities in

development planning are essential to convert Bayelsa State's resource wealth into sustainable infrastructure and inclusive human development.

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