EFFECT OF POLICY ISSUE SALIENCE ON PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION IN WAJIR EAST SUB COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the effects of policy issue salience on public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub county, Kenya. The study was supported by Pluralism Theory. The research design for this study adopted a descriptive research design with a predominantly quantitative approach. The target population comprised of key stakeholders involved in the public policy formulation process in Wajir East Sub County. Wajir East Sub County had a fragmented civil society sector with 203 civil society organizations. The sample size was determined using stratified random sampling to ensure representation from various groups within the target population from which a sample size of 134 was included in the study. The research instruments consisted of structured questionnaires for quantitative data collection and semi-structured interviews. The collected data was analyzed using appropriate statistical tools for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative. Findings indicated that civil society organizations effectively prioritize salient policy issues. The study concluded that in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya, policy issue influences public policy formulation. The study recommended stakeholders in Wajir East Sub County prioritize salient policy issues, collaborate to raise awareness, and engage communities in decision-making.

Key Words: *civil society organizations, Community Engagement, Awareness*

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INTRODUCTION

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have recently gained a lot of attention for their influence on public policy formulation. In the past, government institutions were mainly responsible for policy formulation, and there was limited public involvement (Smith, 2020). However, the emergence of CSOs as intermediaries between citizens and the government brought about a significant change. CSOs started getting involved in policy matters as early as the 20th century when groups like the suffragettes and civil rights activists pushed for social and political change, making the policy process more inclusive (Sanchez Salgado, 2021)). Theoretical perspectives like pluralism and democratic theory highlight the importance of having diverse voices in policy-making. CSOs are a crucial part of civil society, representing various interest groups, advocating for marginalized communities, and contributing to policy discussions (Johnson et al., 2021).

Another key contribution of CSOs to public policy formulation is their ability to conduct in-depth research and policy analysis. The Brookings Institution, for instance, is a prominent think tank that conducts research on a wide range of policy issues (Baqueiro, 2016). Their studies and policy recommendations often serve as valuable resources for policymakers and influence the direction of policy formulation. Through providing evidence-based research, CSOs help ensure that policies are well-informed and grounded in empirical data (Scholte, 2019).

Kenya's civil society organizations have been active participants in public policy formulation, particularly in areas such as governance, human rights, and social development. The Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC), for example, has been a key advocate for human rights and the rule of law (KHRC, 2018). Through advocacy, public interest litigation, and monitoring of government actions, CSOs in Kenya have influenced policy decisions and contributed to reforms that uphold human rights and democratic principles (Munene & Thakhathi,

2017). In Wajir East Sub County, local CSOs have enhanced public policy formulation by addressing specific regional challenges. For instance, organizations like the ccc) have focused on youth empowerment and education (Abdullahi, 2020). Their initiatives and community engagement have influenced local government policies and programs tailored to the needs of the sub-county.

Statement of the Problem

Wajir East Sub County in northeastern Kenya is grappling with various social, economic, and environmental challenges, necessitating the development and implementation of effective public policies. These challenges encompass issues such as poverty, limited access to basic services, ethnic tensions, and environmental degradation. Empirical data points to the presence of these issues within the policy formulation landscape of Wajir East Sub County. For instance, recent research conducted by Mohamed (2018) revealed that approximately 35% of the sub-county's population lives below the poverty line. Access to essential services, like healthcare and education, remains insufficient, affecting roughly 40% of residents, as reported by Aengwony et al. (2020). Additionally, ethnic tensions and conflicts have been documented, resulting in a significant number of inter-communal disputes, with an estimated 25% of the population affected, according to Saney (2021). Furthermore, environmental degradation poses a pressing concern, with an estimated 20% increase in environmental incidents over the past decade (Adan et al. 2018). Therefore, understanding the role and influence of policy issue salience in shaping these policies within Wajir East Sub County was imperative to address these pressing challenges effectively.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to determine the effect of policy issue salience on public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub county, Kenya. The study was guided by the following research questions;

- To what extent does the salience of policy issues influence public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical review

The salience of policy issues refers to the degree of importance or prominence a particular issue holds in the eyes of the public, policymakers, and stakeholders. It is a multifaceted concept that can be influenced by a variety of factors, including media coverage, public opinion, and political agendas (Eckhard & Ege, 2016). Understanding the salience of policy issues is crucial for effective public policy formulation as it directly impacts the prioritization of problems and the allocation of resources by governments. Policy issue salience is a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. It encompasses both the perceived importance of an issue and its visibility within society and politics (Bello-Gomez et al., 2022). Perceived importance relates to how pressing or significant an issue is considered by various stakeholders, including policymakers, advocacy groups, and the general public. Visibility, on the other hand, pertains to the extent to which an issue captures media attention and features prominently in political discourse (Baumgartner & Jones, 2019).

The salience of policy issues exerts a profound impact on the process of public policy formulation in several ways. Firstly, it influences the policy agenda-setting process, which determines which issues are considered for government action (Marzaniar & Subarsono, 2023). When an issue is highly salient, it is more likely to be prioritized and included on the political agenda. Policymakers are more inclined to address issues that are perceived as important and are receiving substantial public attention. Consequently, less salient issues may be marginalized or delayed in the policymaking process (Sager & Thomann, 2017).

Secondly, policy issue salience affects the allocation of resources and the distribution of government attention. Highly salient issues tend to attract more funding, expertise, and political capital. This can lead to a disproportionate focus on certain problems, even if they may not be the most pressing or solvable issues (Bergmann et al., 2021). As a result, the allocation of resources may not always align with the objective assessment of societal needs, but rather with the salience and political attractiveness of specific issues.

Moreover, the salience of policy issues can shape the framing and rhetoric surrounding policy debates (Kraft, 2017). Issues that are highly salient often become politicized, and competing actors may employ emotional appeals and moral arguments to advance their positions. This can lead to polarization and gridlock in the policy process, as well as hinder the adoption of evidence-based solutions. Conversely, less salient issues may receive less public scrutiny and therefore be subjected to less rigorous analysis (Kraft, 2017).

The media plays a crucial role in shaping the salience of policy issues. High levels of media coverage can elevate the salience of an issue by bringing it to the forefront of public consciousness (Birkland, 2017). Consequently, policymakers may feel compelled to respond to media-driven narratives and public perceptions. This can lead to a situation where media agendas, rather than objective assessments of policy priorities, drive the policy formulation process (Fernández-i-Marín et al., 2021)

Theoretical Review

Pluralism Theory

The Pluralism Theory, often applied to the study of democracy and political representation, has had a significant influence on understanding the role of civil society organizations in shaping public policy. However, this theory is not immune to criticism. This essay explores the strengths and limitations of the Pluralism Theory in the context of its application to the effects of civil society organizations on public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya.

One key criticism of the Pluralism Theory, as highlighted by C. Wright Mills in "The Power Elite"

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(1956), is its tendency to oversimplify the complex power dynamics at play in society. In Wajir East Sub County, where various actors, including economic elites, hold significant influence, the theory might underestimate the impact of concentrated power on policy decisions.
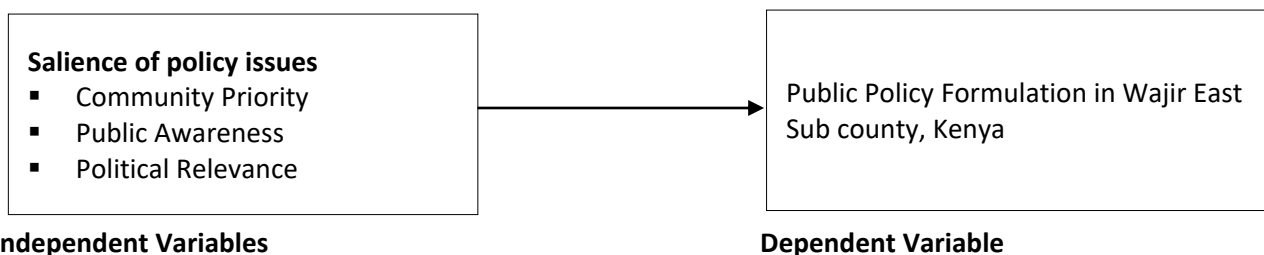
Another significant critique, articulated by G. William Domhoff in "Who Rules America?" (1967), is the theory's failure to adequately address economic inequality and how it can translate into unequal political influence. In regions like Wajir East Sub County, where economic disparities exist, this critique suggests that civil society organizations may face unequal challenges in influencing policy due to resource disparities.

Pluralism assumes equal access to the political process. However, in practice, access to resources and decision-makers can vary widely, potentially disadvantaging some civil society organizations. In Wajir East Sub County, where resources might be limited, not all organizations can effectively engage with the political system, raising questions about the theory's applicability in this context.

While the Pluralism Theory offers a valuable framework for studying the role of civil society organizations in shaping public policy, it is essential to recognize its limitations. Critics have validly pointed out its oversimplification of power dynamics, inadequate consideration of economic inequality, and failure to address unequal access. Consequently, a more nuanced approach that accounts for these critiques may provide a more accurate understanding of how civil society organizations impact public policy in the specific context of Wajir East Sub County, Kenya. This nuanced perspective will help scholars and policymakers better appreciate the complex interplay of power and influence in policy formulation.

Conceptual Framework

Salience of policy issues
- Community Priority
- Public Awareness
- Political Relevance

Public Policy Formulation in Wajir East Sub county, Kenya

Independent Variables
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Researcher 2023

Dependent Variable

The salience of policy issues in public policy formulation reflects their relevance and significance. Identifying salient issues ensures that policymaking addresses pressing concerns, aligning with societal needs. This process involves prioritizing key problems, enabling policymakers to allocate resources effectively and respond to the most critical challenges, thereby enhancing the overall impact and responsiveness of public policies (Marzaniar & Subarsono, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study adopted a descriptive research design with a predominantly quantitative approach. This design facilitated the collection of numerical data to provide a detailed snapshot of the relationship between civil society organizations and public policy formulation. The study was conducted in Wajir East Sub County, located in the northeastern region of Kenya. Wajir East Sub County was chosen due to its significance in the context of civil society organizations' activities and their potential impact on public policy formulation in the region. The target population comprises key stakeholders involved in the public policy formulation process in Wajir East Sub County. Wajir East Sub County has a fragmented civil society sector with 203 civil society organizations. The sample size was determined using stratified random

sampling to ensure representation from various groups within the target population. A suitable sample size was calculated based on the population parameters, allowing for a statistically significant analysis. The Slovene's formula (1978) was utilized to explore the minimum sample size of 134. Stratified random sampling was employed to categorize the target population into distinct strata based on relevant characteristics. Subsequently, a random sample was selected from each stratum, ensuring proportional representation.

The research instruments consisted of structured questionnaires for quantitative data collection and semi-structured interviews for qualitative data collection. These instruments were developed to align with the study's objectives and research questions. The content validity of the research instruments was ensured through expert reviews and consultations with scholars and practitioners familiar with the subject matter. The reliability of the instruments was assessed through test-retest reliability measures to confirm the consistency of responses over time. To enhance the credibility of the instruments, researchers undergone training on data collection techniques and maintaining neutrality throughout the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The response rate for the study in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya, was 80.6%, indicating a significant level of engagement from the respondents. Out of the 134 distributed questionnaires, 108 were returned, demonstrating a strong interest and willingness to participate in the research. This high response rate enhances the reliability and validity of the study's findings by ensuring a substantial amount of data was collected from the target population.

Descriptive Analysis

The study sought to investigate the effects of civil society organizations on public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya. The study used a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 was strongly disagree "SD", 2 was disagree "D", 3 was neutral "N", 4 was agree "A" and lastly 5 was strongly agree "SA".

Policy Issue Salience on Public Policy Formulation

The study sought to determine the effect of policy issue salience on public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya. The results are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Policy Issue Salience on Public Policy Formulation

Opinion	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Civil society organizations effectively prioritize and address the most salient policy issues in Wajir East Sub County.	2 (1.9%)	3 (2.8%)	18 (16.7%)	50 (46.3%)	35 (32.4%)	4.05	.880
Policy issues that receive significant media coverage are more likely to be considered in public policy formulation.	3 (2.8%)	2 (1.9%)	15 (13.9%)	51 (47.2%)	37 (34.3%)	4.08	.898
Level of awareness and concern among public influences policy issue salience.	4 (3.7%)	7 (6.5%)	17 (15.7%)	41 (38.0%)	38 (35.2%)	3.94	1.070
Government is responsive to policy issues that are highly salient in the community.	9 (8.3%)		24 (23.1%)	40 (37.0%)	34 (31.5%)	3.75	1.224
Civil society organizations play a significant role in raising the salience of critical policy issues in Wajir East Sub County.	6 (5.6%)		27 (25.0%)	21 (19.4%)	54 (50.0%)	3.97	1.264
Policy issue salience varies depending on political climate in Wajir East Sub County.	2 (1.9%)	5 (4.6%)	9 (8.3%)	34 (31.5%)	58 (53.7%)	4.31	.942
Collaborative efforts between civil society organizations and government officials can increase the salience of policy issues	7 (6.5%)		19 (17.6%)	26 (24.1%)	56 (51.9%)	4.06	1.240
Average						4.0057	1.0463

Key: SD: Strongly D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree, StD: Standard Deviation.
Source: Researcher (2024)

As per the findings as shown in Table 1, most of the respondents 78.7% agreed generally that civil society organizations effectively prioritize and address the most salient policy issues in Wajir East Sub County, 16.7% disagree with the statement while only 4.7% were neutral to the statement. . This finding is supported by the relatively high mean of 4.05 and a moderate standard deviation of 0.880, indicating a general consensus among respondents with some variability in opinions. The study also found that, most of the respondents 81.5% were in agreement that policy issues that receive significant media coverage are more likely to be considered in public policy formulation, 13.9% were neutral while only 4.7% disagree with the statement. This finding is reinforced by a mean of 4.08 and a standard deviation of 0.898, suggesting a strong agreement among respondents with minimal variability. In addition, most of the respondents 73.2% agreed that the level of awareness and concern among the general public influences policy issue salience, 15.7% were neutral while 10.0% disagreed to the opinion. Despite this agreement, there was notable variability in opinions, as indicated by the higher standard deviation of 1.070 alongside a mean of 3.94. It was further revealed that most of the respondents 68.5% agreed that the government is responsive to policy issues that are highly salient in the community, 23.1% of the respondents were neutral to the opinion while only 8.3 disagreed. However, there was considerable variability in opinions, with a standard deviation of 1.224 and a mean of 3.75, suggesting differing perceptions among respondents. Most of the respondents, 69.4% of the agreed that civil society organizations play a significant role in raising the salience of critical policy issues in Wajir East Sub County, and 25.0% of the respondents were neutral while only 5.6% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the opinion. The mean of 3.97 and standard deviation of 1.264 indicate a general agreement with some variability in opinions among respondents. Most of the respondents 85.2% agreed that policy issue salience often varies

depending on the political climate in Wajir East Sub County, 8.3% were neutral and only 6.6% were in a strong disagreement with the opinion. With a mean of 4.31 and a standard deviation of 0.942, there was a strong consensus among respondents with minimal variability. Lastly, the most of the respondents 76.0% agreed with the opinion that collaborative efforts between civil society organizations and government officials can increase the salience of policy issues, 17.6% of the respondents were neutral to the statement while 6.5% disagree with the statement. Despite this agreement, there was variability in opinions, as indicated by a standard deviation of 1.240 alongside a mean of 4.06. According to Hatton (2021), policy issue salience significantly influences Public Policy Formulation. Issues garnering high salience often receive greater attention from policymakers, increasing the likelihood of policy action. Conversely, low salience may result in policy neglect or delay. Important affects agenda setting, resource allocation, and decision-making processes, shaping the overall policy landscape and responses to societal challenges.

During the interview, one of the stakeholders said, "In Wajir East Sub County, they said the level of awareness and concern among the general public regarding policy issues varies depending on the issue at hand. For instance, issues related to healthcare access, education quality, and water scarcity tend to receive significant attention and concern due to their direct impact on the daily lives of residents. This awareness undoubtedly influences the policy formulation processes as policymakers are more likely to prioritize addressing issues that resonate with the public."

As for specific examples of policy issues in Wajir East Sub County that gained significant media coverage, they said we can look at cases such as the allocation of resources for infrastructure development, particularly roads and electricity access, and the management of natural resources like water and land. Media coverage of these issues has often led

to increased public scrutiny and pressure on policymakers to address these concerns in their policy decisions.

Public Policy Formulation in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya.

The study sought to determine public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya. The results are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Public Policy Formulation in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya

Opinion	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
Civil society organizations face significant challenges in accessing government officials to discuss policy issues.	7 (6.5%)	8(7.4%)		23 (21.3%)	70 (64.8%)	4.38	1.0827
Limited financial resources hinder the effectiveness of civil society organizations in policy advocacy.	3 (2.8%)	5 (4.6%)	12 (11.1%)	29 (26.9%)	59 (54.6%)	4.19	1.1229
Collaborative efforts between civil society organizations and government agencies offer promising opportunities for policy reform.	5 (4.6%)	13 (12.0%)	6 (5.6%)	27 (25.0%)	57 (52.8%)	4.09	1.2192
Public participation in policy formulation processes is a key opportunity for improving policy outcomes.	2 (1.9%)	6 (5.6%)	15 (13.9%)	24 (22.2%)	61 (56.5%)	4.17	1.1501
The transparency and openness of government institutions are essential for effective policy formulation.	2 (1.9%)	13 (12.0%)	7 (6.5%)	21 (19.4%)	65 (60.2%)	4.24	1.126
Cultural and social dynamics in Wajir East Sub County influence public policy decisions.	1 (0.9%)	5 (4.6%)	3 (2.8%)	29 (26.9%)	70 (64.8%)	4.50	.8372
Building strong partnerships between civil society organizations, communities, and government stakeholders can overcome policy challenges	7 (6.5%)	12 (11.1%)	1 (0.9%)	22 (20.4%)	66 (61.1%)	4.18	1.2763
Average						**4.26**	**1.112**

Key: SD: Strongly D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree, StD: Standard Deviation.
Source: Researcher (2024)

According to the study findings as shown in Table 2, most of the respondents 86.1% agreed with the opinion statement that civil society organizations face significant challenges in accessing government

officials to discuss policy issues, the 7.4% of the respondents were neutral while only 6.5% strongly disagreed with the opinion. With a mean of 4.38 and a standard deviation of 1.0827, there was a strong consensus among respondents regarding this challenge. Most of the respondents 81.5% also agreed that limited financial resources hinder the effectiveness of civil society organizations in policy advocacy, 11.1% were neutral while only 7.4% of the respondents disagreed with the opinion. This finding is supported by a mean of 4.19 and a standard deviation of 1.1229, indicating a widespread acknowledgment of the financial constraints faced by CSOs. Most respondents 77.8% as well agreed that collaborative efforts between civil society organizations and government agencies offer promising opportunities for policy reform, 12.0 were neutral to the opinion while 10.2% strongly disagreed with the opinion. With a mean of 4.09 and a standard deviation of 1.2192, there was a consensus among respondents, indicating recognition of the potential benefits of collaboration. In addition, most respondents 78.7% agreed that public participation in policy formulation processes is a key opportunity for improving policy outcomes, 13.9% of them were neutral while only 7.5% strongly disagreed with the opinion. With a mean of 4.17 and a standard deviation of 1.1501, there was general agreement among respondents regarding the importance of public engagement. 79.6% of the respondents agreed that the transparency and openness of government institutions are essential for effective policy formulation, offering a dynamic alternative to more rigid traditional funding channels, 12.0% of the respondents were neutral while only 8.4% strongly disagreed with the opinion. With a mean of 4.24 and a standard deviation of 1.126, there was a consensus among respondents regarding the significance of institutional transparency. Further, most of respondents 91.7% agreed that cultural and social dynamics in Wajir East Sub County influence public policy decisions, 2.8% were neutral while 5.5% strongly disagreed with the opinion. This finding is supported by a mean of 4.50 and a

standard deviation of 0.8372, indicating a strong consensus regarding the influence of cultural and social factors. Lastly, most of the respondents 81.5% agreed that building strong partnerships between civil society organizations, communities, and government stakeholders can overcome policy challenges, 11.1% were neutral while 7.4% disagreed with the statement. With a mean of 4.18 and a standard deviation of 1.2763, there was a consensus among respondents regarding the value of collaborative efforts. Anderson, et al. (2022) public policy formulation is a multifaceted process involving problem identification, agenda setting, policy design, decision-making, and implementation. It entails analyzing issues, gathering evidence, and exploring potential solutions. Stakeholder engagement, including government agencies, interest groups, and the public, is crucial for developing comprehensive policies that address societal needs. Policymakers weigh various options, considering political, economic, and social factors before crafting and implementing policies aimed at achieving desired outcomes.

Inferential Analysis

Inferential statistics infer from the sample to the population. They determine probability of characteristics of population based on the characteristics of the sample. Inferential statistics help assess strength of the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3 displays the correlation matrix depicting the relationships among the independent variables. Correlation analysis serves to investigate the connections within a set of variables, aiding in the assessment of multicollinearity (Pallant, 2010). When correlation values deviate from 1 or -1, it suggests that the factors represent distinct variables (Farndale, Hope-Hailey & Kelliher, 2010), indicating the absence of multicollinearity. This absence enables the utilization of all independent variables in the study.

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Table 3: Correlations of the Study Variables

		SPI	PPF
SPI	R	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	108	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	108	
PPF	R	.755**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	108	108

Key: SPI: Salience of policy issues, PPF: Public Policy Formulation,
Source: Researcher (2024)

From the Table 3, A Pearson correlation analysis results indicate that there is a significant and a strong positive correlation between salience of policy issues and public policy formulation in Wajir East Sub county, Kenya (r =0.679, p < 0.05).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya, policy issue salience significantly influences public policy formulation. Civil society organizations are perceived to effectively prioritize salient policy issues, often influenced by media coverage and public awareness. The government's responsiveness to salient issues and collaboration with civil society impact policy formulation. Additionally, the political climate and collaborative efforts between civil society and government officials shape policy salience. Findings highlight the importance of addressing salient issues through collaborative efforts to enhance policy responsiveness and effectiveness.

The study concluded that in Wajir East Sub County, Kenya, policy issue influences public policy formulation. Civil society organizations are perceived to effectively prioritize salient policy issues, often influenced by media coverage and public awareness. The government's responsiveness to salient issues and collaboration with civil society impact policy formulation. Additionally, the political climate and collaborative efforts between civil society and government officials shape policy salience. Findings underscore the importance of addressing salient issues through collaborative efforts to enhance policy responsiveness and effectiveness.

The study recommended that stakeholders in Wajir East Sub County should recognize and prioritize policy issues based on their salience to ensure more effective public policy formulation. It suggested that civil society organizations, media outlets, and the government should collaborate to raise awareness and address salient policy issues. Additionally, policymakers should consider the level of public awareness and concern when formulating policies, and they should be responsive to issues that are highly salient in the community. The study emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts between civil society organizations and government officials to increase the salience of critical policy issues.

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