

The Role of Civil Society Organisations as Sites for Knowledge Production in Jordan



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Abstract

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Jordan play a crucial role in development, driving social change, and enhancing the welfare of the country's citizens. They advocate social protection and human rights, contributing to lifelong learning by providing training and educational services to local communities. However, their role as knowledge producers is often understated in official narratives and invisible to the public. This paper explores the role of civil society organisations as knowledge producers, specifically looking at national Think Tanks. The paper argues for an expansive view of CSOs' role in shaping national strategies and policies as partners with the government. The paper highlights the critical role of CSOs in advancing the Economic Modernisation Vision goals through creating a supportive and participatory policy environment. The paper offers recommendations to strengthen the role and coordination of CSOs as knowledge producers and partners with the government in setting national priorities and agendas.

الملخص

تلعب منظمات المجتمع المدني في الأردن دوراً محورياً في دفع عجلة التغيير الاجتماعي نحو مستقبل أكثر عدالة، وتعزيز رفاه المواطنين عبر خدمات وبرامج متنوعة تشمل خدمات التدريب والتعليم واذكاء الوعي في المواضيع التي تمس حياة المواطنين والمجتمعات المحلية. وبالرغم من هذه الجهود، يظل دور منظمات المجتمع المدني كمراكز لانتاج المعرفة في السرديات الرسمية، غير مرئي إلى حد كبير.

تستعرض هذه الورقة دور منظمات المجتمع المدني، وبالأخص مراكز الفكر الوطنية، كمواقع لانتاج المعرفة، وتنادي بتبني منظور أوسع لدور منظمات المجتمع المدني بوصفها شركاء للحكومة في صياغة الاستراتيجيات والسياسات الوطنية. كما تُبرز الورقة الدور الحاسم لمنظمات المجتمع المدني في دعم تحقيق أهداف رؤية التحديث الاقتصادي عبر الإسهام في خلق بيئة سياساتية داعمة وتشاركية. وتقدم الورقة توصيات لتعزيز دور منظمات المجتمع المدني وتنسيق جهودها بوصفها منتجين للمعرفة وشركاء للحكومة في تحديد الأولويات الوطنية وصياغة الأجندات التنموية.

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1 Introduction

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Jordan play a crucial role in reform and development, driving social change and enhancing the welfare of the country's citizens.¹ Historically, CSOs, particularly Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), have a long-standing record and reputation for providing charity and humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups, and more recently for generating context-specific knowledge on social and economic reforms.³ Beyond service provision, CSOs advocate for social protection and the rights of marginalised groups, while raising awareness on issues ranging from gender-based violence and disability rights to refugees' inclusion into the formal labour market.^{4,5,6}

CSOs also contribute to lifelong learning, providing capacity-building, training, and educational services to local communities. However, their role as knowledge producers is often understated in official narratives and invisible to the public. In this paper, knowledge production is understood and operationalised as the interactive, dynamic, problem-driven processes of generating data, evidence, and insights, as well as knowledge dissemination and public engagement in various forms. Drawing on Gibbons et al.'s understanding of knowledge production as socially distributed and context-driven, CSOs in Jordan contribute to knowledge production not only through research but also through needs assessments, community consultations, and advocacy networks.⁷

The paper examines the role of CSOs, specifically local think tanks, as sites of knowledge production within the CSO landscape in Jordan. The following question drives the research:

- What is the role of CSOs as knowledge producers in public policy-making in Jordan, and how do they shape national priorities and agendas?

This research is especially relevant to current discussions on reforms in Jordan, particularly in the context of implementing Jordan's Economic Modernisation Vision (EMV), where the role of CSOs in knowledge production and shaping evidence-based policies is often overlooked in implementation plans.⁸

¹ Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. The Fifth National Action Plan 2021-2025 Under the Open Government. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, December 2021.

² OECD (2024), OECD Public Governance Reviews: Jordan: Together for an Accountable and Transparent Public Administration, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/be41202d-en>.

³ USAID/Jordan Monitoring & Evaluation Support Project (MESP). Civil Society Assessment Report. Contracted Under AID-278-C-13-00009. May 2016. <https://www.msiworldwide.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Civil-Society-Assessment-Report-Jordan.pdf>

⁴ Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD). Walking on Eggshells: Pathways to Equality in Jordan. Amman, Jordan: ARDD, 2022. <https://ar-dd-jo.org/publication/walking-on-eggshells-pathways-to-equality-in-jordan/>.

⁵ Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies. National and Local Debate Sessions on the Role of CSOs in Enhancing Social Protection, 2021. Amman, Jordan: Phenix Center, 2021. <https://en.phenixcenter.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Report-national-and-local-debates-sessions-on-the-role-of-CSOs-in-Enhancing-social-protection-2021.pdf>.

⁶ Yara Shaban and Marah Jamous, Towards Dignified Inclusive Opportunities: Enhancing Self-Reliance and Access to the Formal Labour Market for Refugees and Host Communities (Amman, Jordan: West Asia-North Africa Institute, 2023). <https://swaninstitute.org/en/publication/towards-dignified-inclusive-opportunities-enhancing-self-reliance-and-access-formal>.

⁷ Michael Gibbons, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schwartzman, Peter Scott, and Martin Trow. The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221853>.

⁸ Civil Society Organisations were mentioned in one initiative of the Economic Modernisation Vision implementation plan, focusing on their role in enhancing financial support with the private sector for developing the current Student Support Fund system. For an overview of the Economic Modernisation Implementation Plan visit: https://jordanvision.jo/-files/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%B1%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AC_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B0%D9%8A_%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%94%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AB_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A.pdf

The paper argues for an expansive view of the role of CSOs in shaping national priorities and strategies as partners with the government.⁹

In the context of the EMV, the paper highlights the contributions of CSOs to support the “Smart Jordan” and “Vibrant Jordan” drivers. The Smart Jordan driver prioritises innovation and a knowledge economy, and CSOs can contribute by promoting lifelong education, participatory research, and citizen-driven research to drive innovation and shape innovation policies. The EMV’s “Vibrant Jordan” driver focuses on communities and quality of life. CSOs can serve as mediators between citizens and the government, promoting the public interest.¹⁰ They also build citizens’ capacities through non-formal education and partner with the government to shape public policies and national agendas. In doing so, they help ensure that national development efforts are effectively translated across communities and governorates.

The paper offers policy recommendations to strengthen the role and coordination of CSOs as knowledge producers and government partners in setting national priorities and agendas, thereby aligning with EMV priorities, including fostering critical thinking, inclusive, evidence-based policymaking, and human development.

1.1 Knowledge Production Landscape in Jordan

The knowledge production landscape within the development sector in Jordan is complex, and CSOs often play a constrained role in research, as dictated by their relationship with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), international development agencies, and foreign donors. There is a clear asymmetry in power dynamics in which donors determine research priorities, and local organisations are expected to adhere to Request for Proposals (RFPs), which limits the development of and advocacy for their independent research agendas.¹¹ There is also widespread research fatigue among researchers and respondents, resulting from the repeated studies commissioned by different INGOs and donors.^{12 13} This has far-reaching and observable consequences, including diminishing people’s trust in research, persistent distrust in many government circles of CSOs “promoting foreign agendas”, and participants’ viewing research participation through “the lens of incoming aid,” which affects research quality and impact.^{14 15 16}

CSOs in Jordan also face regulatory and funding challenges. These include lengthy processes to obtain foreign funding approval from the Cabinet prior to the commencement of their work, and weak alternatives to foreign funding, which has been exacerbated in recent years by the decline in foreign funding opportunities.¹⁷

⁹ Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies. Jordan's Civil Society in 2024: A Future Outlook. Policy paper. Amman, Jordan: Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, 2025.

¹⁰ OECD, OECD Public Governance Reviews: Jordan, 2024.

¹¹ Toukan, "Ethical Dimensions of Nonacademic Research," 229.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Maysa Baroud, Haya Al-Dajani, and Persephone de Magdalene. "Conducting research with Syrian refugees: Reflections and experiences of researchers and practitioners in Lebanon and Jordan." In *Refugee Resilience and Adaptation in the Middle East*, pp. 155-177. Routledge, 2023.

¹⁴ Toukan, "Ethical Dimensions of Nonacademic Research," 229.

¹⁵ OECD, OECD Public Governance Reviews: Jordan, 2024.

¹⁶ Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies. Jordan's Civil Society in 2024: A Future Outlook. Policy paper. Amman, Jordan: Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, 2025

¹⁷ Ibid.

Despite these challenges, CSOs, particularly local think tanks, continue to conduct research and provide evidence-based policy recommendations by forming various partnerships and seeking new funding mechanisms. This includes the formation of coalitions, consortia, and communities of practice, as well as exploring alternative modes of funding.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework and methodology, followed by a discussion of the main findings and their implication for CSOs' role in knowledge production in Jordan.

2 Theoretical Framework

To analyse the role of CSOs in Jordan as sites of knowledge production within the context of ongoing reform and the Economic Modernisation Vision, this study is guided by Martha Nussbaum's "Capabilities Approach" or the "Human Development" approach. Instead of measuring progress solely by Gross Domestic Product, the human-centric framework emphasises human dignity and what individuals are able to do and are enabled to achieve. The purpose of development is to "create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives."¹⁸ This is pursued by supporting the internal capabilities of each individual through various streams, including health and education, whether formal, informal, or lifelong learning, as well as support for family care and love, among others. It also requires an enabling environment that allows people to exercise and utilise these capabilities. Such an environment encompasses social, political, and economic conditions that allow citizens to choose whether and how to exercise their internal capabilities.¹⁹

The Capabilities Approach is particularly relevant to policymakers to design meaningful interventions that improve the well-being and quality of life of their citizens. Interventions that focus solely on economic growth often do not translate into improvements in the living standards for the most vulnerable people. CSOs, in their various roles, are essential for translating the Capabilities Approach into practice. This is achieved through service provision, advocacy for human rights, raising awareness, capacity building, and shaping national policies that promote the well-being and flourishing of all citizens, especially marginalised groups. As Nussbaum notes, "the road to human advancement will not be through economic progress but through human development and empowerment."²⁰ In this study, CSO's role as knowledge producers is understood as a central mechanism for advancing these capabilities in the Jordanian context.

3 Methodology

The study employed a purposive sampling approach to select seven local think tanks for in-depth interviews, aiming to gather rich insights into their roles as knowledge producers. The selection was based on three main criteria: 1) their history and institutional presence, with the

¹⁸ The late Mahbub ul Haq wrote this sentence. This Pakistani economist inaugurated the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme, as cited in Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011

¹⁹ Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011

²⁰ David A. Clark, *The Capability Approach: Its Development, Critiques and Recent Advances*, GPRG-WPS-032 (Global Poverty Research Group, Economic and Social Research Council, 2005). https://base.socioeco.org/docs/developments_critiques_advances.pdf#:~:text=As%20we%20have%20seen%20the,While%20growth%20may%20be

newest organisation operating in Jordan for a little more than five years and the oldest for close to thirty years; 2) their status as independent, non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation whose core work centers on research and advocacy; 3) and thematic areas they cover, including economy and legislative environment, national security, sustainable economic strategies and economic growth, democracy, governance, and human rights, the promotion of women's rights, legal assistance and support for marginalised communities, and the participation of women and youth in political life.

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with each organisation's director or head of programmes. The interview guide was structured around three main clusters of questions: 1) the organisation's work as a research institution, with particular attention to its role as a knowledge producer; 2) its participation in setting national agendas and its forms of collaboration with government actors; and 3) the extent to which their work aligns with, and responds to the Economic Modernisation Vision.

With participants' informed consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent content and thematic analysis. The analysis sought to identify recurring patterns and differences, and to examine how local think tanks understand and enact their roles as sites of knowledge production in Jordan.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section summarises how Jordanian CSOs generate and use knowledge, the constraints they face, and their roles in governance and development. It first examines their work as knowledge producers, then the structural challenges shaping this role. It concludes by analysing their engagement with state institutions and the Economic Modernisation Vision (EMV).

4.1 Civil Society Organisations as Knowledge Producers

All organisations interviewed described systematic research practices, including designing questionnaires, conducting mixed-methods field work, translating empirical findings into infographics, policy briefs, fact sheets, articles, and position papers. They also engage in knowledge dissemination and capacity building through various formats, often in collaboration with national, regional, and international partners, including partnerships with academic institutions and research centres. In addition, two organisations described specific roles that extend beyond knowledge production, such as undertaking monitoring and evaluation functions related to government performance or EMV implementation, and providing legal assistance to vulnerable individuals and communities.

At the same time, one interviewee noted persistent confusion among the public between charitable associations and CSOs registered as not-for-profit companies whose work focuses on empowerment, capacity building, and civic engagement.²¹ A similar concern was raised by another interviewee, who described the CSO landscape as fragmented and differentiated, with some entities that might not be regarded as civil society. In his assessment, certain organisations operate as semi-governmental or solely represent the private sector's interests.²²

²¹ Interview by the author, Amman, August 29, 2025.

²² Interview by the author, Amman, August 22, 2025.

The interviews thus revealed not only the complexity of CSOs' registration, governance, financial structures, and networks of internal and external collaborators, but also highlight an important part of Jordan's civil society field that remains under-recognised as a knowledge producer. This complexity around who is considered a member of civil society invites a shift away from definitions based solely on voluntary work not associated with the private sector or the government.²³ Instead, it points towards a more productive focus on the capacity of institutions and organisations to contribute to the common good and engages citizens with public issues.²⁴ The concept of civicness is particularly useful in directing attention to how diverse institutions cultivate collective responsibility in the public sphere through knowledge production, advocacy and monitoring, rather than relying on blanket categorisations that fail to capture the variety of actors working for the public interest.

4.2 Knowledge Production Challenges and Constraints

Several interviewees articulated significant structural constraints facing their work as knowledge producers. One key challenge is the regulatory and bureaucratic complexity, including registration, licensing, and approval processes, especially for foreign funding and activities outside of Amman. These constraints can often delay projects and limit long-term planning. Another challenge is limited or unavailable access to detailed, timely data, and the absence of aggregated datasets or outputs from other knowledge production entities on development topics. Short project cycles and donor dependency, particularly for institutions without independent funding streams, further constrain their work. One interviewee noted, for instance, that legal representation and social change processes often outlast project cycles, making it challenging to follow cases through their conclusion.²⁵ Finally, several interviewees reflected on the tendency of CSOs to compete for funding and visibility rather than coordinate research agendas. This fragmentation weakens the impact of civil society on public policy and knowledge production.

4.3 Civil Society Organisations as Partners in Governance and Development

The interviews revealed an uneven ecosystem of state-CSO relations, in which organisations participate in governance through multiple overlapping channels and decision-making arenas. One organisation works closely with multiple ministries and the Royal Court on macroeconomic analysis, indicators and implementation plans, including those related to the EMV. Others engage critically with the ministries and agencies on specific issues, including elections, labour, social protection, and tax policies. A third group collaborates extensively with state institutions providing legal aid, training judicial and security actors and co-implementing programmes.

However, these modes of participation are often fragmented, ad hoc, and dependent on government leadership. One interviewee described a fluctuating relationship with successive governments, which directly affected the level of engagement in formal consultations.²⁶ Another interviewee noted that foreign donors working with official entities and ministries frequently request the participation of national CSOs in strategic programming.

²³ Phenix Center, National and Local Debate Sessions, 2021.

²⁴ Paul Dekker and Adalbert Evers, "Civicness and the Third Sector: Introduction," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 20, no. 3 (2009): 217–219, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-009-9086-z>.

²⁵ Interview conducted by the author, October 5, 2025.

²⁶ Interview by the author, Amman, August 22, 2025.

Yet, in her view, governmental institutions themselves rarely invite a broad and diverse range of CSOs to engage in a collaborative and inclusive manner when assessing the effectiveness and impact of national programmes and strategies.²⁷

All organisations employ networks of formal and informal connections to decision-making cycles and engage with media, social media, and public events to translate technical research into accessible messages. One organisation emphasised its history of advocacy to mobilise the public and advance policy change.²⁸ Another interviewee acknowledged that the intelligence services are informed of their research outputs on citizens' perception of critical issues affecting the Jordanian public.²⁹

CSO's knowledge is thus already embedded in governance, but often in fragmented and informal ways. Access to decision-making spaces is selected and often mediated through personal connections, donor-funded projects, or specific thematic areas rather than through formalised mechanisms for CSO participation. This presents a missed opportunity to incorporate the knowledge generated by CSOs working on the ground with citizens and local communities.

4.4 Civil Society Organisations' Engagement with the Economic Modernisation Vision

All interviewed organisations relate their work to themes central to the EMV, whether in economic growth and investment, social protection and inclusion, governance and accountability, or the economic empowerment of women and youth. Nevertheless, their direct engagement with the EMV during the consultation and goal-setting stages has been uneven. Several interviewees noted that no formal invitations were extended to their institutions, and that they were not centrally positioned in the EMV's initial design. One interviewee reported that his organisation did not participate in drafting the EMV, which he perceived as being heavily influenced by private-sector perspectives, despite his institution's long-standing work on economic development grounded in a human rights-based approach.³⁰ Other interviewees situated their involvement predominantly at the post hoc monitoring stage to determine whether employment targets and economic growth were met.

By contrast, one organisation has been directly engaged in EMV technical work, including developing the roadmap, indicators, and sectoral strategies, and continues to monitor and evaluate the EMV. According to the interviewee, this exception is due to the organisation's central role in advancing EMV proposals to the Royal Court and articulating the private sector's contributions to economic activity and growth.

CSOs can nonetheless play a pivotal role in advancing several EMV drivers if more structured and inclusive channels for participation are established. For example, CSOs can contribute to the "Smart Jordan" driver through their knowledge-production role by prioritising innovation and the knowledge economy, fostering lifelong learning, supporting participatory and citizen-driven research, and generating evidence that shapes innovation and innovation policies

²⁷ Interview by the author, Amman, August 16, 2025

²⁸ Interview by the author, Amman, October 5, 2025.

²⁹ Interview by the author, Amman, August 15, 2025.

³⁰ Interview by the author, Amman, August 22, 2025.

in ways that reflect citizens' needs. Under the "Vibrant Jordan" driver, CSOs as intermediaries between citizens and the state can articulate public interests and concerns and raise awareness of Jordan's priorities and national strategies. CSOs can help ensure that national development priorities are effectively translated into practice across different communities and governorates. As one interviewee observed, human development in one way or another always advances economic modernisation and economic growth.³¹

5 Recommendations

Based on the findings, literature, and interviewees' recommendations, the paper proposes policy recommendations for government actors, civil society organisations, and international partners.

For the government of Jordan

- **Support CSOs as knowledge producers**

The government can establish frameworks and dedicated bodies for commissioning independent research from local think tanks on key policy questions, with clear criteria and safeguards for independence, transparency, and ethical standards. The Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship and the Department of Statistics can also develop data-sharing protocols that allow accredited CSOs and think tanks to work with official statistics and administrative datasets in greater detail, under well-defined safeguards.

To ensure research quality, a national repository could be created to house all development-sector studies, alongside scholarly publications. Such a repository would help track, coordinate, and align research with national research priorities and development needs.³² Together, these measures would enable local think tanks and international partners to address societal needs effectively, improving the efficiency and impact of their work.

- **Institutionalise and mainstream CSOs' participation in policy-making**

This could be achieved by establishing formal mechanisms and cross-cutting permanent bodies, such as advisory councils, regular consultation forums, and working groups that invite a wide range of CSOs and think tanks to engage in policy and decision-making.³³ These mechanisms should facilitate continuous, meaningful engagement by research-based CSOs in the design, drafting, implementation, review and monitoring of major national strategies, visions, and policies such as the EMV. They can also serve as spaces to jointly define national priorities and needs based on shared assessment and knowledge of local realities.³⁴

- **Reform regulatory and funding approval processes**

Simplify and streamline processes for CSO registration, activity approvals and foreign funding approvals.³⁵ A 2025 policy paper published by the Phenix Centre for Economic and Information Studies proposed several legislative and organisational reforms to

³¹ Interview by the author, Amman, August 16, 2025.

³² Toukan, "Ethical Dimensions of Nonacademic Research," 229

³³ OECD, OECD Public Governance Reviews: Jordan, 2024.

³⁴ Phenix Center, Jordan's Civil Society in 2024, 2025.

³⁵ OECD, OECD Public Governance Reviews: Jordan, 2024.

enhance the operating environment for civil society, including establishing a unified supervisory authority and adopting a notification-based registration system.³⁶ These proposals could provide a useful starting point for reform efforts.

For Civil Society Organisations

- **Strengthen methodological standards and peer learning**

Civil Society coalitions and networks can collaborate on shared training programmes for researchers on mixed-methods, policy paper writing, and ethical research practices. Moreover, local think tanks can establish informal peer review processes among themselves for major reports and policy briefs to enhance quality and credibility.

- **Consolidate and coordinate research agendas**

Local think tanks and research-based CSOs can develop issue-based coalitions in partnership with academic institutions or research networks in Jordan and across the WANA region, similar to the Jordan Whole of Society Network for Displacement and the Euro-Mediterranean Research, Dialogue, Advocacy (EuroMeSCo). These coalitions can coordinate research priorities, share data and tools, and present joint papers or reports. This would create stronger evidence-based policies, and amplify civil society voices in policy-making.

- **Prioritise the production and dissemination of Arabic-language knowledge**

CSOs should encourage participatory research and citizen surveys to deepen public ownership and legitimacy of research outputs, and increase and prioritise the production of Arabic outputs, including policy briefs, videos, infographics, and media interventions to inform domestic public debate, not only donor reports.

For international donors and partners

- **Design funding schemes that support core research functions**

International donors and partners can design funding schemes that support research, data systems, and research staff development, and allow for flexible, multi-year funding based on local priorities in consultation with government and local think tanks.

- **Promote open access to outputs and data**

Donors and partners can make research outputs available in accessible formats and in Arabic. Where appropriate, anonymised datasets can be shared to strengthen broader knowledge ecosystems and enable secondary analysis by local researchers and institutions.

³⁶ Phenix Center, Jordan's Civil Society in 2024, 2025.

6 Conclusion

Civil society organisations in Jordan play an essential role as sites of knowledge production that shape public policies, encourage debate, raise awareness of social issues, and provide capacity-building. In line with the targets of the Economic Modernisation Vision, CSOs can contribute to human development and improve the quality of life by generating context-specific evidence, amplifying the voices of marginalised communities, and mediating between citizens and the state on issues ranging from social protection to economic reform. The paper calls for strengthening the role of CSOs and coordination mechanisms that enable them to act as partners with the government in setting national strategies and shaping public policies, evaluating and monitoring their implementation, and raising awareness on issues that protect the dignity and human security of citizens.



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