

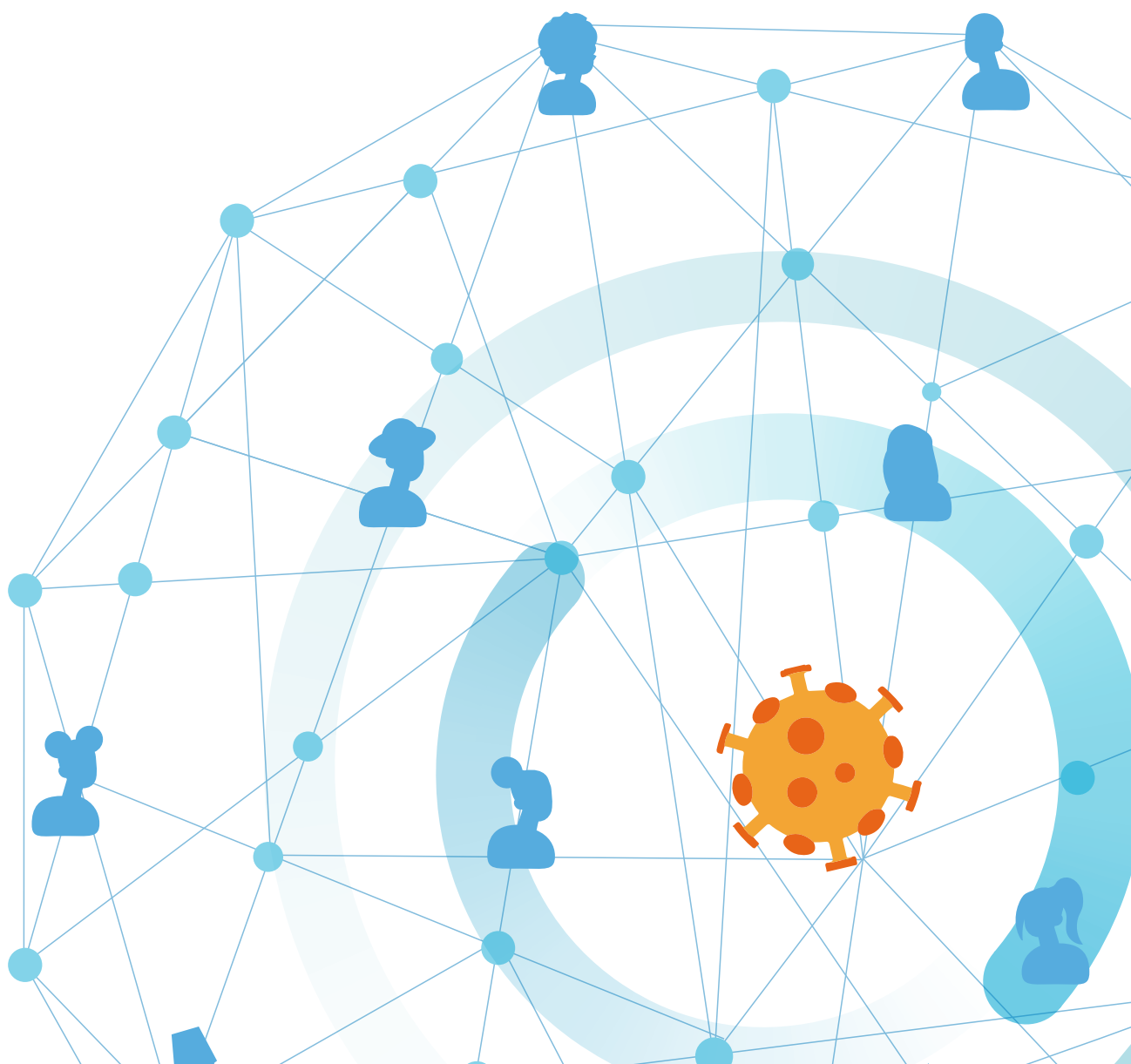


United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Social and Human
Sciences Sector

The socio-cultural impact of COVID-19

Exploring the role of intercultural dialogue in emerging responses



1. Introduction



In its influential 2013 report 'Intercultural Competencies: conceptual and operational framework' UNESCO approaches intercultural dialogue (ICD) as assuming "that participants agree to listen to and understand multiple perspectives, including even those held by groups or individuals with whom they disagree".

ICD encourages readiness to question well established value-based certainties by bringing reason, emotion and creativity into play in order to find new shared understandings. By doing so, it goes far beyond mere negotiation, where mainly political, economic and geo-political interests are at stake. It is a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.

Since its inception within international and inter-governmental agencies, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, ICD has been employed to advance the agendas of social cohesion, inter-group solidarity, and intercultural understanding. The challenge for ICD in the context of COVID-19 is that not only are these objectives constrained due to lockdown rules and the restrictions on almost all forms of direct human contact and mobility, but also that the pandemic itself has unfortunately generated new forms of ethno-cultural racism, intensified inequalities, and further exposed systematic structural discrimination. The latter, in particular, has recently been further highlighted through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, protesting institutional discrimination and police violence.

But as this brief illustrates, proponents and practitioners of ICD were quick to adapt to this crisis situation and shifted much of their activities online in order to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic. The shift has ensured that cross-cultural exchange, mutual support and inter-group solidarity, all key dimensions of the ICD approach, can be maintained in safe online contexts and thus continue to play a key role within the socio-cultural response to COVID-19.

Through inductive exploration of authentic, local, community responses to the COVID-19 crisis, this brief aims to shed light on the new context in which the ICD agenda is being pursued, complementing the many existing quantitative analyses of the socio-cultural impact of the pandemic. In doing so, four core objectives will be advanced:

- 1) an exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on ICD and community relations;
- 2) an examination of the creative community responses to these challenges, in particular online ICD initiatives;
- 3) the identification of key principles for the design and implementation of effective policy responses; and
- 4) an initial reflection on the potential for ICD to contribute meaningfully to a post COVID-19 context in order to support and further improve intercultural relations and solidarity that have been impacted by the pandemic.

1.1. Definition of Intercultural Dialogue

Across a wide range of academic literatures and policy articulations, ICD is often characterized as a deliberative process of interaction, exchange and dialogue amongst individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and faith traditions, aiming to foster social harmony, civic integration and peaceful coexistence. Indeed, a [recent systematic review of the ICD literature](#) has revealed that the most common understandings of ICD mirror to large extent those definitions articulated by UNESCO.

A recently published [UNESCO report](#), outlining an innovative conceptual and technical framework to measure the enabling environment and impact of intercultural dialogue, provides an operational definition that states:

[ICD is the] process undertaken to realize transformative communication that requires space or opportunities for engagement and a diverse group of participants committed to values such as mutual respect, empathy and a willingness to consider different perspectives.

This definition emphasizes respect, empathy and understanding as the basis for processes of cross-cultural exchange and dialogue. ICD, therefore, inherently prioritizes the values of mutuality and inclusion to underpin the process of dialogue, exchange and solidarity. It is important to note that these values cannot be pursued through legislation and laws only, as they require positive societal conditions that can enable productive ICD in respectful, inclusive and equitable ways.

1.2. The strategic role of ICD in responding to and recovering from crises

In addition to its devastating health impacts, it has become apparent that COVID-19 is leading to a [global economic downturn](#) which the International Monetary Fund [estimates will be the biggest in living memory](#) (with [IMF forecasts](#) predicting that global GDP at the end of 2020 will be 6.5% lower than January 2020 projections). With rising unemployment, and national governments borrowing heavily to subsidize new welfare schemes for those most affected, COVID-19 has proven to be an unprecedented economic and geopolitical crisis, on top of being a significant epidemiological challenge.

Yet the economic impacts of the pandemic are being felt more severely by countries in the Global South that are not well-equipped to manage economic disruption of the scale currently being experienced. This shows that the world now more than ever before, cannot afford to lose sight of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, it is [imperative to not separate responses to COVID-19 from the broader SDG agenda](#) with its emphasis on bridging broad developmental gaps internationally. And although the impact of the crisis is being felt most severely in sectors linked to certain SDGs, for example SDG 3 on health and SDG 4 on education, it is clear that all other SDGs have been, and will continue to be, impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to ensure that existing inequalities are not further exacerbated, and that inclusive progress towards achieving the SDGs is maintained, a commitment from all stakeholders – governments, international organisations, civil society, and the private sector – to nurture and sustain solidarity with and between disadvantaged communities will be needed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an approach reflects one of the main lessons from the pandemic, namely the interdependency of our world. Dialogue is crucial for this vision to be articulated, agreed upon, assumed, and ultimately realized.

Indeed, the importance of inter-group solidarity and cross-cultural cooperation and understanding has been underscored in many of the UN Secretary-General's reports and messages to guide the global response to the pandemic. These include his [call for a global ceasefire](#), the [UN report on COVID-19 and human rights](#), his [policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on women](#), and the [UN framework for managing the immediate socio-economic impact of COVID-19](#).

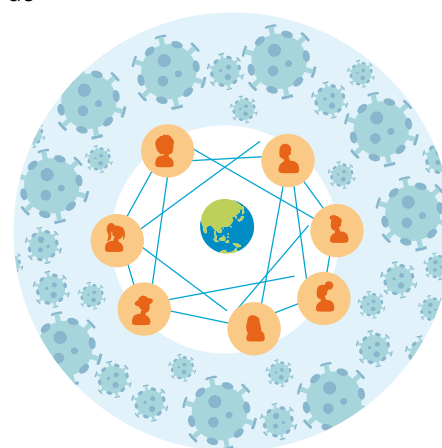
2. Impacts

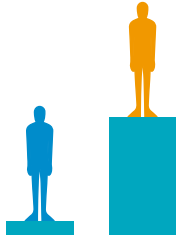
How has COVID-19 affected ICD and community relations?

Intercultural dialogue is an important deliberative tool for enhancing peace-building and sustainable development within and across societies. In the context of COVID-19 and its emphasis on physical distancing and immobility, the practice of ICD, in its structured and unstructured forms, has shifted mainly to online platforms.

This shift has facilitated and maintained much needed conversations across cultural, religious, ethnic and socio-economic lines. The need for dialogue during COVID-19 has become even more pronounced as the pandemic not only exposed vulnerabilities and inequalities but also caused new forms of discrimination that require urgent action by governments, civil society activists, and health practitioners as the examples below illustrate.

The section which follows, therefore, discusses some of these impacts, converging around four main issues: (i) the amplification of social inequalities and vulnerabilities; (ii) the rise of xenophobia and ethno-cultural racism; (iii) increased gender-based violence; and (iv) rising discrimination against non-citizens. All of these negative impacts directly undermine the core agenda of ICD with its emphasis on inclusion, empowerment and respectful inter-personal engagement.





2.1. Amplification of social inequalities and vulnerabilities

The COVID-19 pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated social inequalities. Whilst there have been society-wide impacts from the disease, its ramifications have not been equally felt by all. [According to Human Rights Watch](#), the most impacted:

'tend to be marginalized and excluded; depend heavily on the informal economy for earnings; occupy areas prone to shocks; have inadequate access to social services; lack social protection; are denied access to such services on the basis of age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, migrant status or other forms of discrimination; have low levels of political influence and lack voice and representation; have low incomes and limited opportunities to cope or adapt; and have limited or no access to technologies. And often these vulnerabilities intersect. People living in war-torn societies, where often health systems have collapsed, are particularly vulnerable'.

Entrenched social inequalities and vulnerability impact the capacity of marginalised people to access basic services. This problem, which has been exacerbated by COVID-19, can undermine social peace and intercultural understanding. For example health inequality is linked to and determined by '[race, indigeneity, age, \(dis\)ability, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, refugee status, class and religion](#)'. Indeed, those who are continuously threatened and violated within institutional health settings, have suffered more racism, stigmatisation, and exclusion from equitable care.



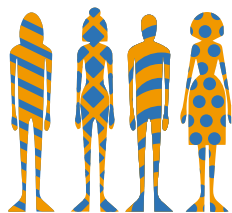
2.2. Rise of xenophobia and ethno-cultural racism

The ICD framework has at its heart the elimination of ethno-cultural racism and the promotion of mutual empathy, respect and understanding. Unfortunately, the pandemic has challenged those ICD principles and led to new forms of racism and xenophobia against many groups. UN Secretary-General António Guterres contends that COVID-19 has '[unleash\[ed\] a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering](#)'. Indeed, there has been widespread reports of extremist right-wing political groups using the COVID-19 crisis to pursue '[anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic conspiracy theories](#)'.

Particular targets of this racist '[tsunami](#)' have been Asian people or those of Asian descent. Whilst the first cases of the virus were '[connected to an animal market in the Chinese city of Wuhan](#)', reference to origins of the virus through politically-charged racial terminology has been seen to be '[deliberately provocative](#)'. Such racialized representations have been linked to a rise in anti-Asian attacks reported in many countries.

The rise in discrimination has not been limited to people of Asian descent. Indeed, as reported by Human Rights Watch, there has been a significant rise in discriminatory behaviours against different groups and minorities around the world. Many countries have witnessed a spike in anti-immigrant and anti-foreigner sentiments, whilst '[anti-Muslim attacks were recorded, as well as numerous reports of anti-African racism and discrimination](#)'.

Besides being subjected to racist attacks, these racialized groups are also often '[at the front lines of the pandemic](#)' being disproportionately impacted by infection, contagion and morbidity. Through over-representation '[in professions where they are risk-exposed](#)', these groups bear a double burden of economic vulnerability, and disproportionate exposure to the health threat of the pandemic. This illustrates how discrimination can be compounded through the current crisis by the intersection of race, gender, socio-economic background and citizenship status.



2.3. Rise in gender-based violence

Gender-based violence reflects particular sets of stereotypes, behaviours and perceptions towards gender identities. During the pandemic, as communities are in lockdown, the rates of gender-based violence have skyrocketed around the world as the disease exacerbated pre-existing gender inequities and vulnerabilities.

The [rising level](#) of 'sexual and gender-based violence has emerged as one of the main hidden consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic'. Women and girls have found themselves at even higher risk of [sexual and domestic violence](#), child abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence. COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines measures have also made it more difficult for victims to report such violence and to safely seek help.

As a result, the UN has warned that such increased levels of violence could [affect at least one third of all women and \[further\] care and support to GBV \[gender-based violence\] survivors may be disrupted when health service providers are overburdened](#). This form of violence compounds other forms of gendered oppression, in particular social marginalisation and economic disempowerment, as often experienced by [women with disabilities](#) or [indigenous women](#). The problem of gender-based violence is that its impacts are likely to endure well after the coronavirus is contained, and will likely be wide scale and inter-generational, affecting current victims as well as their children.

It is for these reasons, and in order to break down such behaviors and attitudes towards women and girls, dialogue around optimal mitigation strategies must be undertaken as a priority during and post COVID-19 in order to challenge such perceptions of gender roles and relations. ICD, in this context, has an important role to play in order to enable community-led initiatives around gender roles, responsibilities and relations in societies. Such improved understanding and awareness can help to delegitimize and ultimately curb gender-based violence.



2.4. Rising discrimination against non-citizens

Whilst COVID-19 has impacted all aspects of modern life and touched almost everyone, what has become clear is that those with precarious citizenship status, particularly migrant workers, refugees and international students, have experienced additional levels of discrimination during the pandemic. Strict COVID-19 related sanctions have affected foreign workers disproportionately and specifically. There have been reports worldwide of [raids on, and detentions of, migrant workers and refugees](#), and in a number of countries incidences of [racist discourses have emerged](#), blaming migrant workers for spreading the disease.

For refugee and asylum seekers, especially those held in immigration detention or in refugee camps, the pandemic poses additional threats to their already vulnerable lives. Whilst there are examples of [some people being released immigration detention](#), many refugees in the Global North remain detained. In the Global South, where healthcare systems are more likely to be inadequate or fragile, particularly for those held in crowded refugee camps, the risk posed to health and life is even more catastrophic. The possible spread of the COVID-19 in these places could [wreck havoc](#) and would indeed:

[trigger widespread unrest and severely test international crisis management systems. Its implications are especially serious for those caught in the midst of conflict if, as seems likely, the disease disrupts humanitarian aid flows, limits peace operations and postpones ongoing efforts at diplomacy.](#)

International students have also found that they are [excluded from targeted welfare support](#) programmes leveraged in response to COVID-19. Despite the many examples of local governments and educational institutions attempting to support international students, their precarious immigration status (often on temporary visas) has meant that they have faced unique hardships in relation to accessing healthcare, housing, and other support, often compounded by their inability to return to their home countries due to travel restrictions.

3. Responses

Creative responses for promoting ICD and solidarity during COVID-19

The global responses to the pandemic have seen new forms of intercultural engagement and solidarity come to the fore on the basis of creative individual and collective initiatives. These responses range from the creation of spaces to provide moral support and empathy, to online platforms for intra-community solidarity, where individuals from different cultural and religious groups can support each other and organise care for the most vulnerable.

The illustrative examples listed below cohere around: 1) the promotion of cross-cultural, inter-group solidarity; 2) creative arts-based approaches to intercultural learning, 3) the organization of local government interventions to support vulnerable communities; and 4) enhanced engagement in anti-racism activism. An overview of UNESCO's own responses are also provided for inspiration.

3.1. Promotion of cross-cultural, inter-group solidarity

Given the mandatory restrictions on movements and the emphasis on physical distancing, many different forms of dialogue and cross-cultural, inter-group solidarity have shifted to online spaces. These have taken a wide variety of different forms.



Spreading messages of solidarity online

The internet and online social media platforms have been widely used to help spread messages of solidarity and support, often across cultural and religious divides, during the pandemic.

Some of the most publicised examples of cross-cultural solidarity include [young people in Nigeria](#) holding a virtual dialogue series, aimed at 'Promoting Peace through Languages and Interfaith Events'. These online learning events aim to continue building the skills of young Nigerians to acquire requisite linguistic and cross-cultural tools to engage in peace-building initiatives.

In order to enhance the spirit of inter-faith solidarity during the pandemic, prominent religious leaders from around the world, brought together by NGO Religions for Peace, held [virtual interfaith exchanges](#) 'for hope and solidarity', broadcast widely on Facebook. Participants included religious leaders from thirteen different faith traditions. The virtual exchange ended with a shared interfaith commitment that pledged both prayer and action in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similar messages of solidarity have been advanced in other corners of the world. For example, the Adyan Foundation (Lebanon) has been working on the global solidarity campaign [#DistantlyTogether](#). In partnership with the UNHCR, the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), and the Issam Fares Institute, the Adyan Foundation has also launched '[a call for solidarity and social action with the refugee and displaced communities](#)', alongside joining 16 faith-based organizations for a '[joint appeal in response to the global initiative for 'human fraternity'](#)'.



Online organisation of cross-cultural direct action

Online spaces have also been widely used to facilitate cross-cultural collaborations to directly create resources of use to vulnerable or marginalised communities.

Artists such as Yadesa Bojia [‘produced facebook videos translating official coronavirus advice for Ethiopian Americans’](#), ensuring that hard-to-reach populations are not further excluded. Similarly, in South Africa, the Ndlovu Youth Choir has performed the [‘Don’t panic: We’ve got this’](#) song in which they use music performance to spread the World Health Organization’s COVID-19 prevention advice to among communities who may not have access to mainstream media sources.

Social media has also been widely used as a key vector to organise and disseminate direct-community action, as shown in Canada’s ‘caremongering groups’ where people set-up Facebook groups from which to directly provide help to people in need, particularly [‘those who are more at risk of health complications related to coronavirus’](#). Similarly, the Help Hub in Oxford, United Kingdom, has allowed volunteers to [‘offer online support and reassurance to vulnerable people who are self-isolating’](#).

There is also evidence of new forms of international academic collaborative practices. For example, [‘medical researchers around the world are involved in an unprecedented collaboration to test experimental treatments for COVID-19’](#); an initiative Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, calls a [‘solidarity trial’](#).

In addition, there are examples of businesses reframing the way their operating models work. For example, the Australian supermarket Woolworths has opened [‘its stores an hour early to allow elderly and vulnerable people to shop in seclusion so to avoid the risk of cross-infection’](#). There are also examples of distillers in North America and the UK, [‘making hand sanitiser using the alcohol they produce and giving it away to the communities they are a part of’](#).

There have also been many examples of communities coming together across socio-cultural difference to mobilise and address social inequalities and discrimination that affect the more vulnerable. These include initiatives such as a [#viralkindness](#) campaign where people put postcards in neighbours’ letter boxes asking if they need help; a campaign which spans the world from the UK to Australia. In New York, The Migrant Kitchen, in partnership with DoorDash and Seeds of Peace, has been giving [‘free meals to feed the families of those impacted by the coronavirus crisis, including families of hospital staff and other frontline workers...\[and to\] centres sheltering those ultra vulnerable to the virus’](#).

‘Mutual Aid’ groups have also spread around the world. These include those fundraising for Indigenous groups in Australia [‘to ensure communities have the essential resources’](#), as well as in Colombia where various vulnerable groups [‘now can’t support themselves because of the COVID 19 lockdown’](#). There are similar Mutual Aid [housing cooperatives in Uruguay](#) that provide basic shelter, food and other necessities to socially marginalised individuals.

In Barcelona, sub-Saharan African youth [‘have joined forces with a local clothing company to sew masks and aprons for health workers’](#). Alongside the initiative helping to raise awareness of the street vendors’ plight, they are funding [‘a food bank... to provide essential supplies to members of their community’](#). Similarly, in Poland, volunteers [‘from Ukraine, Mexico, Iran and many other nationalities’](#) are making protective equipment and health products for hospitals.

Such responses not only reflect ICD’s values of mutuality, empathy and respect but more importantly contribute directly to minimising the negative impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups and individuals.



3.2. Creative, arts-based approaches to intercultural learning

Arts and artistic performances have played a crucial role in connecting people during the COVID-19 lockdown, with many arts organisations finding creative means to share their collections and practices online in order to support intercultural learning and maintain social connectedness during the crisis.

For example, many museums – from the Museum of Art of São Paulo, to the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and Paris' Louvre Museum - have opened their doors virtually to the world, allowing visitors to engage with exhibitions and collections online. These online exhibitions engender new means for intercultural learning aimed at people from different national and cultural backgrounds, both within and across nation-states.

Online platforms have also been used by arts organisations to foster intercultural understanding and social cohesion. For example, Pakistan's Ajoka Theatre has been holding its '[Coronologue Online Theatre Festival](#)' which emphasizes the importance of heritage and cultural identity for individuals and communities. Similarly, and in order to sustain intergenerational knowledge sharing through online masterclasses, many global activities have been initiated including '[traditional pottery in Turkey, hat-weaving in Ecuador, traditional dance in Greece, weaving in Ukraine and felt carpet making in Kyrgyzstan](#)'.

In addition, performing arts spaces have been looking at new ways to share their work whilst physical spaces are closed. For example, Border Crossing Education, which '[sponsor and help to create intercultural resources, films and travel programs](#)' in the US and UK, are making available their productions and films, as well as hosting interactive discussions on their work during this period.

Some of these online initiatives aimed at fostering [intercultural empathy learning](#) are critical for overcoming digital educational disparities as well as cultural barriers to online schooling. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed highlighted the urgent need to explore alternative modes for [fostering intercultural dialogue and learning](#) not only to navigate the crisis itself but also to engage productively in the post-pandemic deliberations about new strategic priorities.

3.3. Local government interventions to support vulnerable communities

As aforementioned the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates existing social and economic inequalities. It shows the responsibilities of local governments and councils to challenge such realities and to find new forms of solidarity. Some local and regional governments have responded to different forms of vulnerabilities within societies and tried to provide direct support to communities according to their specific local needs. Many of these initiatives have centered on: (i) providing direct material support such as housing and micro-finance; (ii) facilitating recreational and creative inter-generational projects; and (iii) targeting support for migrants and foreign workers.



Provision of material support

There have been countless examples of local governments and civil-society organisations providing targeted material support to address the needs of vulnerable communities most at risk of the effects of the pandemic.

For example, in Switzerland there have been calls for [better provision of services and sites for Roma and Travellers](#), such as [‘suspend\[ing\] parking fees to relieve financial pressures, and to improve sanitary installations ensuring running water and liquid soap for frequent hand washing’](#).

There are also a range of initiatives launched by local authorities to provide housing for homeless people during the pandemic ([Berlin, Geneva, Montreal, Ioannina](#)), including for those who have the disease but do not require hospitalisation (Berlin and Geneva).

There are also a range of programs to provide housing for vulnerable people whose vulnerability has been exacerbated because of the pandemic, such as domestic violence victims ([Dudelange, Luxembourg](#)) and migrant workers ([for example African communities in Campania, Italy](#)).

In Osmangazi, Turkey there are now [‘quarantine apartments where all legal residents of the city can stay for free’](#) and in other cities there have been a range of rent reductions offered ([Lisbon, Barcelona](#)). In the UK, Leeds Council has established a monitoring network to identify and meet the needs of [‘refugees, asylum seekers, people with disabilities’ and the LGBT community](#).



Recreational and intergenerational projects

In order to maintain intercultural and intergenerational connections during the pandemic, many examples of recreational and intergenerational activities have been seen.

For example, in Ramallah (Palestine), a virtual inter-generational story-telling for children has been organised by elderly citizens through social media, alongside the delivery of online sports classes. Meanwhile, the Government of Algeria has launched [“Master @ Home” online classes in music, visual arts, theatre, dance, performance arts, literature and restoration](#).

Many libraries, often run by local governments, have also worked to continue to make their collections available in different ways. For example, in Bulgaria, the Peyo Yavorov regional Library, has enabled [‘large parts of its collection on intangible cultural heritage’](#) to be accessed online.



Targeted support for migrants and foreign workers

At a national level in some countries, COVID-19 has put the plight, and contribution, of migrant workers in the spotlight. Consequentially, there have been many examples of actions being undertaken to address the needs of these often vulnerable communities.

One of the most prominent examples noted at a national level is Singapore’s experience. With cases expanding in [‘the congested dormitories that house 180,000 migrant workers across the island, which became perfect vectors for disease transmission’](#), the government broadened its response to directly target the needs of migrant workers, showing the importance of inclusive approaches, regardless of citizenship status.

The appreciation and recognition of the contribution of migrant workers was also evident in the UK where there has been an increased awareness of the important contributions made by migrant workers to British society. This was particularly the case for those migrants who work in the UK National Health Service, social services and food industries, where opinion polls [‘show widespread public sympathy for low-paid foreign employees in the NHS and care sector’](#)



3.4. Online engagement in anti-racism activism

The rise of racism and xenophobia during the pandemic was highlighted as one of the main challenges requiring urgent action by governments, civil society organisations and activists alike. As highlighted in section above on impact, many racialized communities around the world have been subjected to unacceptable forms of verbal, and in some cases physical, abuse.

Yet, there have been many cases of creative, online initiatives that aimed to nurture the spirit of intercultural understanding and inter-faith solidarity through anti-racism activities. For example, the city of Limassol, Cyprus organised online meetings between their city councillors and civil society organisations in order [to address the needs of persons from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds](#), in particular those from ethno-cultural minorities. And along similar lines, a virtual 'Intercultural Cuisine' was launched in Pavlograd (Ukraine) which featured step-by-step videos and recipes of dishes from different cultures, aiming to highlight the positive contributions of minority groups.

In Australia, the Australian Intercultural Society has had to quickly adapt to the COVID-19 restrictions on direct contact and moved to hosting cross-cultural, inter-faith [virtual Iftar dinners](#) during the holy month of Ramadan. This ensured that important conversations around social harmony and anti-racism were maintained and delivered via online platforms.

Many other ICD practitioners are similarly using online platforms to develop understanding about the socio-cultural impacts of COVID-19 for societies around the world. A range of webinars have been held to this end, including on combatting [racism](#) during COVID-19 in the US, as well as in Northeast Asia (Peace Boat) and Morocco (MasterPeace, Marrakesh) to discuss the many ways the pandemic has intensified discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards certain groups.



3.5. UNESCO's response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has resonated deeply with UNESCO's mandate and core mission. Indeed, UNESCO's response to COVID-19 has included initiatives to facilitate inclusion of disadvantaged groups and to promote solidarity and culture sharing. These are fundamental strategies and approaches to ensure that the global community can stand together and tighten the bonds of our shared humanity. Below are some illustrative examples of such responses.

In relation to school closures and in order to promote the continuity of education for all through remote learning, a [Global Education Coalition](#) was launched during this period of unprecedented educational disruption. The initiative seeks to encourage investment in remote learning not only to mitigate the immediate disruption caused by COVID-19 but also to develop more open and flexible education systems for the future.

The social, economic and political consequences of COVID-19 are also affecting the fundamental right of access to culture, the social rights of artists and creative professionals, and the protection of the diversity of cultural expressions. To address this profound impact of COVID-19 on culture, a ["Culture & COVID-19: Impact and Response Tracker"](#) has been developed to provide an overview of the rapidly evolving situation, exploring tangible examples of how countries around the world are adapting to generate solutions to ensure opportunities for learning and exchange of culture during the pandemic.

As the unfolding crisis is deepening inequalities and rendering many communities even more vulnerable, UNESCO is rallying the voices of prominent artists to denounce mounting racial discrimination, including through the recent release of the video [“United Against Racism”](#). The Organization also organized a series of international webinars in collaboration with the cities of the [International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities](#) to highlight the challenges faced and measures undertaken at national and local levels to fight racism and discrimination.

COVID-19 has led to a parallel pandemic of disinformation that directly impacts lives and livelihoods around the world. Falsehoods and misinformation have proven deadly and sowed confusion about life-saving personal and policy choices, disproportionately affecting those who are already vulnerable. In response, UNESCO has launched [targeted guidance](#) for policymakers and practitioners to tackle disinformation, as well working with vulnerable communities (including indigenous groups) to strengthen [media information literacy](#) skills to detect and avoid disinformation.

In the same spirit, as vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants, minorities and indigenous peoples are exposed to a disproportionate risk of infection, UNESCO is developing online training for constituting a network of facilitators in the UN system and healthcare systems in order [to build the intercultural capacities of healthcare workers in local communities](#), providing the skills for culturally sensitive responses.

4. Recommendations

Key principles for furthering ICD and social cohesion during and post COVID-19

Building on the categorisations of challenges identified in section 2 and the responses generated in section 3 above, this section identifies key principles for pursuing the ICD agenda within and post the COVID-19 crisis. As the reported examples of impact demonstrate, COVID-19 has exposed, and in many cases intensified, many entrenched structural and institutional inequalities, shaping and constraining both the intercultural dialogue and sustainable development agendas. Developed from the understanding built on the impact of COVID-19 on the ICD agenda, and the many local responses (an indicative selection of which have been discussed in this brief) leveraged to meet it, four overarching lessons can be made to help the international community adapt intercultural dialogues to the new context:

- Firstly, COVID-19 has illustrated that the interconnectedness and interdependence of our global community is at once an advantage and disadvantage. The divergent experiences of the pandemic have emphasized that any crisis or problem anywhere in the world, regardless of where it is geographically located, can engender serious implications for the entire global community. Therefore, one of the main lessons from the pandemic is the need to engage and collaborate across cultures, communities and sectors in order to build sustainable preparedness of all societies for economic crises, global conflicts, natural disasters and pandemics. The key to this collective, global capacity building exercise is an appreciation of the key role of the twin concepts of interconnectedness and interdependency for building inter-sectoral, complementary capabilities across health, education, economics, culture and science.

- Secondly, one of the main priorities is to build on the new forms of solidarity that have emerged through the COVID-19 pandemic (reported in section 3) that may help prepare us for other global challenges we face from climate change, economic crises, social inequalities and [global digital disparities](#) to name but a few.
- Thirdly, respect for diversity, ICD and a commitment to universal human rights needs to be upheld as a core value and a guiding principle for shaping a new social compact for a post COVID-19 world. This requires all of us to rethink the ways in which we engage together as individuals, as communities and as a global society.
- Fourthly, the negative responses reported in the aftermath of the spread of COVID-19, such as the spike in racism against particular communities, reflect the growing distance of the global community from the core values and guiding principles of ICD that are needed most urgently to address such challenges.

These core values of collaborative engagement and solidarity across national and ethnic boundaries, which are defining features of the ICD framework, require us to re-configure the ways in which we relate to one another, work together and coordinate our responses to future policy priorities in a post COVID-19 world. Taking these core ICD values as framing guidelines, the operational recommendations listed below for policy makers and civil society actors aim to enhance the broader human rights and sustainable development agendas.

4.1. Recommendations for Policymakers:



a. Government/intergovernmental organisations role in furthering the pursuit of the universal human rights agenda:

Governments and inter-governmental agencies, including various UN agencies such as UNESCO, have a critical role to play in advancing the social cohesion and ICD agendas that COVID-19 has shown to be requiring significant and concerted effort. To this end, and in order to promote cross-cultural solidarity, social peace and intercultural learning, governments might consider adopting the following recommendations:

- I. “unequivocally condemn racism, which is an important, initial part of any response to the coronavirus;
- II. Initiate special public education initiatives, and strengthen the policing of hate crimes, whilst offering “support to communities victimized by discrimination and racially motivated attacks”;
- III. work with social media corporations “to protect users against hateful and xenophobic content on their platforms and should invest adequate resources to addressing it and mitigating its harm.” ([adapted from the work of Human Rights Watch on responses to racism and xenophobia during the pandemic](#));
- IV. put in place measures that will ensure that deliberative, democratic governance, human rights, inter-group solidarity and social cohesion will be prioritised and re-introduced post-COVID-19; and
- V. work through inter-governmental agencies such as UNESCO towards reducing global digital disparities, one of the most significant challenges during the transition to remote schooling for example.



b. Government's roles in reducing entrenched social inequalities:

One of the key systemic problems amplified by COVID-19, as reported in section 2 above, relates to entrenched social inequalities within and across societies. As shown in this brief, the pandemic has exposed, and in many cases exacerbated pre-existing forms of marginalisation. Entrenched social inequalities and racial discrimination undermine the very possibility of a meaningful, inclusive ICD agenda.

Governments, therefore, have a critical role to play in responding to this challenge in the immediate term, but also in addressing it through dialogue in long term social and economic agendas. In particular, there is a need to:

- I. Respond to the urgent material needs of vulnerable people and minority groups (as illustrated in the impact section), particularly in relation to access to basic social support and medical care;
- II. Ensure that such provision of support is inclusive of all and does not exclude non-citizens; this applies in particular to racialized minorities such as temporary workers, refugees and international students who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 through the loss of employment opportunities and income generation activities; and
- III. Negotiate, agree upon and adopt medium to long term strategies for sustainable and equitable social and economic development.



4.2. Recommendations for dialogue practitioners and civil society

COVID-19 has raised serious questions about the viability of our hyper-connected, super diverse world. While the pandemic's negative impacts raised serious challenges on the ICD agenda, the responses by different actors in the global community have, nevertheless, shown the many advantages of dialogue and exchange of ideas in engendering international scientific collaboration, in building inter-group solidarity and ultimately in reducing the spread of the virus.

In this context, ICD and deliberative participatory processes are essential in effectively coordinating efforts aimed at overcoming the pandemic, in relation to consequent social inequalities and global disparities. Therefore, and reflecting the lessons of the responses reported in this brief and reflecting the recommendations around intercultural understanding of UNESCO and the Council of Europe, some of the priority action around overcoming inter-group disharmony and enhancing social harmony need to focus on:

- I. Encouraging positive cross-cultural engagement through ICD strategies and resisting the temptation of privileging divisive policy agendas; indeed, there is a danger that physical distancing dictated by COVID-19 might lead to even more exclusion and segregation of marginalised individuals and groups; and
- II. Build on some of the positive community responses highlighted in this brief that showcase strong solidarity between groups and individuals across ethnic, cultural, religious and citizenship lines. These responses reflect core ICD principles and illustrate the advantage of strengthening social relations through creative forms of digital connectivity in order achieve inclusive and resilient societies ([adapted from CoE's Intercultural Cities COVID-19 Special Page](#)).

5. Conclusion

The ICD imperative in the post-COVID-19 agenda

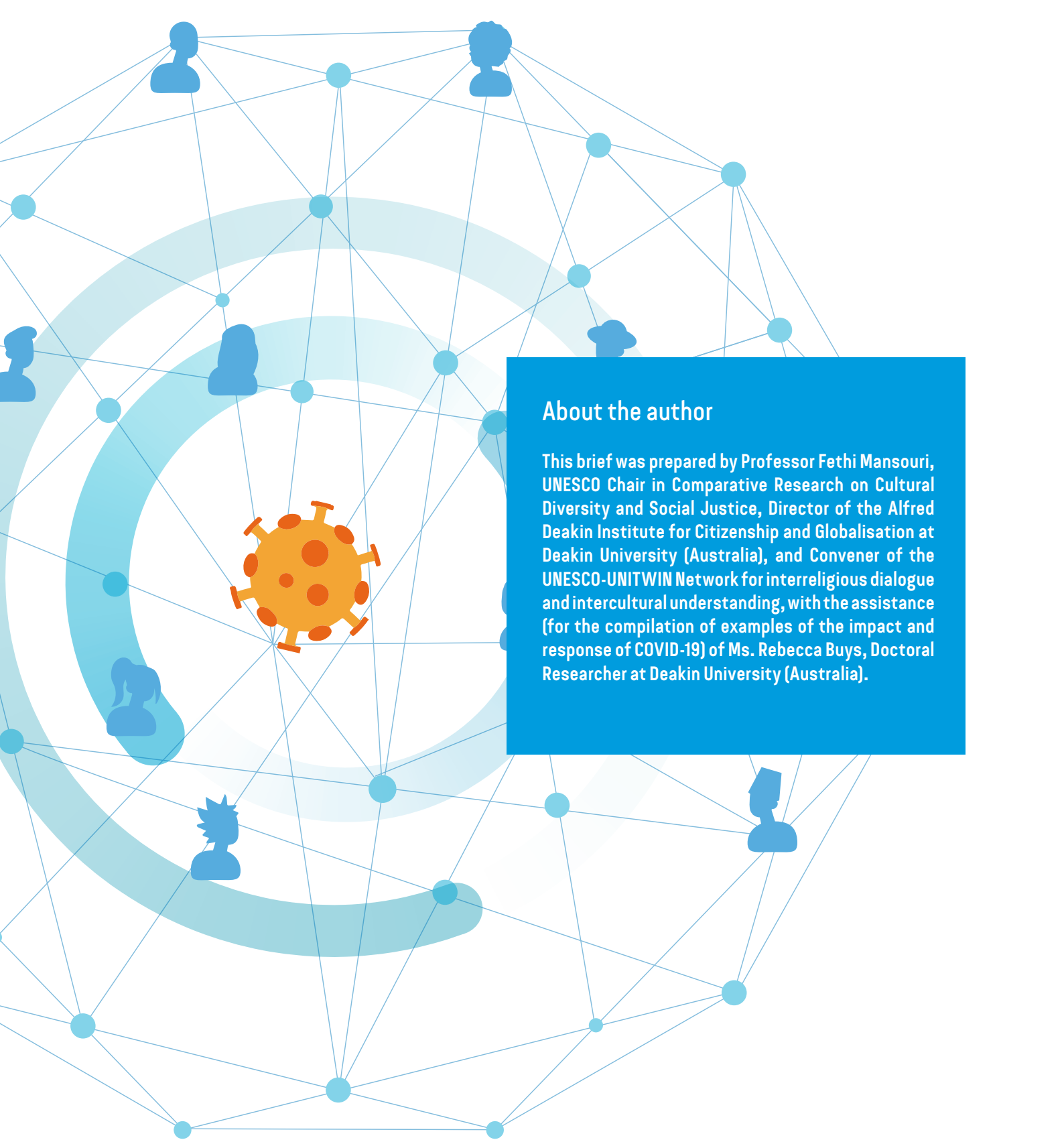
The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated entrenched inequalities within and across societies. This has reignited a new global consciousness seeking to redress social injustices and racial discrimination that has been captured by the Black Lives Matter movement which reflects a growing awareness of the systemic drivers of racism and discrimination. As the world continues to come to grips with these new realities and associated challenges, the role of ICD becomes more needed now than ever before as it offers both the ethics as well as the tools required to engage in inclusive, participatory and respectful deliberations about the post COVID-19 agenda.

There is no doubt that the way governments, industry and communities respond to COVID-19 will have serious, long-term implications for the world community during and post COVID-19. As the diverse, creative responses reported in this brief show, the emerging post COVID-19 world will be shaped by new dynamics and complex realities immersed in virtual inter-connectivity and driven by cross-sectoral engagements. To this end, the ICD agenda will have a significant role to play in developing a new socio-cultural compact that will contribute to shaping the way we live, work, connect and engage across national, ethnic and civilizational lines.

As the examples reported in this brief show, the many creative responses to the pandemic have led to significant reshaping of social activities, work practices and everyday lives. These highlight that COVID-19 will not signal the end of intercultural understanding, multilateralism and globalization. Rather the creative, inter-sectoral responses to the pandemic demonstrate the importance of global connectivity and intercultural dialogue in driving international collaboration and global peace.

In responding to this post COVID-19 global agenda, ICD will serve as an important deliberative tool for communities, societies and inter-governmental bodies keen to engage in discussions about the optimal pathways towards a speedy, but ultimately sustainable, recovery within the broader context of the SDGs agenda. To this end the global community will need the proactive, positive ICD framing in order to consider and agree upon the optimal strategies towards:

- More equitable and sustainable development across the globe where ICD's deliberative capacity will be critical in discussing, negotiating and committing to a shared and mutually binding global development agenda;
- More inclusive, convivial societies will be even more needed post COVID-19 where ICD will be needed because of its emphasis on mutuality, exchange, respect and transformative change;
- More creative and resilient communities able to adapt and respond at times of crises where ICD's role will be essential for negotiating new socio-political contracts that are locally empowering, creatively co-designed, and premised on more sustainable and equitable access to resources.



About the author

This brief was prepared by Professor Fethi Mansouri, UNESCO Chair in Comparative Research on Cultural Diversity and Social Justice, Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University (Australia), and Convener of the UNESCO-UNITWIN Network for interreligious dialogue and intercultural understanding, with the assistance (for the compilation of examples of the impact and response of COVID-19) of Ms. Rebecca Buys, Doctoral Researcher at Deakin University (Australia).

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