

**ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: EXPANDING
AND APPLYING OUR KNOWLEDGE BASE AND
STRATEGIC OPTIONS**

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Abstract

The study examined Environmental Public Relations (EPR) strategies as intervention to caution the challenges of confronting sustainable development in Africa. The objective is premised on the effect of public relations on environmental sustainability with special emphasis on social, cultural, economic, political, physical, global, communication, administrative, legal and education environment. Mobilisation, participating social marketing and effective utilization of public relations tools and strategies will assist create the needed environmental education that will results in change in attitude of the people to become environmental friendly. It was concluded that the situation of Africa countries, in terms of sustainable development level, will improve if the concept of environmental sustainability is properly anchored while deploying the necessary public relations strategies.

Keywords: Environment, Public Relations, Development, Knowledge base, Strategic options,

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to what the rich and powerful advocates of globalization will like us to believe, a casual look at the world around us will show that the globe is indeed, nearer than ever before, to the brink of a major crisis. While these advocates will like us to believe that the present globalised economy will lead us to a global Eldorado brought about by rapid economic and overall development in every part of the world, the glaring gap between the poor and the rich at global and national levels, point to the gathering storm or global crisis. While they are covering our eyes and deadening our nerves with their boom scenario messages of a rapid industrialization in a globalised economy, they keep mum about the impending doom scenario of the damages being done to man and his environment by the same global industrialization efforts. They also hardly ever mention the balancing effects of the globalization scenario.

While globalization preachers sing to the roof tops the strengths, glamour and great benefits of the agents or tools of industrialization and globalization like the information and communication technologies (ICTs), the energy technology, biotechnology or genetic engineering and materials (e.g. fibre glass or fibre optics), they intentionally play down the negative impacts of these technologies on man and his environment. In their best moods or when pressed against the wall by environmental activists or the growing complaints of the faceless poor and wretched of the earth, they pay lip services or make hollow and unenforceable policies and promises on environmental issues and problems.

It is because of this age-long abject neglect, prevarications and deceits that the achievement of sustainable global development through sustainable environment protection policies and actions, has remained a mirage from the Adamic age and the stone age to the present age. Since the Adamic age, for instance, the Almighty God and Creator of mother earth, had given man the power over everything in

the earth, with of course the responsibility to protect it. In the words of God (Genesis 1:28) "...Be fruitful and multiply, and *replenish* the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over everything that moveth upon the earth." Ugly man took the raw destructive power contained in the above statement (contrary to what God meant) and seems to have forgotten completely the charge by God that he should also continually "*replenish*" the earth. And to make the matter worse for mother earth and us all, man gave literary interpretation to God's injunction that he should "*subdue*" and "*have dominion*" over everything on earth. He therefore did not only conquer or subdue, dominate or rule everything in mother earth, but went ahead to primitivistically destroy, plunder and loot everything, to his own detriment. God must by now be angry with man and may therefore allow the impending environmental doom or crisis. We hope not.

Similarly, that great Greek philosopher, Plato, was as far back as two and half millennia ago, warning man about his anti-environmental behaviours and its consequences (including perhaps God's ire) when he wrote that "by comparison with the original territory (or earth), what is left now is like the skeleton of a body wasted by disease" (in Taylor, 1963). Who knows what Plato would say if he were to be alive today. He would probably be so amazed that he would lack words to express his feelings. Or, like the present-day philosophers and writers, he would be shouting himself almost to death, hoping that someone somewhere would listen. One of such present-day philosophers and a leading writer/researcher on the environment, for example, has kept warning man about the impending environmental disaster, crisis or doom. He has warned that we are in the embrace of an environmental crisis that is coiling (like a big python) around more and more regions and ecosystems.

That philosopher/writer, Paul Harrison, (1994:270) has also

observed that "accelerating deforestation in the South, forest death in the North, red tides, the ozone hole, the threat of global warming: all have arrived over the space of a mere fifteen years. Underlying these is the long attrition of biological diversity and progressive degradation of land." He used his book-length study of this problem to show how population explosion, rising consumption and *damaging technologies* have combined to create the biggest environmental crisis in human history. In his own words:

Crisis spurred the agricultural and industrial revolutions. It may now speed the third, revolution. The transition to Sustainable development. The race is on between our power to damage and our ability to achieve balance with the environment: Can we act before circumstances force our hands? Hamlet had less than half an hour to live when he finally killed Claudius. Can we break the Hamlet Syndrome?

Put in another way, the question that all of us should answer, based on the above well- thought questions and statements are: Can we avert the impending environmental catastrophe in the world? Can we act now? Can we start now to work towards achieving sustainable development through sustainable environmental management practices or behaviours? These are million naira questions, which every person must answer whether he is among the leaders or the led, whether he is in the developed or less developed countries. For us in Africa, they are life and death questions that demand very urgent answers.

One sure route to our first step in answering the above questions is by ensuring that everyone everywhere in Africa (and

beyond) is well informed and educated on the environmental issues facing Africa and the world today. And we shall be quick in adding that, -first and foremost, the professionals or the people who will handle this environmental information and education efforts or campaigns, must ensure that they themselves are fully informed and educated on the environmental issues and problems as well as how to impart their knowledge on others, by continually expanding their knowledge bases.

These are the planks that form the foundation of this article, which focuses on how 'public relations and other related strategies can be systematically employed in successfully managing environmental issues and problems, in order to ultimately achieve sustainable development in Africa and the world. Though the focus of the article is mainly on Nigeria and Africa, its applications and scope go far beyond the African continent.

To achieve the objectives of the article, we shall introduce and explain the concept of environmental public relations (EPR); offer an EPR model that will help us to properly understand and apply it; explain the concepts of holism, ecology and sustainability as keys to EPR understandings and applications; identify and explain selected marketing and management and environmental scanning strategies that can be applied in EPR management; and offer some specific EPR strategies that EPR and other public relations managers can adopt, adapt and apply in various modified forms and contexts. And in doing all these, we shall be guided by the thesis or understanding that EPR can and should be applied to inform and communicate and educate more effectively, elicit goodwill, build consensus, influence people's opinions, attitudes as well as judgments, and ultimately influence their actions or behaviours towards our endangered environment.

What Is Environmental Public Relations (EPR)?

It seems necessary, to proceed by more pointedly defining and explaining the concept of environmental public relations for easier reference, perusal and understanding.

Simply put, environmental public relations is a specialized area of public relations and reputation management practice that focuses on how best to apply relevant public relations principles, practices, strategies, techniques, models and tactics in any effort to properly manage environmental issues, problems and projects and so ensure the achievement of sustainable development objectives at the communal or local, national, regional and global or international level. But it is much more than this as we shall see later. It is a specialised public relations concept or strategy, which grew out of our observed utter neglect of the deliberate, planned and systematic application of relevant public relations and reputation management strategies at various levels in past attempts to manage environmental issues and problems.

EPR is a specialised public relations and reputation management strategy that also arose from our observation that even those environmental management managers or experts who make any effort at all to apply public relations and reputation management do so lackadaisically, haphazardly, adhocishly, halfheartedly, tokenistic ally and without making any real effort to first acquire some good working knowledge of public relations and reputation management; or employ some trained public relations executives or managers to work with them; or use the services of professional public relations consultants, in order to properly apply public relations strategies in the management of environmental problems, issues and projects.

EPR also grew out of our observed gap in knowledge in the area of public relations literature or studies and practice, and our desire

to contribute towards the filling of that gap with the hope that more public relations scholars and experts will start doing more research and publishing more technical journal articles and books that will help to create abundant and reliable body of knowledge in this specialised area of public relations (EPR) that touches on all aspect of our existence in this earth, no matter where we are because, for example, the air we breath, the water we all drink and the sunshine we all enjoy, know no boundaries.

If public relations and reputation management is a relatively new management function and is consequently facing many misperceptions, misunderstandings, misapplications and even poor recognition and under utilisation, we should expect that the much newer environment public relations (EPR) is bound to face all these negative factors and a lot more. The problem though is that EPR as a specialized area of public relations and reputation management practice, has to do with life and death because of its focus on critical and dangerous problems in the ecosystem or the human environment that can massively destroy man, animals, plants and indeed the entire earth as we know it today. Even though crises and issues management as a specialized area in modern public relations and reputation management, have to do with life and death (Nwosu, 1996), it is not as crucial as EPR, at least for two reasons.

Firstly, most issues and crisis management are usually geo-specific and their consequences hardly ever pose life and death danger to the entire earth or a very high percentage of the world's population. Secondly, strictly speaking, a major focus in issues and crisis management is the environment. This is because many environmental problems today have gone beyond mere localized problems to global issues, and if not properly managed at the issue stage, as research on crisis management have shown, they will sooner than later graduate into full-blown crisis (Nwosu, 1996), in line with the CRISIS LIFE CYCLE discussed in detail in the book. Public Relations management

by Ikechukwu Nwosu (1996, 104-122). In fact, many of the environmental issues in the world today are already at the crisis level or stage and many United Nations Agencies, nations, governments and Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) are already spending billions of Dollars in tackling them as global challenges. All these go to clearly and strongly demonstrate the importance of EPR.

The other side of EPR: The flip side of the coin:

Under this sub-title, we will further expand our understanding of EPR in this paper by giving other definitions and explanation of it, in addition to the ones we have given already. We shall also design and describe an EPR model that will help us to more clearly understand what it is or what it does. All these will be aimed at expanding the one-sided and unidirectional definition and the explanations of the concept of EPR, which we intentionally gave earlier because that is easy to understand, and also because that is really the major focus of or approach to EPR we want to emphasise in this paper.

In offering these other sides or dimensions of meaning of EPR, our emphasis will extend to the inescapable fact that environmental issues and problems themselves influence EPR decisions, communications and activities or practices. These constitute what we described above as the flip side of the coin in EPR management and practices, which we should bear in mind and be guided by. They also underscore the need for us to adopt a multi- dimensional, wide-spectrum and holistic approach to the understanding and application of EPR principles and strategies.

Towards an Expanded and a more Appropriate Definition of EPR

We can define EPR as a set of public relations management activities that are aimed at creating public acceptance and competitive advantage for any corporate entity by convincing its stakeholders (domestic and international) that its policies, products and activities are totally harmless to the environment or at least environmentally friendly (especially when compared with the policies and activities of their competitors, this definition sounds right and appropriate. But it is narrow, simplistic and incomplete. It is at best only 50% of what EPR is or should be, as we shall see later. It is also similar to the intentionally simple definition of EPR we gave earlier.

It can also be said to be opportunistic and heavily focused on or directed towards the achievement of tactical advantage, rather than the pursuit of the strategic change needed to ensure the achievement of broad and specific environment and societal development goals and objectives. Furthermore, it is dangerously too close to the now-discredited lip-service and lopsided or one-sided approach by companies (especially commercial or profit oriented ones) to dealing with environmental problems and issues. As one critic of this discredited approach rightly observed, "selling and Public Relations activities with a green theme were rife, but this had little connection to customer (stakeholder) needs or to realities of the environment impact of the products (and policies) involved" (Peattie, 1995).

A publishing company may, for example, write on all its publications the following promotional and environmental-friendly stunt or statement: "The Publisher's policy is to use paper manufactured from sustainable forests" (Pitman Publishing Company, London). That is well and good. But we need to go beyond this slogan or statement, get inside the company or organization, critically examine its policies, products and activities, and most importantly,

procure research insights from its internal and external stakeholders, before we can give it the credit of being a truly environment - friendly company. That is the only way.

It is imperative, therefore, that for us to get closer to the true, expanded and appropriate meaning, definition and explanation of EPR we must relate it to or situate it in the very complex and inseparable socio-cultural, political, economic, technological, physical (ecosystem) and other environments in which organisations (profit and non-profit) and their stakeholders or publics exist and interact with each other.

Based on all these, we shall operationally define EPR in this article as follows:

EPR is a holistic management process and a specialized area of public relations management that is responsible for identifying and anticipating (forecasting) the ecosystem needs, interest, policies, public activities, issues and programmes of any corporate entity (e.g. company, country or state parastatal); and implementing sustainable programme of public relations actions and communication that will reconcile them with the ecosystem needs, interests, expectation, demands, activities, problems and policies of the stakeholders of that corporate entity (domestic and global), policies and actions, as well as the perception and acceptance of that corporate entity, its products, services, policies and activities as environmentally friendly by all domestic and global stakeholders of the corporate entity and the environment.

This is an intentionally long definition that is supposed to, at the same time explain the various dimensions of EPR, especially its essential two sides that will always remind the EPR manager that while he is using public relations and oilier related strategies to ensure

that his organization is environment-friendly, he should never forget to factor in these environmental problems, actors and issues into his organization's policies, projects, programmes, plans and activities because, whether he likes it or not, these environmental problems, issues and actors do have significant or serious influence on his organisation's EPR policies, activities, performance and overall rating on the environmental-friendliness or management scale in the mind and eyes of environmental actors and the general public (domestic and global). This might be described as the dualism in or the dual nature of effective EPR management.

Towards a Holistic Model of EPR

To further expand our understanding of EPR principle and applications, we shall offer and explain below our EPR model (Nwosu, 2002: 12):

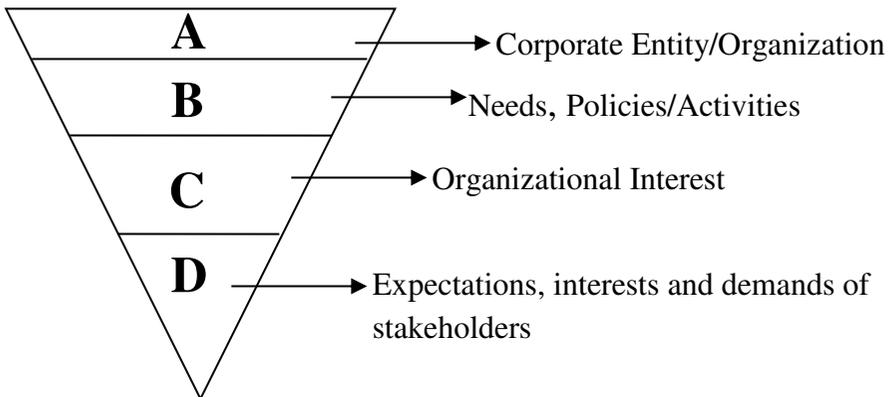


Figure 1.1: EPR Model

As shown in Fig. 1.1 the inverted triangle ABC encapsulates or encloses the recommended Holistic EPR strategy that forms the hub of the Holistic Four Triangle Model of Environmental Public Relations. In this inverted triangle, the A tip or segment represents the corporate entity or organization concerned whose environmental performance is being handled with EPR strategy. The A tip also shows that we should start by identifying, understanding and critically examining how that organization's general policies, goals, objectives corporate strategies and plans are influenced or are sensitive to environmental issues and problems as well as how they can influence the organisation's ecosystem or environmental needs, policies, activities etc. which are shown in tip B or segment B of the ABC inverted triangle. Triangle ABC shows and emphasises the need to reconcile always the ecosystem or environmental needs, policies, activities and interests of that organization with the environmental needs, expectations, interests, demands, and activities of its stakeholders or publics, all in a holistic manner.

Holism, Ecology Sustainability and EPR:

Another look at our operational or expanded definition of EPR above will show that we worked with the concepts of holism, ecology and sustainability in trying to come up with that definition. We therefore need to tightly explain and discuss them here to further bring out their meanings and utility in understanding and practicing EPR management.

The origin of the concept of holism can be traced or credited to J. Smuts who in his 1920 book entitled *Holism and Evolution* stated that nature's evolution and progressions towards ever more complex forms and organization is driven by a tendency to form wholes that are *more* than sum of the parts, through the process or ordered groupings, and that it is only through the appreciation of the whole entities and interactions among them that life can be understood. Smuts' 1920

holism concept must have directly or indirectly influenced Luding von Bertalanffy's (1968) General Systems Theory because there are a lot of similarities between their thoughts and conclusions. It is also on record that it was as from the 1960s and 1970s that management experts like Peter Drucker (1973) and L. Unterman (1974) started promoting the idea or concept of holism in management studies and practice. All these gave birth to the holistic management strategy.

But as Paettie (1995: 30) rightly points out, "the holistic management strategy "was originally prescribed for companies to tackle the problems of internal control and coordination. In other words, it had an internal closed system and production orientation". And as the operational definition and the model of EPR we offered in this paper clearly shows, holism in EPR management must involve taking an internal and external open- systems marketing orientation to achieve the desired objectives. This involves seeing the organization concerned, not just as a holistic corporate entity in techno- economic terms, " but as part of a socio-environmental ecological system." (Paettie, 1995:31).

Marketing Strategies in EPR:

Since EPR is a holistic management process, its practice must extend far beyond the normally recognised boundaries of public relations theory and practice, especially in terms of its philosophy, strategies, techniques and mode of application. For example, EPR must be more proactive and interactive than the run-of-the-mill public relations practice, or management. It must also put into use many more marketing and management strategies than general public relations practice. For example, it must be guided by the principles of SOCIETAL MARKETING which is essentially a marketing philosophy that emphasises that corporate social responsibility (CSR) or community relations (CR) principle of ensuring that we use EPR to make sure that our companies or other organisations contribute

appreciably or reasonably to any society or community in which they operate or do business in, so that they will not be seen a distant, uncaring or uninterested landlords whose only interest is to collect their rents (profits) *at the end of* every month and smile to the banks while citizens of these societies and communities suffer neglect and poverty.

Related to the concept of societal marketing is the concept of SOCIAL MARKETING, which is very often confused with societal marketing. But while societal marketing, is more of a marketing philosophy, social marketing is more of a marketing strategy, which is used only in the marketing of not-for profit products, services, ideas and institutions, such as environment issues, and problems. Also important is the concept of DEMARKETING which refers to the marketing strategy that can be used to stop a consumer from consuming harmful products like cigarette and marijuana, or engaging in unwholesome behaviours like having multiple sex partners as well as polluting the environment with all kinds of waste materials.

In addition, the EPR manager is expected to embrace the principle and strategies of RELATIONSHIP MARKETING which essentially involves building and sustaining close and lasting relationship with customers, distributors, suppliers and other important or special stakeholders of the organization to maintain loyalty, cooperation and lasting respect and understanding. This can be quite an expensive strategy, but the payoff is worth it especially when properly applied and managed. The EPR manager should not have problem with this because relationship marketing grew out from the good old marketing support function of public relations known as CUSTOMER RELATIONS or customer care/services (Nwosu, 1996: 5 -8).

EPR and Sustainable Development

What about the SUSTAINABILITY concept and its relationship to and applications in EPR management? This concept has its root in the concept of sustainable development, which has its origin in the 1980 World Conservation Strategy, which was further crystallized and more widely disseminated in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). Sustainable Development has been defined as the development strategy that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987).

Jacobs (1991), identified the three key components of sustainability which we believe will serve as appropriate guides to the understanding and application of the sustainability concept by the EPR manager and his team. The first component is *Futurity* which involves the adoption, in all we do as EPR managers, a long-term perspective which gives equal consideration to the needs of future generations and to our own needs, both at the individual and corporate levels, especially with respect to environmental protection or preservation. The second component is *Welfarism*, which underscores, the need for EPR manager, his team and us all to always factor into our activities and policies a deep consideration of the benefits accruable to every individual in every society from these policies and activities. This will help to ensure improved quality of life for all, now and in the future. The third component or element of sustainability is *Equity*. This calls for a concerted effort by individuals and organisations to endeavour to balance the distributions of economic costs and benefits between different communities, countries, regions, socio-economic classes, ethnic groups, religious, races and sexes in all that they do. This sense of equity and fair judgment will no doubt form a cardinal point in the EPR management policies and activities of any organization, for it to achieve any reasonable results or impact in managing environmental issues and problems.

Perhaps it is for these and many other reasons that can be given that a senior lecturer in Strategic Management at the Cardiff Business School. Ken Peattil (1995:33) has emphatically stated that:

Sustainability is no longer an alternative policy; it is now a generally agreed principle of future economic growth and development. The international chamber of commerce's Charter for Sustainability has been signed by over 1000 of the world's leading companies, and sustainability is an inherent part of the European Union (EU) policy, following the publication of the Fifth Environmental-Action (Plan), Towards Sustainability.

We cannot agree more with the above statements and will indeed hasten to add that (the whole of Africa through the AU (formerly OAU) have in 2001 and 2002 fully endorsed the principles and practical applications of sustainability as a development and environmental management philosophy. This is contained in the historic policy document entitled New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

CONCLUSION

All that has been written in this article go to strongly demonstrate the great importance of EPR as specialised area of public relations management, research and practice that should be given the urgent and serious attention it deserves, in our own collective interest as homo sapiens, nations, regions and inhabitants of mother earth. For these and many other reasons that can be given, we strongly recommend that all academic departments, or programmes that teach or offer public relations (including marketing, mass communication

and environmental studies departments) universities and polytechnics should introduce at least one general and compulsory course in environmental public relations and reputation management (EPRM), plus one specialized EPRM course. Industries, government, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations should also closely liaise and work with these academic and research programmes or departments in the institutions of higher learning, to promote all kinds of interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary researches, training and education in all areas of the ecosystem, or the physical environment.

Professional chairs in EPRM should be established; specialized institutes and centers on EPRM and the environment in general should be set up in these institutions of higher learning and their existing programmes on the environment should be adequately supported financially, materially and in every other way. These are already happening in the developed countries of Europe and the United States of America. It should start happening in the developing countries of Africa Asia, Latin America, and Middle East. That is the only way forward for everybody, organization, nation and continent. It is the only hope for sustainable data generation, ideas generation, strategies formulations, decision making and action taking that will ensure the survival of mother earth. After doing all these, we should leave the rest to the Almighty God who created mother earth and other planets in the first place.

Finally, we like to start drawing the curtain in this paper by charging the EPR managers in Nigeria, Africa, and every part of the world to study and put to practice the tenets of the now-historic "PRA CODES OF PRACTICE on Public Relations and Environment" produced by the International Public Association (1992). Among other things the code prescribes that:

1. Members shall not publicise products, organisations, or service

claiming environmental benefit, unless those are demonstrable in the light of current science and technology.

2. Members shall endeavour all times to promote openness, which fairly handles facts and concerns related to the environment and development.
3. Members shall seek to develop programmes, which counsel and communicate the benefits of balanced consideration of environment, economic and social development.
4. Members shall provide a free flow of information within and through IPRA concerning environmental development issues on an international level.

National public relations institutes and other professional associations such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations should come up with, and more importantly religiously enforce, environment protection codes of ethics and standards, with the IPRA Code above as guide. This will help their members to deliver resoundly the result that various organisations and individuals are expecting from them in the crucial area of EPR managers must also present adequately the community, society, public or people's views and facts on the environment to ensure a balance information mix of flow pattern that will guide decisions and actions in all quarters on environmental problems and issues.

The General Manager (Public Affairs) of Chevron Nigeria Limited, Mr. Sola Omole did not only underscore the expectation of many actors in environmental management that Public Public relations managers and practitioners should lead the way in the crusade to protect the environment, but would agree with the missing link we supplied or added to Dr. Adegoroye's charge above. This is why he

environment public relations and public information management.

There are many of such publicly asserted or vocalized expectations from public relations practitioners and managers, but we shall offer only two of such assertion. One came from no less a person than the Director General/Chief Executive of the Nigeria's Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA), Dr. Adegoroye (1997:13). In his words,

it is in this respect, among others, that the greatest and true catalyst that is an inalienable and indispensable requirement for the realization of our stated vision in PUBLIC RELATIONS! Credible and prompt information to the public resolution of interagency role conflicts; removing distortions in interpretation of environmental information available or disseminated to the public: presenting government views based on scientific and sociological facts; etc. are in my view, the areas of expertise of public relation officers.

What a powerful confidence/expectation! What a powerful charge! But to these assertions and charges we must add a very important missing link, that missing link ishas written, (Omole, 1997:11) "public relations, especially environmental public relations, must be built on credible, authoritative information. All of the brightly colored and beautiful looking advertisements and printed brochures mean nothing, if they are not based on facts, Environmental public relations in our industry must be responsible for projecting and

advertising (promoting' authenticated information as well as demonstrating and accepting accountability when there is a problem." We agree completely with this very balanced and well- though-out assertion.

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