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Dimensions of Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Child Protection Work—A Collection and Analysis of Practices in Southeast Europe*

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Abstract

Multi-agency and interdisciplinary collaboration working across and within sectors and teams is critical to ensure that children are adequately protected from any risk of abuse. Research indicates that children are most effectively protected when agencies and stakeholders work together. This is because it is almost impossible for a single agency to respond adequately to any allegation and the complex nature of child abuse. Countries in South East Europe are actively engaged in developing and refining their child protection systems over the last 20 years. Considerable efforts are placed on introducing and building the capacity of workers to respond to child abuse from a system and multi-agency perspective. Barriers to effective multi-agency working include: systems which are not designed or are overly complicated for the reality of the context; lack of training and resources; long-standing and entrenched attitudes towards other professionals and co-working; and a lack of accountability and ownership.

Keywords

Child protection, interdisciplinary collaboration, multi-disciplinary practice

Information upon which the review was based was obtained from two sources: (1) selected literature review; and (2) semi-structured interviews with professionals from all countries and a focus group discussion with representatives of eight countries[1]. The paper aims to explore different approaches to multi-agency and interdisciplinary work in the area of child protection from eight countries in South East Europe. It will present some factors influencing the development of such practice, associated with challenges and achievements as well as with reflections on how to further improve such work. It should be noted that information on multi-agency working is often fragmented and reviews are not routinely conducted. The paper does not undertake the role to compare countries; instead, it aims to bring a review of various practices, dimensions, and relationships and how this translates into actions to protect children from all forms of abuse.

CRITICAL ISSUES AND INFLUENCING FACTORS

While multi-agency working seems a relatively straightforward and pragmatic way of approaching child protection and utilizing the available resources

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and expertise, it rapidly becomes clear that one of the first challenges is defining what is meant by multi-agency working both at a general level and also within a specific country (Atkinson, Jones, and Lamont 2007). Partly this is to do with the conceptual framing of multi-agency working within a country, but it is also a product of how multi-agency working has developed within contexts, shaped by historical and cultural perspectives. Below presented are some critical issues drawn from the analysis.

Issue 1: A Question of Terminology

Different terms are used in the literature and in legal, policy, and practice context to express the multi-dimensional engagement of various professionals in working with issues of child abuse and protection. According to Atkinson et al. (2007), the activity that could be characterized as "multi-agency" is referred to by a large number of different terms. Within the practice of case management of individual cases, multi-agency working has been described as a process where "several professional groups, various knowledge and skill bases and different agencies are drawn together in a structure to provide services" (Payne 2000). In its broadest terms, multi-agency working incorporates the concepts of partnership, collaboration, and co-operation. It consists of a network of professionals from different agencies who work together to meet the needs of the client group (Balloch and Taylor 2001). It involves more than one agency working together in a planned, joint, and formal manner and it adopts a whole systems approach to service delivery which examines personal, family, social, educational, and environmental aspects of life (McInnes 2007).

The confusing nature of some of these terms can make research more complex and lead to difficulties in making comparisons between studies (Atkinson et al. 2007). Common terms used include: "partnership working", "interprofessional collaboration", "multi-disciplinary team (MDT)", "multi- or inter-agency team (MAT)", "co-operative practice", "joint-working", "transdisciplinary working", "multi-sectoral team (MST)", and "child protection team (CPT)" (Atkinson et al. 2007). Useful distinctions can be made among:

(1) Multi-agency/multi-disciplinary working—where more than one agency works with a child, family, or project but not necessarily jointly. Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. Lloyd, Stead, and Kendrick (2001) had described this as a "terminological quagmire".

(2) Interagency working—where more than one agency works together in a planned and formal way. Such work can be at different levels, either strategic or operational and is typically framed within policy and practice such as enshrined in law or articulated through shared Standard Operating Procedures and Protocols (McInnes 2007).

(3) Joint working—where professionals from more than one agency work together on a particular project or scheme. For example, speech and language therapists and early years' workers work together delivering group work to vulnerable children (Atkinson et al. 2007).

Issue 2: The Question of Remit and Function

Often discussions regarding multi-agency working imply that there is one way of working together to protect children. In fact, there is no single model for multi-agency working. Models are reflecting varying degrees of integration across the various elements of collaboration, and in particular, the remit and expected function of the multi-agency approach. The desired degree of integration is dependent on the focus and goals of the work and the purposes and length of case involvement. The review of various models and practices has shown that a variety of multi-agency working approaches have several aspects which can be used to differentiate them from each other and which relate to:

(1) The purpose of multi-agency work: such as assessment, planning intervention, investigation, decision making, advice and recommendation to

justice, review of child death, etc. This relates to whether multi-agency work is seen as a mechanism to be used in relation to the management and intervention of individual cases (typically using a case management approach) or whether multi-agency working is seen as being integral to broader actions aimed at preventing abuse.

(2) The trigger criteria when multi-agency working is stimulated, are defined through threshold criteria for addressing needs of the case (for example, if the child needs to go through court proceedings or is involved in a criminal case, or if there is a suspicion of significant harm or the child is "at risk").

(3) The location where the multi-agency working takes place (in social services, prosecutor office, hospital, center, etc.).

(4) The leadership and context (executive functioning of different agencies). This also relates to the historical and cultural contexts over time and how changes and developments are undertaken and linked to the development of the broader systems of child welfare and child protection.

Issue 3: The Differing Models

Irrespective of the remit and function, the strength of multi-agency working is seen as lying in the diversity of opinions and ideas represented, rather than its ability to bring the opinions of participants to some common viewpoint. While multi-agency work has evolved, there is no prescription for a good or bad model. Instead, we could speak about "evolving models". Different promising practices established suggest that an adequate model of multi-agency work needs to consider some factors such as: local context; resources available; availability of other services; capacities of human resources; and the development of trust and working relationships. Serving children and families should be the primary focus, but attention needs to be paid to the personnel that will work with the model and make it functional. Review of relevant literature shows that distinctions can be made among five main approaches to multi-agency work, which can individually or in combination depending on the country and choices made (either deliberately or organically), form the basis of the "model" employed (Duggan and Corrigan 2009).

(1) Decision-making: To provide a forum where professionals from different agencies can meet to discuss issues and to make decisions.

(2) Consultation and training—the primary purpose is the sharing of experience and expertise through professionals from one agency enhancing the expertise of those of another by providing consultation and training. Integrated response—gathering a range of expertise together in one place to deliver a more coordinated and comprehensive service—is in effect a "one-stop shop".

(3) Coordinated response—the main aim is to draw together many agencies involved in the delivery of services so that a more coordinated and cohesive response to needs identified can be adopted. This is typically achieved by the appointment of a coordinator with responsibility for pulling together previously disparate services.

(4) Operational team delivery—the aim is for professionals from different agencies to work together on a day-to-day basis and to form a cohesive multi-agency team that delivered services directly to clients.

(5) Even though the individual model may differ, multi-agency working approaches in addressing cases of children subject to abuse do have similarities. Such approaches have developed over time to tackle some issues with responding to child abuse cases and include shared responsibilities in protecting and caring for children, addressing the complex and dilemmatic nature of child abuse effectively, and eliminating "the trauma of the system effects" on children.

Issue 4: Influencing Factors and the Broader Context

As mentioned in the introduction, the focus on

developing comprehensive national child protection systems has led from *ad hoc* ways of working together—based mainly on individual workers' preferences and beliefs—towards a more systematic approach to collaboration. There are some factors which influence the development of models such as: context; resources; level of integration; availability of services; legislation framework; integration and recognition of community-based mechanisms; and approaches to decentralization versus centralization of social welfare systems. Another essential aspect to consider is the different typologies of national child protection systems as these relate to the conceptions of child abuse and the best way to protect children. For example, variations in the way child welfare/protection systems respond to concerns about child abuse and how much they are characterized by child protection or a family service orientation will impact on the nature of multi-agency working (Gilbert 1997). Related to this is the point at which multi-agency working as a principle is introduced and where models are transplanted based on experiences from elsewhere or if an attempt has been made to strengthen what exists in the country and design a model that is specific to, and reflects the specific context of the country. A wide range of factors determine the functioning of multi-agency working such as: (1) agency differences; (2) local authority structures and boundaries; (3) staffing arrangements and time investment; (4) individuals' and agencies' expectations and priorities; (5) agencies' aims and objectives; (6) budgets and finances; (7) confidentiality and information-sharing protocols; and (8) development of a common language and shared understanding.

A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF MAIN LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS IN THE PRACTICE OF CHILD PROTECTION IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

The embedding of the multi-agency approach in legal and policy frameworks is essential if it is to become institutionalized and adopted consistently. This also includes ensuring that the necessary resources are dedicated to supporting its operationalization. While multi-agency working may be desired and may present an effective way of working with children and families, the application of the approach can differ especially in terms of when it is applied. An emerging trend, not just in South East Europe, is for case management and multi-agency working to be seen as equivalent. However, they are two separate things. Although multi-agency working is often a feature of case management, it does not have to be included as part of case management (since case management is merely an identified process for making sure cases are handled appropriately, consistently, and timely). Similarly, multi-agency working can be applied to child protection in the absence of a case management approach. Decisions regarding mandate and scope are intricately linked to the introduction of the concept of multi-agency working.

In Albania, much of the legal framework is still issue-based rather than taking a broad systems-approach to child protection. At the same time, because the laws have historically been issue-driven, there are resulting issue-specific legislative gaps (Ferrone and Chzhen 2015). The first law on the Protection of Children's Rights was approved in 2010. After almost six years of implementation, the law was revised in 2016, by introducing a more comprehensive improvement towards a systemic approach to child protection. Multi-disciplinary design in the law is beginning to bring an increasingly systemic approach to CP (Child Protection) across ministries, at least in theory. The law on child rights already has elements of decentralized structures and services that support the general development of local governments. The 2010 law is helpful in mandating a CP Unit (CPU) that is responsible for the case management for children and families at risk and foresees a CP worker (CPW)

position at the municipal level and in outlining the additional duties and responsibilities of the CPU. The Decision of the the Council of Ministers (DCM) no. 334 "On mechanisms and procedures for domestic violence" further provides clarity on the procedures and guidance on completing forms and the procedures in the cases of violence and abuse. The principle of the multi-disciplinary approach is stipulated in the normative framework and is a principle widely acknowledged for its importance. Multi-agency working is more elaborated in the Protocol of the Child Protection Workers, and in the DCM on the "Mechanism of coordination of work for the referral of cases of victims of domestic violence". Multi-agency working is carried out through multi-disciplinary teams. These are supposed to have a proactive role in the coordination of actions and the implementation and review of individual case plans for children at risk. Several studies undertaken emphasize that, there is a lack of information and understanding about the existing child protection legal framework across ministries and levels. Another persistent challenge is that there is no uniform in-service training and no consistent sensitization on the content of the law on child rights and how to implement it in practice (Westwater and Jovanović 2009). Coordination remains one area in Albania that is not fully functioning and challenged by behavioral, technical, and structural aspects. Horizontal coordination at the national is ineffective and hampered by a weak definition of collective work for all line ministries mandated with child protection. The Child Protection Index report for Albania highlights that because of multi-disciplinary coordination of Child Protection Units, all municipalities lack multi-disciplinary groups (ChildPact 2016a).

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, multi-agency work on child protection is more present in the social protection strategic framework; juvenile justice and other provisions are made as part of the domestic violence legislation. However, some of the new laws such as laws on acting with minors in criminal proceedings, specify the tasks of different agencies in work with juveniles in conflict with the law. The research findings revealed an array of legal and practical barriers that impede children's access to justice and disproportionately affect children in vulnerable situations. Justice institutions and proceedings were designed however not to adapt to meet the unique needs of all children. The use of child-sensitive procedures in Bosnia and Herzegovina is improving, although the application of the full range of protections and support remains *ad hoc*. Mechanisms and resources to ensure that justice proceedings address the needs of children and support their development are still lacking (Ferrone and Chzhen 2015). BiH has a number of permanent government bodies tasked to ensure the coordination of national policy. The distinct levels and autonomy within BiH present a challenge for national and entity coordination. Accordingly, the large number of distinct bodies dilute authority and demand significant efforts of coordination for necessary policy actions and practice of multi-agency coordination. Within the last several years' various referral mechanisms, inter-agency protocols have been established at local levels for different topics such as domestic violence and cases of child begging. These mechanisms are still very fragmented, lack standards, and are thematically oriented although more initiatives exist at the local level that genuinely present the multi-agency working concept. The report on the Child Protection Index recommends to build a unified approach to child protection, BiH has to adopt a comprehensive national law on child rights and protection that can extend the jurisdiction of responsibility to all entities and the cantons (ChildPact 2016f). The responsibility to align and implement legislation remains at each level of authority but can be guided by unified policy. Such a law could provide a pathway to develop coordination mechanisms among central, regional, and local authorities charged with child protection.

The situation in Montenegro also reflects a more thematic approach both to child protection issues and multi-agency working. For example, some essential documents create a framework for multi-disciplinary teams' functioning including the National Action Plan for Children 2013-2017 and the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence. The current Strategy on the Protection against Domestic Violence sets out goals and activities related to enhancing multi-agency cooperation and includes the development of multi-disciplinary models of working on prevention and protection against domestic violence including enhancing cooperation of all stakeholders involved. However, the law does not establish a mandatory duty to create those teams or regulate how teams should function. Although protocols exist regarding multi-agency working, these are limited to cooperation in prevention and protection against domestic violence. A national protocol has been developed and signed by all relevant institutions, to establish and enhance multi-agency cooperation and to regulate the duties and responsibilities of all institutions involved.

In Kosovo national legislation, primarily the Family Law of Kosovo recognizes the importance of the family including children growing up in families and the responsibility of both parents for the growth and education of their children. There is a range of institutions which work towards securing children's rights as provided for in national legislation, and there is a distinction to be made between institutions that provide policies and national strategies with the aim of promoting children's rights and those institutions which deal with the management of individual cases. The Inter-Ministerial Committee for Children's Rights formed in 2008, is chaired by the Prime Minister of Kosovo and brings together all ministries and other stakeholders to ensure that children's rights are central to policies and actions (Save the Children 2013). The Family Law in Kosovo 32/2004 and the Law for Family and Social Services No. 02/L-17, serve as the primary legal framework to regulate family relationships and provision of support for families and individuals in need (Ministry of Justice, Republic of Kosovo 2015). The Centre for Social Work (CSW) at the local level is the primary structure, which identifies and coordinates the provision of services for children in need. Each municipality in Kosovo through the relevant directorate (usually the Directorate of Health and Social Welfare—DHSW) is responsible for providing social and family services within its territory. The role of the DHSW is to identify the nature and extent of need for social and family services through annual plans and maintaining records and statistics, as well as to ensure that the CSW is resourced according to the standards set by the Ministry (Terre des homes 2015). The Centre does the actual delivery of such services for Social Work, through financial or other assistance provided to NGOs to deliver such services. Kosovo has been developing a model of multi-agency working called "Round Tables", which requires the participation of different agencies and stakeholders, with the case manager from the CSW undertaking the role of coordination. Towards the end of 2015, Kosovo developed a protocol to govern the functioning of the Round Tables as a tool to guide the multi-disciplinary work around cases of children in need of protection. The Child Index report for Kosovo, recommends that Kosovo has to further strengthen child protection. Besides, it notes the need for improving coordination mechanisms and case management training to all actors in areas of education, justice agencies (ChildPact 2016c).

In Serbia, there is no single specific Child Protection Law. The proposal for a Law on Children Rights Ombudsman has been in the assembly procedure since 2012, yet is not adopted. This draft law proposal mentions multi-agency cooperation very briefly, as it identifies the roles and responsibilities of the central institutions regarding child protection. Even though specifying the roles and duties of all

significant actors is of great importance for enabling their cooperation, a more detailed framework for working together is not included. However, the general framework for policies related to children is defined by the National Plan of Action for Children for the Period 2004-2015 (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy of the Republic of Serbia 2005b). As part of this framework, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted in 2005, the General Protocol for the Protection of Children from Abuse and Neglect. The purpose of the protocol was to provide a framework for the establishment of a capable, operational, and multi-sector network for the protection of children from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. In addition to the general protocol, individual sectoral protocols were adopted that defined specific roles and procedures in protecting children from abuse and neglect within each relevant sector in the system of protection (education, healthcare, the police, social protection, and the judiciary), following Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF Serbia 2017). This document was the basis for the development of individual protocols that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders and provide mechanisms for cooperation among institutions from different systems. Despite this, research suggests that multi-agency (multi-spectral as it is referred to) cooperation is still in the phase of early development and cooperation among actors varies significantly from one part of the country to the other, depending on the local context within the municipality or city (Gasmi, Lutovac, and Prilja 2017). The Child Protection Index report 2016 for Serbia notes that Centres for Social Work (CSWs) are tasked with case management that includes investigation, coordination with other services, and the appointment of a guardian *ad litem* and referral to needed services. However, the same report recommends that a comprehensive consolidated law on child rights and protection as previously recommended by the UN Child Rights Committee is vital to ensure a comprehensive legal and policy framework for the protection of children and serve as a basis for multi-agency and interdisciplinary work (ChildPact 2016e).

Bulgaria has embraced a more comprehensive approach to child protection and multi-agency working through the Child Protection Act (CPA) adopted in 2000, which sets child protection at the center of public policy (Official Gazette 2010). The Act regulates the rights, principles, and measures for child protection authorities at state and municipal levels, as well as the latter's interaction in the process of child protection. It also ensures the participation of non-profit organizations and individuals in the provision of child protection services and activities. By adopting the CPA, Bulgaria introduced the concept of the systems approach where child protection measures are complemented and implemented with other states acts focused on children and families, for example, in the Education Act and Act to Combat Delinquency of Minors, as well as the relevant regulations for the implementation of the CPA, such as the ordinance criteria and standards for social services for children (Mestan 2011). The national legislation connected with child protection includes a large number of regulations of various ranks—laws, regulations for the implementation of the laws, rules, and others. For each law and regulation, some texts require and regulate multi-agency cooperation, both at the policy and implementation level, including individual cases. There are a wide variety of bodies dealing with the adoption of these and, given the complex processes related to the harmonization of the Bulgarian legislation with the European Union laws and the implementation of common European legislation, this diversity poses questions about possible inconsistency in the application of the laws and the existence of contradictory regulations in practice (ISS & SOS Children's Village 2015). The Child Index report for Bularia highlights that there is a

need for a new and comprehensive family policy that aligns social and economic measures, education, healthcare, housing, child protection, and social assistance for family well-being (ChildPact 2016b). The report recommends that Bulgaria has to assign quality and financial standards to social work and case management to limit the number of cases that a single social worker manages at any given time and increase measures to prevention.

As with Bulgaria, in Romania, there have been a number of changes in the child protection system, initially required to allow the shift from much-centralized child protection based institutional care, which have also included multi-agency approaches to protection. The responsibility for all child protection services (including all types of institutions, support and prevention services) is that of the County authorities with the functioning of multi-agency working being guided by a series of legal documents, i.e. laws, sub-legal acts, protocols, and decisions of the Government and of the National Authority of Child Rights Protection. Law no. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights—Chapter I Article 5 (4)-(4) sets out that the role of the State is to ensure child protection and to guarantee that all the rights through a specific activity are performed by state institutions and public authorities and Article 6 (e)-(e) regarding decentralization of services for child protection intervention and multi-sectoral partnership between public institutions and authorized private bodies. Another essential legislative provision is Government decision no. 49 of 19 January 2011 approving the methodology framework on prevention and intervention in multi-disciplinary teams and networks in situations of violence against children and domestic violence and the methodology of multi-disciplinary intervention. In Romania, local multi-disciplinary teams have a proactive role during the case management process. The case manager with the multi-disciplinary team develops the individualized protection plan or, where appropriate, other plans according to the legislation within 30 days of the case being identified. The case manager, with the multi-disciplinary team, performs a re-evaluation of the child's situation every three months or whenever necessary and reviews the plan as appropriate. Besides, local cross-sectorial teams (EIL/LCST) are made up of designated persons from institutions representing the devolved structures of the local public administration and the autonomous administrative authorities and non-governmental organizations engaged in the prevention, monitoring, and combating of violence and exploitation. Local Multi-disciplinary Teams (LMT) are set up at the county level and the level of each of the districts of Bucharest. Agencies which must be represented include a wide range of sectors and services such as: the labor inspectorate, police, education, public health, and NGOs. The Child Protection Index report, recommends that Romania ensures that all social service departments adequately meet the requirements under case management protocols and continuing education for social workers, as well as, allocate adequate resources to local level social services which remain understaffed and do not meet operational requirements under quality standards for case management protocols (ChildPact 2016d).

Croatia has a more flexible arrangement regarding the requirement for multi-agency working. The Ministry for Social Policy and Youth (MSPY) in Croatia coordinates and governs the bodies that implement child protection policies and procedures, and provides financial assistance for projects designed to improve the well-being and quality of life of children and families. More specifically, the Ministry oversees the Centers for Social Welfare and institutions responsible for child protection. It develops and implements comprehensive national strategies involving child protection as well as conducting, financing, and monitoring projects aimed at child well-being through local and international partners (UNICEF Office for Croatia 2011). In

high-risk situations, protocols describe the necessary, obligatory cooperation (step by step) between different institutions (e.g. school, Centre for Social welfare, and police in other CP cases). It is individual when one organization, for example, school is dealing with child protection cases, for example, bullying, every professional that works with children can decide to include other institutions as they feel appropriate.

CLONCLUSIONS

Multi-agency working has been widely adopted across the region as an approach for child protection. In many cases, considerable efforts and resources have been invested into developing accurate models of multi-agency working (for example in Romania and Bulgaria), while in others, the model of multi-agency working is gradually evolving, such as in Albania, Serbia, and Kosovo. Efforts to support multi-agency working include frameworks to facilitate and legitimize multi-agency working, for example, through legislation and policy reform and the development of protocols and standards, coupled with capacity building initiatives and the establishment of new services and models in working with children and families.

Many of these initiatives have been supported by international organizations such as UNICEF, UNDP, as well as local civil society organizations and donors, although the government is an integral partner to ensure sustainability in the longer term. However, despite these efforts, the extent to which multi-agency working is realized in practice varies across the region. Besides, all countries face considerable challenges in ensuring that multi-agency working as envisaged is translated into action. Barriers to effective multi-agency working include: systems which are not designed or are overly complicated for the reality of the context; lack of training and resources; long-standing and entrenched attitudes towards other professionals and co-working; and a lack of accountability and ownership. One significant feature of multi-agency working in the region is the timing of its introduction. In countries outside the region where multi-agency working has been established for some time, it has mostly been introduced where a relatively well-functioning and resourced child protection system already existed, for example, in other countries in Western Europe. By contrast, within South East Europe, the introduction of multi-agency working has been carried out in parallel to systems development or in advance of the development of services and structures. In conclusion, approaches to both laws and policy relating to child protection generally and multi-agency working individually vary dramatically across the region—from those countries which have no unified laws on the protection of children, and instead address the protection of children through a series of thematic lenses (such as trafficking or domestic violence) to those with comprehensive and unified laws and policies. This is reflected in the approach to the establishment and operationalization of multi-agency working. In some countries, this is embedded in the law, including the development of protocols and operational guidelines, whereas in others, it is mentioned in an *ad hoc* and seemingly overlapping or contradictory way. Regarding mandate and scope of multi-agency working across the region, this tends to coalesce around two main issues: advisory and monitoring bodies which often operate at national and regional/district level and bodies which work at the local level on specific cases. These local level bodies tend to be more action orientated, for example, participating in decision making, planning, and implementation of responses using a case management approach. In some cases, these local level bodies are highly regulated through shared protocols, guidance, and procedures which may or may not be mandatory.

Notes

* The paper is prepared based on a review of good practices

publication, titled "Multi-agency working in child protection. A review of south-east Europe" conducted by Enkelejda Bregu and Stephanie Delaney on behalf of Terre des homes Hungary and Childhub, 2016.

1. Countries identified for this analysis are: Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Croatia.

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Bio

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