

The use of demographic data in Vietnam¹

Liem T. Nguyen² & Duong B. Le³

Over the past two decades, various demographic surveys were carried out. General Statistics Office of Vietnam under supports of international organizations has collected several nationally representative data. Other Government and non-Government institutions have also collected various data. While those demographic data provide a good resource for policy making and planning, question of their use remained. This paper aims to gather major demographic data in Vietnam over the last two decades, assess their use, and raise recommendations for more effective use of this valuable resource. The results show that those demographic data were under-used: the number of studies using those data source is small and a large number of potential topics for analysis were ignored. Low awareness and accessibility to data, limited human capacity to exploit quantitative data, and lack of resources for in-depth analysis would have contributed to this low use of demographic data and they should be changed.

Introduction

The most recent Census of Vietnam showed that at the time of the April 1, 2009, the population of Vietnam has reached 85.8 million, making it the third most populous country in the Southeast Asia and the 13th of the world (CPHCSC, 2009). Over the 10 years between the 1999 and 2009 Censuses, the population of Vietnam has increased by 9.47 million people and the average annual growth rate was 1.2 percent. This is the lowest growth rate in the past 50 years and it indicates a great achievement of the Government to limit rapid population growth as it was found after the reunification. Nevertheless, large population size remained a major concern to the Government (CRR, 2005) and there remain wide regional disparities of population growth and birth rates across the country.

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² Institute of Population, Health and Development. Email: liem@phadvn.org.

³ Institute for Social Development Studies. Email: duonglb@isds.org.vn.

The national population strategy of Vietnam for the 2001-2010 period did not only aim to “achieve the replacement level of fertility for the entire country by 2005” but also “raise the quality of the population physically, intellectually and spiritually” and “try to attain the HDI at the average of the advance level of the world by 2010” (CO, 2000). Population size and quality remained as key areas of interest in two other important documents of the Government: the population ordinance, which was approved by the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly in 2003 (SCNA, 2003), and the population strategy for the 2011-2020 period, which is under development. This orientation of the Government clearly indicates the strong interest of the Government to not only the population issues themselves but also the linkages among population issues and social capital as well as socio-economic development issues.

Implementation of the population strategy of the Government requires comprehensive and up-to-date data on population and development for monitoring and evaluation. The national population strategy clearly indicated that “improvement of the quality of population information and data” is a solution to achieve the objectives of the strategy and it was one among seven programs of action under the national population strategy. Besides, “researches of issues relating to population quality” was another program of action under the strategy. Creation and development of a national population database system were found as important activities under the population strategy.

Regardless of the clear orientation of the Government and great demands of population data, questions relating to population data and its use remained. There is no doubt that various nationally representative population-based surveys were carried out in Vietnam over the past three decades. However, the national population database system is still under creation and various concerns to its reliability remained (UNFPA, 2006). Besides, while many available national surveys had rich information, their use seemed to be limited.

This paper is an attempt to gather major demographic data in Vietnam over the last three decades, assess their characteristics, their use, and raise recommendations for more effective use of those valuable resources.

Availability and sources of demographic and population-based data

The General Statistic Office of Vietnam is the main Government institution who is in charge of data collection for most of the large scale nationally representative surveys. This was done thanks to GSO's extensive branches or offices from central to district level and presence of their staffs from central to commune level. Beside GSO, there are three other types of Government institutions who also collect population-based data: 1) National Academy of Social Sciences; 2) research centers under Government bodies or ministries; and 3) research centers and departments under universities. Those institutions collect data under requests of Government bodies who manage them and they also collect data under contracts with other Government and non-Government institutions. Most of the data collected by those institutions are small scale and at sub-national levels. Non-Government research institutions also collect population-based data and most of them are also at sub-national levels.

Thanks to the strong commitment of the Government to population issues and strong technical and financial supports from various international organizations, various population-based surveys were carried out in Vietnam. The largest population-based survey as usual is the Census, which was first carried out by GSO in 1979. Under the supports of UNFPA, three other Censuses were carried out by GSO in 1989, 1999 and 2009. Beside the Censuses, an Inter-censal Survey was carried out in 1994 and annual surveys of Population Changes and Family Planning with a sample of 2 percent of the national population were carried out by GSO since 2001. Those large scale nationally representative surveys provide most crucial population data, i.e. fertility, mortality and migration, and family planning – a major concern of the Government on population issues. The 1989, 1999 and 2009 Censuses had two forms of questionnaire: the short-form questionnaires were applied to all residents in Vietnam and the long-form questionnaires were applied to a smaller sample of the national population. While the short-form questionnaires provided basic and essential population information, the long-form questionnaires included other major socioeconomic information such as education, training, health, disability, employment, occupation, and housing. The samples for the 1989, 1999 and the 2009 Census were 5 percent, 3 percent and 15 percent of the national population respectively. The sample surveys provided data representing the provincial level in 1989 and 1999 and district level in 2009. Hence, those are

valuable sources of data for population and socioeconomic planning at not only national but also sub-national levels.

Beside censuses and population changes surveys, demographic and health surveys were carried out in Vietnam by GSO in 1997 and 2002. Those surveys had much smaller sample sizes but they are still relatively large with more than 7,000 respondents. Those surveys also aimed directly to population issues and and many more detailed information relating to fertility and mortality. A list of those population surveys is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: National demographic surveys in Vietnam

#	Data	Year	Sample size
1.	Census	1979, 1989, 1999, 2009.	All residents in Vietnam
2.	Sample of 1989 Census	1989	5% of national population
3.	Sample of 1999 Census	1999	3% of national population
4.	Sample of 2009 Census	2009	15% of national population
5.	Inter-censal survey (ICS)	1994	
6.	Annual Surveys of Population Change and Family Planning (SPCFP)	Since 2002	2% of national population
7.	Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)	1997	7,001 households
8.	Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)	2002	7,048 households

Quality of population was assessed in further details by other national surveys of GSO and other organizations. Those surveys had nationally representative samples with sample sizes in range of 5,000 to 10,000 respondents. Most of those surveys focused on population quality with long questionnaires and rich information. Most of those surveys included basic demographic information but population was not their main area of interest; they usually focused on certain socioeconomic issues or targeted certain groups of populations. The well-known living standards surveys in Vietnam, for instance, were a part of the on-going living standards measurement study (LSMS) of the World Bank (WB) in many countries; they had very long questionnaires with a section on fertility, some questions to identify migrants, and rich information on various issues relating population quality, e.g. education, health, employment, farming, income and expenditures, housing, participation in poverty reduction programs, agriculture, forestry and

aquiculture production, and non-farm activities. The surveys were carried out in Vietnam in 1992-1993; 1997-1998, and then every 2 years since 2002.⁴ The second and third rounds of the well-known Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICSs) of UNICEF were also carried out in Vietnam in 2000 and 2006 respectively. Those surveys aimed to fill data gaps for monitoring the situation of children and women with a sample size of around 8,000 households.⁵ The key indicators of interest in the surveys include health, education, child protection, mortality and HIV/AIDS. 21 MDG indicators were collected through MICS3 to monitor achievements of the MDGs. A list of those surveys and other major nationally representative population-based surveys is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Nationally representative population-based surveys in Vietnam

#	Data	Source	Year	Sample size	Main areas of interest /Target groups
1.	1992-1993 Vietnam Living Standards Surveys (VLSS)	GSO	1992-93	4,300 households	Living standards
2.	1997-1998 VLSS	GSO	1997-98	5,994 households	Living standards
3.	2002 VLSS	GSO	2002	75,000 households (for income; of which 29,532 for income and expenditures)	Expenditure and income (Core) + basic SES information
4.	2004 VLSS	GSO	2004	45,900 households (for income; of which 9,188 for income and expenditures)	Core + land and non-farm activities
5.	2006 VLSS	GSO	2006, 2010	46,000 households	Core + health and education
6.	2008 VLSS	GSO	2008	46,000 households	Core + land and non-farm activities

⁴ Detailed information of the surveys can be found online at <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/EXTLSMS/0,,contentMDK:21485765~menuPK:4196952~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:3358997~isCURL:Y,00.html>

⁵ Detailed information of the surveys can be found online at <http://www.childinfo.org/mics.html>

#	Data	Source	Year	Sample size	Main areas of interest /Target groups
7.	Multiple Indicator Clustering Survey (MICS2)	GSO/ Childinfo	2000	7,628 households	Women and children
8.	MICS3	GSO/ Childinfo	2006	8,355 households	Women and children
9.	Survey of economics and household living standards in rural area (SEHLS)	GSO	1990	3,000 households	Income and expenditures
10	Rich-poor household survey (RPHS)	GSO	1993	93,000 households	Income and expenditures
11	Evaluation of Vietnamese child malnutrition control and prevention program (CMCP)	GSO	1994	9,600 households	Child malnutrition
12	CMCP	GSO	1996	14,400 households	Child malnutrition
13	Multi-purposes household surveys (MPHS)	GSO	1994, 1996, 1997, 1999		Living standards
14	Poverty survey (PS)	GSO	1999		Household income and expenditures
15	National survey on household economic and life (SHEL)	GSO	1999-2000	25,170 households	Household income and expenditures
16	Labor and Job Annual Surveys (LJS)	GSO /MOLISA	1997-2000		Labor market
17	World health survey (WHS)	WHO	2002	19,029 individuals in 4,174 households	Health report, performance of health system, health care expenditures, adult mortality, birth history, risk factors.
18	National Health Survey (NHS)	GSO/ MOH	2001-2002	36,000 households	Monitoring national health goals, private health care, coverage of public health programs, health insurance, health financing, quality of health care.

#	Data	Source	Year	Sample size	Main areas of interest /Target groups
19	Surveys of Rural, Agriculture and Fishery (SRAF)	GSO	1994, 2001, 2006	145,000 households	Rural households, infrastructure, farm economy, rural production.
20	Vietnam population and AIDS indicator survey (VPAIS)	GSO/ NIHE	2005	6,337 households with 13,996 individuals	AIDS indicators
21	National Survey on the Family in Vietnam (NSFV)	Committee of Population, Family and Children (VCPFC); GSO, IFGS	2006	9,300 households	Family values, norms, economics and welfare.
22	Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY)	GSO /MOH	2003, 2008	7,584 youths between 15-24 years old	Youth SES and aspiration
23	National Sexuality Survey (NSS)	ISDS	2009	5,000 individuals aged 18-65	Sexuality

Many other non-nationally representative population-based surveys were carried out in Vietnam; a few of them were managed by GSO but most of them were managed by State research institutions and NGOs. The most noticeable population data of this type was the Migration Survey which was carried out in 2004 by GSO. This survey provided rich information relating to migration process that was not affordable in the censuses and population change surveys. However, it only targeted major places of destinations of migrants. Before that, a migration and health survey was carried out by the Institute of Sociology in collaboration with Brown University in 1997 in 4 provinces; and after that a survey on impacts of migration was carried out in 2008 by the Institute of Social Development Studies also in 4 provinces. Young lives survey was also conducted in Vietnam in 2002 and repeated in 2006.

There are a very large and unknown number of non-nationally representative population-based surveys in Vietnam. Table 3 provides a list of only a few among them. Reasons for this situation will be discussed in the later part of this paper.

Table 3: Some examples of non-nationally representative population-based surveys in Vietnam

#	Data	Source	Year	Sample size	Sites
1.	Migration and health survey (MHS)	Institute of Sociology & Brown University	1997	2,500 individuals in 1,800 households	4 provinces
2.	Young lives survey (YLS)	RTCCD/ GSO /SCU	2002, 2006	1,999 children aged 6 to 18 months and 1,000 children aged between 7.5 and 8.56 years	5 provinces
3.	Global youth tobacco survey (GYTS)	CDC & WHO	2003	18,000 secondary school students aged 13-15 from 125 schools	5 provinces of Vietnam
4.	Migration survey (VMS)	GSO /UNFPA	2004	10,000 individuals (5,000 migrants and 5,000 non-migrants)	11 provinces that are the major places of destination of migrants
5.	3-city youth study survey (3CYS)	Institute of Gender and Family Studies	2006	6,363 youths aged 15 to 24 years	1 city /Hanoi in comparison to Shanghai and Taipei
6.	Migration impacts survey (PIM)	ISDS	2008	5,000 individuals	4 provinces in the north and south of Vietnam, 2 origin and 2 destination

Major characteristics of population-based data

The overview of available population-based data showed that Vietnam has many population data and several of them followed the international standards. Those data included not only population data but also population quality data that are crucial for evaluating, monitoring and planning various aspects of socio-economic development. Most of the available surveys, including the censuses and the demographic and health surveys, followed international standards

and they also received technical and financial supports from international organizations such as UNFPA, UNDP and WB.

It was found that quality of the population surveys was high and improved over time. Beside the censuses, the population change and family planning surveys are among the best data providing important annual demographic information at national, regional, and provincial levels. “In the recent population change surveys, survey tools were improved over time to gain good data on fertility and mortality. ... Similar to previous population change surveys, the quality of the 2008 population change survey was high as evaluated by international consultants of UNFPA.” (UNFPA, 2009).

Although there is no doubt about availability and quality of population-based data in Vietnam, several questions remained. First of all, it is the question of data accessibility. This question includes two aspects: 1) awareness of the existence of the data; and 2) access to public and raw data. While many population-based data were available, most of them were not widely advertised. GSO is the central organization that had involved directly or indirectly to many surveys; GSO recently made a great effort with their website and information of various surveys were posted on its website.⁶ Establishment of the National Data Archive (NADA) under the supports of the International Household Survey Network and the WB recently indicated further efforts of GSO in publicize survey and census micro data.⁷ Four objectives of the NADA are: 1) Promote best practice and international standards for the documentation of micro-data amongst data producers in the country; 2) Provide equitable access to micro-data in the interest of all citizens, by protecting confidentiality and following international recommendations and good practice; 3) Promote the effective use of existing survey and census data for statistical and research purposes, thereby encouraging a diverse range of analytical work through secondary research; and 4) Ensure the long term preservation of micro-data and the related metadata, and their continued viability and usability in the future. Nevertheless, there is little information of on-going surveys and information of several surveys was not available on GSO’s website, which includes the NADA’s website. For instance, GSO’s website did not have information of the

⁶ www.gso.gov.vn

⁷ <http://www.gso.gov.vn/nada/?page=home.html>

demographic and health surveys, the first two rounds of the living standards surveys, the 2001-2002 national health survey, the population and AIDS indicator survey, etc.; among the 42 national surveys that had GSO involvement and listed above, 23 surveys were not presented in the GSO's website. Besides, regardless of the very specific and clear objectives of NADA, information of available data on NADA is thin and has not met those objectives yet; the reason would be that NADA's website is still a demo site or under construction. Difficulties in accessing data were reported by some researchers. There is also a fee for use of some data, such as the VLSS, which is another constraint for researchers in a developing country like Vietnam.⁸ NADA showed a great progress of GSO recently as it showed the contact point or name of the department in charge of a specific data and procedure to receive data.

Second, it is the question of or concern to data surplus, i.e. are we having more data than enough (?) and, consequently, are we wasting resources for data collecting (?) The list of available population-based data above showed that Vietnam has very rich information but it also showed a high frequency of data collection, some similarities and overlapping across surveys. Figure 1 presents a list of national surveys by year of data collection and it clearly shows a very high frequency of data collection, especially during the last two decades: 41 national surveys were carried out over the last 20 years; 25 national surveys were carried out in the last 10 years; and there are 4 to 5 national surveys in some years, i.e. 1994, 1999, 2002, and 2006. Obviously, similar data was repeatedly collected on large scale because many contents or sections in the questionnaires of those surveys were similar. Education and training, health status and access to health care services, employment and occupation, income and expenditures are frequently found in most, if not all, of those surveys. The living standards surveys, multi-purpose household surveys, household economic and life survey, poverty surveys shared major characteristics and information. The world health survey and the national health survey were carried out in about the same time (2001 to 2002) with similar objectives. Recently, GSO has integrated some surveys, e.g. the MPHS and VLSS, to avoid overlapping and more of such efforts is desired.

⁸ Access policy and fee for obtaining the VLSS data are available at: <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/EXTLSMS/0,,contentMDK:21482640~menuPK:4196952~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:3358997~isCURL:Y~isCURL:Y~isCURL:Y,00.html>

Figure 1: List of national surveys by year of data collection 1989-2009

Year	Name of national surveys	Number of surveys
1989	Census	1
1990	SEHLS	1
1991		0
1992	VLSS	1
1993	RPHS	1
1994	ICS, CMCP, MPHS, SRAF	4
1995		0
1996	CMCP, MPHS	2
1997	DHS, VLSS, MPHS	3
1998		0
1999	Census, MPHS, PS, SHEL	4
2000	MIC2, LJS	2
2001	NHS, SRAF	2
2002	SPCFP, DHS, VLSS, WHS	4
2003	SPCFP, SAVY	2
2004	SPCFP, VLSS	2
2005	SPCFP, VPAIS	2
2006	SPCFP, VLSS, MICS3, SRAF, NSFV	5
2007	SPCFP	1
2008	SPCFP, VLSS, SAVY	3
2009	Census, NSS	2
Total		42

A fair reason for having a new survey is usually that the available data did not have enough information of certain issues or a particular group of, usually vulnerable, population.

Nonetheless, questions relating to their effectiveness remained, e.g. Is it necessary to have a new survey? Is it necessary to collect data on annual basis? Can we make use of available information and national data through data merging? etc. Assessment of population-based data with thoughtful considerations to those questions would increase effective use of resources for data collection.

Third, while Vietnam may have a situation of data surplus, the country also faces a situation of data insufficiency in certain areas. For instance, migration is an important component of population and it is considered as an important issue relating to urbanization and economic development of Vietnam; however, migration data is insufficient. The census data can only define migrants as those who changed their place of residence within the five years preceding the

census date (GSO, 2001). The most recent 2009 census and the annual population change and family planning surveys face the same problem. Migrant population therefore is well underestimated since many return migrants, short-term or temporary migrants were not included in the censuses. Further, many information relating to migration process was not included. The 2004 migration survey was an effort to supplement those information but they could have done it only at the major places of destination of migration. Besides, regardless of the large number of population-based surveys, there is still no reliable data on number of migrants in urban areas of the country.

Fourth, it is the question of the use of population-based data for planning and policy decision making. There is no doubt that results of census and population-based data were used to point out fertility trends and assess fertility policies of Vietnam but it has not the case for mortality and migration related policies. The national population strategy showed a great desire of the Government to use population-based data for planning and policy decision making. However, assessment of an international consultant on the population strategy showed that this has not been implemented (UNFPA, 2006).

Fifth, it is the question of availability of survey documents. GSO provides very basic information of the available surveys on their website. NADA provides more structural but still very basic information. There are only a few surveys provided very detailed technical information relating to the survey, e.g. study design, sampling, questionnaires, data access policy and contact point. VLSS is a very good example of survey documentation as most of them are available online through the LSMS's website.⁹

For non-nationally representative samples or small-scale surveys, there are some additional questions or concerns. The small scale surveys also mean that generalization of those surveys is limited. A mistake that was frequently found in reports using those data is the over generalization of results, e.g. data was collected in a small number of provinces but the report discuss about the

⁹ See:

http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/EXTLSMS/0,,contentMDK:21485765~menuPK:4196952~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:3358997~isCURL:Y,00.html#Viet_Nam

issues of the whole country. Awareness of those surveys is even a bigger challenge than awareness of national surveys since those surveys are scattered and usually known to a small groups of people who have connection with the data collecting organizations.

The use of population-based data

In general, it is found that the use of population-based data in Vietnam is limited. The limited use of population-based data in planning and policy making was presented in the previous part. Besides, there are only a very small number of publications using those population-based data and most of them are descriptive reports. The major publications of GSO and the Statistical Publishing House were reports of the major findings of the surveys that present only basic descriptive statistics of main indicators from a survey. Although UNFPA, WB, UNDP, SIDA and other donors of the surveys tried to promote the use of population-based surveys through provision of technical and financial supports for in-depth analyses, the number of in-depth analysis publications is still very small. For the most recent Census of 2009, UNFPA/ GSO approved for only 4 in-depth analysis monographs using the census data. Similarly for the 2004 migration survey, UNFPA funded only 3 in-depth analysis monographs using this dataset. Besides, there were only a few studies using this 2004 migration survey data. Similar situation happened to most other datasets.

There are at least two main reasons for this limited use of population-based data in general and demographic data in particular. Apparently, the accessibility to data, which include awareness of available data, as presented above is a reason for this limited use. The second reason relates to human resources or ability to use quantitative data and the number demographers by training in Vietnam. Although the number of Vietnamese students going abroad for studying has increased over time, there is still a limited number of people who are good at quantitative analyses. In fact, UNFPA as well as WB and other UN offices in Vietnam found it difficult to find local consultants who are able to perform quantitative data analyses. This situation was a reason for the delay of several national reports. The number of demographers was even smaller and demographic training received less attention recently. During the early 1990s, when the fertility was high and population issues received great attention, Department of Population was

established under the National Economics University for formal population training. However, this department was closed, probably due to low demand of students to join this department. Nowadays, formal population training is implemented at sub-department level or research centers of some universities, such as the Institute of Population & Social Issues under the National Economics University, sub-department of Population and Environment under the Department of Sociology and Center for Population Studies and Social Work of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, sub-department of Population under the Department of Health Community of the Hanoi School of Public Health. The small number of Vietnamese participants to annual PAA meetings is another evidence for the small number of demographers in Vietnam. Finally, the low use of population-based data would be contributed by a funding-driven reason: most donors provided funds for data collection, development and dissemination of the preliminary findings reports. There was usually a limited to no funding for development of in-depth studies or promotion of their use.

Summary and discussions

The review of availability and characteristics of population-based data in Vietnam showed that there was a large number of population-based data in Vietnam, especially over the past two decades. A large number of national representative data was carried out in Vietnam; most of them were managed by GSO and received technical and financial supports from international consultants and organizations. Those surveys included not only demographic information but also rich information of population quality. It was found that most of those data have good quality and it has improved over time. The other side of the great availability of population-based data was the overlapping and similarities across available data. An evaluation of demographic data found that Vietnam had enough information to have accurate estimates of fertility and mortality. However, much less satisfaction was found with migration data; availability and reliability of migration data remained major challenges.

Although population-based data had great availability and quality, their use in Vietnam is limited and questions regarding their effective use remained. It is showed that most population-based data was under-used; reports of preliminary findings with simple descriptive analyses were

frequently found but there was a small number of in-depth studies using those data source, especially while comparing to a large number of potential topics for in-depth analyses. Low awareness and accessibility to data, limited human capacity to exploit quantitative data, and lack of resources for in-depth analysis would have contributed to this low use of demographic data. There was a great concern to effective use of population-based data in Vietnam given the high costs of national data collection, the high frequency of data collection, and the low level of usage of population-based data in the country.

The current situation of population-based data in Vietnam and their use suggested several ideas for more effective use of population-based data. First, since there is a concern to awareness of data availability, facilitating development of NADA as a pool of available population-based data and advertise NADA for greater awareness of its existence is strongly recommended. Secondly, promote and enrich survey documentation, especially documentation of survey designs and tools, in NADA would increase the use of data. Among the available survey, VLSS /LSMS provides a very good reference for the survey documentation. Third, promote the use of NADA among data collectors of all scales would also increase the use of available data and also increase effectiveness of data collection. Fourth, given the concerns to overlapping and similarities across population-based surveys, especially the nation-wide surveys with large sample size and high cost, it is recommended to have an assessment of the use, effectiveness and necessary of available data. Consideration should be taken to the use of inter-censal and census data as an alternative to the use of costly annual population change surveys since projections for years between censuses and inter-censal surveys would be estimated with high accuracy. Besides, development of a national basic socioeconomic data that can be merged with other national surveys should be considered to save resources for collection of the same data over surveys. Fifth, the use of population-based data for planning and policy decision making should be promoted given their current low use and the strong desire of the Government. Finally, the current situation of the use of population-based data suggested that capacity building for analyses of quantitative data in general and promote development of human resource in demography in particular should be promoted. This solution would lead to a greater number of in-depth studies using the available data.

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