



THE AZRAQ EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY FUND

2020 Annual Report

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

2020 was a year of immense challenges for people around the world. Like the rest of the globe, Covid-19 has had devastating effects on our community in Azraq. Lockdown measures resulted in massive job loss and food insecurity for the majority of our beneficiaries. School closures meant that our 250 students once again lost out on critical in-person education opportunities.

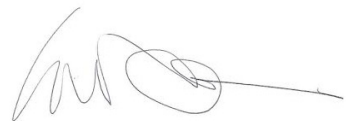
But, like the rest of the world, we carried on. In spite of it all, we had significant accomplishments and growth in 2020. We took the major step of changing the name of our organization in an effort to strengthen our mission and vision for the future. And we broke ground on a new facility that will provide a home for our students for many years to come.

Thanks to strong partnerships and the generosity of so many who stepped up, our local team stayed intact and our student body remained unchanged. We found ourselves able to think further outside the box than we ever had before. We developed a distance learning model that worked even for children with no access to technology or strong family support systems at home.

We reaffirmed our commitment to the community of Azraq, strengthened the relationships we've built over the last five years, and did what we do best: put education opportunities and humanitarian aid directly into the hands of our beneficiaries.

As we look forward to 2021, we are hopeful for vaccines and getting "back to normal," but we could not be more proud of what our "new normal" looks like, at least for the moment. We are as strong as we have been, leading with love, creativity, and a vision for our refugee students that puts them ahead on the road to success.

With the deepest gratitude, thank you for another impactful year. We could not do what we do without you!



Lexi Shereshewsky, *Executive Director*



BACKGROUND

ABOUT THE AZRAQ EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY FUND

The Azraq Education and Community Fund, formerly The Syria Fund, provides opportunities for refugee families to create a sense of normalcy after years of conflict, hardship, and displacement. In the face of an enormous humanitarian crisis, we focus our efforts in the small, rural town of South Azraq, Jordan where nearly half of the town's population are refugees. This community is underserved by large, mainstream aid organizations and AECF provides meaningful contributions to directly better their lives.

A NOTE ABOUT OUR NAME CHANGE

This year, we took a major strategic step and changed the name of our organization from The Syria Fund to The Azraq Education and Community Fund (AECF). When we started The Syria Fund five years ago, we committed to bring communities together and to make a difference for those most impacted by the war in Syria. We learned so much through amazing partnerships and experience, and over time, focused our efforts on the remote and rural town of South Azraq, Jordan to build our flagship program, The Azraq Center.

As we deepened our commitment to Azraq and moved to a community-based approach, we decided to change our name. The Azraq Education and Community Fund better reflects our mission, programs, and commitment to the entire community of Azraq - both Syrian and Jordanian. Thank you for standing with us as we continue to evolve as AECF!

COVID-19 IN JORDAN

In Jordan, a country already facing extreme vulnerabilities and deep poverty, the Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating. Jordan reported its first cases of the virus in early March and enforced strict lockdowns, including school closures and the shutting down of the airport, on March 19th. The impact has been severe across the country, particularly for Syrian refugee families.

According to 2020 UN reports about Syrian families in Jordan:

- Poverty among Syrian refugees in Jordan has increased by **18%** since the beginning of the pandemic (a staggering statistic, considering that nearly 85% of refugees were already living under the poverty line).
- More than **90%** reported reducing meals or expenses for health and education to cope with the situation.
- **1 in 4** students in Jordan did not access the Government-provided distance learning programs during the lockdown.
- **41%** of Syrian families reported that their children went to bed hungry during the lockdown.

While the Government has increased access to cash assistance and humanitarian aid, unemployment and poverty rates continue to rise, as do Covid-19 cases. Schools and universities remain closed across the country for the vast majority of students. As of December 2020, Jordan was reporting more than 36,000 active cases and 3,900+ deaths.



EDUCATION AND THE AZRAQ CENTER



Access to quality education for Syrian refugees is a high priority across Jordan and particularly in Azraq. Jordan's double shift school system, while increasing access for thousands of students, has weakened the overall education sector. School days are condensed for both Syrian and Jordanian students and classes are often led by new or inexperienced teachers. Dropout rates are high and students face many barriers that continue to keep them out of the classroom, including the need to work, early marriage, and psychological burdens. This crisis is exacerbated by the pandemic. UNICEF reports that 26% of Syrian refugee students didn't access Government distance learning programs amid closures due to lack of internet, guidance, or awareness.

The Azraq Education and Community Fund's flagship program, The Azraq Center, addresses this ongoing education emergency in South Azraq. Our goal is to provide remedial education to help Syrian refugee children make up for the years of education they missed due to the war, to catch up to their appropriate grade level, and to develop a deep love of learning that will carry them through high school graduation and beyond.

Our student body of 250 consists of 58% girls and 42% boys. One of our top priorities is student retention - which is a high concern and even more so in the current pandemic environment. Over 56% of our student body has attended the program for more than three years. Amid school closures, we are more committed than ever to making sure that each child has the opportunity to stay in school and keep learning.

DISTANCE LEARNING

The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to close our physical center in March 2020 and switch to a distance learning model. Because the majority of our beneficiaries lack internet access or devices at home, we developed a hands-on approach to distance learning that includes weekly deliveries of worksheets and activities to each students' home, and follow-ups via WhatsApp groups on family mobile devices that keep kids connected and engaged.

Thanks to the dedication and hard work of our teachers and administrators, our distance learning program is a huge success and we are proud to have retained 100% of our pre-pandemic student body.



Ayat, Age 4



MONTESSORI-INSPIRED EARLY EDUCATION

In collaboration with the Blossom Hill Foundation, our youngest students kept their learning going, even from afar! Like the rest of our center, The Blossom Hill Early Education Center moved to a distance learning model in March, still rooted in Montessori methodology.

Our friends at The Montessori School in Wilton, Connecticut helped provide Montessori-specific distance learning curriculum and consulting. Their support and expertise enabled us to pivot our model and continue providing innovative education to 60 students (ages 3 to 5) using a combination of traditional and Montessori-specific activities from home.

Objects found in the home represent shapes, sizes, sounds, weights, and more, while worksheets help students learn the contours of letters and recognition of the full English and Arabic alphabets and numbers!

ART & POETRY MICROPROGRAMS WITH VOTC

AECF continued our successful partnership with Voices of the Children, a non-profit providing innovative arts programming for our students in exchange with peers in Washington State. This Fall, we hosted microprograms of five students at a time, focusing on poetry and ceramics.

Poetry: Our 3rd-5th graders wrote original poems titled “The Best Part of Me” and “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me At All.” They discussed how Covid has impacted their lives, identified attributes they learned about themselves, and turned their thoughts into poetry.

Ceramics: 8th grade girls sculpted ceramics as part of a “Butterfly Garden” project. The butterflies are a physical representation of a barrier each student struggles to overcome. Ultimately, the butterflies will form a garden that represents strength and unity working together to overcome issues, whether they’re personal, familial, societal or global.



YOUTH EXCHANGE WITH PAPER AIRPLANES

This Fall, we launched a pilot Youth Exchange program in collaboration with the non-profit, Paper Airplanes. The goal of the program is to foster understanding between youth in Jordan and in the United States and to build English language conversation skills. We paired ten teenage students in Azraq with peers of similar age in the US to meet weekly for conversation exchange. Paper Airplanes provides training and curriculum to guide lessons and provides a platform for teens to connect and express themselves!





HUMANITARIAN AID

The pandemic has made a difficult situation for our beneficiaries in Jordan even worse. 85% of all registered Syrian refugees in Jordan are not living in refugee camps, but rather among their Jordanian neighbors, in cities and villages referred to as “Host Communities.” Outside of the camps, refugees must support themselves except for limited aid from international organizations. Many families are not eligible for food coupons or rent vouchers, and all Syrian refugees must pay for medical care and day-to-day expenses. Unable to work legally for the most part, many families struggle to make ends meet and live deep in poverty.

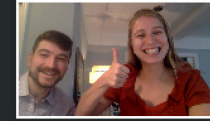
The economic impact of the pandemic has been devastating for our beneficiaries in Jordan. A survey we conducted in the late Spring found that:

- **90%** of beneficiary families lost their job as a result of closures and lockdowns.
- **100%** of families reported an urgent need for basic food items like rice, lentils, and flour.
- Only **3%** of families had reliable internet access at home, and no families owned electronic devices other than phones to access distance learning programs for their children.

To address the immense food insecurities that many families faced this year, we increased our food distributions to meet the growing need. AECF distributed regular food packages all year long to every family in our center and at least 30 additional vulnerable families in the community. Food packages include staple items like flour, oil, sugar, and beans, with additional distributions of fresh meat and whole chickens.







A NEW FACILITY IN 2021

For years, our team has dreamed of constructing a new physical space for our center where we would have proper classrooms, an IT lab, a full-fledged library and more. In 2018, we partnered with an NGO that agreed to build a new facility. Unfortunately, the building they constructed was unsafe and ultimately could not be repaired or used. However, in 2020, with the continued support of our incredible partners Joe and Alina Moosa and the participation of our team on the ground and the local community we serve, AECF has overcome this difficult setback.

With the Moosa's support, we have partnered with professional Jordanian engineers with more than 30 years of experience to construct a new building with a safe and practical design that will last us for decades. Construction is now well under way and we are confident that by Spring 2021, we will be able to finally realize our dream of having a proper building to expand our mission and bring new and innovative education opportunities for hundreds of students for years to come.

Our new facility includes:

- 8 classrooms
- 1 Montessori Room
- 1 IT Lab / Library
- Sport Court
- Theater Stage
- Play Area
- Reception Room and more!





Taha, Age 12

LOOKING FORWARD IN 2021

We enter 2021 with a lot to look forward to!

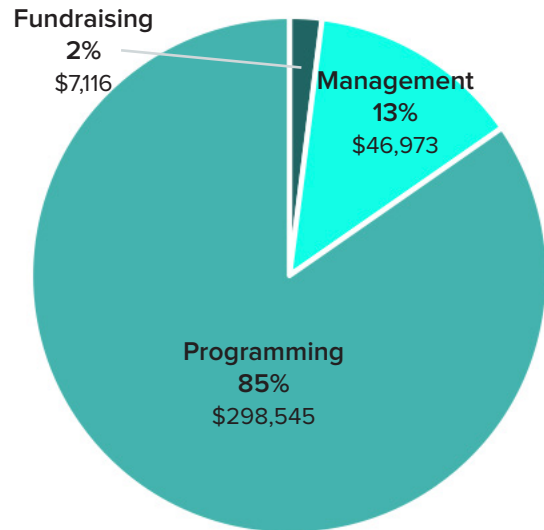
As our new building nears completion, we are preparing to expand our program with a specific focus on teenagers. In our new space, we will aim to host two shifts of classes per day, in the morning and the afternoon, to serve our existing student body, and expand to reach others in the community!

Teenage programming will focus on literacy, IT, English, and high school graduation preparation. We are working with new volunteers and teachers to create mentorship programs and a scholarship fund as we motivate teenagers to stay in school, graduate from high school, and look towards the future.

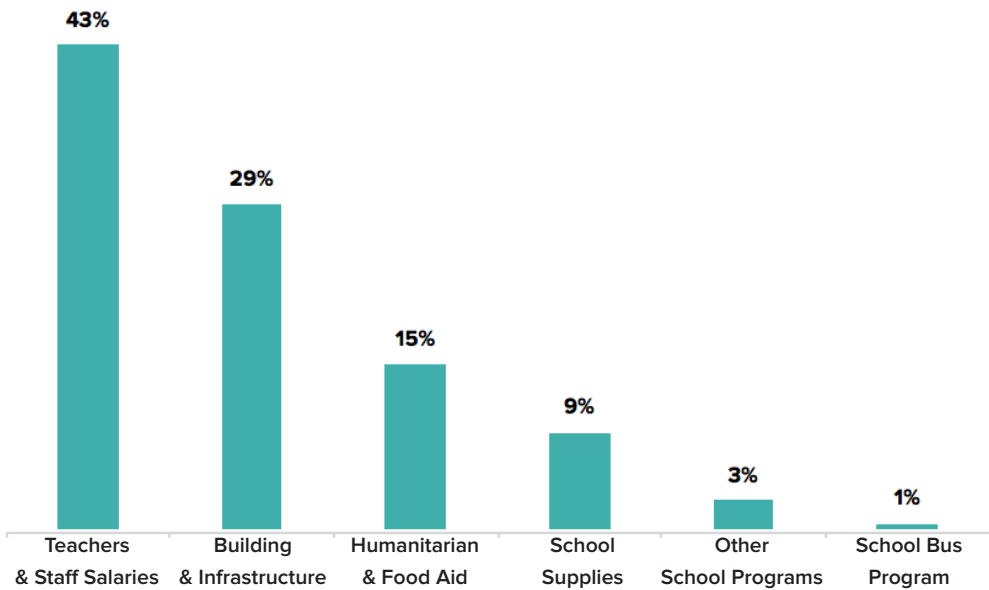
Right before the lockdown in March, we started an adult literacy class targeted to older women that we are excited to start up again. AECF identified and brought together a group of mothers and grandmothers to learn key literacy skills for the very first time and we look forward to bringing these women back together and get them reading!

In our core program, we are adding new classes and clubs including global studies, gardening and environmental initiatives, and increased Math, Science, and IT opportunities. Look out for a student-led blog, film programs, and more!

2020 FINANCIAL SUMMARY



PROGRAMMING BREAKOUT



Shahed, Age 5

A FEMALE-LED TEAM

Our female-led Jordan team is made up of members living in the South Azraq community. Our international team supports the program through fundraising and operational activities.



Nofa al-Fayiz
Jordan Project Head



Alia al-Saad
Program Director



Lexi Shereshevsky
US Project Head



Martine Stilwell
Canada Project Head



Anwar, Level 1



Manar, Level 2



Areej, Level 3



Yusra, Arabic



Su'ad, Math



Amira, Special Ed



Lamees, English



Amal, English



Anood, IT



Haneen, Montessori



Noor, Montessori



Haneen, Montessori



Asil, Art



Um Ahmed, Cook



Wa'el, Operations



Suleiman, Operations

OUR PARTNERS

Nachmyat Eastern Badia Association

Nachmyat Eastern Badia Association is a registered Jordanian local charity founded in South Azraq, Jordan in 1984. Led by Nofa Fayiz, Nachmyat's mission is to help alleviate poverty and support orphans, refugees, people with special needs and other vulnerable families in the community.

The Blossom Hill Foundation

The Blossom Hill Foundation is committed to investing in social entrepreneurs to help children affected by conflict in the Middle East thrive. AECF and Blossom Hill partner together on our Early Childhood Center, bringing Montessori-inspired education to 60 children ages 3-5.

Helping Refugees Jordan (HRJ)

Led by experienced humanitarian Catherine Ashcroft, HRJ is a group of dedicated and experienced volunteers who are helping recognized Jordanian and international charities and NGOs deal with the large influx of refugees living in Jordan as well as the vulnerable host populations.

Voices of the Children

Voices of the Children pairs youth around the world in collaborative arts programs to shine a spotlight on humanitarian crises, encourage community engagement and personal growth. AECF collaborates closely with VOTC to implement art programs including poetry workshops, theater programs, poetry, and more!

Paper Airplanes

Paper Airplanes is a nonprofit organization that matches conflict-affected individuals with personal tutors for 12-16 week sessions conducted via Skype and other video conferencing platforms. AECF partners with Paper Airplanes as part of their Youth Exchange program.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Lexi Shereshewsky | *Executive Director & Board Member*

Lexi Shereshewsky was inspired to start The Azraq Education and Community Fund after spending time living and studying in Damascus, Syria in 2009 and 2010. In addition to her role as Executive Director, Lexi is a Marketing Manager for DailyMail.com. Lexi leads fundraising initiatives and works daily with AECF's team on the ground.

Demetri Blaisdell | *Chief of Business Affairs & Board Member*

Demetri lived in Damascus, Syria from 2009-2010 before moving to New York to attend Columbia Law School. In addition to serving as Chief of Business Affairs of AECF, Demetri is an associate at the New York office of the law firm Boies Schiller Flexner LLP, where he specializes in complex commercial litigation.

Martine Stilwell | *Azraq Center Founder & Board Member*

Martine Stilwell is a retired Psychiatrist and Physician based in Vancouver, Canada. Born in Holland, Martine lived in Australia, Tasmania, Indonesia, and Ecuador before ultimately settling in Canada. In 2014, after coming into an inheritance, Martine went to Jordan and helped found The Azraq Center. Martine plays an integral role in the management of the Azraq program and travels to Jordan multiple times per year.

Mary Murano | *Development Director & Board Member*

Mary Murano is a media executive with 25+ years experience in television content distribution and client relations. She has held leadership positions at NBCUniversal, Oxygen Media, Rainbow Media and Al Jazeera America. Mary brings her extensive business acumen to AECF where she helps liaise with grant-giving organizations and secure new funding opportunities.

Z. Joe Moosa | *Key Stakeholder & Board Member*

Joe is the President and CEO of Retirement Concepts Developments. Joe's record as an entrepreneur includes having founded, developed, and sold several companies to publicly traded organizations, including GE Capital. Joe co-founded Pacific Reach in 2014 as a real estate development and management company focusing on multi-family, commercial and hospitality markets. Joe and his wife Alina became involved in AECF in 2018 with the goal of helping expand the organization's activities and infrastructure.

Jerry Shereshewsky | *Board Member*

Jerry Shereshewsky brings over 45 years of experience in marketing and branding to AECF. He uses his extensive experience to help engage a wide network to support the organization's mission. Having spent time traveling in Syria in 2010, Jerry is committed to helping those affected by the conflict.

Ken Bernhard | *Board Member*

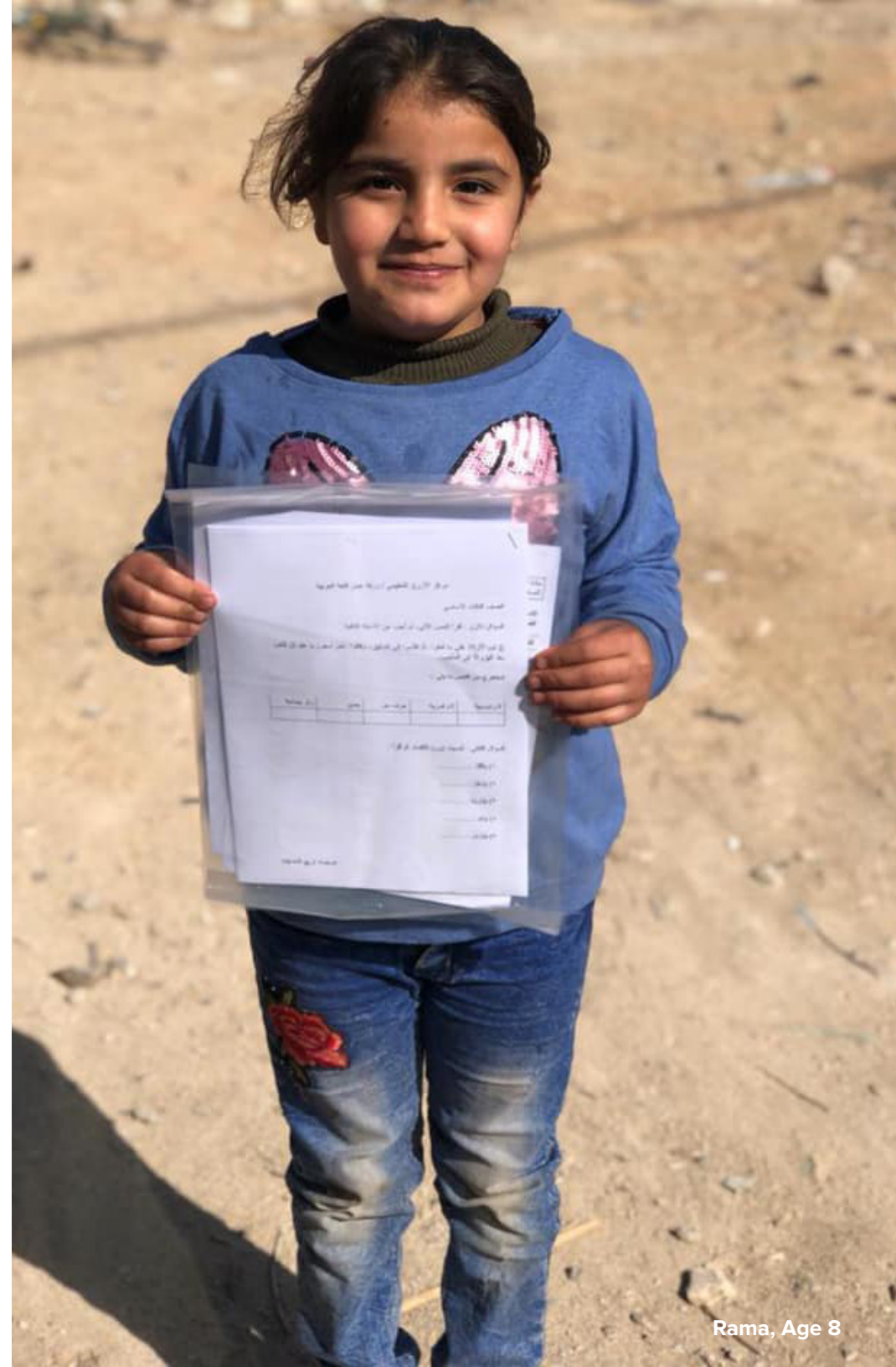
Ken Bernhard is a principal in Cohen and Wolf's Municipal, Business & Corporate, Real Estate, and Family Law Groups, representing municipalities, businesses, and individuals, in litigation, real estate, matrimonial and commercial matters. Ken is a passionate philanthropist and has volunteered around the world to support projects and promote education to those in need.

Yasir Dhannoon | *Board Member*

Yasir is an entrepreneur and project manager with expertise in technology and innovative solutions. He has created apps and digital platforms for global companies, including Harpercollins, Verizon, and General Mills. Yasir has a personal connection to AECF's mission after living in Syria for 3 years+ as a refugee from Iraq.

THANK YOU TO OUR MAJOR 2020 DONORS

- Joe and Alina Moosa
- The Blossom Hill Foundation
- The Dr Scholl Foundation
- Aegis Charitable Trust
- AECF's Board of Directors
- The Westport Sunrise Rotary Club
- Helping Refugees Jordan (HRJ)
- Milana Vayntrub
- Adnan Sakiri
- Sukejmon Mena
- AECF Student Ambassadors (Hannah, Sarah, Jocelyn, Lydia, Maya, Molly, Jane)
- Beryl Shereshevsky & her YouTube community
- The Duggan Family
- Georgie Stilwell
- Aslam Chandiwalla
- The Michaelson Family
- The hundreds of donors and volunteers across the U.S. and around the world!



Rama, Age 8



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