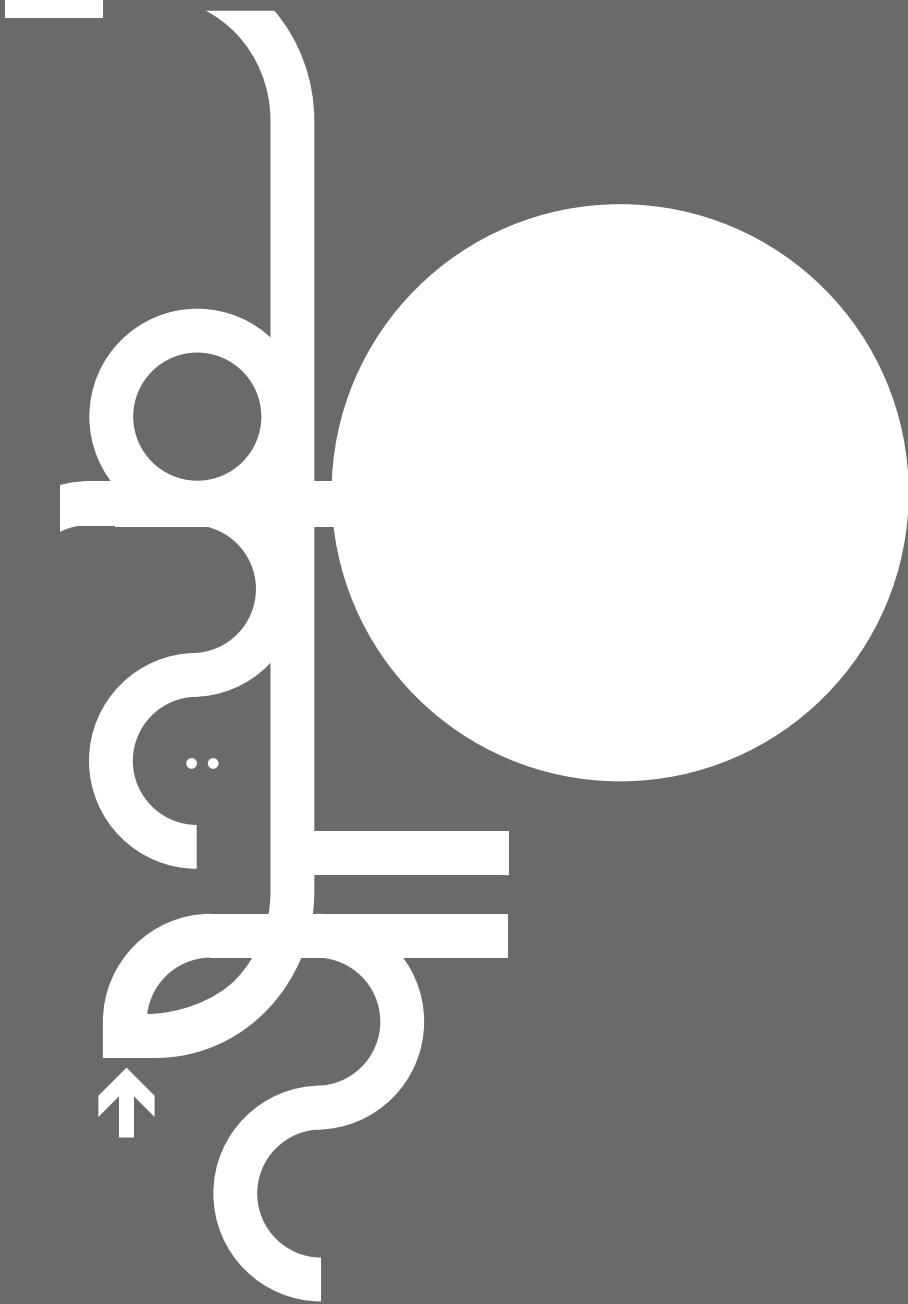


A Partnership Between
The Tochar Valley Rural
Community Network (Mayo)
&
Michigan State University:
A Community Perspective

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A Partnership Between The Tochar Valley Rural Community Network (Mayo) & Michigan State University: *A Community Perspective*

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Abstract

In this chapter, Sr Maureen Lally (managing director) and Brendan Sammon (chairperson) of the Tochar Valley Rural Community Network (TVN) tell the story of their partnership with Michigan State University (MSU). Their unique relationship with an American third level institution has evolved over ten years to include a variety of activities jointly envisioned and implemented by TVN and MSU. The chapter details these activities from the perspective of community leaders and explains why they believe the underlying philosophy makes this ‘a partnership with a difference.’

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Background & Introduction

In 1998, Terry Gallagher (a retired Teagasc colleague of mine) and I became concerned about the findings of a Teagasc study about the future of agriculture in Co. Mayo. In it, researchers predicted severe threats to the viability of smallholder agriculture and a deterioration in the quality of life in rural Ireland. If their predictions were to come true (and Terry and I had no reason to believe they would not—and in fact, the predictions came true more quickly than they anticipated), the farmers and other rural people in Co. Mayo were going to face serious problems in the very near future. Terry and I held meetings throughout southwest Mayo to bring these trends to the attention of communities and to encourage them to face these challenges head on. We asked communities: What’s alive and well in your village? What do you want your village to be like in 10 years time? Will your community still exist in 20 years time? We listened to their responses.

As a result of what we heard in those meetings, Terry and I formed a limited company by guarantee—a voluntary, grassroots network, with the overall theme of helping communities to help themselves. Our thinking at the time was that—*no community on its own can achieve as much as a network of communities working together toward shared goals.*

Ten years later, our vision remains the same. TVN remains a voluntary grassroots rural community network, committed to the empowerment of rural people in the development of sustainable rural communities. Today, TVN serves 18 communities (expanded from the original 12) in southwest Co. Mayo, from Mayo Abbey in the east to Murrisk in the west. The network emphasizes community enhancement, income generation, youth involvement, walks development, leadership training, natural and cultural heritage, and women’s involvement.

From the start, Michigan State University has been a key partner all along the way—giving us encouragement, ideas, and resources. The TVN-MSU relationship has been based on

principles of engagement that are about learning together. In this chapter, I (with some help from my TVN and rural community development colleagues) tell the story of the TVN-MSU partnership and explain why I feel this is 'a partnership with a difference.'

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Learning How to Work Together

Over the years, the TVN-MSU partnership has taken different forms at different times. Various MSU lecturers have worked together with the TVN on board development; leadership training; community-based action research programmes; semester long and summer study abroad programmes for Michigan State University students; study tours and learning exchanges for community development practitioners from Ireland and Michigan; and strategic business planning. Some of these activities are on-going, while others are more of a once-off activity, designed to meet a specific need at a specific time.

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Our Beginnings

Through contact established by a Teasgasc colleague, Seamus Lillis, I first met MSU people, Frank Fear, Richard Bawden, and Peggy Desmond, at a Cross-Border (Irish Republic and Northern Ireland) Peace and Reconciliation conference in Derry City in 1999. At the conference, I presented the history of the Tochar Valley Rural Community Network as case study on grassroots approaches to rural community development. After my presentation, Frank Fear asked whether the TVN had written up our case study and wondered whether the TVN would be interested in having an MSU student support us in that endeavour. My colleague and friend, Terry Gallagher said, "Why not? You never know where something like this might lead." He was certainly right. I had no idea that a conversation during a tea break would turn into the wonderful partnership the TVN has today.

Our first joint venture was a grant application to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to support a new model for third level institutions and communities to work with one another on issues we (not the university experts) deem to be important. From the outset, Terry and I knew we wanted to work with the lecturers from MSU in a way that was completely different from 'business as usual.' Luckily, MSU wanted to work with TVN in a new way as well. In our application, we explained our new model by contrasting it to the more typical technical assistance approach commonly promoted and offered by third level institutions. MSU was to be more of a 'guide by the side, than a sage on the stage.' Writing together, TVN and MSU described our new model as autonomous development:

Universities and colleges around the world have a tradition of working with local people to improve local quality of life. Technical assistance (including information technology transfer and extension) has been the dominant form of institutional engagement model. In this model, university expertise—often in the form of research-based knowledge—is made available locally. This model works well when indigenous capacity is limited and when local people benefit from adopting outside ideas, practices, or technologies. The technical assistance model is less appropriate when local people have experience envisioning and organizing local development efforts. When local development is conceived and directed locally—known in some quarters as 'autonomous development'—outside influence is locally regulated, that is targeted by local people in ways that make sense locally. Expressed simply, autonomous development involves local people taking control of their development agenda. It is the ultimate form of empowerment (Fear, Desmond, & Hartough, 2000: 1-2).

With this funding, MSU lecturers, Extension professionals, and graduate students got to know us—as individuals and as communities—through regular visits to southwest Mayo. During these visits, TVN organized bus tours to showcase the region’s cultural and natural heritage, held meetings, and shared meals together with MSU colleagues. At our request, the MSU people organized trainings for the TVN’s newly formed Board of Directors, to support us in developing a shared vision for our network and to define roles and responsibilities for ourselves. Through these interactions, the TVN people and the MSU people truly got to know one another and develop trust. This foundation of trust has made it easier for both of us to work along side one another to address important issues facing the TVN communities.

With the W.K. Kellogg grant aid, MSU leveraged additional grant aid from Michigan Campus Compact to support a doctoral student whose research was titled, “Engaging change while rooted in tradition: a community development response to dynamic times in Co. Mayo.” Her work focused on understanding how the autonomous development approach was of benefit to communities.

TVN and MSU together decided to use some funding to involve a few MSU undergraduate students in community work in TVN communities. TVN organized and hosted two, four-month placements for MSU students—one in a secondary school to work with Transition Year Students and teachers and another to work with parents and youth interested in forming a youth centre. From this experience, both TVN and MSU learned so much in those early years about what it takes to prepare students and communities to work together.

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Expanding Our Partnership

Based upon these early successes and our growing confidence, especially with the student placements, TVN and MSU decided to develop a six-week student placement program through MSU’s Office of Study Abroad, with support from MSU’s College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. In 2002, I worked with Peggy Desmond to pilot the study abroad program, evaluate it, and fine tune the program for future years. The basic model—community interests are identified first and then matched with students who have similar interests second—stayed the same.

Study Abroad Programme

In 2003, TVN and MSU officially launched the student study abroad programme. Every year since then, TVN communities have worked closely with MSU lecturers (Jan Hartough, Shari Dann, Diane Doberneck, or Dale Elshoff) and students on community engagement projects. In addition to community projects, TVN communities identify host families who teach students about life in rural Ireland and community mentors who introduce students to local resources for their projects. Working alongside TVN communities, MSU students learn how to put community engagement ideas into practice in a ‘real life’ setting. They also make significant contributions to our communities. To date, they have completed approximately 50 community-based projects, such as amenity guides, tourist signage, child care feasibility studies, community guides, cemetery history projects, youth centre activities, village enhancement proposals, and walks development, to name but a few.

Through these projects, individual TVN communities and the TVN overall have also benefitted from improved relationships with our partners here in Ireland. For example, by serving as resource people on the study projects, individuals from Mayo County Council, LEADER, FAS, RSS, the V.E.C., and other statutory agencies provide technical expertise and resources to communities. Often, the relationships between the partner agencies and the communities last well beyond the student projects.

Kettering Foundation Leadership Trainings

Through our connection with Jan Hartough, MSU Extension Director for Barry Co. (Michigan), the TVN received an invitation to send our community members for leadership training organized by the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio. Since 2004, 12 community leaders have travelled to Ohio to learn about deliberative democracy, facilitation skills, and Kettering's public issues forum process. They have returned to southwest Mayo with new skills to use in their own communities and for the benefit of the network overall. In addition, Jan Hartough worked with the TVN to hold training events in 2004 and 2006 in Mayo to provide further training in facilitation (including roles of moderator, recorder, observer, and participant) to additional TVN community members.

The Misuse of Alcohol: Your Community's Opportunity to Respond

The Kettering Foundation also supported the TVN's development of a resource guide for communities to explore and respond to the growing problem of alcohol misuse. *The Misuse of Alcohol: Your Community's Opportunity to Respond* was based on action research in 10 post-primary schools about students' attitudes and experiences with alcohol. Six community forums, using this resource guide as a framing document for dialogue, were held in TVN communities. As a result of this success, the TVN was funded in 2009 by the Western Region Drug Task Force to develop a similar resource guide and community forum process to address substance misuse more broadly. The TVN's substance misuse project is expected to start in the fall 2009.

Study Tours and Learning Exchanges

With grant aid from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Shari Dann, Scott Loveridge, and Diane Doberneck (MSU) and I organized four study tours or learning exchanges about community and economic development in rural communities in 2006-2008. 'Enhancing agricultural-based economic development in rural communities: a collaborative partnership to internationalise research, Extension, and teaching' brought together community leaders, MSU lecturers, MSU Extension professionals, Teagasc professionals, and others. The study tours focused on topics identified by the study tour participants and included value added agriculture; farmers markets; organic farming; cultural and heritage tourism; walking trail development; youth development, and entrepreneurship.

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Partnering In The Future

Croagh Patrick Heritage Trail

In March 2009, the TVN launched a 61 km walking trail, named the Croagh Patrick Heritage Trail (CPHT) to encourage local people and tourists to experience and appreciate the rugged landscape of southwest Mayo. The trail was also designed to strengthen the local economy through opportunities for entrepreneurs, trail guides, B&B owners, and others through the knock-on effects of rural tourism. In addition, the TVN envisions a series of looped walks in each of the TVN communities to link the communities to the spine of the larger CPHT trail. MSU students and lecturers who contributed to the launch of this trail will undoubtedly play a role in further development of amenities along the trail as well as interpretation materials for those walking it.

Strategic Business Planning

After 10 years, the TVN is in the process of completing our first strategic business plan, under Brendan Sammon's leadership of the TVN. Because a rural community network such as ours has a dual mandate—helping individual communities and networking resources and learning across them, we needed a customized strategic business planning process. Diane Doberneck, an MSU lecturer familiar with our approach to community engagement, is leading us through a series of community consultations and focused interviews to help us develop our own plan for the next five years. With that plan in place, the TVN will be able to move forward and achieve our vision for the next ten years.

By working together, TVN and MSU have strengthened individuals through leadership training and study tours, enriched individual communities through study abroad programme projects, and supported the overall network through board training, development of the Cr. Patrick Heritage Trail, and strategic business planning. As you can see, the TVN has partnered with MSU to address different priorities, through a number of different arrangements, at different points in time. This flexibility and responsiveness is part of an underlying philosophy that adapts to our changing needs. It is also part of why, I believe, we have created a partnership 'with a difference.'

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A Partnership—with a Difference

"There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about," writes Margaret Wheatley in *Turning to One Another in Conversation*. Through our partnership with MSU, the TVN works at the grassroots to encourage communities to discover their own power. Both the TVN and MSU support them as they identify their own needs, set their own directions, and achieve goals they have set for themselves. Regardless of the partnership activity (listed in the section above), the TVN-MSU rural community development work is guided by our ideas about authentic community engagement. We believe that it is the following four ways of working together that make the real difference.

Community as the driver

First, both TVN and MSU believe in autonomous community development, that is, communities themselves set the priorities and drive the process. Communities take the lead and MSU follows. This is a very different approach than external groups (or even TVN overall) telling rural communities what they should do. Neither is it the same as communities working very hard to find out what the priorities are of an outside group (e.g., a state agency, a third level institution, etc.) and fitting their own goals to the external priorities. In autonomous community development, community leaders work at the grassroots and consciously avoid developing an overreliance or dependency on outside groups for goal-setting and resources (Bradshaw, 1993; Carmen, 1996; Fear et al, 2005; Fraser, 2005; Gilchrist, 2004; McIntosh, 2008; Murdock, 2000; Pigg & Bradshaw, 2003).

In our work together in Co. Mayo, together TVN and MSU place a special emphasis on listening to what communities want to do work on and on following their lead on community development goals. When communities are a bit unsure, we ask focused questions to help them clarify their priorities and goals. We avoid telling them what we think they should do—even when they ask. For example, during a recent community meeting of adult leaders and parents involved in a community youth group, one parent asked the MSU student (on her study abroad placement), "what do you think we should do?" She replied, "It is not my place to tell you what to do. I am here to listen to your ideas, reflect them back to you, and support your efforts to organize activities for your youth I can tell you a bit about my experiences if you would like, but only as something for you to consider as you make up your own minds." While this more facilitative approach may take longer in achieving results, we believe it the only way to ensure communities themselves are the drivers.

Focusing on people first and then projects

Second, both TVN and MSU believe in a capacity-building approach, implementing processes that strengthen the abilities of people to take collective action towards creating healthy ecosystems, vital economies, and social well being. Capacity may be built at the individual, team, organization, or community levels with sensitivity to context and changing dynamics. For us, capacity-building means making sure our work in communities helps community people to learn new skills and take on new roles. The idea here is to build up skills, so that community members have new learnings to draw upon in their next community activity.

In our work together, capacity-building means TVN and MSU move away from the idea of “doing for” and move toward the idea of “doing with,” genuinely partnering with community members. While it may be easier or more time efficient to just do the work ourselves, TVN and MSU believe that bringing people along with us in the process of community engagement, in the end, leads to even longer-lasting, more sustainable outcomes for communities.

TVN and MSU realize that a capacity building approach differs from those who take a more “bricks-and-mortar” approach to rural community development, where what matters the most is the accumulation of completed facilities and other tangible outcomes (e.g., the achievement of tasks without attention to how they were accomplished). While “bricks and mortar” are important, we believe there is another frequently overlooked dimension to successful rural community development—community capacity. Communities need to gain practice and confidence in the skills needed to make decisions about their community work and the skills to manage what they create into the future. In other words, as community developers who believe in capacity building, we are not only building projects in communities, we are also building up their people (Banks & Orton, 2005; James & Wrigley, 2007; Simpson, Wood, & Daws, 2003).

From strength to strength

Third, TVN and MSU believe in asset-based community development, working from strength to strength. This approach fosters hope by shifting attention away from “what’s missing in the community” or “what wrong with the community” to “what are we proud of” or “what is going well for us.” It is based on the assumption, that even though there may be problems in a community, sometimes very serious ones, there are also untapped resources (or assets) that can be drawn upon to improve the situation. These assets may be associated with **people** (e.g., human, social, cultural, political, and financial assets) and with **place** (e.g., natural and built assets) (Flora & Flora, 2007; Greene & Haines, 2002; Kretzmann & McKnight, 2003; O’Leary, 2006).

In our work together, TVN and MSU have had to re-think the typical relationships between communities and third level institutions. For example, from an assets-based community development perspective, the third level institution is not the only source of resources to contribute to the community initiatives (in a kind of well-disguised charity mentality). Instead, both communities and third level institutions have things to bring to the community development table. Sometimes, however, communities do not know what they might offer or have the confidence that what they bring to the effort will be good enough. In these instances, it is especially incumbent upon those at the third level institution to be affirming and to draw out potential community resources community members themselves may have overlooked.

Learning as we go

Finally, TVN and MSU are committed to ‘sense-making,’ a process by which information becomes knowledge that guides action (Smit, 2007: 6). Because individuals have their own unique perspectives on experiences, we believe it is essential to make time to acknowledge these differences and to develop a shared meaning for our joint experiences. Together, TVN and MSU have developed a habit of asking ourselves “what is it we are learning from this experience?” and then using those learnings to inform our subsequent actions. In order to support our commitment to sense-making, TVN and MSU have purposefully learned about deep listening, reflection, dialogue, and inquiry skills to strengthen our partnership. Naturally, we find ourselves balancing between the actual ‘doing’ of our community work and the ‘learning from it’ (Cornwall, 2008; Heron, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Senge, 2006; Wheatley, 2002). The commitment to reclaim time to think and reflect together is a hallmark of TVN’s partnership with MSU.

While some of our sense-making is an informal kind of reflection on our own practices, TVN and MSU are also committed to more formalized approaches to learning in action. At different moments in our shared history, TVN and MSU have also undertaken ‘action research,’ to identify an issue more formally and undertake research that addresses the issue in practical ways. For example, action research was the basis of the alcohol misuse booklet we developed. With training sponsored by Kettering, TVN and MSU sent teams of TVN community members into local schools to collect data from school students. This information was used to develop the scenarios in the issues booklet, and those scenarios formed the basis of community-wide discussions about alcohol misuse. Another example of action research is the strategic business planning process the TVN is currently undertaking. The TVN-MSU goal is to listen to the 18 communities and to gather their ideas about TVN’s organizational competencies, resources, relationships, and learning, in order to create a plan for the future (Fowler, Goold, and James, 1995).

In our sense-making and action research activities, we have collaborated with our MSU partners in a different way. Instead of expecting them to have “the answers” for us, TVN has learned that the best answers come through sustained action, reflection, and dialogue, where both TVN and MSU are discovering new knowledge and arriving at new understandings together.

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The Real Rewards

Over the years, TVN and MSU have earned recognition and awards on both sides of the Atlantic for our approach to working together and for working with communities. In Ireland, recognition for the TVN-MSU partnership has been for specific community projects or initiatives, where communities took the lead roles and MSU took a supporting role, including

- Balla Youth Centre, recognized by The Mayo Person of the Year Award in 2005
- Clogher bog walk, recognized by Bord Fáilte in 2005
- Mayo Abbey Pride of Place for Villages under 500, by Cooperation Ireland in 2006
- Islandeady Pride of Place for Integration, by Cooperation Ireland in 2007

In America, our awards have focused on individual leadership and contributions, including:

- Maureen Lally, Distinguished Partner in Study Abroad Programs Award, bestowed by MSU’s College of Agriculture and Natural Resources in 2007
- Diane Doberneck, First Annual Academic Service Learning and Civic Engagement Award, bestowed by MSU’s Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement, in 2008

The spark that lights the fire

While these recognitions are important, they are not the most significant reward for the TVN-MSU partnership work with rural communities. What matters the most to us is knowing that through our partnership, both TVN and MSU have contributed in a small way to the transformation of individuals and communities. Our work has been the spark that lights the fire, but not necessarily the fire itself. Community members themselves fuel the fire. Instead of doing work for communities, TVN and MSU have taken on the role of catalyst, or in the words of a 2005 MSU student, “enthusiastic accelerators.”

This approach to community engagement is not the easiest, because as catalysts, networkers, and connectors, we are must constantly shift between types of work (Glichrist, 2004) and between a focus on the means and the ends of community engagement (Cornwall, 2008). TVN and MSU are also challenged to accommodate the priorities and capacities of 18 rural communities, which differ from one another and, often times, differ from the network overall. Despite this, both TVN and MSU know that our unique approach to working together allows us to open our hearts, minds, and spirits in service to the greater good (McIntosh, 2008; Williams, 2004). This Irish phrase captures our belief: *Is ar scath a cheille a mhaireann na doaine* (it is in the shadow of being together that people live their work).

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Conclusion

I believe that partnering with MSU has afforded the rural communities of southwest Mayo opportunities to think broadly and deeply about their communities. The partnership approach adopted by TVN and MSU relies on appreciating the assets that already exist in communities and determining ways of investing these to create strategies to help all segments within the community prosper. In working together, TVN and MSU have strengthened the people’s confidence and belief in themselves. The communities have learnt several ways of advancing their community development efforts and achieving their own vision for the future. They have also acquired the skills and knowhow of envisioning and following through with community goals.

It is obvious that learning takes place in many ways; some learn through studies, others through reports, but communities, particularly rural communities, learn through stories. The stories allow them to reach back to their common history and their individual experience for knowledge about truth and directions for the future. Simple conversations, in which TVN, MSU, and the 18 communities share our stories of struggle and success, have helped to energize all of us and to restore hope in our future.

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