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Localising the SDGs: Auroville's Sustainable practices towards eco-township development

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Abstract: As the global community confronts the escalating challenges of climate change, environmental degradation and unsustainable resource consumption, there is a growing need for localised models that advance global sustainability goals. The study examines the ecological sustainability practices of stakeholder organizations at Auroville, an intentional township in Tamil Nadu, India, known for its ecological and spiritual vision. The study employed a sample of 18 organisations based on their contributions to environmental sustainability. Using the Pearson correlation method, the findings reveal how locally driven practices such as organic farming, renewable energy use, waste recycling, and e-mobility contribute to the development of Auroville as an eco-township and align with relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study examines how institutional structures and personal agency combine to produce sustainable outcomes using Giddens' Structuration theory. As a result, Auroville serves as a model for place-based sustainability that connects grassroots innovation with the global Sustainable Development Goals agenda, offering insights for the development of eco-townships in the future that are focused on mitigating environmental degradation.

Keywords: Auroville; Environment; Localised sustainable practices; Organisations; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Introduction

In recent decades, the world has witnessed intensifying environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. These challenges have paved a way to create integrated sustainable models apart from achieving the global frameworks like SDGs. SDGs adopted by the United Nations in 2015, offers a holistic framework for promoting social justice, environmental preservation and economic resilience. To implement these actions effectively in reality, grassroots governance, community-based participation, and place-based ecological innovation should be integrated into everyday activities. In this context, concepts such as alternative settlements, eco-villages, and intentional communities have emerged as key models for sustainable living [12]. Community-led models often provide valuable insights into how their participatory methods can co-produce ecological and social sustainability [7]. It can be explained with one of the instances, Auroville, an internationally recognized experimental township established in 1968 in Tamil Nadu, India. It was founded by Mother and Sri Aurobindo, their spiritual vision which aims to advance environmental harmony, human unity and conscious life served as an inspiration for Auroville's establishment. The aim of an Auroville is to create a population of nearly 50,000 from diverse countries. As of the recent data, the present population is 3,282 individuals from 59 countries residing over Auroville [3]. Auroville has enhanced over the decades into a flourishing sustainable model which engages in waste recycling, eco-construction, water conservation, organic farming, use of renewable energy and eco-mobility. Apart from its localising sustainable practices, Auroville's development model aligns with global SDGs such as SDG2 (Zero hunger), SDG7 (Clean energy), SDG11 (Sustainable cities) SDG12

(Responsible consumption), SDG13 (Climate action). The academic literature on Auroville often focuses on philosophical aspects rather than systematically interpreting how its practices contributed to sustainable development. This study aims to bridge the gap by analysing the environmental practices adopted by stakeholder organisations in Auroville and evaluating their alignment with global sustainability goals.

Methods

The study employed a cross-sectional research design to analyse current patterns, institutional factors and their alignment with global sustainability goals. Through the use of quantitative techniques, including statistical analysis and structured questionnaires, the researcher was able to determine quantifiable changes, frequencies and correlations among the various sustainability practices adopted by 18 organizations. However, qualitative techniques such as thematic analysis and unstructured interviews were crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of the values, motivations and lived experiences of stakeholders. This approach enabled the study to capture the contextual and philosophical aspects underlying sustainable practices, especially those aligned with Auroville's vision and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To avoid the internal biases, a number of strategies are applied to increase the validity and dependability of qualitative data throughout the research process. A triangulation method has been deployed which includes secondary materials, unstructured interviews, and structured interviews to bring the single point of view. Understanding the Auroville's sustainability, researcher maintain reflexivity to go through their own assumptions and expectations. Proper accuracy of semantic and contextual meaning is maintained throughout the translations and tamil interviews. Throughout the extensive fieldwork, researcher build a good rapport with the participants to avoid the response bias. This helps to reduce the subjective bias in data interpretation and increase the internal validity of qualitative data.

Sampling

- Purposive sampling was used to select the sample size of 18 organizations based on particular inclusion criteria and methodological concerns.
- Rather than covering a small portion of the ecological sector, the sample includes roughly 60–70% of the main environmental organizations in Auroville.
- To represent the range of eco-township activities, organizations were chosen from a variety of sustainability areas, including organic farming, renewable energy, waste management, eco-construction, water recycling, and e-mobility.
- The final three interviews reinforced preexisting patterns rather than introducing significantly new themes, demonstrating that data saturation was reached during fieldwork and that the sample size was sufficient to capture the variety of sustainable practices in Auroville.
- (n=18) satisfies the minimal requirement for exploratory correlation analysis in mixed-methods research, while being modest. The study placed more emphasis on depth than breadth, gathering rich qualitative narratives using in-depth organizational data as well as 45- to 60-minute interviews. To improve validity, the data was triangulated across several sources (interviews, documents, and observations). This sample size is consistent with studies on intentional communities and eco-villages and is suitable for case study research examining localized sustainability methods within a particular community context.

Sample Size

Table 1: Sample Size

Data type	Source	Sample Size
Quantitative	Organisations (correlation analysis)	18
Qualitative	Key informants	26
Secondary	Documents and Academic Publications	17

Source: Primary Data

Primary Data

Purposive sampling has been deployed in the study to choose participants involved in Auroville's ecological sustainability projects. However, the study limits the findings on renewable energy, waste management, paper recycling, and e-mobility because of space limitations and subject matter emphasis. Although data regarding organic farming and waste recycling was gathered, a thorough examination of water management techniques and organic farming will be included in the next edition. Practices that have strong organizational support and are compatible with climate action and other sustainable initiatives are given priority in the current study.

Quantitative (n=18): Data for statistical analysis (Pearson correlation) were collected from 18 organisations engaged in various environmental practices such as organic farming, renewable energy, waste management, organic farming and eco-buildings *(as shown in figure 1).*

Qualitative (n=26): In-depth interviews were conducted with 26 key respondents representing 18 organisations. These include NGO's organiser (n=13), field level staff (n=9), experts (n=4). Interviews conducted between 30 to 45 minutes in English and Tamil depending on participant preference. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent.

Secondary Data

- Secondary data were drawn from documentary sources to provide contextual background and triangular primary findings.
- Academic publications on Auroville's sustainability practices, ecovillage models and eco-township development (n=11).
- Official documentation from Auroville foundation, including organisational websites, policy documents (n=3)
- General sustainability literature on SDG's, biodiversity, organic farming and community participation framework (n=3)

These secondary sources help to interpret theoretical framing, provide contextual understanding of Auroville's historical and philosophical foundations. Primarily analytical focus remained on interview data and organizational practices throughout the fieldwork.

Results and Discussion

The study aims to explore the environmental practices adopted by stakeholders from various organisations at Auroville in pursuit of the vision of sustainable eco-township. Data collected from 18 organisations reveals the use of sustainability initiatives that reflect Auroville's integrated approach to ecological sustainability.

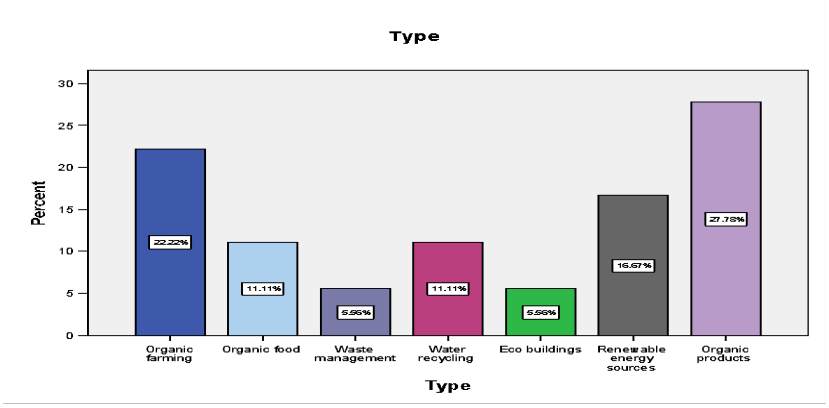
The below frequency table evaluates the common practice of ecological activities.

Table 2: Type of Organisation and Environment practices adopted

S.No	Categories	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.	Organic farming	4	22.2	22.2	22.2
2.	Organic food	2	11.1	11.1	33.3
3.	Waste management	1	5.6	5.6	38.9
4.	Water recycling	2	11.1	11.1	50.0
5.	Eco buildings	1	5.6	5.6	55.6
6.	Renewable energy sources	3	16.7	16.7	72.2
7.	Organic products	2	11.1	11.1	83.3
8.	Recycling and upcycling	3	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	18	100.0	100.0	

Source: Primary Data

Figure 1: Bar chart showing frequency of practices adopted by stakeholde



Source: Primary Data

The data shown in the Table 1 and Figure 1 reveal that stakeholder organisations in Auroville actively engage in a diverse range of sustainability practices though the intensity and frequency vary across categories. These practices are grouped thematically into four domains: food and agriculture, energy and infrastructure, waste recycling, mobility and innovation. Organic farming (22.2%) and the production of organic food and other products (33.3%) were the most prominent food and agriculture practices. This reflects Auroville's long-standing emphasis on natural living, soil health, and food self-sufficiency. The moderate adoption of energy and infrastructure, which includes the use of renewable energy (16.7%) and the construction of eco-buildings (5.6%), indicates that although sustainable energy practices are progressing, infrastructure initiatives such as eco-construction encounter obstacles due to a lack of skilled labor and higher resource requirements. In the domain of waste recycling, practices such as water recycling (11.1%), waste management (5.6%), and upcycling (16.7%) are in progress but unevenly adopted. Though technical and infrastructure constraints persist to impede implementation, this shows increased awareness and creativity in circular economy techniques. The growing popularity of e-vehicles, which is not included in the frequency table but greatly reduces carbon emissions and fits with Auroville's eco-township vision, is a representation of the mobility and innovation domain.

Benefits of ecological transformation and sustainability of Auroville as an township

Assessing the environmental practices adopted by stakeholders in Auroville offers a critical contribution for ecological transformation and township's sustainability. The sustainability practices such as organic farming, renewable energy sources, water recycling and waste management have led to ecological improvement while strengthening community-based environmental stewardship. Integrating quantitative data with stakeholders reveals how these interventions support Auroville's broader goals of ecological transformation, resource efficiency and long-term sustainability. The following content explores the understanding of how these efforts have generated environmental benefits and its alignment with the principles of integrated and sustainable living.

Table 3 : Correlation between Eco-township involvement and Sustainability Parameters

Categories		Eco-township	Parameters
Eco-township	Pearson Correlation	1	.406
	Sig. (2-tailed)		**.095**
	N	18	18
Parameters	Pearson Correlation	.406	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.095**	
	N	18	18

Source: Primary Data

As shown in table 2, Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between sustainability practices adopted and organisational involvement in eco-township initiatives. The results from Table 2, reveals a moderate positive correlation **(r=0.406, p=0.095, n=18)** explains that organisations adopting a wider range of sustainability practices are more likely to contribute meaningfully to the development of Auroville as an eco-township.

Although the correlation was not statistically significant at the conventional 0.05 level, the trend indicates a positive association between breadth of environmental practices and lead to the way of ecological transformation. Given the relatively small sample size, this finding may warrant further exploration in future studies. Qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews further support this relationship, highlighting the impact of integrated practices in shaping Auroville's ecological landscape.

E-mobility and Carbon emission reduction

The vital component of Auroville's plan for ecological change and climate action is e-mobility. The township has implemented a significant number of electric transportation systems, such as 167 e-vehicles and 665 e-cycles, which altogether prevent approximately 902,633 kg of CO_2 emissions per year. This carbon offset is equivalent to the absorption capacity of around 42,983 trees, based on global conversion standards (21 kg CO_2 per tree per year).

A stakeholder from an e-mobility organization explained the deeper philosophical motivation behind their efforts:

"We are putting consciousness into matter through our work. This, according to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's vision, is known as Karma Yoga."

This statement demonstrates how Auroville's sustainability is ingrained in a spiritual ethic that links action and consciousness, rather than just being operational. Therefore, the development of e-mobility infrastructure is a cultural and philosophical manifestation of the township's fundamental ideals in addition to function as an environmental intervention. Moreover, the organisational model of e-mobility is inclusive, with 70% of the workforce drawn from surrounding bioregional villages and 30% from within Auroville. This hybrid approach to staffing fosters cross-community collaboration and skill development while contributing to the township's socio-economic integration goals.

Paper Recycling and Resource efficiency

In Auroville, recycling paper exemplifies the principles of resource circularity, zero-waste, and ecologically conscious craftsmanship. Organisations involved in this sector transform discarded materials including cotton fabric, old jeans, and dry leaves into valuable products like notebooks, table mats, and paper jewellery. By using natural pigments derived from dried leaves gathered in Auroville and the surrounding bioregion *(as shown in figure 2- figure 3)*, it reduces exposure to chemicals and protects the environment.

One of the stakeholders described the philosophy behind their practice:

"Do not harm the environment, nothing should be bought. Whatever nature provides is adequate and can be recycled."

This ethos of sufficiency reflects a broader cultural commitment to sustainable production. Additionally, water consumption during the recycling process is minimized, and any used water is recycled again for gardening, ensuring optimal resource efficiency. Importantly, the recycling sector also promotes women's empowerment, with approximately 95% of the workforce being female, especially from the nearby villages. The township's waste management strategy thus combines technical solutions with creative outreach and educational engagement, making it a model for community-driven environmental action.

Figure 2 : Segregation of dry leaves

Source: Primary Data

Figure 3 : Segregation of dry leaves

Source: Primary Data

Waste management and community awareness

Waste management is a foundational component of Auroville's environmental sustainability strategy, with an emphasis on segregation, recycling, and creative reuse. According to stakeholder accounts, approximately 1.5 tonnes of waste are collected monthly in Auroville, which includes both biodegradable and non-biodegradable materials. While the volume may appear modest, the impact of the practices lies in their systematic segregation and transformation of waste into functional and aesthetic outputs.

A stakeholder from a waste management organisation elaborated:

"We collect plastic, paper, wood and other landfill waste, segregate them, and repurpose them into craftworks—CD mosaic art, rubber tyre crafts, junk art—which are then sold at our recycled shops."

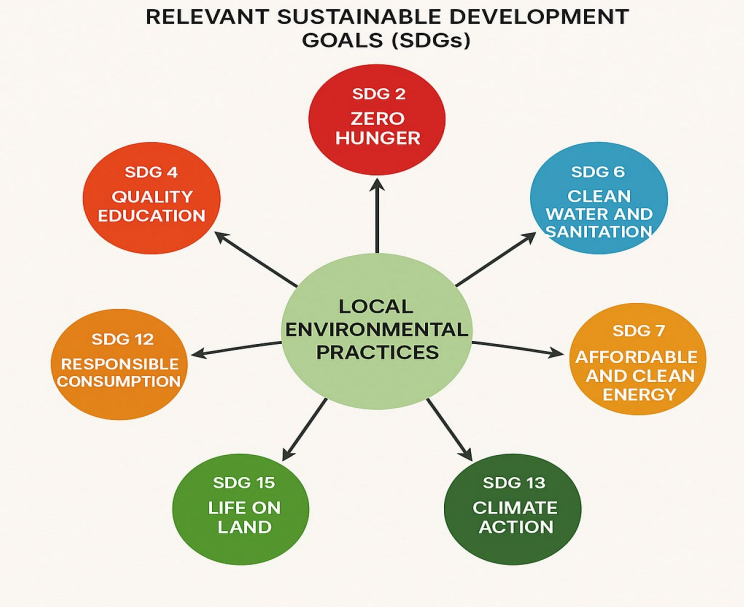
In addition to generating other revenue streams and promoting public involvement, these initiatives minimize the quantity of waste that is dumped in landfills. The township's circular economy model is promoted by converting waste materials like plastics, tires, and wine bottles into decorative and functional objects. It is also believed that reusing non-biodegradable waste can help to preserve groundwater levels by avoiding pollution and overflow from landfills. Auroville prioritizes not only material management but also behavior change and community awareness. An innovative project known as "Trash and Show" is conducted annually by Aurovillian artists, in which participants dress entirely of waste materials.

This performative intervention serves as a powerful educational tool, drawing attention to the hidden potential of waste and cultivating a deeper appreciation for reuse and sustainability.

Relevant SDGs and Global sustainability

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)generated by UN in 2015, offers a global framework for promoting economic growth, environmental preservation and social justice. While SDGs are global in scope, their success depends on how they are implemented at local level. The environmental practices adopted by Auroville's stakeholders provide a basis for analysing how ground root efforts can help to achieve global sustainability goals. This section elaborates how Auroville's ecological initiatives such as organic farming, waste management, renewable energy, recycling and water conservation align with relevant SDGs. These actions contribute to the development of sustainable communities, responsible consumption and climate action.

Figure 4: Connectivity between local environment practices and SDGs



Source: Primary Data

Table 4: Alignment of Auroville's practices with relevant SDG's

Auroville Practice	Description	Relevant SDGs
Organic farming	Promotes inclusive healthy lifestyle, preserve biodiversity and local food systems.	SDG2, SDG15
Renewable energy	Reduces carbon footprint	SDG7, SDG13
Water recycling	Greywater treatment reuse for irrigation and groundwater recharging systems	SDG 6
Waste segregation & recycling	Minimises landfill waste generates recycling process in all ways which supports the circular economy	SDG11, SDG12
E-mobility	Reduces greenhouse gas emissions	SDG 13
Eco-construction	Reduces construction waste, water Consumption, uses natural materials	SDG 11
Natural dyeing	Reduces chemical dependency in the production processes Prevents health hazards related to chemical exposure	SDG12
Woman as an entrepreneur	Encourages green entrepreneurship	SDG5

Source: Primary Data

Table 3, shows an alignment between Auroville's local sustainability initiatives and relevant SDGs. Organic farming contributes to SDG2 (Zero hunger), eco-construction and recycling of clothes aligns with SDG11 (Sustainable cities and communities), SDG 15 (Life on land) is supported by efforts to preserve biodiversity and food security. Initiatives such as use of renewable energy sources, e-mobility support SDG7 (Renewable and clean energy and SDG 13 (Climate Action) are addressed by preventing and lowering carbon emissions. Water recycling practices contribute to SDG6 (Clean water and sanitation) through greywater treatment and groundwater recharging system supports Auroville's water conservation and target of recycling. Waste segregation, recycling of dry leaves for natural dyeing align with SDG12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), women led sustainable production models pave the way to SDG 5 (Gender Equality). These accomplishments demonstrate how localized, community driven efforts in Auroville are actively contributing to global sustainability. Ecological sustainability has resulted in the restoration of degraded land, increased biodiversity, and decreased environmental impact through organic farming, waste management, and the use of renewable energy. It is a global example for inclusive, sustainable living and has also promoted a strong eco-conscious community.

Challenges in maintaining and scaling sustainable ecological practices

- Certain practices—such as eco-building techniques—require specialized skills, yet there is a notable reluctance among individuals to engage in or acquire training for such labor-intensive work.
- Inadequate funding continues to be a major constraint, limiting the capacity of organizations to expand their activities both within and beyond the Auroville township.
- Land dispersion and governmental policies pose structural barriers that affect long-term planning and implementation of ecological projects.

Theoretical implications

The results of this study correspond with Giddens Structuration Theory, which highlights how structure and agency are interdependent in forming social practices. The interaction between institutional frameworks, including environmental policies, norms, and stakeholder groups, and the agency of local participants, such as farmers, artisans, educators, and planners, results in the sustainability model of Auroville. For instance, the moderate positive correlation between eco-township involvement and adoption of sustainability parameters supports the idea that structural commitment enables active engagement of individuals in fields like organic farming and renewable energy. Although institutional structures establish the foundational framework for sustainable practices, it is the active engagement and adaptive capacity of community members that ensure the ongoing replication and enhancement of these practices over time. This dual process, referred to as the duality of structure, demonstrated by the way that

sustainability in Auroville is ingrained in daily activities and routines in addition to being a formal policy commitment. The evolution of Auroville into an eco-township illustrates the co-production of ecological and social sustainability through the dynamic interplay between individual agency and institutional structures.

Discussion

This study elaborates how the environmental practices adopted by stakeholders of organisations in Auroville contribute to the development of eco-township in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings demonstrate a strong emphasis on recycling, e-mobility, waste management and the use of renewable energy indicating a conscious integration of ecological principles into organisational strategies. The frequency data underscore a collective commitment to food self-sufficiency, renewable energy and low-impact infrastructure, supported by grassroots involvement and spiritual values embedded in daily practices. The quantitative analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.406$, $p = 0.095$) between the number of sustainability practices adopted and the level of organisational involvement in eco-township development. This study shows a significant trend: organizations involved in numerous environmental domains tend to exhibit deeper alignment with Auroville's long-term ecological vision, even though it does not satisfy the traditional threshold for statistical significance. This finding is further supported by qualitative insights from stakeholders who described sustainability as a lifestyle encompassing farming, recycling, energy, and education. It is further reinforced with Giddens Structuration Theory, a theoretical paradigm that highlights the duality of structure and agency. In Auroville, institutional arrangements such as eco-policies, the Master Plan, and the community's philosophical orientation enable and reinforce the agency of individuals and organisations in adopting and innovating sustainable practices. The development of Auroville into an eco-township is the consequence of a co-production process in which ecological norms are continuously shaped and maintained by community involvement rather than just top-down planning. The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature on Auroville's sustainability practices[8],[15]emphasize Auroville's ecological resilience through reforestation, sustainable energy and inclusive planning. [10] highlight the socio-economic accomplishments of Auroville's practices, women empowerment and rural development. This study also extends its understanding by examining how the sustainable practices followed by organizations correspond with SDGs related to climate action, renewable energy, responsible consumption and production. Auroville stands as a model demonstrating that eco-township development can be attained with the co-operation of both institutions and community participation. These results are consistent with the findings of [7] highlighting the important role of institutional factors including well-defined goals, obvious benefits, and effective leadership in ensuring program sustainability. Despite the richness of the data, the study's scope is limited by the small sample size ($n = 18$) and the unique socio-cultural context of Auroville, which may not be easily generalised to other regions. However, the practical implications remain strong intentional communities with clearly defined ecological and philosophical frameworks can serve as scalable models for sustainable development. The Auroville model illustrates how the dynamic interplay between institutional structures and individual agency, reinforced by community-led innovations, can cultivate inclusive and ecologically resilient townships. Therefore, Auroville's integrated approach grounded in environmental stewardship, spiritual consciousness, and participatory governance offers valuable insights for regions seeking to localise global sustainability goals.

Conclusion

The study has examined the environmental practices adopted by various stakeholders at Auroville, Tamil Nadu and their contribution to the township's development as an eco-township aligned with the (SDGs). Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the research highlights how locally embedded sustainability initiatives such as organic farming, waste management, renewable energy use and eco-conscious production are not only ecologically beneficial but also socially transformative. These results demonstrate that grassroots efforts can result in significant and replicable forms of sustainable living if reinforced by an integrated institutional goal. Auroville shows that community-driven, context-specific, participatory, value-based practices can lead to environmental transformation rather than relying just on large-scale interventions. Such localized eco-township models present encouraging avenues for creating resilient, sustainable communities as global issues intensify. Localized, community-driven initiatives can make a significant contribution to global sustainability goals, as demonstrated by Auroville's sustainability practices. An experimental, reproducible strategy that combines social ideals and environmental preservation is integrated by its eco-township model. As global challenges intensify, such grassroots models provide practical insights for building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities worldwide.

To avoid the subjective bias and to provide the convergent evidence in the conclusion of study, it incorporates stakeholder interviews, quantitative correlation analysis, and secondary documentation. Participants implementation

concerns were mentioned to provide the balance evaluation instead of idealized portrayal including lack of resources and expertise. Sample size has been carefully considered based on the Giddens's Structuration, which provides theoretical basis for pattern analysis and statistical findings. This systematic approach provides findings that accurately reflect Auroville's sustainability principles and brings valuable insights towards the development of eco-townships.

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