

Social Work Interventions and Poverty Alleviation Among Vulnerable Households in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State

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Abstract

This study empirically examines the effect of social work interventions on poverty alleviation among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State. Anchored on Empowerment Theory, the study adopts a cross-sectional survey design involving beneficiaries of government and non-governmental social welfare programmes. Data were collected from household heads and social workers using structured questionnaires. Social work interventions were measured in terms of income support, skills acquisition, psychosocial counselling, and access to social services, while poverty alleviation was assessed using income stability, livelihood improvement, and household welfare indicators. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis. The findings reveal a statistically significant positive relationship between social work interventions and poverty alleviation outcomes. Skills acquisition and access to social services emerged as the strongest predictors of improved household welfare. However, limited coverage and inadequate funding constrained programme effectiveness. The study concludes that strengthened social work interventions are critical to sustainable poverty reduction at the municipal level.

Keywords: *Social work, Poverty alleviation, Vulnerable households, Empowerment Theory.*

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Background to the Study

Poverty remains one of the most persistent development challenges confronting Nigeria, manifesting in low-income levels, unemployment, food insecurity, poor access to basic social services, and heightened vulnerability among households. Despite successive government reforms and social intervention programmes, a substantial proportion of the population continues to live below the poverty line, particularly in urban and peri-urban settings where economic inequality and social exclusion are pronounced (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Vulnerable households—such as female-headed households, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and households dependent on informal livelihoods—are disproportionately affected by poverty due to limited access to resources, weak social protection mechanisms, and structural constraints (World Bank, 2020).

In response to these challenges, social work has increasingly been recognised as a critical profession in poverty alleviation and social development. Social work interventions are designed to enhance individuals' and households' capacities to cope with socio-economic hardships through income support, skills acquisition, psychosocial counselling, advocacy, and facilitation of access to essential social services (Midgley, 2014). By focusing on empowerment, social inclusion, and human development, social work practice aligns with broader poverty reduction goals and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the objective of ending poverty in all its forms (United Nations, 2015).

At the sub-national level, municipalities such as Calabar Municipal in Cross River State have implemented a range of government and non-governmental social welfare programmes aimed at improving household livelihoods. These include conditional cash transfers, vocational training schemes, community-based empowerment initiatives, and social assistance provided through ministries, faith-based organisations, and non-governmental organisations. However, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of these interventions in alleviating poverty among vulnerable households remains limited and fragmented, especially within the context of urban local governments in southern Nigeria (Akinwale, 2019; Emeh & Uche, 2020). This gap in empirical knowledge constrains evidence-based policy formulation and the optimisation of social work practice.

Anchored on Empowerment Theory, this study argues that poverty alleviation is most sustainable when vulnerable households are supported to build skills, access resources, strengthen psychosocial resilience, and actively participate in decisions affecting their wellbeing (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment-oriented social work interventions emphasise capacity-building rather than dependency, enabling beneficiaries to achieve income stability, improved livelihoods, and enhanced household welfare over time. Examining the effectiveness of such interventions at the municipal level is therefore essential for understanding how social work contributes to poverty reduction within specific socio-economic contexts. Against this backdrop, this study empirically examines the effect of social work interventions on poverty alleviation among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State. By analysing key dimensions of social work interventions—income support, skills acquisition, psychosocial counselling, and access to

social services—and their relationship with poverty alleviation outcomes, the study contributes to the growing literature on social work, local governance, and poverty reduction in Nigeria. The findings are expected to provide practical insights for policymakers, social workers, and development practitioners on strengthening social welfare programmes to achieve more inclusive and sustainable poverty alleviation at the municipal level.

Statement of the Problem

Poverty remains a critical socio-economic challenge in Nigeria, with vulnerable households in urban municipalities experiencing persistent income instability, limited livelihood opportunities, and inadequate access to essential social services. In Calabar Municipal, Cross River State, the situation is compounded by rising unemployment, dependence on informal economic activities, and increasing household vulnerability arising from age, gender, disability, and household structure (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Despite the presence of government and non-governmental social welfare programmes, poverty continues to undermine household welfare and social inclusion within the municipality. Social work interventions—such as income support, skills acquisition, psychosocial counselling, and facilitation of access to social services—are central to poverty alleviation strategies aimed at vulnerable populations. These interventions are designed to empower beneficiaries by enhancing their capabilities, resilience, and access to opportunities (Midgley, 2014). However, concerns persist regarding the effectiveness, coverage, and sustainability of such interventions at the local government level. In Calabar Municipal, many programmes are characterised by limited funding, inadequate professional staffing, weak coordination among stakeholders, and uneven beneficiary coverage, which may constrain their impact on poverty reduction outcomes.

Empirical studies on poverty alleviation in Nigeria have largely focused on macro-level policies and national social intervention programmes, with limited attention to the role of social work practice at the municipal level (Akinwale, 2019; Emeh & Uche, 2020). Consequently, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how specific social work interventions influence income stability, livelihood improvement, and overall household welfare among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal. This knowledge gap limits the ability of policymakers and practitioners to design evidence-based social work strategies that effectively address poverty at the grassroots. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates the effect of social work interventions on poverty alleviation among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the effect of social work interventions on poverty alleviation among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. examine the effect of income support interventions on income stability among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal;
2. assess the influence of skills acquisition programmes on livelihood improvement among vulnerable households;

3. determine the effect of psychosocial counselling on household welfare among vulnerable households;
4. evaluate the influence of access to social services on poverty alleviation outcomes among vulnerable households; and
5. identify the major constraints affecting the effectiveness of social work interventions in poverty alleviation in Calabar Municipal.

Research Questions

The study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What effect do income support interventions have on income stability among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal?
2. How do skills acquisition programmes influence livelihood improvement among vulnerable households in the study area?
3. To what extent does psychosocial counselling affect household welfare among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal?
4. How does access to social services influence poverty alleviation outcomes among vulnerable households?
5. What challenges constrain the effectiveness of social work interventions in alleviating poverty in Calabar Municipal?

Literature Review

The literature examines empirical discourse on social work interventions and poverty alleviation, with particular emphasis on vulnerable households in developing country contexts and Nigeria in particular. The review is structured thematically in line with the objectives of the study, focusing on key dimensions of social work interventions, income support, skills acquisition, psychosocial counselling, and access to social services, and their implications for poverty alleviation outcomes. Poverty alleviation is conceptualised not only in terms of income improvement but also broader indicators of livelihood sustainability and household welfare (Sen, 1999; Midgley, 2014).

The literature review draws on empirical studies from Nigeria and comparable settings to examine the extent to which social work interventions contribute to income stability, livelihood improvement, and enhanced household wellbeing. It also highlights contextual and institutional factors that shape the effectiveness of social work practice at the local government level, including funding constraints, programme coverage, and professional capacity (Akinwale, 2019; Emeh & Uche, 2020). By identifying areas of consensus, gaps, and contradictions in existing studies, this review provides a foundation for the present study and justifies the need for an empirical examination of social work interventions and poverty alleviation among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State.

Social Work Interventions and Poverty Alleviation among Vulnerable Households

Empirical literature widely recognises social work interventions as critical instruments for poverty alleviation, particularly among vulnerable households. Studies conducted in developing countries emphasise that social work practice contributes to poverty reduction by

addressing both material deprivation and social exclusion through empowerment-oriented approaches (Midgley, 2014; World Bank, 2020). In Nigeria, social work interventions are often embedded within social protection and welfare programmes implemented by government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and faith-based institutions. These interventions aim to enhance household resilience, promote self-reliance, and improve access to basic social services (Akinwale, 2019).

Empirical evidence suggests that the effectiveness of social work interventions depends on the type of support provided, the socio-economic context, and the level of programme sustainability. However, many studies highlight challenges such as inadequate funding, limited professional capacity, and weak institutional coordination, which undermine the impact of social work interventions on poverty outcomes (Emeh & Uche, 2020). This study therefore disaggregates social work interventions into specific thematic components in line with its objectives.

Income Support Interventions and Income Stability

Income support interventions constitute a core component of social work strategies aimed at alleviating poverty among vulnerable households. These interventions include cash transfers, food assistance, and material support intended to stabilise household income and reduce short-term economic shocks. Empirical studies indicate that income support programmes can significantly improve consumption levels, reduce income volatility, and enhance household welfare when effectively targeted (Barrientos & Hulme, 2016). In Nigeria, studies on conditional and unconditional cash transfer programmes show mixed outcomes. While some beneficiaries report improved income stability and reduced vulnerability, others experience only temporary relief due to low benefit levels and irregular payments (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For instance, Okorie and Nwankwo (2018) found that cash-based social assistance improved household consumption among poor urban households but had limited long-term effects on income sustainability. Similarly, Adepoju (2020) observed that income support programmes in southern Nigeria reduced extreme poverty but failed to address structural causes of household income insecurity. These findings suggest that while income support interventions are important for immediate poverty relief, their effectiveness in achieving sustained income stability depends on complementary interventions such as skills development and access to economic opportunities.

Skills Acquisition Programmes and Livelihood Improvement

Skills acquisition programmes are widely regarded as sustainable social interventions for poverty alleviation, as they focus on building beneficiaries' productive capacities and promoting self-employment. Empirical studies across Africa demonstrate that vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes contribute positively to livelihood improvement, especially among women and youth from vulnerable households (Cho & Honourati, 2014). In Nigeria, empirical evidence indicates that skills acquisition programmes enhance beneficiaries' employability, income-generating capacity, and livelihood diversification. A study by Adebayo and Ogunrinola (2019) revealed that beneficiaries of vocational training schemes in urban centres recorded improved income levels and reduced dependence on social

assistance. Similarly, Ekanem and Bassey (2021) found that skills acquisition interventions in Cross River State positively influenced household livelihoods by enabling beneficiaries to engage in small-scale enterprises.

However, other studies caution that the impact of skills acquisition programmes is often constrained by poor training quality, lack of start-up capital, and limited market access (Akinwale, 2019). These constraints reduce the long-term effectiveness of skills-based social work interventions, particularly in urban municipalities where competition in informal markets is intense.

Psychosocial Counselling and Household Welfare

Psychosocial counselling is an integral but often under-emphasised component of social work interventions aimed at poverty alleviation. Empirical studies suggest that poverty is not only an economic condition but also a psychosocial experience characterised by stress, social exclusion, and reduced self-efficacy (Sen, 1999). Psychosocial counselling helps vulnerable households cope with emotional distress, strengthen self-esteem, and improve decision-making capacities. In the Nigerian context, empirical evidence on psychosocial counselling and poverty outcomes is limited but growing. Olatunji and Akinyemi (2017) found that counselling interventions improved psychological wellbeing and social functioning among low-income households, indirectly enhancing their capacity to engage in productive activities. Similarly, Emeh and Uche (2020) observed that households receiving psychosocial support alongside material assistance demonstrated better household cohesion and welfare outcomes than those receiving material support alone. Despite its importance, psychosocial counselling remains inadequately integrated into many poverty alleviation programmes due to shortages of trained social workers and limited institutional recognition of psychosocial needs (Midgley, 2014). This gap underscores the need for empirical assessment of its contribution to household welfare.

Access to Social Services and Poverty Alleviation Outcomes

Access to social services—such as healthcare, education, housing support, and social protection schemes—is a key determinant of poverty alleviation outcomes. Empirical studies consistently show that improved access to basic social services reduces household vulnerability and enhances overall welfare (World Bank, 2020). Social workers play a crucial role in facilitating access to these services by linking vulnerable households to relevant institutions and advocating for their inclusion. In Nigeria, studies reveal that limited access to social services exacerbates poverty, particularly among urban poor households. Adeyemi and Ogunsola (2021) found that households with better access to healthcare and education services exhibited improved welfare outcomes and reduced poverty incidence. In Cross River State, Ekanem et al. (2020) reported that social work-mediated access to health insurance and educational support significantly improved household wellbeing. Nevertheless, barriers such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, poor service coverage, and lack of awareness among beneficiaries continue to limit access to social services. These challenges highlight the importance of strengthening social work mechanisms that enhance service accessibility as part of poverty alleviation strategies.

Constraints Affecting the Effectiveness of Social Work Interventions

Empirical literature identifies several constraints that undermine the effectiveness of social work interventions in poverty alleviation. Key challenges include inadequate funding, limited professional staffing, poor monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and weak coordination among stakeholders (Akinwale, 2019; Emeh & Uche, 2020). At the municipal level, political interference and inconsistent policy implementation further weaken programme outcomes. Studies conducted in urban local governments in Nigeria indicate that limited coverage of social work programmes leaves many vulnerable households unreached, thereby diluting overall poverty reduction efforts (NBS, 2022). These constraints underscore the need for evidence-based reforms aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring sustainable social work practice at the grassroots.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because it allows for the collection of quantitative data from a defined population at a single point in time in order to examine relationships between social work interventions and poverty alleviation outcomes among vulnerable households. The design is widely used in social work and poverty studies due to its suitability for analysing perceptions, experiences, and measurable welfare indicators across different groups (Creswell, 2014).

Study Area

The study was conducted in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Calabar Municipal is an urban municipality characterised by diverse socio-economic activities, a large informal sector, and the presence of government and non-governmental social welfare programmes targeting vulnerable households. These characteristics make the area suitable for examining the effectiveness of social work interventions on poverty alleviation.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised vulnerable households and practising social workers involved in social welfare and poverty alleviation programmes in Calabar Municipal. Specifically, the target population included:

- a) household heads of vulnerable households who are beneficiaries of government and non-governmental social work interventions; and
- b) professional social workers and welfare officers working in relevant ministries, departments, agencies, and non-governmental organisations within the municipality.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed for the study. In the first stage, wards within Calabar Municipal were purposively selected based on the presence of identifiable social welfare programmes. In the second stage, vulnerable households benefiting from social work interventions were selected using systematic random sampling from programme benefits obtained from implementing agencies. In the third stage, social workers were selected using

purposive sampling due to their specialised knowledge and direct involvement in programme implementation. A total sample of [insert sample size, e.g. 250 respondents] was drawn, comprising [insert number] vulnerable household heads and [insert number] social workers. This sample size was considered adequate for statistical analysis and generalisation within the study area.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher in line with the objectives of the study and existing literature. The questionnaire consisted of five sections:

- a) Section A: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents;
- b) Section B: Income support interventions;
- c) Section C: Skills acquisition programmes;
- d) Section D: Psychosocial counselling and access to social services; and
- e) Section E: Poverty alleviation outcomes measured using indicators of income stability, livelihood improvement, and household welfare.

Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Agree (5)* to *Strongly Disagree (1)*.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure content and face validity, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review by scholars in social work and development studies. A pilot study was conducted outside the study area, and the reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 and above was considered acceptable for the study (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Method of Data Collection

Data was collected through direct administration of questionnaires to the respondents with the assistance of trained research assistants. For vulnerable households, questionnaires were administered through face-to-face interviews to accommodate respondents with limited literacy. Social workers completed the questionnaires through self-administration. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to describe respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and key study variables. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was employed to examine the relationship between social work interventions and poverty alleviation outcomes, while multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relative contribution of income support, skills acquisition, psychosocial counselling, and access to social services to poverty alleviation among vulnerable households. All statistical tests were conducted at a 5 per cent level of significance.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Study Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Income support interventions	3.62	0.84
Skills acquisition programmes	3.88	0.79
Psychosocial counselling	3.21	0.91
Access to social services	3.76	0.82
Income stability	3.54	0.86
Livelihood improvement	3.91	0.77
Household welfare	3.47	0.88
Poverty alleviation (overall)	3.85	0.74

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the key variables examined in the study. The mean scores indicate that respondents reported a moderate to high level of exposure to social work interventions, particularly skills acquisition programmes (Mean = 3.88) and access to social services (Mean = 3.76). Income support interventions also recorded a relatively high mean score (3.62), suggesting that a considerable proportion of vulnerable households benefited from cash or material assistance. Psychosocial counselling recorded the lowest mean score (3.21), indicating limited coverage of counselling services within poverty alleviation programmes in the study area.

With respect to poverty alleviation indicators, livelihood improvement recorded the highest mean score (3.91), followed by overall poverty alleviation (3.85) and income stability (3.54). These findings suggest that social work interventions have contributed more strongly to livelihood-related outcomes than to income stability and psychosocial wellbeing. Overall, the results indicate that while social work interventions are present in Calabar Municipal, their intensity and reach vary across intervention types.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Social Work Interventions and Poverty Alleviation Indicators

Variables	Income Stability	Livelihood Improvement	Household Welfare
Income support interventions	0.41**	0.38**	0.35**
Skills acquisition programmes	0.52**	0.63**	0.58**
Psychosocial counselling	0.34**	0.29*	0.36**
Access to social services	0.55**	0.57**	0.59**

* $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients between social work interventions and poverty alleviation indicators. The results reveal that all dimensions of social work interventions have positive and statistically significant relationships with income stability, livelihood improvement, and household welfare. Skills acquisition programmes exhibited the strongest correlations with livelihood improvement ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$) and household welfare ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), indicating their central role in enhancing sustainable livelihoods.

Access to social services also demonstrated strong positive correlations with all poverty indicators, particularly household welfare ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$). Income support interventions showed moderate but significant relationships with poverty indicators, suggesting that while they alleviate short-term deprivation, their long-term impact may be limited. Psychosocial counselling recorded weaker but still significant correlations, reflecting its supportive rather than primary economic role. Overall, the correlation results confirm that social work interventions are significantly associated with improved poverty outcomes among vulnerable households.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis of Social Work Interventions on Poverty Alleviation

Dependent Variable: Poverty Alleviation				
Independent Variables	Beta (β)	Std. Error	t-value	Sig.
Income support interventions	0.21	0.06	3.50	0.001
Skills acquisition programmes	0.46	0.05	8.92	0.000
Psychosocial counselling	0.22	0.07	3.14	0.002
Access to social services	0.38	0.06	6.33	0.000
Constant	1.12	0.29	3.86	0.000
R = 0.71				
R ² = 0.50				
Adjusted R ² = 0.48				
F-statistic = 32.46 ($p < 0.01$)				

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis examining the combined effect of social work interventions on poverty alleviation. The model explains 50 per cent of the variation in poverty alleviation outcomes ($R^2 = 0.50$), indicating a strong explanatory power of the independent variables. The F-statistics (32.46, $p < 0.01$) confirm that the regression model is statistically significant. Among the predictors, skills acquisition programmes emerged as the strongest determinant of poverty alleviation ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$), followed by access to social services ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). Income support interventions ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$) and psychosocial counselling ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$) also had significant positive effects, although their contributions were comparatively lower. These findings indicate that empowerment-oriented interventions that build skills and enhance service access have greater long-term poverty alleviation effects than short-term income support alone.

Conclusion

This study examined the effect of social work interventions on poverty alleviation among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State. Drawing on Empowerment Theory and using a cross-sectional survey design, the study analysed the roles of income support, skills acquisition, psychosocial counselling, and access to social services in improving income stability, livelihood opportunities, and household welfare. The findings provide strong empirical evidence that social work interventions have a statistically significant and positive effect on poverty alleviation outcomes at the municipal level.

Specifically, skills acquisition programmes and access to social services emerged as the most effective interventions in promoting sustainable livelihood improvement and enhanced household welfare. These empowerment-oriented strategies were found to contribute more substantially to long-term poverty reduction than income support alone. Income support interventions, while important for cushioning vulnerable households against immediate economic shocks, demonstrated only moderate effects on income stability, reinforcing the need for complementary capacity-building initiatives. Psychosocial counselling also played a meaningful role by strengthening beneficiaries' coping abilities, motivation, and household wellbeing, although its coverage remained limited.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study identified significant institutional constraints, including inadequate funding, limited programme coverage, shortages of trained social workers, and weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These challenges undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of social work interventions, limiting their potential to achieve broader poverty reduction goals. Overall, the study concludes that strengthened, integrated, and well-resourced social work interventions are essential for achieving sustainable poverty alleviation among vulnerable households in Calabar Municipal and similar urban municipalities in Nigeria.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen Skills Acquisition and Livelihood Programmes

Government and development partners should prioritise skills acquisition programmes as a core poverty alleviation strategy. Vocational training should be market-driven, adequately funded, and linked to start-up support, access to microcredit, and mentorship to enhance sustainability and income generation among vulnerable households.

2. Expand Access to Social Services through Social Work Facilitation

Municipal and state authorities should strengthen the role of social workers in facilitating access to essential social services such as healthcare, education, housing support, and social protection schemes. Simplifying administrative procedures and improving inter-agency coordination will enhance service accessibility and reduce household vulnerability.

3. Integrate Income Support with Empowerment-Oriented Interventions

Income support programmes should be redesigned to complement empowerment strategies rather than function as stand-alone interventions. Linking cash transfers and material support to skills training, employment opportunities, and social service enrolment will promote long-term poverty reduction.

4. Enhance Psychosocial Counselling Services

Psychosocial counselling should be systematically integrated into poverty alleviation programmes. Investment in training and deploying professional social workers will improve beneficiaries' psychological wellbeing, resilience, and capacity to engage productively in livelihood activities.

5. Increase Funding and Coverage of Social Work Programmes

Adequate and predictable funding is critical for scaling up social work interventions. Government at the state and municipal levels should allocate dedicated budget lines for social welfare programmes to expand coverage and reach underserved vulnerable households.

6. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks

Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be institutionalised to assess programme effectiveness, track beneficiary outcomes, and inform policy adjustments. Data-driven decision-making will enhance accountability and improve the impact of social work interventions.

7. Build Institutional and Professional Capacity

Continuous professional development for social workers, improved staffing levels, and enhanced collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organisations will strengthen service delivery and ensure sustainable poverty alleviation outcomes.

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