Exploring Community's Knowledge of the Available Child Protection Services in Southwestern Uganda

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Abstract

Background

While the government of Uganda and other stakeholders have put in place many child protection services, the community members need to understand and appreciate the existence of such services, and their consequent utilization. Therefore, the current study set out to explore community members' knowledge of child protection services available in Sheema District and Mbarara City in South Western Uganda.

Methods

We conducted 22 key informant interviews with government and civil society officials. Also, six FGDs were conducted with community members. All participants were purposively selected and data were collected using an interview guide. Participants views were audio recorded with their consent, data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically.

Results

We found that community members had limited knowledge about child protection services which related to five broad themes, namely; awareness about children's risks and protection concerns, laws on child protection, places and institutions where to seek redress, child birth registration, and existing child welfare programs.

Conclusions

The study findings revealed that community members had little knowledge of child protection services available in the communities where they lived. We recommend designing and implanting interventions purposed to create community members' awareness of the existing child protection services.

Key words: Child Protection, Community, Knowledge, Southwestern Uganda

Introduction

Child protection is one of the fundamental rights of children, and it requires that everyone be versed in knowledge about the principles of child protection (Refugee et al., 2019). It is a preventive way of avoiding child abuse. It is also one way of facilitating good growth and development of children from their infanthood to adulthood and into good and productive citizenry, which in itself is inclusive development (MoLSD, 2015; UNICEF, 2015). Three key principles guide the practice in child protection work as provided under the (UN CRC 1989) and these are; (a) The Best Interests of the Child, (b) Non- Non-Discrimination, and (c) Do No Harm (UNICEF, 2015). The best interests of the child as a principle emphasizes promoting the welfare of the child in whatever decisions or actions one makes concerning children. Non-discrimination means that children cannot be segregated against concerning any factor or reason. Therefore, efforts must be made to minimize any possible negative effects and maximize the possible benefits of utilizing the recommended principles of child protection by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Practices, 2013; M. Wessells et al., 2014).

Many legal instruments guide child protection on how different countries adhere and what governments should do (Bekaert et al., 2021; Molnar et al., 2021; Sserwanja et al., 2021). Among them is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. According to the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 4 (Protection of rights): Governments have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. When countries ratify the Convention, they agree to review their laws relating to children (Mccarthy, 2012).

In a study conducted by Wessells et al., (2014) about "A grounded view of community-based child protection mechanisms and their linkages with the wider child protection system in rural and urban areas in Kenya" The authors found that relatively little was known about the effectiveness and use of Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs), their alignment and linkage with formal aspects of wider child protection systems. Moreover, a gap in knowledge about CBCPMs is problematic since an understanding of the use, effectiveness, and sustainability of CBCPMs is essential for improving practice and policy in regard to strengthening child protection systems.

At a community level, there exists community child protection assets and potentials including cultural norms and values, which members should have knowledge about (Wessells et al., 2014). The USAID & Save the Children (2011) report on Child Protection Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices in Central and Western Liberia noted that, knowledge of child protection and particularly from community members rotate around seeking people's awareness of the following five concerns: (a) Awareness of children risk and protection in the community, (b) Children without parental care, (c) the systems of child care and protection, (d) the Places of safety and support and, (e) Child welfare committees (Save the Children, 2015; Sebastian Rich, 2013; M. Wessells et al., 2014). This standard has been tested and found to be relevant in some African countries like Liberia, Kenya, and Mali (Better Care Network, 2017). It is against such a background that our study set out to explore community's knowledge of the available child protection services in Southwestern Uganda.

Methods

Study design

The study was purely qualitative and adopted an exploratory approach to explore community members' knowledge on child protection services available in Sheema District and Mbarara City in Southwestern Uganda. Data was collected by conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) and Key informant's interviews (KIIs). The FGDs were composed of community members while the KIIs were conducted with government officials and officials in the civil society sector who took care of children welfare. The actual data collection activities were done between the months of September 2022 to January 2023. Interview guides were used to collect data from the FGDs and the KIIs. The interview guides had items that sought for participants' knowledge, opinions and experiences relating to child protection services available in Southwestern Uganda. The FGD guide was translated into Runyankore-Rukiga, the local language of the region. This was because majority of the community members didn't understand nor speak English the official language of Uganda.

Study settings

The study was conducted in Shema district and Mbarara city in Southwestern Uganda. Sheema district is located along Mbarara - Kasese Highway, about 34 kilometers from Mbarara City. It is a new district, which assumed the district status in July 2010, curved out of Bushenyi District, and is part of Ankole Subregion (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheema_District). The district has fifteen Sub counties, but only two sub counties of Kabwohe Division (representing semi urban setting) and Masheruka Subcounty (representing rural setting) which registered many reports of child maltreatment as per the Orphans and other Vulnerable Children (OVC) Situation Report for Sheema District (2019), were selected for this study. The district has also on a number of occasions reported serious child abuse cases, an issue that raises questions on whether community members are knowledgeable about the government and civil society child protection services in the area. Quite a number of government and civil society agencies such as Compassion International, Community Volunteer Initiative for Development (COVOID), Kihunda CDC, Rweibaare CDC, Advancing Ministries for the Gospel etc. have come into play to extend children protection services. On the other hand, Mbarara city is located 269 kilometers from Kampala, the old traditionally known city in the country. The city was chosen because of its strategic institutional mechanisms that exist in the council with quite a number of child protection services. There are also many children who have come to the city due to several factors ranging from the search for work, neglect, and abandonment by their parents or caregivers (Monitor newspaper, January 22, 2021).

Study participants

A total of 70 participants including, 48 community members and 22 officials from government and civil society institutions participated in this study. The community members were included in the study because the study directly aimed to explore their knowledge of the child protection services in the community. The government and civil society officials were included in the study because of the rich information they had on the subject of study. Community members were selected basing on their prior care for a neglected or maltreated child or children. These were identified and recommended for inclusion in the study by the area Local Council One (LC1) Chairpersons and the area Child Development Centre (CDC) Project Directors.

Data collection procedures

The study employed two data collection methods which were; Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Data from both FGDs and KIIs were collected until a saturation point was reached. We conducted six FGDs each comprising of eight community members selected purposively basing on their prior care to a maltreated child or children. Again 13 KIIs with government officials were conducted. Other nine KIIs were also conducted with the civil society. Permission to collect data was sought from the BSU-REC, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and all local authorities from the study area. Upon presentation of the permission letters from relevant offices, and explanation of the purpose of the study, participants were requested to take part in the study voluntarily. A written informed consent was obtained from those who accepted to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted in designated places that were considered safe for both the participants and the research team.

The FGD and KII guides composed of open-ended questions which sought to collect data on community's knowledge of the available child protection services in Sheema District and Mbarara City in South Western Uganda. The Key Informants' Interviews lasted for about 30 to 45 minutes while FGDs lasted for 60 to 90 minutes. All participants were offered a small token of appreciation of five thousand Uganda shillings (1.5USD) as compensation for their time to participate in the study. Participants were also given contacts of the Principal Investigator in case they had any questions to ask. Moreover, all participants were assured that the study was for academic purposes and that there were no any foreseeable risks involved in the study. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or anything to lose if they declined participating.

Data management and analysis

All FGDs and KIs Interviews were audio recorded in order to allow for later transcriptions. Data were transcribed verbatim by research assistants and compared with the audio recordings to verify the accuracy of the transcription. The transcripts in Runyankole-Rukiga were then translated into English by an independent translator. Any discrepancies in the translation were discussed and amended accordingly. All the authors (AM, RB, AA and HEA) independently read through the transcripts. The initial coding was done by the PI (AM), and then the codes were discussed with the other co-authors for consensus based on the themes that emerged from the data. We adopted a thematic analysis for this study because extracts of raw data get embedded within the analytic narrative to illustrate the complex story of the data, going beyond a description of the data and convincing the reader of the validity and merit of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in (Nowell et al., 2017). Five themes (awareness about children risks and protection concerns, laws on child protection, places and institutions where to seek redress, child birth registration, and the existing child welfare programs) emerged from the data from the FGDs and KIIs. We selected the most compelling quotations from both FGDs and KIIs in support of our results.

Results

Five broad themes were generated from the data namely; awareness about children risks and protection concerns, laws on child protection, places and institutions where to seek redress, child birth registration, and existing child welfare programs.

Knowledge about children risks and protection in the community.

Children risks and protection concerns at community level is an important issue although community members generally did not seem to understand these concerns. It was only when a triangulation was done by asking other study participants that helped to explain in detail about what community members did not know and why. However, what is considered risky for children such as denial of education, food and other forms of abuse such as beating of children was not looked at as a big issue by community members. Also, situations of poverty and such practices were found to be responsible for forcing some under-age children into vulnerable situations of being maltreated like in sexual abuse of young girls by men, resorting to working as house-helps and participating in hard Labour. As expressed by one parent in a community FGD, it was mentioned that;

I have all the liberty to treat my children the way I want including disciplining (beating) them. Children need to be beaten in order to put sense in their heads. Many children are becoming very problematic because they think they shouldn't be touched since the government stopped beating of children. Also, let us not forget that we are poor in our villages, there is no money, no jobs, the prices of goods are high in the market, and it is not easy to pay school fees for our children. What do we do? (FGD, community member participant)

Community members were complaining about the hard-economic situation in the country. Poverty was a major issue being raised here, putting many children in their families at a risk of abuse and exploitation. As long as parents and other caretakers of children keep in such lamentation without forging a way out in terms of earning a living, children will live in insecurity and get more prone to abuse as long as scarcity of resources prevails in their homes.

In trying to ascertain the truth of this matter, the study took a step ahead to enquire from the key informants about whether community members knew the children risks and protection concerns. And this is what one female key informant had to say on whether community members knew of children risks and protection concerns:

Well, we would expect them to be aware because we try to do as much as we can to sensitise them about child maltreatment and what they need to do as community members in order to protect their children, including provision of children basic needs in a home at minimum. However, many of them have failed to put into practice what we tell them. Some of them are in fact risks themselves to their children. Men have gone ahead to marry other wives, are into alcoholism and polygamous families are burdensome to men in trying to meet the expanded families' needs! (KII, participant)

This data from both the community member and the key informant proved that some community members don't have enough knowledge about risks and protection concerns of children, or have limited knowledge about the same. Responses from key informants making an observation that some of the community members are risks themselves was enough to conclude and argue that, there is limited knowledge on such an important issue of risks and protection issues for children.

Community members' knowledge about children without parental care

On community members' knowledge about children without parental care, results revealed that indeed, there were children who lived such a life in the communities. On this view, one of the participants had this to report:

It is true we have such children who are neglected and abandoned, many women especially young girls who just get boyfriends anyhow have got challenges with their partners running away and

leaving them with their children without care. Also, we have some children who are either partial or complete orphans. Other children are living with single parents (especially single mothers) and grandmothers (FGD, Community Member Participant)

Such a response from a community member explains the fact that there are children without parental care. The community members are therefore knowledgeable about such issues and concerns of children. The problem was reflected in the unwillingness of some members to respect children right to protection especially those without parental care.

Community members' knowledge on existing laws on child care and protection

Results about community members' knowledge on the existing laws on child care and protection revealed that community members lacked concrete information about the specific laws, procedures, punishments, the importance of such punishments to children offenders and the roles of different actors and stakeholders. A detailed discussion with community members further found that many of them could not mention any one law that provides for the rights of children to protection, or anyone that condemns child maltreatment. One community member participant argued;

What we know is that if anyone is caught violating the rights of children and engages in mistreating a child, he or she will be arrested by police and taken to prison. That is all we can say. We are not lawyers to tell which law applies in which case…. that is the work of you the educated people! After all, we fear 'these things of reporting to police'. They (police) would want you to make a statement and this compromises how we live with our neighbors because of hatred that may develop because you have reported someone. (FGD, Community Member Participant)

The results revealed in the discussion above clearly show that community members either lacked knowledge on the specific laws that guide child protection, or are ignorant altogether. This therefore means that the fight against child maltreatment will take a long way in realising its goal. This is because it's in the same communities where acts of abuse are committed, largely by the community members, who include parents, relatives, neighbours and strangers. Despite this revelation by the community members' lack of knowledge, the other study participants especially the key informants in government were arguing that they are doing their part to sensitise community members about the dangers of child abuse and importance of protecting children in safe and secure environments.

One of the key informant civil servant made an observation about why community members seemed not to understand the law about child abuse and protection and had this to say:

Of course matters of laws and policies are not easy to transfer to the minds of people especially many of whom are illiterate. It takes time. Sometimes these people know what the law provides but they go ahead and commit these crimes (Interview, Key Informant).

Also, the other government civil servant who worked with one of the child and family protection unit (CFPU) in police concurred that:

Community members know because we teach them about the dangers of child abuse, importance of respecting children rights to protection and their responsibility to report suspects of child abuse. We even go ahead and emphasise that the law is always there to catchup with them by apprehending law breakers. May be they haven't appreciated child protection. They are aware government banned beating children although they go ahead and beat their children severely and yet according to them, beating is one way of 'disciplining' their children. It (Child maltreatment)

is a very sophisticated matter, because what community members say in public is not what they do (KII, participant)

There was realized a contradiction between the above two results on community members' knowledge about child protection and the other responses from KII participants who were outside of government (civil society institutions). This is because, according to the participants who belonged on the side of civil society argued that, community members lacked knowledge generally on laws and policies about child protection. An analysis of the views of respondents indeed agreed with this argument by civil society officials who participated in this study, that community members do not know these laws.

Only a few people in our communities know about child protection. It is only local council courts and police who know child abuse is bad, otherwise, many of our people don't know. That is why social workers get problems from parents who ask them (social workers) why anyone else should interfere with the control and powers they have on their children. That is why it is imperative that our community members need to be sensitized more to for example understand the different service delivery points in case such cases arise, which are; from Local Councils, to NGOs that are child focused, community development officers, (CDOs), probation officers, courts of law, police and prisons (KII, civil society Organisation participant).

Several child protection policies and laws were pointed out by government and other officials in NGOs although community members were assessed as lacking knowledge about them, and challenges with their implementation. They were established to include the National Child Policy, The National Child Labour Policy, The Local Council Guidelines On Children's' Rights, Child Protection Regulations Under Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, The Children Act of 2006, The Criminal Procedure Act, and the Anti-Torture Act among others.

Knowledge on the existing places of safety and support

The fourth subtheme was whether community members knew the existing places of safety and support. The study results revealed that community members were aware of some places like Babies' homes, foster homes and police. One community member said:

Due to the fact that some children have nowhere to go or call a home, and because of the brutal environment that children live in, there are some places and institutions like churches (like CDCs), babies' homes, and police. Many of our children would be going through a lot of suffering but we thank police, churches and all those who manage foster homes in this city because of the care (such as education) and the protection that they give to some of those children. Otherwise, life would be very hard for those children (FGD, Community Member Participant).

There are various places of safety and support where children or any other concerned community member would run to for assistance. There are different governmental and non-governmental institutions that serve that purpose. They include agencies like police, courts of law, NGOs that are child focused, and churches, to mention just a few. But as already noted, results revealed there is a difference between community members' awareness of the existing child protection services and utilization or implementation of the same. Reporting about such an issue, all the key informants especially in the civil society sector noted that majority of community members either fear approaching service providers or have a negative attitude about them. One key informant reported that:

Our community members still have a negative perception about some of the existing offices and institutions especially police. Police is there to help anyone as long as a criminal related act has

been committed. However, there is a tendency for people to fear or ignore reporting their concerns to police. Although other places like churches and foster homes have helped, we would love that every service and institution is used so that a complete person in the name of a child is supported and grows to enjoy their childhood and become a resourceful citizen in future. We should work as a concerted effort because protection of children should be everybody's responsibility (KII, Participant)

In view of the above finding, it was observed that community members knew some of the points and places of safety and support for the benefit of children. However, it may be hard to conclude that they were using these places for the safety, protection and effective guidance towards care and good parenting of children.

Knowledge of community members of child welfare committees and any other existing programmes

Finally, results on knowledge of community members about child welfare committees or any other existing programmes established that some committees and programs existed for enhancing and promoting children welfare. Community members however were divided about this aspect, with some reporting that they were aware while others seemed not to know. Hence, overall, the existence of child protection committees to community members was not a big issue. The issue should be whether such committees are being utilized to the benefit of the children. However, according to the CDCs institutions' Project Directors, there exists committees established at community level and they have been very instrumental in guiding their work with communities. According to one key informant participant in an interview, it was emphasized as thus:

One of the guidelines that we use as CDCs is the strategy of committees. We have a child protection committee composed of five members in the community whose role is to verify the nature of the case/s. The purpose is to help us in determining whether the case requires police or courts of law. We help to direct the individuals affect by referring them on where to go and the appropriate courses of action they should take. This strategy is working very well because it is transparent since it is open to the community and the children. People know such systems are in place but they decide not to report their relatives, fear of continuing with the case in courts of law...their local area leaders also do not quickly respond to handling their issues (KII, Participant)

The identified concerns above were used to assess community members' knowledge of child protection. Generally, knowledge on almost all of them was lacking especially where the community member participants showed lack of knowledge about what these concerns were and their roles. However as proposed by the Systems Theory by Lodwig, communities are comprised of a series of subunits which must work in unison for the benefit of all (Galagali, 2020; Kidson, 2007; Report, 2013; Resources & Africa, n.d.; Richard & Rhoda, 2015; Ssembatya, 2016; M. Wessells et al., 2014; M. G. Wessells, 2015). Hence, it is suggested that every actor must perform his or her role in order to create a stronger, knowledgeable community where protection of children is given a priority and respected by all. This is because child protection is a shared responsibility.

Discussions

Community members' knowledge of children risks and protection

There are several factors that were assessed to find out if community members knew about child protection services. This helped to explore the information they had to determine utilization of the same

services in the area. One of such knowledge factor that was assessed was about the risks and protection concerns for the children (Services, 2018; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). It is in concurrence of the study findings that child maltreatment results from a combination of factors: psychological, social, situational, and societal. Factors that may contribute to an increased risk for child abuse and neglect include, for example, family structure, poverty, substance abuse, poor housing conditions, teenage pregnancy, domestic and community violence, mental illness, and lack of support from extended families and community members (Horn et al., 2013; Molnar et al., 2021; Parkinson et al., 2017; Richard & Rhoda, 2015). To reduce the occurrence of maltreatment, communities should develop and implement prevention programs that support children and families. The challenge with the findings of this study is that community members largely exhibited limited knowledge about the listed children risks and protection concerns. The reason could have been that they were found to be part of the victim abusers since some of the children under study were under their care.

Community members' knowledge about children without parental care

Research has found that there are many children in communities who lack parental care for various reasons. As noticed by UNICEF Uganda, more than half of Uganda's children live in vulnerable situations and are prone to human rights abuses (UNICEF, 2019). They are orphans or children living in households headed by another child or by an elderly person; they are homeless children, or those living on the street. They are children who've dropped out of school. They may be disabled, or forced to be labourers at an early age; they are girls who've become mothers before they've had a chance to grow up. As many reports have established, vulnerable children suffer violence, exploitation, and sexual abuse, and are at risk of HIV/AIDS, early pregnancy, dying in childbirth, and overall poor physical and mental health (Farida, 2020; Pearson et al., 2021; Renzaho et al., 2018; Sharley et al., 2019; Ssenyonga et al., 2019). Such children endure daily acts of violence at an alarming rate in homes, schools, urban streets, the justice system, and other spaces of daily life. And in homes and communities where violence against women is accepted and prevalent, like in Uganda, invariably the rights of children are also violated (UNICEF, 2019).

The above facts are no exception with the findings of this study where it was established from community members that there are many vulnerable children who were going through a lot of hardships (DeBoer & Seaver, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). Different examples of such children were mentioned on who exactly they are. The challenge however was that community members seemed unbothered and had limited knowledge about the children protection services existing in the community. The few ones who knew about these services were not willing to utilize them, especially with the issue of reporting where it was revealed that the fear of creating enemy with relatives and neighbors was indeed a stumbling block. The fear of some community members to report will continue to put the lives of children at stake, if not checked.

Community members' knowledge of the existing laws on child care and protection

The other knowledge base item was on child care and protection laws and policies. Child protection is guided by various laws and policies. Policies like orphans and other vulnerable child (OVC) policy, The Penal Code Act; which specifies punishable acts like dissertation of children, the National Child Policy of 2020, The Children Act of 2006, The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda 1995, to mention a few are some of the prominent laws in Uganda (Government of Uganda, 2020; MoGLSD, 2018; Uganda Police, 2020). As with other items on this scale, community members had scanty knowledge about them. A few

who could try would only mention 'the constitution of the country', and the police arresting wrong doers. Asked why they had limited knowledge about these laws, community members reported that after all, all the laws are in English; a language that they did not understand. The other area where we picked our interest was in the field of translating such laws into local languages for the benefit of many community members who do not understand English through reading or writing it.

In Liberia, USAID & Save the Children (*2011*) conducted a study on Child Protection Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices in Central and Western Liberia. The results were shocking to find out that even some care givers, Eighty-three percent of caregivers knew any laws in Liberia about the care and safety of children, however less than one third of them (29 percent) were able to name two or more of these laws. Caregivers are mostly familiar with human rights legislation such as the CRC (75 percent). To a much lesser extent, they know the Rape Act (38 percent) and the Children's Bill (15 percent). Awareness of other laws (4 percent), the Act to Ban Trafficking (3 percent), the Domestic Relations Act (1 percent), and the proposed Adoption Bill (1percent) was negligible. A larger proportion of men indicate knowing at least one (93 percent vs. 75 percent women) or two (48 percent vs. 13 percent women) of these laws; the difference is particularly marked regarding the Children's Bill (Report, 2011). Even KIs were not always able to name any national laws to protect children therefore, the change of knowledgeability about child protection concerns is not only in Uganda. As with the case of Alberia, a cross section of persons should be subject to the same study aimed to establish their knowledge about children rights issues.

Child welfare committees and other programs. CDCs have committees at community level, comprising of a five-man member committee with a task of verifying those cases that have child risk and protection concerns which they have to first verify and present for consideration. In Sudan, for example, Community-Based Child Protection Committees and Networks (CBCPNs) were operationalized to engineer child protection work for community members (Quigley & Delaney, 2012). This CBCPN normally serves as a forum where community members meet, discuss child protection problems and research solutions. It is thus an informal community structure, representing all sectors in the community who have a role to play in protecting children – including children themselves. While bringing concrete solutions to the situation of individual children and young people, they also serve as platforms for holding duty-bearers accountable for promoting child rights and protecting children from violence (Horn et al., 2013; Quigley & Delaney, 2012; M. G. Wessells, 2015). It was reported by all the CDCs Project Directors that child protection community committees actually exist. It was however realised that only a handful of members turn up for meetings to meet with such members. There is need to keep encouraging community members to familiarize themselves with the workings of such committees at community level.

Limitations

The study sampled community members who somehow also doubled as parents of the maltreated children. Such participants were hesitant to report that they did not know much about child protection services. However, efforts were made to compare their views with views from other methods and participants like key informants in order to have balanced and objective results.

Conclusion

The study findings revealed that community members had little knowledge of child protection services available in the communities where they lived. We recommend designing and implementing interventions purposed to create community members' awareness of the existing child protection services.

Ethical approval and consent

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Bishop Stuart University Research and Ethics Committee (BSU-REC 31/08-22). The study was also registered and approved by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST SS1483ES), a body that oversees conduct of research in Uganda. Permission from Mbarara City and Sheema district authorities was obtained to allow us conduct the study from their areas of jurisdiction. The study procedures were explained to all the participants and they all provided written informed consent.

Authors contributions

All authors made significant contributions at all levels to the work reported, that is, at conception, study design, execution, data acquisition, analysis and interpretation. They all took part in drafting, revising and critically reviewing the article; gave final approval of the version to be published; had agreed on the journal to which this article has been submitted, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Competing interests

All authors declare that they have no any conflict of competing interests of any form.

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