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Community's knowledge, attitude and practices towards inclusive home based early childhood education in Uganda: Lessons for scaling deep

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Background: Most innovations that would help to provide inclusive home-based early learning for children in marginalised communities sometimes collapse when the funders pull out. One of the reasons for this has been lack of information on the dynamics in such communities that can help to sustain such innovations.

Aim: This study aimed to provide information on what communities in the study area know, their attitude and practices that can sustain home-based early learning initiatives.

Setting: The study setting was in rural districts with marginalised communities, two in eastern and the other two in central Uganda.

Methods: This study uses an exploratory approach to collect data through interviews and focus group discussions in the selected Ugandan communities. Data were collected from 120 purposively sampled parents, caregivers and teachers using in-depth interviews.

Results: (1) Participants support the establishment of inclusive home learning centres and already have learning expectations of their children by the age of 6 years. (2) While women are more available for early childhood care services, men are supportive of inclusive education. (3) Cases of children with special needs are more prevalent in the study area, suggesting that many more could be found than currently known.

Conclusion: The study concludes that communities have preferences for some activities carried out in the centres if established. This study provides an advance information that is useful for planning by agencies and government departments that may want to support establishment of such centres in marginalised communities.

Keywords: inclusive home based early childhood education; access; centre based care; scaling; community support.

Introduction

Currently, there is evidence to show that investing in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a key contributor to breaking poverty cycles (Naudeau et al. 2011), where children from disadvantaged groups either gain or lose most if excluded (Heckman 2006). For countries that are witnessing the challenge of widening gap between the rich and poor, ECCE narrows the 'opportunity divide' and reduces poverty, ethnic and linguistic disadvantages (UNESCO 2010: 49–50). Children in sub-Saharan Africa who live in poverty now need urgent interventions, as waiting any longer will make it more costly to place things right for them (Naudeau et al. 2011).

We also know that there have been doted attempts to provide early childhood education in some communities at home level using family or community resources. However, not all children, especially those with special needs and those from marginalised communities, are benefitting. This is because some families prefer a centre-based approach that provides children with direct educational experiences and have better trained teachers (Fukkink & Blok 2010). However, there has been criticism for this approach elsewhere for not paying sufficient attention to stimulation (OECD 2006), and not affordable to all

Those who prefer a home-based approach believe that it leads to positive changes in parental attitudes, behaviour and school involvement (Fukkink & Blok 2010) that is lacking in many schools, and are

affordable for the marginalised groups. However, studies show that a home-based approach on its own is not effective (Brooks-Gunn & Markman 2005) as some parents lack the capacity to supervise their children (Gomby, Culross & Behrman 1999).

Bearing the two sides in mind, the other options of mixed models have come up to maximise the benefits of home and centre models (Fukkink & Blok 2010). The strength of the mixed models lies in the synergy created by the implementers allowing positive parenting in families, as well as children getting more focused instruction from qualified persons (Ramey & Ramey 1998). Communities that have tried this mixed approach report favourable educational results at the child level (Karoly, Kilburn & Cannon 2005), and at parent level (Yoshikawa 1995) that outweigh those of a single model.

What we do not know is why there are fewer early childhood education initiatives in rural communities to provide the much-needed services. The mere fact that there are few ECCE centres in some communities, yet those communities hear about such centres in other communities should make many to be interested. Some agencies have had their way to communities and initiated learning centres only to find themselves alone in it, as the centres are neglected (Ejuu, Apolot & Serpell 2019). This collapse not only frustrates the efforts of those who want to help but also leads to wastage of the limited resources that should have been put to better use.

There have been also reports of unexplained negative attitude of communities towards early learning initiatives, especially those that take on children with special needs. These reports, however, do not explain what communities know about home-based ECCE centres, their attitude towards it and practices in communities that sustain them. Therefore, instead of agencies guessing the needs and knowledge of the community, they should access to inform the process. It is this knowledge, attitude and practices gap that this study attempts to fill, with the view of finding an entry point to establishing centres in those communities.

Study objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- evaluate the community knowledge of home-based ECCE
- assess the attitude of the community towards establishment of home-based ECCE in their area
- establish community practices that can be used to sustain home-based ECCE centres if established in their community.

Methodology
Design

This exploratory study used a survey design to get opinions of participants on the viability of home-based ECCE in their communities.

Settings

The study was set in rural communities that have limited access to early childhood education services and a low number of ECCE centres.

Study population and sampling strategy

Purposive selection of 120 participants that included parents, teachers and caregivers was carried out. This included 30 participants, of which there were 20 parents, five teachers and five caregivers from each of the districts of Kalaki and Kaliro in Eastern Uganda, Kalungu and Buikwe in Central Uganda.

Data collection

In-depth interviews and focus group discussion guides were used to collect data. Contact persons in the communities, one per district, were identified and provided the criteria of which participant to look for. The criterium was a male or female parent of a child in the ECCE age range. In addition, parents who had a child with special needs were prioritised to pursue inclusive education perspectives.

Data analysis

Qualitative data collected were analysed thematically, while quantitative data were analysed descriptively.

Results
Participants' knowledge of home based ECCE

Before introducing the concept of home-based ECCE into communities, the study first identified community expectations of children by the age of 6 years to help in competence development. Participant responses are summarised in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, more participants preferred vocational skills, and then home chores, vocational skills and games. Female participants (10.1%) had more support for self-care skills. The implication of this is that more learning activities that impart children such skills need to be included in the centre's programmes.

The participants were asked to identify what they thought would make a home-based ECCE centre be of high quality. More participants (19.5%) suggested better sanitation (washing) facilities in the centres, latrines and a large compound.

Participants' attitude towards establishment of home-based ECCE

In this study, all the participants reached showed a positive attitude towards establishment of HBECCE. Some of the major reasons for the support included the centre's ability to introduce its children to different learning skills (listening, speaking, creative thinking, problem solving, reading and writing), easy access for children to learning sites, developing children's social skills, and be disciplined.

A quick survey on the prevalence of children with special needs in the study area found 19 cases of children among participants in the selected districts. The cases ranged from

physical disability being more prevalent, intellectual, communication and hearing impairments. Others identified were partially sighted, hydrocephalus, multisensory and epileptic.

We also explored the participants' views on whether it was a good idea for their children to study with a child who has special needs. All participants supported the idea of children with special needs studying with their own children in the same class, with 43.9% of fathers strongly supporting the idea of inclusive education. Reasons for support of inclusive education in the home-based ECCE are summarised in Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 2, some of the strategies that were suggested to strengthen inclusive education include guidance and counselling (26.7%), parents' sensitisation (23.3%) and putting in place safe learning environments for such children (20.7%). Others suggested financial assistance to parents and use of community by-laws in order to enforce enrolment of such children in schools.

Practices that parents can engage in to sustain home-based ECCE centres if established in their community

Participants identified home-based ECCE sustainability practices as summarised in Figure 3.

As presented in Figure 3, participants wanted to teach agriculture, social skills, discipline and hygiene. The implication of this is that parents offer what they have. This should be a revelation to the curriculum development and implementation players. Education is only relevant if it benefits the individual and the members of the community.

The research team probed to find what are the specific roles community members would be willing to play. Men were more inclined to do monitoring and supervisory roles, while women prefer disciplinary and teaching roles. The gendered roles mean that focal persons need to find ways of working with relevant parents to support different activities. For those participants who were volunteering to manage the centres, they suggested skills they need to do their work well, as summarised in Figure 4.

As shown in Figure 4, more women preferred inclusive childcare and centre management skills, while men preferred resource training on mobilisation skills and entrepreneurial skills. To support the centres, participants suggested contributions as summarised in Figure 5.

As presented in Figure 5, more participants suggested contributing food items, while others suggested contributing learning materials and offering labour to maintain centre materials and structures. The implication of this is that men will be more involved in establishment and construction work at the centre, while women will be engaged in maintenance and day-to-day management of the centre.
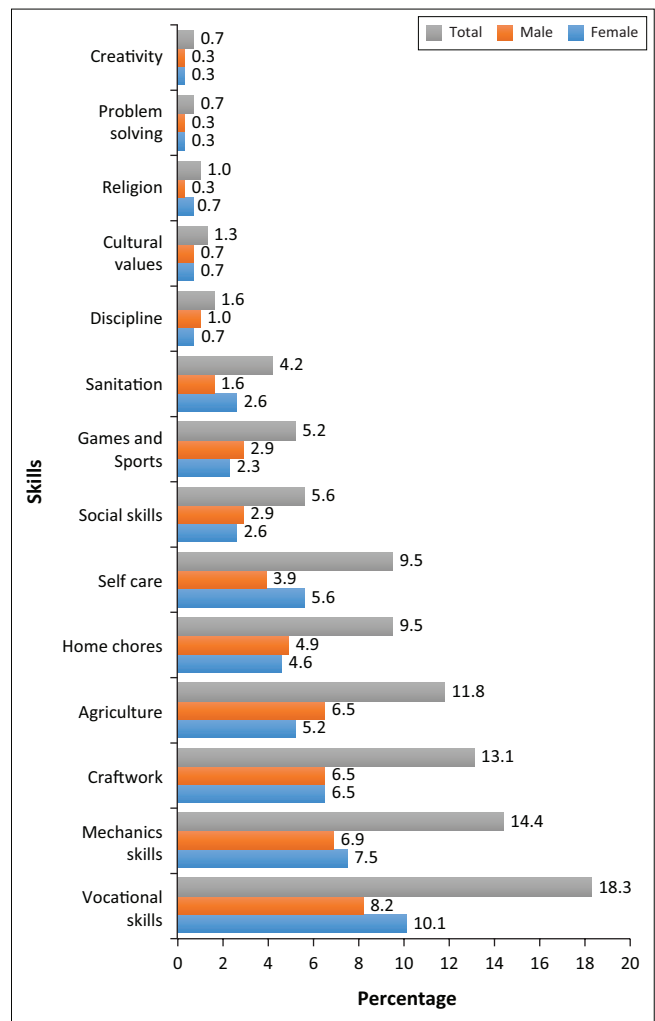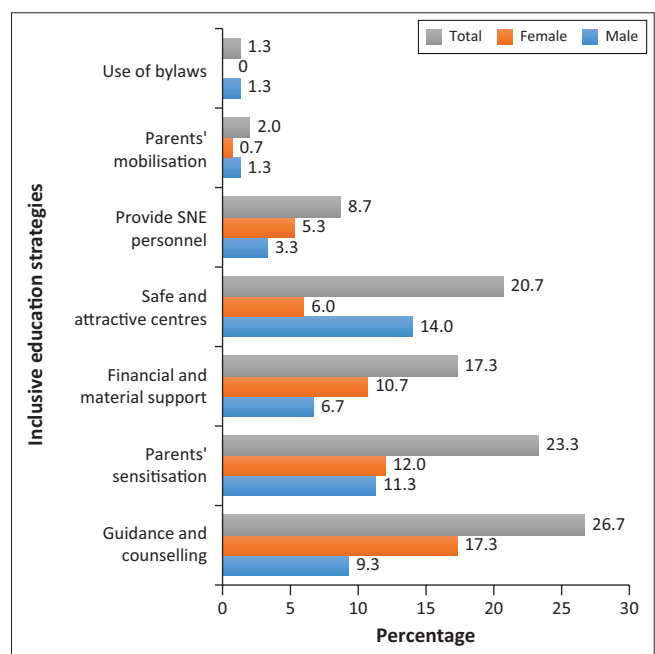

FIGURE 1: Perception of participants by gender on what children should learn.

SNE, Special Needs Education.

FIGURE 2: Inclusive home-based early education promotion strategies preferences by gender.
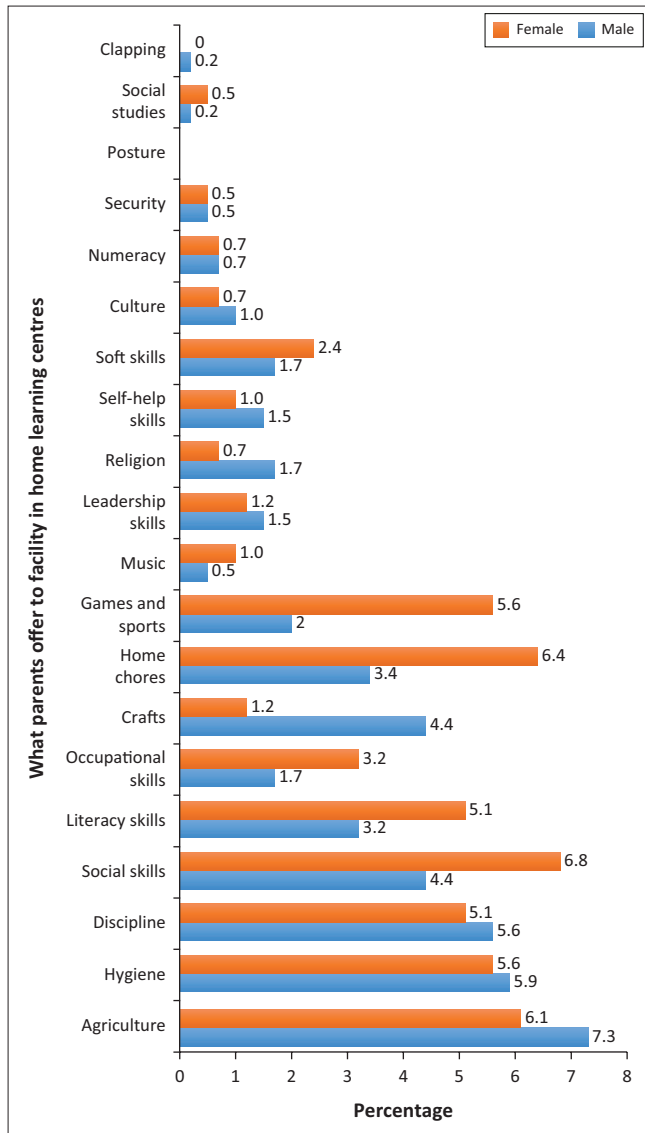
FIGURE 3: What the participants can teach in HBECD given by gender.

FIGURE 4: Skills training needed by gender.

Discussion

Community knowledge of home-based ECCE

Community member in this study felt that home-based ECCE centres are useful in laying a foundation for later learning of their children. They were also able to identify different skills developed in their children by the age of 6 years if the children attended early learning in such centres. Such skills included largely literacy and survival skills that are developed through engagement in different home chore activities. The implication of this is that persons who intend to support establishment of home-based ECCE in the communities must focus on development of such skills if parents are to appreciate the interventions as adding value to their children.

It was also crucial to note that the study identified 19 cases of children with special needs in the selected communities, an indication that there could be many more. This strengthens earlier findings which showed that many children with special needs are present in communities and lack access to
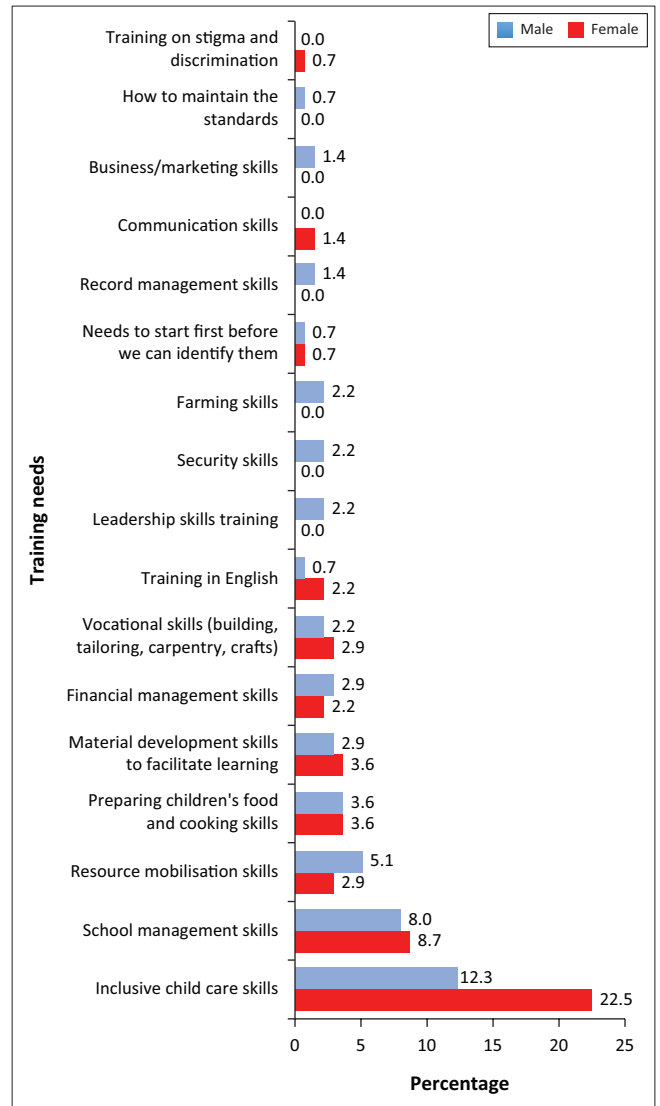
formal learning opportunities (Uganda Society for Disabled Children [USDC] 2003).

The study also found female participants to be more knowledgeable about home-based ECCE than male participants. This may strengthen earlier findings that have shown that female participants are more involved in ECCE than male participants (OECD 2014). In addition, women were more interested in having their children learn self-care skills, while men preferred making their children learn life skills.

Community's attitude towards establishment of home-based ECCE in their area

There was an overwhelming positive attitude of the communities towards establishment of home-based ECCE centres in their areas. Female participants showed overwhelming support for centre establishment when compared with male participants. This implies that ECCE provides opportunity to relieve them from the burden of
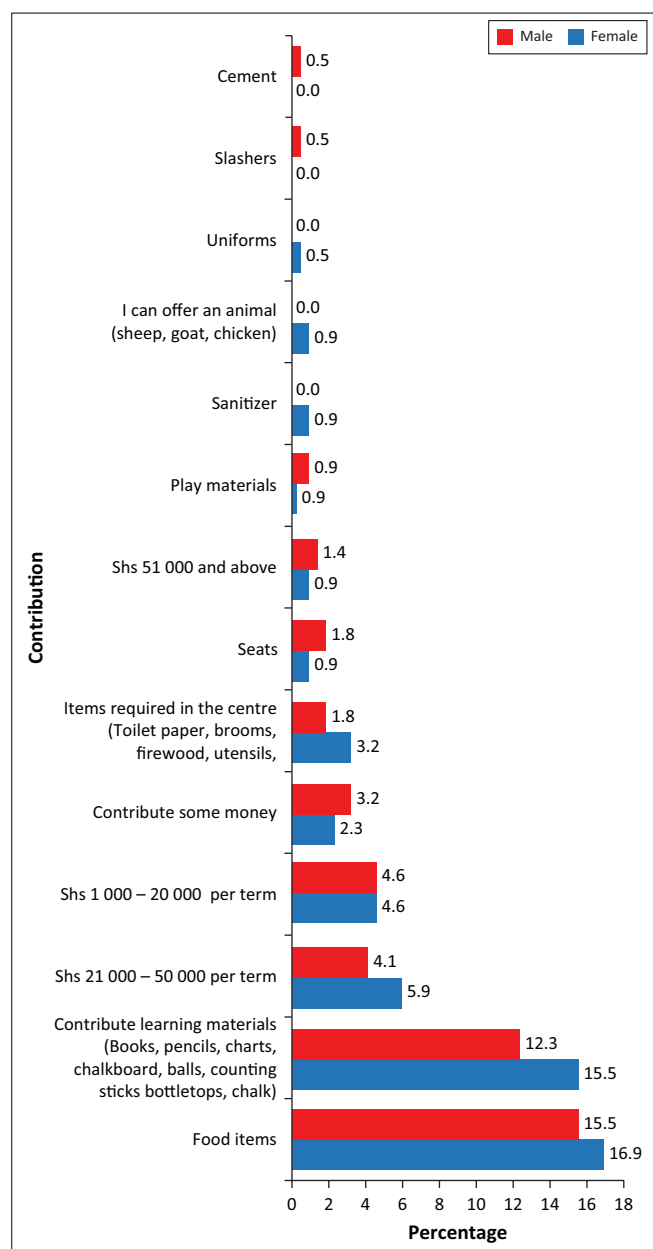
FIGURE 5: What parents are willing to offer to the home based learning centre by gender.

childcare, as childcare in Africa is traditionally a major role for females (Oxfam International 2018).

Participants provided different reasons like preparing children for future life and development of social and life skills for all children including those with special needs as key to their support for learning centres. As alluded to by earlier studies, this stance indicates the willingness of communities in the study area to support their children with special needs in an inclusive setting (Enable-Ed & USDC 2017).

The study also found that fathers supported of inclusive education more when compared with mothers. This is a unique finding in that ordinarily, mothers would be more supportive than fathers, and are still not able to see mutual benefits of inclusive education for all (Hands 2005). Attitude

change is key in all efforts aimed at providing holistic support to and social justice for these children at home and in school (Locoro 2017).

Participants suggested use of community by-laws with penalties for those not complying to enrol their children with special needs in centres. While this can be an effective way of ensuring such children join school, it does not address the underlying factors. Factors such as fear of stigmatisation or safety of the children if established must be dealt with early enough as it is crucial for inclusive education (Banks & Zuurmond 2015; Sense International Uganda 2016). More sensitisation of other parents and counselling of affected persons may be key in combatting stigma and negative attitudes (Mental Health Uganda 2009).

Practices in communities that sustain home-based ECCE centres

Communities are able to sustain established home-based ECCE centres that utilise practices available in the communities. In this case, farming communities will predominantly teach farming skills, while business communities will teach business. If centres work with such skills, they will promote better parent participation to enhance ownership and make the interventions relevant to the needs of families and the community (Werner 2006).

Communities also have practices that are gender specific. For example, in this study, male participants preferred teaching children agriculture, hygiene, crafts and discipline, while female participants preferred social skills, home chores, literacy and games. Agencies can use this gendered nature of parent roles as a critical entry point to begin tackling gender bias early in life (Koch & Irby 2005).

There are also a significant number of people in the community who may not be willing to contribute anything towards the centre, even when they have children in such centres. Some of them will always say they cannot afford to pay any fees to the centre or have time to volunteer physical labour. In this situation, we initiate entrepreneurships to help families come out of the poverty cycle (Naudeau et al. 2011).

Community members were more willing to support centre activities. This is a good gesture as community participation is usually a key factor in centre sustainability (Henderson & Mapp 2002). However, even when persons are willing to participate, they may not have the necessary skills to implement the identified activities. In this case, project officers need to train human resource for the home-based centres if they are to witness successful turnaround (McAlister 2013).

Strength and limitations of the study

The main strength of this study is its ability to work with to get actual perception not influenced by promise of further temporal gifts. However, a major weakness of this study is the timing of the study that was carried out during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Uganda. The idea of home-based

ECCE and the kind of support parents would provide may have been confused with temporary home learning initiated during lockdown.

Recommendations

Communities have a broad idea of what inclusive early learning interventions in the study sites. We recommend that agencies and NGOs that intend to support establishment of such interventions explore specific concepts and provide further sensitisation to consolidate in marginalised communities.

It was also found that a significant number of children with special needs were available in the participating districts. We recommend that district authorities provide more sensitisation to improve community awareness on the need for identifying such children and enrol them in the learning centres.

More communities are becoming interested in establishing home-based ECCE centres that rely on the local content. We recommend that curriculum development agencies start work on developing informal contextual early years learning curricular to guide such initiatives.

Children with special needs will be admitted into home-based ECCE centres in communities. We recommend that special education units at local levels start adapting local play materials to support learners with special needs.

Sustained home-based ECCE are ones directly under the management of parents. We recommend that agencies that want to support establishment of such centres in communities should make parent empowerment a key support strategy for sustainability.

Conclusion

The study findings suggest that communities know a lot about home-based ECCE centres. They know what they want their children to learn and what are the skills the children should have by the age of 6 years. Agencies need to focus on the difference between their perspective and that of the communities to strike a workable balance. If agencies rubbish community knowledge, then the communities will be passive participants who are willing to let the initiatives collapse as they do not believe in them.

Generally, communities have a positive attitude towards establishment of home-based ECCE in their areas. However, their attitudes change if centres follow what is different from community aspirations.

Different practices and opportunities are present in the communities that support early learning. Agencies need to identify practices in the communities that they can utilise to promote home-based ECCE. They also need to involve different community members to play their agreed roles as they see fit for continued support.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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