



Access Rights, Usage Rights, and Living Space of Coastal Communities: Agrarian Legal Literacy on Emerging Land in Widarapayung Wetan, Cilacap

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ABSTRACT

Emerging land in coastal areas is an agrarian resource that is vulnerable to conflict due to uncertain legal status and overlapping interests in spatial utilization. This situation occurs in Widarapayung Wetan Village, Cilacap Regency, where coastal communities' livelihood practices based on coconut farming and coconut sugar production are confronted with claims of use rights to state land. This study aims to analyze the relationship between community access rights, the implementation of use rights to emergent land, and the sustainability of living space, and to evaluate the contribution of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in improving coastal agrarian legal literacy. The study uses a qualitative participatory approach with a PAR design that involves the community as co-researchers (co researchers). Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, licensing document audits, and participatory mapping. The results of the study indicate that the inequality in understanding agrarian law weakens the community's bargaining position in decision-making on coastal space utilization. The application of PAR contributed to increasing community legal literacy, strengthening collective capacity, and developing evidence-based advocacy instruments such as participatory maps and draft free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) protocols. This study concluded that PAR-based agrarian legal literacy is effective in bridging the gap between legal norms and field practices, and supporting the sustainable protection of coastal communities' living spaces.

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Introduction

Emergent land is an important object in the spatial planning of the Indonesian coast. (Suharti et al., 2016) Land that is formed naturally through the sedimentation process of mud, sand, and organic material deposition that usually occurs around the coastline and river estuaries. The erosion process in the upstream carried by the current then settles downstream and the coast, forming new land (aanslibbing). Because it has economic potential ranging from agriculture, aquaculture, to industrial activities, emergent land is often the target of various interests and influences the pattern of control and claims over space.

At the regulatory level, the status of emergent land is in a gray area that often triggers tension. On the one hand, based on Law Number 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry, the forestry framework places emergent land as part of state-controlled resources and is not easily converted by the community. (Ramadhan, 2023) In contrast to the proof of rights from the old convention of PP. No. 1997 concerning Land Registration, in Article 24 paragraphs (1) and (2) it is emphasized that if there is no written evidence, then rights can be proven by the fact of physical control of the land for 20 years or more by the applicant with the condition of good faith and openness as the entitled party and supported by the testimony of a trustworthy person, not questioned by the customary law community or other parties before or during the announcement period. (Ekasaputra et al., 2023) The difference in emphasis between these two legal umbrellas creates uncertainty about rights, especially regarding the access rights of communities who have long been active in coastal areas.

This uncertainty contributes to the growth of agrarian conflict. Land disputes are common and recurring because they involve differences in legal status, power relations between parties, and social and cultural values. (Shani et al., 2024) The southern coast of Cilacap, influenced by the dynamics of land sedimentation resulting from sedimentation, has long been utilized by the community as economically valuable land. This geographical condition makes claims, boundaries, and spatial status increasingly complex. (Irawan et al., 2022)

Widarapayung Wetan clearly demonstrates these competing interests. On the one hand, there are formal claims and permits, including the possibility of labeling use rights for certain areas. On the other, there are access rights and livelihood practices of coastal communities, such as coconut farmers and coconut sugar craftsmen, who depend on the sustainability of the local ecosystem. Activities that lead to changes in land use, such as intensive cultivation, raise concerns about the environmental impacts of water quality, salinization, and river biota, while also threatening community living spaces such as socio-cultural spaces, production spaces, and livelihood spaces that have existed across generations.

Starting from this context, this research focuses on three conclusions: (1) the right of access of coastal communities to space and resources, (2) the right to use as a regime of rights to state land which often overlaps with emerging land, (3) living space as the totality of ecological, social and economic relations which support the sustainability of livelihoods. Through this approach, Partisipatoy Action Research, research in Widarapayung Wetan is directed at increasing coastal agrarian legal literacy by jointly mapping administrative boundaries, designing policy advocacy instruments and standards-free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). (Putri & Yulia, 2024) So that policy dialogue becomes more equal, data-based, and supports environmental sustainability and the sustainability of coastal communities..

Thus, this research, entitled "Access Rights, Usage Rights, and Living Space of Coastal Communities: Agrarian Legal Literacy on Emerging Land in Widarapayung Wetan, Cilacap," is expected to fill the gap between legal norms and field practice. It will present an accountable process of clarifying the boundaries and basis of rights, strengthen community voices in decision-making, and serve as a replicable model of action literacy for other coastal contexts experiencing similar issues.

Methods

This research uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the primary approach because the research objective is not only to capture the situation, but also to increase coastal agrarian legal literacy and present advocacy products that Widarapayung Wetan residents can use in policy dialogue. PAR combines the processes inquiry (joint research) and action (collective action) through repeated cycles reflex action diagnosis with citizens as co-researchers. (Yulita et al., 2024). By design, the research was participatory qualitative with light mixed-methods elements in pre-post literacy measurement and geospatial mapping. The PAR framework was chosen to: (1) build a shared understanding of access rights, Usage rights and living space on emerging land, (2) preparing participatory maps and evidence packages which is socially legitimate, and (3) produces literacy pocket books, policy brief, as well as draft SOPs or FPIC Protocols at the village level as advocacy instruments.

The research location is in Widarapayung Wetan Village, Cilacap Regency. Participants included members of the PPPLP, coconut sugar farmers, village officials, local figures, environmental activists, and, to the extent possible, representatives from the National Land Agency (BPN)/DPMPTSP and related business actors. The selection technique was purposive. based on the connection with the issue continued snowball to reach relevant key informants. Researchers act as facilitators, while residents act as co-researchers involved in the design, collection, and interpretation of data.

Table 1. Stages of PAR Action

No	PAR Stages	Form of Activity	Actors Involved	Research Output
1.	Identification of problems	Initial discussions regarding land conflicts, access rights, and socio-ecological impacts	Researchers, PPPLP, coastal farmers, community leaders	Problem formulation and priority issues
2.	Participatory Mapping	Mapping of living spaces, coconut groves, water access, and disputed areas	Coastal residents and researchers	Participatory coastal area map
3.	Data Collection	In-depth interviews, participant observation, agrarian document audit	Researchers and the community	Social data, agrarian law
4.	Evaluation and Reflection	Evaluation of changes in citizens' legal understanding before and after PAR	Researchers and the community	Increasing agrarian legal literacy

Table 2. Community Collaboration in Research

No	Collaboration Partners	Forms of Involvement	Role in PAR
1.	PPPLP (Coastal Farmers Association)	Citizen assistance and conflict data provision	Key community advocacy partners
2.	Coconut Farmers and Coconut Sugar Crafters	Presentation of land tenure experience	Local knowledge sources
3.	Village Apparatus	Facilitating administration and discussion forums	Local institutional liaison
4.	Public figure	Social mediation and community legitimacy	Strengthening citizen participation
5.	Environmental Activist	Assistance on coastal ecological issues	Strengthening sustainability perspectives
6.	Academic Researcher	Facilitate research, data analysis, and reflection	Facilitator and <i>co learning</i> partner

Result and Discussion

The research findings indicate that agrarian conflict and tension in the coastal area of Widarapayung Wetan are not solely driven by formal claims to emergent land, but rather by unequal understanding and bargaining power between coastal communities and actors holding licensing authorities. Prior to the PAR intervention, the majority of residents understood emergent land as production and living space that could be "naturally" utilized because it had been managed across generations. However, this understanding was not accompanied by adequate knowledge regarding the legal status of emergent land as state land, the rights-of-use mechanism, or the accompanying formal procedures.

Field findings show that the practice of community access rights is *de facto*, based on customs, economic needs, and local social legitimacy, but is not articulated in the form of administrative evidence or legal narratives recognized by the state. (Doktor et al., 2024) This condition creates structural vulnerability, where communities are in a defensive position when faced with legal-formal claims legitimized through permits, certificates, or state documents. (Juni et al., 2025) This uncertainty is exacerbated by the lack of socialization of coastal agrarian policies and the absence of equal dialogue between residents and stakeholders.

In the daily lives of the Widarapayung Wetan community, emerging land is never understood as empty space or "no man's land." For coastal residents, this land is part of their living space, slowly formed through the work of nature and humans. Along with the sedimentation process, the community began clearing coconut groves, cultivating the land for agriculture, and utilizing it as a sustainable livelihood. This practice has been ongoing for a long time, passed down from generation to generation, and is socially recognized at the community level.

However, these practices of control are not accompanied by an adequate understanding of the legal status of emergent land within the national agrarian system.

Most residents are unaware that emergent land is, in principle, categorized as state land and subject to a special licensing and regulatory regime. As a result, the access rights exercised by communities are de facto, socially strong but legally weak. When claims for use rights arise from other parties, residents are in a vulnerable position because they lack a written legal basis to use as bargaining power.

This situation demonstrates that coastal agrarian issues are not simply about who "first" controlled the land, but also about how legal knowledge is distributed and accessed. The imbalance of information between communities and authorities is a major factor fueling tensions and feelings of injustice.

Tensions escalated in 2023 when the Cilacap Military District Command (Kodim) and shrimp pond investors asked residents to vacate their land for the project. The community firmly refused because there had never been any prior socialization or notification, in addition they were worried that the shrimp pond activities would cause river pollution, damage coastal vegetation, and the loss of livelihoods for fishermen and coastal farmers. This refusal then led to repressive actions in the form of land clearing with heavy equipment escorted by armed forces, so that the conflict escalated. Estimated value of losses due to eviction/land clearing on December 1-2, 2023:

Table 3. Losses of Farmers Working on Resurfaced Land

No.	Victim's Name	Size M2	Types of Trees	Number of Trees	Price / Bar	Amount Rp.	
1.	Suparmin Rt. 02/03, Karang Tawang	3.528	1. Coconut tree	25	500.000	12.500.000	
			2. Cikal	10	50.000	500.000	
						Amount	13.000.000
2.	Hartono Rt. 02/01, East Widarapayung	750	1. Coconut tree	3	500.000	1.500.000	
			2. Cikal	21	50.000	1.050.000	
			3. Peanuts	100 kg	15.000 / kg	1.500.000	
						Amount	4.050.000
3.	H. Asmudin Rt. 19/04, Sidaurip	3.000	1. Coconut tree	2	500.000	1.000.000	
			2. Big Ketapang	1	300.000	300.000	
			3. Big Nyamplung	22	400.000	11.000.000	
			4. Besar's hat	190	50.000	9.500.000	
			5. Small hat				
						Amount	22.200.000
4.	Sukarso Rt. 38/09, Sidaurip	3.400	1. Coconut tree	53	500.000	26.500.000	
			2. Cikal Tree	25	50.000	1.250.000	
			3. Besar's hat	50	500.000	25.000.000	
			4. Big Mahogany	45	300.000	13.500.000	
						Amount	66.250.000

5.	Suripto Abdul Rojak Rt. 05/01, Sidaaurip	600	1.	Coconut	6	500.000	3.000.000
				tree	12	50.000	600.000
			2.	Cikal	3	500.000	1.500.000
			3.	Besar's hat			
						Amount	5.100.000
6.	Friend Rt. 39/08, Sidaaurip	1.500	1.	Coconut	25	500.000	12.500.000
				tree	10	500.000	5.000.000
			2.	Besar's hat			
						Amount	17.500.000
7.	Madipin Rt. 08/02, Sidaaurip	3.398	1.	Coconut	30	500.000	15.000.000
				tree	32	50.000	1.150.000
			2.	Cikal	20	500.000	10.000.000
			3.	Besar's hat	1	300.000	300.000
			4.	Big Mahogany	2	400.000	800.000
5.	Big Nyamplung						
						Amount	27.250.000
8.	Yatin Priyono, Rt. 05/01, Sidaaurip	600	1.	Coconut	4	500.000	2.000.000
				tree	12	50.000	600.000
			2.	Cikal	1	500.000	400.000
			3.	Big Nyamplun			
						Amount	3.000.000
9.	Nasrodin Rt. 02/01, Widarapayung West	4.300	1.	Coconut	34	500.000	17.000.000
				tree	50	50.000	2.500.000
			2.	Cikal	13	500.000	6.500.000
			3.	Besar's hat	1	300.000	300.000
			4.	Big Cotton	13	300.000	3.900.000
5.	Big Ketapang						
						Amount	30.200.000
10.	Suroto Rt. 03/01, East Widarapayung	750	1.	Coconut	10	500.000	5.000.000
				tree	5	50.000	250.000
			2.	Cikal	2	500.000	1.000.000
			3.	Big Chronic	100 kg	15.000	1.500.000
4.	Peanuts		/ kg				
21.826						Amount	7.750.000
						total	196.300.000

Source: Widarapayung Coastal Farmers Association

In this context, the power relationship between shrimp farming companies, the government, and local communities appears unbalanced, with the company's economic interests trumping the rights of the communities who have managed the land for generations since the 1970s. Land management by shrimp farming companies should not only focus on economic aspects, but also pay attention to social justice, local wisdom, and environmental sustainability fairly. Going forward, agrarian management must prioritize

accountability, transparency, and respect for the rights of local communities in the distribution and practice of power. Sustainable and equitable solutions require the active involvement of all parties involved—the government, the community, and the company—by addressing social, economic, and environmental aspects in a balanced manner. (Ramadhan, 2023) Therefore, power is not merely a tool of domination, but can also be transformed into community empowerment for the equitable management of agrarian resources.

Through the PAR cycle, the participatory mapping process revealed that the living space of coastal communities encompasses not only cultivated areas of emergent land, but also broader ecological and social networks, such as freshwater streams, coconut groves, coconut sugar distribution channels, and socio-cultural spaces that support sustainable livelihoods. When these spaces were collectively mapped, residents began to realize that the potential impacts of land use policies were not limited to physical land loss, but also to environmental degradation and the collapse of livelihood systems. (Suharti et al., 2016) In the discussion and reflection process conducted through the Participatory Action Research approach, it was revealed that the concept of use rights was often perceived by the community as a form of "takeover" of living space by the state or external parties. This perception arose not only because of rejection of the law, but also because of the lack of socialization, dialogue, and community involvement from the outset.

For coastal communities, land use change not only results in the loss of physical access to land but also raises concerns about environmental sustainability. Residents associate intensive cultivation activities with the risk of water pollution, soil degradation, and disruption to the ecosystem that supports coconut farming and coconut sugar production. Therefore, residents' resistance stems from a concern for their overall living space, not simply a conflict over ownership. (Kartono & Nurcholis, 2016)

Through PAR, residents began to understand that the right to use is a legal instrument that can be procedurally negotiated, not something that is completely closed. This understanding opened up a new space for dialogue, where the community no longer simply rejected but began to raise critical questions about licensing procedures, environmental impacts, and their right to be involved in decision-making. One important finding of this research is that the living space approach (*livelihood space*) helps explain why coastal agrarian conflicts are often complex and emotional. Living space encompasses not only cultivated land but also the social relations, cultural values, and ecological dependencies that accompany it. When one element of living space is disturbed, the impacts ripple out to other aspects of community life.

Participatory mapping conducted with residents demonstrates the interconnectedness of coconut plantations, water sources, harvest transportation routes, and the social spaces where residents interact. (Wahyudi et al., 2018) This map serves as a powerful tool for collective reflection, as residents can visually see how a single policy change could potentially impact their entire livelihood system.

This approach also strengthens the argument that coastal agrarian policies cannot be formulated sectorally. Land, environmental, and community economic management must be understood as an interconnected whole. In other words, agrarian justice is not

measured solely by legal certainty, but also by the extent to which these policies maintain the sustainability of community living spaces.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) in this study functions as a shared learning space. Through discussion, mapping, and reflection, residents gradually develop a new understanding of their rights, obligations, and position within the coastal agrarian structure. This process does not occur instantly, but rather through repeated dialogue based on real-life experiences. For students and academic readers, these findings demonstrate that social research need not always be distanced from reality. PAR, in fact, demonstrates that the research process can be a means of empowerment and a tool for mitigating potential conflict. When knowledge is co-produced, communities become not merely objects of study but active subjects of social change.

The results of legal literacy measurements before and after the PAR intervention indicate an increase in residents' understanding of basic agrarian concepts, such as the differences between ownership rights, use rights, state land, and objection and complaint procedures. (Juni et al., 2025) Residents are also beginning to be able to identify their position within the agrarian "bundle of rights," particularly in terms of access and utilization, although not yet fully regarding exclusion or alienation rights. This improvement is reflected in the change in how residents express their aspirations, from mere emotional rejection to data- and regulation-based arguments.

The findings of this study confirm that the land disputes arising on the coast of Widarapayung Wetan are a manifestation of a classic Indonesian agrarian problem: the gap between legal norms and social practices. Usage rights, as a formal legal regime, tend to be understood technocratically and administratively, while community access rights operate in a socio-ecological realm that is not always accommodated by positive law. When these two regimes meet without a fair mediation mechanism, conflict becomes almost inevitable. (Ade Darajat Martadikusuma, 2025)

This research discussion confirms that the tension between community access rights and the state's use rights regime in Widarapayung Wetan reflects the structural issues of coastal agrarianism in Indonesia. Agrarian legal norms tend to be formulated abstractly and uniformly, while the reality of coastal control and utilization is contextual, historical, and ecological. When these legal norms are implemented without adequate dialogue and social understanding, they have the potential to marginalize long-standing community livelihood practices.

This finding aligns with the property rights perspective, which views resource rights as a "bundle of rights" consisting of access, utilization, management, restriction, and transfer rights. In the context of Widarapayung Wetan, coastal communities have de facto exercised most of the rights within this bundle, particularly access and utilization rights, despite not yet receiving formal legal recognition. This mismatch between de facto practices and de jure recognition is a major source of uncertainty and agrarian conflict.

Living space approach (*livelihood space*) used in this study enriches the agrarian discussion by demonstrating that emergent land cannot be treated solely as an administrative object. It is integrated into livelihood systems encompassing economic, social, cultural, and ecological aspects. Therefore, land use rights policies that focus solely on legality without considering their impact on living space risk creating social injustice

and environmental degradation. These findings strengthen the argument that sustainability must be a primary principle in coastal agrarian management.

Furthermore, the results of this study demonstrate that weak agrarian legal literacy is not caused by the public's unwillingness to understand the law, but rather by limited access to relevant and contextual information. One-way and technocratic policy dissemination often fails to reach the realities of citizens. (Terhadap et al., 2025) In this context, PAR plays a role as a critical learning medium that enables citizens to understand the law through their own lived experiences. This process aligns with the concept of critical education, which positions knowledge as the result of dialogue, not simply the transfer of information.

This discussion also demonstrated that PAR not only impacts individual understanding but also strengthens the community's collective capacity. Through a process of collective reflection, residents began to build awareness of the importance of documenting land tenure practices, participatory mapping, and developing shared narratives as a basis for advocacy. This collective capacity provides crucial social capital in navigating policy negotiations and preventing future conflict escalation. (Utomo, 2020)

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the development of agrarian studies by positioning PAR as a relevant approach to bridge legal analysis and social reality. Many agrarian studies remain trapped in a dichotomy between normative and empirical studies. This research demonstrates that PAR can integrate the two through a process of iterative reflection and action. Thus, the research produces not only descriptive knowledge but also transformative knowledge that directly impacts the research subjects.

The Participatory Action Research approach has proven effective as a bridge between the two regimes. PAR serves not only as a data collection method but also as a critical educational process that allows citizens to reflect on their agrarian experiences in the language of law and policy. The collective reflection process in PAR encourages a shift in power relations, where knowledge is no longer monopolized by external actors but is instead co-produced based on local experiences enriched with regulatory literacy. (Bachriadi, 2012)

This discussion also demonstrated that agrarian legal literacy cannot be understood simply as the transfer of normative knowledge, but rather as a political and ecological process. Legal literacy becomes meaningful when it is connected to the community's living space, namely when residents understand that land rights are directly related to sustainable livelihoods, environmental quality, and social cohesion. (Anwar & Satrio, 2024) In this context, drafting a FPIC protocol with residents is not only an advocacy instrument but also a symbol of recognition of the community's right to meaningful involvement in every decision that affects their living space. (Mungkasa, 2022)

Furthermore, the results of this study strengthen the argument that resolving coastal agrarian conflicts through formal legalization alone is not sufficient. Certification or granting use rights without strengthening legal capacity and literacy has the potential to perpetuate inequality. Conversely, a PAR-based approach opens up space for a more

participatory agrarian governance model, where policies are not only legally valid but also socially legitimate and ecologically sustainable. (Afrihadi et al., 2025)

Thus, the results and discussion of this study demonstrate that the integration of access rights, use rights, and living space through a PAR approach is not only relevant to the context of Widarapayung Wetan but also has the potential to become a replicable model for other coastal areas facing similar problems. Finally, this discussion confirms that the management of emergent land in coastal areas requires a paradigm shift, from *atop down* Towards participatory governance. Recognition of community access rights, strengthening agrarian legal literacy, and protecting living space must be viewed as a mutually reinforcing whole. Without such integration, agrarian policies risk losing social legitimacy and leading to recurring conflicts. This approach positions communities not as policy objects, but as active subjects in the management of coastal agrarian space. (Surur Roiqoh & Navirta Ayu, 2025).

Conclusion

This research shows that land issues in the coastal area of Widarapayung Wetan are not simply a matter of legal status over a plot of land, but rather a broader issue of how coastal communities' living spaces are shaped, maintained, and contested. Access rights held by communities for generations do not automatically receive recognition in the formal legal system, while use rights, as an instrument of the state, often exist without adequate understanding at the community level. (Pendekatan & Agraria, 2023) This inequality is the root of vulnerability and the potential for agrarian conflict in coastal areas.

Through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, this study demonstrates that agrarian legal literacy can be developed through dialogue and context. When communities are involved as co-researchers, they become not only recipients of information but also subjects capable of reflecting on their lived experiences in legal and policy language. This process encourages a shift in residents' perspectives, from mere "land users" to actors aware of their rights, procedures, and bargaining power in coastal space management.

Furthermore, this study confirms that the concept of living space (livelihood space) is key to understanding coastal agrarianism holistically. Emerging land does not stand alone as an economic object, but is connected to ecosystems, social networks, and the sustainability of community livelihoods. Therefore, agrarian policies that ignore the living space dimension risk creating social injustice and environmental damage. The integration of access rights, use rights, and living space through PAR offers an alternative approach that is more equitable, participatory, and sustainable. (Ade Darajat Martadikusuma, 2025)

Based on research findings, it is recommended that management of emerging land in coastal areas should not rely solely on a formal legal approach but also integrate agrarian legal literacy processes based on community participation. It is crucial for local governments and relevant agencies to create equal dialogue with coastal communities and ensure that free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) mechanisms are effectively implemented before changes in land use are implemented. (Adiansah et al., 2021)

For coastal communities, this research is expected to serve as a learning resource that legal knowledge is not the exclusive domain of experts, but rather a collective tool for protecting living spaces and sustainable livelihoods. Strengthening community organizations, documenting land tenure practices, and participatory mapping need to be continuously developed as strategies to strengthen residents' bargaining position in coastal agrarian governance. Meanwhile, for students and academics, this research offers an important lesson that social research does not have to stop at analyzing texts and regulations. The PAR approach demonstrates that research can be a shared learning space, as well as a means of meaningful social intervention. (Wahyudi et al., 2018) Students are expected to become not only observers but also facilitators of change who are sensitive to agrarian inequality, environmental sustainability, and social justice at the local level.

Thus, the conclusions and suggestions in this study confirm that participation-based agrarian legal literacy is not only a practical need for coastal communities, but also a critical learning field for the younger generation to understand and respond to the complexity of agrarian issues in Indonesia.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

This research was compiled collaboratively by the two authors using a multidisciplinary approach. Participatory Action Research (PAR) that positions the community as an active partner in the research process. Faizal Nur Rachman contributed to the research design, field observations, facilitation of participatory discussions with the coastal community of Widarapayung Wetan, collection of interview data, and analysis of access rights, usage rights, and living space for coastal communities.

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Data availability statement

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Finally, the author hopes that this work can provide academic and practical contributions to the development of coastal agrarian legal literacy, as well as become material for reflection and learning for students, researchers, and related stakeholders.

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Additional information

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest in the research or publication of this article.

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