**ABSTRACT**

In the process of socio-economic development, the rural environment has witnessed various setbacks, mostly in agro-social and the socio-economic sustainability of the QwaQwa community of South Africa. Evidence exists from the literature, our observations and experience that sustainability in the rural economic development of the QwaQwa community is not equal and stable, which has exposed the youths of the community to crime and various anti-social activities such as drugging, drinking, gangsterism, raping, among others. Therefore, the asset-based community development approach was adopted to instigate stakeholders’ intention towards community emancipation. This was done within the lens of the transformative paradigm designed with the community-based participatory action research process. The research comprised key stakeholders such as community leaders, NGOs, and youths. A structured interview was used to elicit information from the selected participants. We used socio-themed analysis to make sense of the data in order to understand the sociality of the people living within the spotted problem. The study revealed that the community is endowed with arable farming land and team spirit, but criminalities were found to challenge their development. In its quest for rural emancipation, the study also found out that the QwaQwa community needs empowerment programmes in social and agricultural skill development.

**Introduction**

In the process of community modernisation and its socio-economic development, the rural environment has witnessed various unprecedented setbacks, mostly in the area of synergy establishment among stakeholders towards meeting the required parameters for sustaining agro-social development and its socio-economic characteristics. This is a significant concern considering the education vacuum in the current trends and debates in rural emancipation. The current state of many countries, limitless to the global south, may not be unconnected with countries neglecting agro-social and economic development policies. According to Bayat, Louw and Rena (2014); Ansary (2017), this is a threat to higher education and its environmentalism. Based on this, any nation's national, social, and economic status in such a situation is under threat. However, equitable education, agricultural development, and food security cannot be separated from the important factors of rural development because these are the hub of both human and national development. Therefore, rural development in educational, sustainable agro-social, and economic growth cannot be underrated. In this sense, rural community transformation as an agenda to respond to the challenge of the rural-urban dichotomy and policy through collaborative synergy will pilot this study.

Policy formulation, implementation, and sustainability in any community need collaborative perspectives, especially to deal with multi/inter-faceted challenges like food security and a safe environment as an underside of agro-social sustainability. This is to say that if community-university synergy is not the end in itself, it cannot be too far from being the means to an end. Therefore, promotion and adequate recognition of human capital through the formulation of policies, programmes, and various developmental plans are of great importance to the social development of individuals, even nations in general. This was conceptualised by Omodan, Tsotetsi and...
Dube (2019) as the best way to transform a rural community located close to the university. It is, however, not enough to raise the education level of rural dwellers. But it is also better to ensure that the support needed for transformative policies, programmes, and sustainable agenda is in place.

Evidence exists that sustainability in rural economic development space is not equal or stable: OECD (2016) confirms that several agendas are suitable for rural development but with no sustainable economic blueprint compared to its urban counterpart. The aftermath of this is tantamount to poverty which does not only affect the rural dwellers and their areas but the entire context of the economy. Bertolini (2019) also confirmed that the neglect and unregulated pastoral resources, such as products to aid food security, lead to the degradation of natural resources, rural culture heritage, and diversity. According to him, all this affects national and community development, thereby decreasing national economic prowess. The argument here is that uncontrollable agro-social development or vulnerable agricultural production leads to splits in the economy, increasing inequalities and the cost of social sustainability. Therefore, to develop and sustain the economic contribution of the rural community, proper economic and sustainable collaborative policy comprising university and the agricultural community industries must be put in place in line with the United Nations vision 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The problem of this study stems from our observations and experiences, which have shown that sustainability in the rural economic development of the QwaQwa community of South Africa is not equal and stable. The resultant effect is tantamount to poverty, which affects the rural dwellers and their areas and the entire context of the nation’s economy. The rural community is endowed with farmlands but appears to lack the human and material resources to use these farmlands. This lacuna has introduced youths to crime and various anti-social activities such as drugs, drinking, gangsterism, rape, among others. From various interactions with the dwellers, we argue that the community is only sufficient in farmlands but lacks the support system that could assist the youths in getting jobs. Therefore, the youths are left jobless and exposed to various anti-social behaviours. According to Hálele (2014, p.101); Omodan, Tsotetsi and Dube (2019, p.3), this leads to low or no economic development, poor quality infrastructure, poverty, and undue child labour in such rural locations. To respond to the above-identified problems, the study aims to identify the strengths and available resources to empower the community towards sustainable socio-economic development. In order to ameliorate this situation, the place of the asset-based community development approach, which dwells more on using all the available resources within the community as a tool to better their predicament, is not negotiable.

This paper aims to (i) identify the strength or available resources that could enhance the economic development of the community; (ii) identify the challenges of putting those resources to empower the community people in order to enhance economic development (iii) provide a solution on how to empower the community with a focus on personal and community economic development.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Empirical Review**

In order to respond to the above problem, there is a need to locate the process within the spirit of oneness, togetherness, unanimous support and utilisation of community assets in finding a solution to the problems. That is, the asset-based community development approach (ABCD) was adopted as a theoretical framework for the study. Kretzmann and McKnight developed and pioneered this approach in the United States of America from a community development project (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). According to O’Leary (2015); Fuimaono (2012), this approach emanated to respond to community issues to challenge the dominant needs-based approach. This was done to give room for an alternative approach centred on galvanising and using the community’s capabilities and human capital to build a powerful community (Myende, 2015; Omodan, Tsotetsi & Dube, 2019).

The ABCD approach places more emphasis on recognising the existing gift, talent, strength, and resources available in the community to build and reconstruct a sustainable development in such a community (Fuimaono, 2012; IACD, 2009). In a positive dimension, Ryan (2008) also confirms that ABCDA is an eyepener for the community because it redirected them to recognise their already-existing strengths, resources, and the ability for community development.

From the above background of the theory, one could deduce that ABCDA is built in the form of collaborative practices towards community development. This also surfaced in Coleman, Minor, Seed and Wakeman (2020) that ABCD is one of the research approaches that could uncover the quality and resources of rural people and ensure social and developmental networks to transform their lives and the entire community. This may be the reason why Kobayashi, Cloutier, Khan and Fitzgerald (2020) concluded that ABCDA emancipates vulnerable rural communities. This comes “with the notion that they can leverage on their diversity, resourcefulness, independence, and resilience to build themselves away from the historically “dis-membered” way of “doing” into ingenious modernity” (Omodan, 2020).

From this analysis, one could refer to the study location as a vulnerable rural and Afromontane community endowed with so many hidden resources and abilities to respond to their problem by themselves. However, this assumption also drives the reason for choosing this approach because it enables the researchers to prepare the researched on how to persevere and engage themselves to find a solution to their problem through available human and material resources. By doing this, it assists them by learning how to rely on their uniqueness and human capital. According to Shiggins et al. (2020), such human capital is “gift and capabilities, unity and networking” which progressively enhances more opportunities for their social and economic emancipation.
This theory is relevant to this study because it opens the eyes of community stakeholders to their own capabilities and strength in dealing with issues at their disposal. By implication, it empowers rural people by realising their strengths, assets, abilities and capabilities (Omodan, 2020a). On another note, it also redirects the focus of community/rural people to peruse their hidden assets in order to transform and “re-member” themselves (Reardon, 2014). This is to say that to transform the agricultural and social development of the QwaQwa community of South Africa, the place of ABCDA is fundamental and will go a long way in ensuring sustainable economic development through agriculture. This is expedient because the assumption is that the community itself is rich in assets and capable of increasing the liveliness of its people for the better. This corroborates Omodan, Tsotetsi and Dube’s (2019) view that communities need to explore ways to mitigate problems without or with limited external interventions. In order to provide a solution to the problem of the study, through the use of the ABCD lens, the following research objectives were raised to pilot the study.

Methodology

Paradigmatic Lens

The study falls under the Transformative Paradigm because it proposes to transform the existing agro-social situation of the researched and their environmentalism. This is because the ontological stance of the paradigm is concerned with the nature of social and historical reality (Chilisa, 2012), which informs the choice of the asset-based community development approach as a theory to dismantle the agro-social reality. Epistemologically, the relationships between the researcher and the researched are essential and must be established on trust (Mertens, 2010) to enable all-inclusive knowledge generation to ascertain the versions of reality involved in collaborative policy formulation that could emancipate the researched.

The paradigm is deemed appropriate to lens the project because its assumptions are to emancipate the people through the ideological process and change the people’s status quo from marginalisation to the world of being (Gunbay, 2020). Hughes (2020) also views the transformative paradigm from the dimension of power by saying that unequal power differential among people could be challenged by working together as a team to transform their lives. This research followed the principles of transformative paradigm by collaboratively working together with the participants and providing solutions to the agro-social problems of the QwaQwa community. This was made possible by adopting community-based participatory action research (CBPAR).

Research Design

This paradigmatic argument informs the choice of research design “community-based participatory action research” (CBPAR). CBPAR is a collaborative approach to the research process where all stakeholders (with their expertise) are involved throughout the planning, operation, solution and implementation stage. CBPAR was used as a research design for this study to enable the researcher to examine the nature and the level of internal practices, politics, and processes involved (Omodan, 2020b) in the assumptions of community-university synergy towards agro-social sustainability. This design is therefore appropriate because it enables all the participants, including the researcher, to get together, involve together, and learn from individual perspectives and experiences “towards a better understanding of elusive matters (solution) using community internal and external strength” (Armstrong, 2003). This design was selected to pilot the research implementation process because of its philosophy that is rooted in the principle of partnership, group determination, equity and social justice, which are predominantly built to bridge the gap of inequality between the researcher and the researched (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

The assumption here is that it unites the participants and the researchers to assess their own needs, value their strengths, and see themselves as equal contributors to the research process. The design views all the participants and the researcher as co-producers of knowledge within the purview of community emancipation (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson & Wise, 2008). This was implemented by bringing all the community stakeholders together to plan, inquire and work toward finding solutions to the social and economic problems of the QwaQwa community. This was done based on the principle of ABCDA in order to transform and sustain the agro-social development of the QwaQwa community.

Describing the Participants

The participants comprised community youths, NGO members, and community leaders. The youths involved in the study are within the 25 to 35 age range. They have lived in the community from their teenage age up until the present moment, and they are assumed to be knowledgeable about the suffering and possible hardship the youths in the community are facing. The NGO members who were involved also know the community because they have been dealing with the community people in various capacities, especially on how to assist the community economically, socially, and educationally. Their knowledge of how to emancipate the community from the current lack of social and agricultural resources and even other needed recourse made them important in finding solutions to the identified problems. Lastly, the study also involved the community elders. These elders are otherwise referred to as chiefs. It is assumed that they have enough knowledge about the challenges facing the community; they also have knowledge of how to solve those problems. They become very important in the process, not only because they live in the community, but because they are the closest authority to their people who can possess very information that could assist in sustaining the economy of the community. The process and method of selecting the participants are discussed below.
Method Participants' Selection

The participants for the study consisted of six dominant stakeholders in the QwaQwa community of South Africa selected using the purposive selection technique. This method of participant selection is suitable for research participants where the participant possesses particular characteristics that could not be replaced and jettison for another individual (Omodan, 2016). According to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2015), this method of participant selection is a non-random method that does not need too many theories or a set of principles on the number of the participant but here the researcher(s) the participant based on the information needed and look for people who are in custody of such information, knowledge and/or experiences. In this study, we selected the participants purposively because they are the people who are faced with the problem and also possess the needed information on how to understand the challenges and the possible solution within the purview of community collaboration.

Method of Data Collection

A structured interview was used to elicit information from the participants. The project was carried out between 2019 and early 2020 and was completed before the advent of COVID-19. Hence the interview was successfully conducted individually with each of the participants. Structured interviews were used because it enables us as researchers to construct the interview in line with the objectives of the study. And it also guides the participants' interviewees to answer in line with the objective of the study. Zojceska's (2018) definition supports this implementation process that a structured interview enables the researcher to ask a particular and or a dominant question that will assist in fulfilling the objectives of the research. This is to say that the questions used in such a research process are planned and predetermined in advance, and all participants are expected to be asked the same way (Dull, 2018). In order to implement this, the following questions were prepared and asked from the participants: what are the available resources in your community that could enhance the economic development of the community? What are the challenges hindering the community from using those resources to empower the community people in order to enhance economic development? And lastly, how do you think the people in this community could be empowered in order to sustain personal and economic development?

Method of Data Analysis

This study adopted the socio-thematic analysis (StA) to make sense of the data collected via interview. StA was propounded by Omodan (2019) as a way of understanding the social activities and relationships of people and their status in themes. The method, according to Omodan (2020c), is a combination of Nordquist’s (2019) conversational analysis and Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps of doing thematic analysis. This method becomes expedient because the sociality of the participants is important in the interpretation of the data. At the same time, the data needs to be coded in themes according to the objectives of the study. This is supported by Omodan (2020d) that the method is suitable to categorise data into breakable objectives and “subject the data into sociality test to fulfil the conversationality involved”. In the process of data interpretation, this method assists in presenting the data based on their social life, most especially in understanding their socio-economic conditions and thereby presenting the data to fulfil the objective of the study.

Ethical Consideration

The issue of ethics in research is very important, and it helps the researchers and the researched be protected from any potential harm (Dube, 2016; Omodan, 2019). In order to protect the participants, their liberty and freedom to either withdraw or discontinue from participating in the research should they feel uncomfortable was ensured. Their names were represented with pseudonyms in order to protect their identities from being linked to their statement or their inputs during and after the study. In this case, the community youths were represented with CY, and the NGO members were represented with NGOs, while the community leaders were represented with CL. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the University of the Free State in South Africa. The result of the study was presented below in accordance with the objectives of the study.

Presentation of Data, Analysis and Findings

The data gathered through the process of community-based participatory action research with the use of structured interviews to transform the livelihood of the QwaQwa community is presented below. This was presented using tables according to each objective of the study. Table 1 represents the data collected on Objective 1, Table 2 represents the data collected on Objective 2, while Table 3 represents the data collected on Objective 3.
Our investigation regarding Objective 1 explored the strength of the available resources that could enhance the community's economic development. We discovered that the community is endowed with land for farmland and team spirit.

**Objective 1**

**Theme 1: Availability of Farmland**

The study confirmed that there is the availability of land that is available for the community to engage in farming. This is adjudged to be one of the strengths of the community that could be used to better strengthen their personal and community economic development. The issue of having available farmland surfaces in the participants' response, as stated in the above table. Participant CY1 also confirms that the people in the community use the land to plant crops for living because we have more land. In the same vein, participant CY2 also supports participant CY1 that they have land and that many of them use the land for the planting of vegetables. From their social interaction and our interpretation, it is deduced that the land is available for them in excesses to plant and make end meat for themselves.

Based on the above analysis, the study found out that the QwaQwa community has sufficient land to ensure a good livelihood for the people and the community at large. These finding answer one of the study's objectives that explored the strength and whether or not the community has any available resources within their community. Having found out that there is the availability of land for farming, we believe that the road to economic development and sustainability is not too far. This finding agrees with Ntsebeza (n.d) that access to productive land plays a significant role in the well-being of the people of rural South Africa. The availability of land as confirmed by the study's finding will eradicate poverty, which has been confirmed as being generally high in rural locations without access to land (May & Deininger, 2000). This finding also supported the conclusion of Chitonge (2013) that using land for cropping and livestock production indicates that the majority of rural dwellers have access to land to build a good life for themselves. This finding is also in line with the purpose of ABCDA as a theoretical framework that aims to build the community towards recognising their assets and strength that could be used to develop themselves for themselves.

**Theme 2: Community Team-Spirit**

The data collected also showed team spirit among the community members. They work together and assist one another when there is a need to do that. As reflected in the participant statement in Table 1, these actions showed that the community member has identified that one of their assets and strengths is working together, assisting one another for the purpose of progress. This argument suffices in the participants’ statements as indicated above; the participant NGO1 confirmed that the community members work together to assist one another, especially in planting vegetables. CL2 also supports this that the community people cooperate well by assisting one another in planting. NGO2 was also on the same page with community leaders by commenting on the community people that they have planting skills and care for the livestock together. In the same vein, NGO2 also commended the community that they share duties, lands, water and work well together. This indicates that the community has recognised that they are one and that they must use their strength to sustain themselves.

The above analysis showed that the QwaQwa community is united and work together to assist one another. These findings confirmed that our research process, which involved the use of participation and initialisation of human and material resources to better a lot of the community, is in place, and the community has understood the importance of collaboration and unity of purpose as stipulated by ABCDA (Wakeman, 2020). It can also be deduced that this team spirit is a means to the emancipation of the community people. This is in line with the exploration of Cloutier, Khan and Fitzgerald (2020) regarding the principle of ABCDA that it emancipates vulnerable rural communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective 1</th>
<th>Analysis of Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To identify the strength, that is, the available resources that could enhance the economic development of the community</td>
<td>Availability of Farmland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL1: “We have plenty of fields which is the land, and we also have livestock.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CY1: “Most of the people in our community use the land to plant crops for living because we have more land.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CY2: “We have lands, and we use the land to plant vegetables.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Team Spirit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO1: “They work together whenever help is needed, for example, on sewing projects and planting of vegetables.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL2: “We communicate well and cooperate to assist ourselves in planting.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO2: “They have communication skills, planting skills and caring for the livestock.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO1: “They share some duties and free land, spring water, and people able to work.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Thematic representation of data based on the research objective 1
Table 2: Thematic representation of data based on the research objective 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective 1</th>
<th>Analysis of Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To identify the challenges of putting those resources to empower the community people in order to enhance economic development.</td>
<td>Illiterates and Rampant Crimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL1: “Crime, people steal from one another.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO2: “They smoke nyaope and get involved in criminal issues.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CY2: “Crime is too much; they steal our farm products and other things from us.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CY1: “We are afraid of thieves; many young people are illiterate and unemployed.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objective 2

Theme 1: Illiterates and Rampant Crimes

The data collected also indicated that crimes and criminalities resulting from illiteracy and unemployment are predominant in the community. The participants confirmed this as a major challenge to their economic and social well-being. This was mentioned in their response to interviews. Participant CL1 confirms that there is stealing in the community, which happens among the young unemployed youths. This youth usually engages in anti-social atrocities, such as smoking nyaope. The aftermath effect, according to NGO2, is stealing and raping. All these are forms of criminality taking place in the community. This act, according to CY2, is a detriment to farming because they steal some of their farm products and other things, which are believed to be the limited resources available at their disposal. This act has made the farmers and other community members afraid and was linked to illiteracy among the young ones. Also, the issue of unemployment was also linked to the rampant criminalities in the community.

Based on this analysis, the study found out that the community’s major challenge is illiteracy, which has led to so many criminalities such as stealing, drug abuse, rape, and smoking. This has been a stumbling block toward community peace and prosperity. This might have affected the farmers from trusting in the atmosphere of their community when it comes to farming and harvesting their products. This finding confirms Addison (2005) that the government is paying little or no attention to creating a peaceful livelihood for the poor, especially those living in rural communities. This could be interpreted to mean that government, both at the local and national level, under-invest in the development of rural people and their livelihood. This, one way or the other, has a significant effect on the economics of the rural people and the development of the entire community. In turn, the issue of criminality is connected to the under-development of the rural economy and its sustainable development.

Table 3: Thematic representation of data based on the research objective 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective 1</th>
<th>Analysis of Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To provide a solution on how to empower the community with a focus on personal and community economic development.</td>
<td>Illiterates and Rampant Crimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL1: “Yes, we want our community to get better with relevant services such as infrastructure and tools for our work.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL2: “We want facilitates and empowerment, for instance, some farming skills for our youths.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO1: “It will be fine if our people are provided with better skills and be empowered to work hard.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CY2: “People do projects but they are no funds; we need funding opportunities.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objective 3

Theme 1: Provision of Empowerment Facilities

In order to respond to objective three, which seeks to provide a solution by empowering the community members, we collected data related to this. The data confirmed that the community and its people need empowerment facilities that could enhance their productivity in farming, among others—the quest for community empowerment surfaces in the participants’ statement during the data collection process. Participant CL1 pleaded that the community is in need of infrastructural facilities such as farming tools that could enhance their farming activities. To buttress the statement of CL1, CL2 also requested training and retraining services for the youths where they will get more skills that will enhance their job. The statement of NGO1 also reiterated that the community people need to be empowered by getting more and better skills. In our social understanding, this still brings about the provision of more training that could increase the skills of the community people. The request came from participant CY2, who confirms that there are projects at hand, but there is no fund to carry out their project. This further supported all the participants who had requested one or two empowerment activities. Funding is very important in ensuring that all requested employment activities will be carried out with money. However, the study confirms that the community needs to be empowered to sustain their livelihood and well-being.
The study found out that the QwaQwa community needs to be empowered; this in our social understanding will further enhance and increase their well-being and be able to cater to their needs without waiting for any external assistance. This finding also confirms the finding of Makhathini and Mpanza (2020) that providing adequate infrastructures and recourse is a major key to developing local economies. Makhathini and Mpanza (2020) further concluded that the provision of infrastructures for the local dwellers is still lagging behind in the republic of South Africa. However, this study also supports the finding because our study also finds that the QwaQwa community of South Africa still lacks many social and farming facilities that could enhance the livelihood of the community.

Conclusion

The study sorts to respond to the deficiency of economic development in the rural community of QwaQwa in South Africa. This was done by re-establishing the importance of Agro-Social Development in the livelihood and well-being of the rural dwellers in South Africa. In the process, the study examined the strengths and available resources in the community, the challenge that is hindering them from using their strength, and the possible solutions. ABCDA was adopted to instigate stakeholders’ intention toward community emancipation within the principle of transformative paradigm, and “Community-Based Participatory Action Research” (CBPAR) was used to design the study. Deducing from the findings of the study, we have concluded that the community is blessed with farmland which could be used to sustain their economy. As such, they also possessed unity and oneness as human resources, but they lack materials and facilities that could be used to sustain their farming occupations. Also, crimes and criminalities are major challenges linked to illiteracy and unemployment. On the final note, the community is in need of social or agricultural facilities in the form of empowerment. Based on this, the following are recommended;

i. We recommend that the community continue in their oneness and team spirit to better their community. That is, the collaborative spirit among them should be seen as one of their strength that could be used with little or no external assistance. By so doing, the available land at their disposal could be utilised to some extent, even when there are limited agricultural resources available.

ii. Secondly, the local, provincial and national governments should prioritise rural development in their budget and annual planning. This should be made to cater to rural education to eradicate illiteracy and unemployment. This will also encourage people to be self-reliant and thereby desist from crimes and criminalities that have become a compulsory devil for rural communities.

iii. Lastly, the relevant NGOs, governments, philanthropies, educational organisations and funding entities are needed to empower the youths and the farmers of the community. This is fundamental to them to meet with 21st-century community development and sustainable economic plan. We further recommend that sustainable development in QwaQwa is tied to the availability of skills such as; adaptability skills and interpersonal skills to enable youths to work together. On the other hand, social empowerment programmes in the form of grants and other farming implements will transform the space for better sustainability.

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All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.


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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


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