

COMMENT

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Harnessing hope: a psychological strategy for achieving the sustainable development goals

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Abstract

The 2023 SDG Report reveals a concerning trend: weak progress on over 50% of SDG targets in the last three years, with 30% stalled or regressing. Failure to make progress towards goals may lead to a rise in negative affective states, including anxiety and depression. Hope is a teachable skill that leads to positive outcomes in psychiatric and medical health, education, the workplace, and overall well-being. Teaching hope globally using established programming and dissemination of hope science is vital for SDG progress by teaching everyone the essential skill of hope. Literature for this narrative review was compiled based on keyword relevance, relevancy, and recency. Findings on hope's relationship to the SDGs and actionable strategies are discussed.

Keywords Hope, Hopelessness, Sustainable Development Goals, World Health

Introduction

In 2015, a group of scientists, advocates, and activists presented a compelling argument for the inclusion of explicit mental health targets in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; [66]). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Action Plan for the Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) famously did not include mental health. The inclusion of mental health in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is increasingly important, especially considering that the prevalence of mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression has risen by 25% globally since the onset of the pandemic (WHO [95]).

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a global initiative, urging collective efforts to foster social, economic, and environmental sustainability (United Nations [92]). The target year for achieving these goals is set for 2030 (United Nations [93]). As the midpoint of the 2030 agenda is reached, the Sustainable Development Report indicates that all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are significantly off track (Sustainable Development Solutions Network [90]).

The UN has overlooked the impact of making little to no progress on the SDGs over the last several years on the mental health of those working to attain them. When people don't reach their goals or make progress toward them, consequences usually occur right away. But when individuals repeatedly fail to achieve goals or perceive a lack of progress, this can contribute to a sustained state of emotional despair and motivational helplessness, which is associated with increased risk of mood and anxiety disorders. [45, 69]. Moreover, Marchetti [62] found that goal failure without the prospect of positive change

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in the foreseeable future leads to the development of hopelessness.

Hopelessness is the acute collision of emotional despair and motivational helplessness, in which individuals perceive that circumstances are intolerable and that they lack the capacity to influence change [1, 27, 89]. While there is a concern for the growth of hopelessness from failed SDG progress, hopelessness is also growing in populations worldwide. In the US alone, in a recent survey, 57% of teen girls endorsed “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year” (CDC [16]). In Canada, a large-scale study with nearly 50,000 post-secondary students found that 65.4% of participants reported hopelessness [52]. Globally, 50% of the population will develop a mental health disorder by the age of 75, with depression, anxiety, and trauma-related disorders leading (Queensland Brain Institute, [77]).

More concerning, hopelessness is predictive of weapon carrying on school property, self-harm, violence, addiction, risk-taking behaviors, motor vehicle accidents, psychological distress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation ([2, 26, 41, 43, 51, 57, 79]; Wolf et al. 2020). Moreover, hopelessness is often a consequence of oppression and discrimination, especially in vulnerable populations [68]. Most importantly, hopelessness is learned, and those high in hopelessness are less likely to achieve their goals [67]. As the year 2030 approaches, progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains limited, and significant health and societal consequences are likely if actions are not taken. The solution is hope.

Hope is one construct that can aid in the mitigation of mental health-related symptoms and promote the achievement of the SDGs. According to Snyder et al. [85], hope is defined as “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of agency (i.e., goal-directed energy) and pathways (i.e., planning to meet the goals)” (p. 287). As a result, hope is made up of positive emotions as well as the thoughts and behaviors associated with setting and achieving goals. Hope is a well-known concept, often found in religious contexts; 85% of the world identifies with a religion [55, 59, 96]. However, hope is also secular; thus, it is a unifying force that connects all people of all faiths and beliefs [50].

There are wide misconceptions that hope is synonymous with a wish or optimism; however, researchers have found that hope is a separate construct that is measurable and teachable [28, 48]. Specifically, studies on hope programming, such as Hopeful Mindsets and Hopeful Minds, have found increases in hope after learning the Five Keys to Shine Hope, which is a mnemonic for Stress Skills, Happiness Habits, Inspired Action, Nourishing Networks, and Eliminating Challenges [12, 48, 49]. To increase hope, researchers note that people need to learn how to set meaningful goals, develop strategies to achieve

them, seek support, and maintain a positive mindset [86, 97].

The more hope a person has, the better their health will be overall [10, 34, 36, 84]. Hope also protects against mental illnesses like depression and anxiety as well as suicide. It also makes people stronger when they're going through hard times and lets them avoid risky behaviors and violence. Moreover, researchers have found that individuals with higher levels of hope are more likely to achieve their goals, subsequently improving their well-being [70]. These individuals meet their goals due to their high agency-related hope thoughts, which stem from the belief that they can attain their goals and achieve success in life, and their pathways-related hope thoughts, which stem from the belief that they can overcome barriers and develop alternative solutions to goals when necessary [72]. Thus, individuals with higher levels of hope are more likely to achieve their goals; individuals high in hope are critical for reaching *all* SDGs, not just a target under a goal.

Hope is measurable and teachable, and teaching hope can lead to the motivation to set and pursue goals, take risks, and initiate action, which are all skills that are critical to attaining all goals in the SDGs [48, 71]. Furthermore, providing individuals with skills to enhance their hope involves teaching them how to actively manage hopelessness and work towards restoring hope.

The United Nations' acknowledgment of the shortcomings of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been limited, which may contribute to a sense of global uncertainty if timely action is not taken. Moreover, while the United Nations recently passed the International Day of Hope for July 12th on March 4th, 2025, the resolution provides little instruction on how to raise awareness and disseminate the skills to increase Hope on the internationally recognized day (United Nations General Assembly [94]). This narrative review aims to present evidence supporting hope as a strategy for achieving each of the SDGs, focusing on themes such as physical and mental health, economic stability, social sustainability, and climate and environmental issues. It also examines strategies for spreading skills to foster hope through public health campaigns and international policy efforts. Because the Sustainable Development Goals fundamentally rely on sustained goal-directed behavior at individual and collective levels, hope represents a foundational psychological mechanism underpinning their successful attainment.

Methods

This literature review was conducted primarily through Google Scholar, utilizing keyword searches related to “hope,” “hopelessness,” “Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),” “mental health,” “poverty,” “climate change,”

“sustainability,” “peace,” “health,” “workplace,” “education,” and other related terms. The review spanned a period of seven months, from March 2023 to November 2023. Both authors conducted the literature search independently and then compared their findings to ensure comprehensiveness and consistency. Initially, both researchers had a collective of 72 articles; however, after a selection process, 57 unique articles were included in the final narrative review. The selection of sources was guided by relevance, citation frequency, and publication recency, with a preference for peer-reviewed journal articles, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews. Studies employing Snyder’s Hope Theory as a framework were prioritized for theoretical consistency. Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles, research explicitly related to the key themes identified, and studies published within the last ten years; However, a few articles outside of the timeframe were included if there were limited credible sources related to a theme that were more recent. Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed sources, studies published outside the specified publication period, and research that did not directly address the selected topics or lacked empirical data.

Hope for promoting mental and physical health

Hope plays a crucial role in promoting health and well-being across various aspects of life, potentially preventing numerous health conditions, which maps onto SDG 3 of good health and well-being. This is because individuals who are higher in hope have an optimistic view of life, leading them to take action to preserve their health [36]. For example, individuals with elevated hope often adopt healthier behaviors, such as increased exercise and better nutritional choices (e.g., [46, 65]). These positive health behaviors are further demonstrated by Harvard University’s “The Human Flourishing Program,” which found hope is linked to improved physical health and health-related outcomes, including a reduced risk of all-cause mortality, fewer chronic conditions (i.e., diabetes, hypertension, stroke, cancer, heart disease, lung disease, arthritis, and overweight/obesity, chronic pain), reduced risk of some mental health conditions (i.e., depression, anxiety, and stress), and improved sleep patterns [29, 58, 84]. Additionally, hope is linked to a greater sense of connection and belonging, both of which are related to prevention and positive health outcomes (Wothington, 2020).

In addition to prevention efforts, hope is a documented intervention in health outcomes. For example, researchers have found individuals with higher hope adhere to treatment plans better than those low in hope, as they are more motivated to reach recovery goals (e.g., [44, 54]). Furthermore, studies show that individuals with higher hope experience faster recovery from injuries and

diseases, and their postoperative recovery prognosis is more favorable [58, 99].

Hope emerges as an effective intervention against mental health conditions like anxiety, stress, and depression, which is crucial given that depression stands as the leading global cause of disability [31, 83, 91, 95]. Additionally, using the positive affect component of hope as an intervention for anxiety and stress serves as a strategy to decrease hypertension [6]. For individuals confronting chronic, incurable conditions, hope proves instrumental in enhancing their quality of life by providing the necessary tools to cope with and confront challenges [88].

Hope and economic stability

Hope also plays a crucial role in enhancing urban safety and resilience, which maps onto SDGs 9 through 11. Research shows that individuals with higher levels of hope are less likely to engage in substance abuse, criminal behaviors, and risky activities [5, 47]. This reduction in harmful behaviors correlates with decreased recidivism rates and overall crime, contributing to safer cities and communities [24]. Furthermore, hope is linked to lower levels of sexual risk behaviors and teen violence [25, 56], highlighting its importance in fostering safer, more resilient urban environments.

Hopelessness is often a consequence of oppression and discrimination, so it continues the cycle of oppression as all the related negative outcomes of hopelessness are in the cycle of poverty and inequality [68]. Teaching hope, especially in disadvantaged communities, is a strategy to enhance self-efficacy and develop methods to overcome poverty, hunger, gender inequality, and lack of access to clean water, addressing SDGs 1, 2, 5, 6, and 10.

In the context of socioeconomic stability, a reciprocal relationship exists between hopelessness and poverty, and SDG 1 aims to end poverty. Individuals living in impoverished conditions are prone to higher levels of hopelessness, while those experiencing elevated hopelessness are more likely to endure increased poverty [21, 80]. The entanglement of hopelessness and stress contributes to a poverty trap, anchoring individuals at the poverty level. Mani et al. [61] suggested that the perpetuation of poor mental health in poverty may stem from reduced cognitive capacity, as managing poverty consumes mental resources. Moreover, Bernard et al. [9] found that hopeless individuals make fewer investments, even when returns are high.

In contrast, hope aids in cognitive stimulation, which can be helpful for devising strategies to generate income. Programs teaching hope to low-income families have been found effective at moving families out of poverty (Hong et al. 2020). Additionally, individuals with a positive outlook on their future, characterized by higher levels of hope, tend to make more substantial investments

in their future, resulting in improved financial outcomes [76].

Hope is pivotal in addressing hunger by targeting food insecurity, agricultural technology, and farmer mental health, which relates to SDG 2 of ending hunger. Researchers found that higher levels of hope strengthen the relationship between financial capabilities and one's perception of access to resources [32]. Thus, higher levels of hope may improve the efficacy of food assistance programs and reduce hunger. Furthermore, individuals with elevated levels of hope are more likely to adopt agricultural technology, thereby serving as a catalyst for the adoption of innovative farming techniques and the improvement of our food supply [13].

Alarming data from the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control underscored the pressing issue of US farmer suicides, with farmers being twice as likely as individuals in other occupations to die by suicide [75]. Farming is one of the most perilous industries; thus, it is imperative to acknowledge hope's role in buffering against suicide [19, 53]. Consequently, promoting hope among farmers not only addresses the psychological well-being of individuals but also contributes to the resilience of the agricultural sector, which is vital for ensuring global food security.

Lastly, promoting hope emerges as a crucial factor in addressing gender inequalities and fostering gender equality, mapping onto SDG 5 of achieving gender equality. The disparities in overall well-being are exacerbated by rising levels of hopelessness, particularly in teenage girls (CDC [17]). According to the CDC [17], in the United States, the prevalence of hopelessness has doubled for girls compared to boys. Globally, women and girls encounter discrimination based on sex and gender, contributing to various challenges such as domestic and sexual violence, unequal pay, limited access to education, and insufficient healthcare [4]. Recognizing the profound impact of hopelessness on health, education, and workplace outcomes, it becomes imperative to equip women and girls with the skills to cultivate hope as a strategy for promoting gender equality.

Hope and social sustainability

Fostering hope can improve education and employment outcomes, thereby directly supporting the achievement of SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, and SDG 8, which seeks to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.

Hope has been shown to significantly impact educational outcomes, highlighting its importance in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments. Research consistently demonstrates that hope is a crucial predictor

of academic success, surpassing even intellectual functioning in its predictive power [11, 37, 74]. Students with higher levels of hope tend to invest more effort in their educational goals and persist through challenges, leading to higher grades [42]. This relationship between hope and academic achievement is not limited to students; teachers with higher levels of hope are also more effective in motivating disaffected students [35].

The long-term benefits of hope in education are profound. Students who exhibit higher hope levels during their first year of college often achieve significantly higher grades by the end of their third year, indicating that hope is a sustained driver of success rather than a short-term motivator [23]. This effect is particularly pronounced among students with learning disabilities, who face additional educational hurdles [42].

Moreover, hope has been associated with stronger friendships, increased creativity, and enhanced problem-solving skills, all of which contribute to navigating school challenges and working toward graduation [98]. Additionally, hope helps protect against depression and anxiety, which are significant predictors of school dropout [38]. Recognizing this, 85% of K–12 school superintendents consider student hopefulness a crucial measure of public school effectiveness [39].

In the context of employment, hope is equally significant. A Gallup study identified hope as one of the four primary needs of employees, finding that those who feel enthusiastic about their future are 69 times more likely to be engaged at work [8]. Hope accounts for about 14% of work productivity, a higher influence than intelligence, optimism, or self-efficacy [60]. Compared to their less hopeful counterparts, high-hope individuals achieve approximately one extra hour of work per day, underscoring the productivity benefits of a hopeful mindset.

Furthermore, hope serves as a protective factor against anxiety and depression, mitigating the economic burden of lost productivity. Depression and anxiety alone cost the global economy USD 1 trillion per year, with projections reaching USD 16 trillion by 2030 [20]. These findings highlight the integral role of hope in both individual well-being and economic productivity, emphasizing its importance in driving global economic growth.

The only known predictor of gun violence is a history of violent behavior, and researchers have found Hopelessness, characterized by the acute collision of emotional despair and motivational helplessness, is a key psychological driver of violent behavior [3, 25]. However, hope is an important construct for conflict resolution, violence prevention, and risky behavior prevention. Hope maps onto SDG 16 as it is an intervention that can promote peace when resolving intractable conflicts [22]. By using hope as a strategy, it is possible to promote global peace, which can facilitate progress toward the achievement of

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 17. Goal 17 focuses on strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development.

Climate and environment

Climate and environmental sustainability are critical areas addressed by several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, SDG 6 aims to make sure that water is managed in a way that is sustainable; SDG 12 aims to encourage sustainable patterns of production and consumption; SDG 13 focuses on acting quickly to stop climate change and its effects by limiting emissions and encouraging renewable energy; and SDG 14 aims to protect and use the oceans, seas, and marine resources in a way that is sustainable for development. SDG 15 emphasizes protecting, restoring, and promoting the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably managing forests, combating desertification, and halting biodiversity loss.

The adverse effects of climate change, such as flooding, tornadoes, and drought, pose significant physical threats and severe implications for mental health. People exposed to these disasters often suffer from acute traumatic stress, with symptoms persisting until safety and security are reestablished [30]. Furthermore, the looming threat of essential resources like water becoming scarcer due to climate change intensifies people's anxiety. This scarcity can lead to violent conflicts as communities vie for access to clean water.

Providing individuals with tools to cultivate hope empowers them to navigate challenges related to water scarcity, which SDG 6 aims to achieve. Hope serves as a strategic approach, guiding individuals from hopelessness to a mindset that can protect against anxiety related to water scarcity while opening up pathways for innovative solutions and collaborative efforts to address these pressing problems [30, 78].

Moreover, numerous studies underscore the positive relationship between hope and engagement in climate-change-related activities and pro-environmental behaviors, which maps onto SDGs 12 through 14. For instance, hope can serve as an antecedent for group motivation toward outcomes not achievable by individuals alone, which is crucial in combating climate change [15]. Additionally, a combination of climate-change-related anxiety and hope can motivate actions against climate change [82]. These findings demonstrate that hope acts as a catalyst, propelling individuals and societies toward addressing climate change effectively.

Individuals with higher levels of hope are more likely to adopt greener alternatives and embrace sustainable practices [14]. Fostering hope within communities can encourage broader shifts toward sustainable

consumption and production, supporting the achievement of several SDGs. Specifically, hope contributes to SDG 7, which ensures access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all; SDG 9, which focuses on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and fostering innovation; SDG 11, which aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable; and SDG 12, which emphasizes sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Individuals with higher levels of hope are better equipped to tackle the obstacles associated with achieving clean energy and help work towards SDG 7. They exhibit enhanced problem-solving abilities and a greater capacity to innovate, which are essential for overcoming the challenges related to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy solutions [18, 33, 64]. Constructive hope, combined with an acknowledgment of climate change threats, acts as a powerful motivator for political engagement and support for clean energy initiatives. This dual approach inspires individuals to navigate challenges and drive collective action toward achieving sustainable energy goals.

Activating hope

As the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is reached, it is important to recognize the significance of hope in the pursuit of the SDGs. The global initiative set by the United Nations in 2015 encompasses a comprehensive vision for a world marked by equitable access to quality education, healthcare, social protection, and overall well-being. Mental health, crucially emphasized in the SDGs, has become increasingly relevant in light of the escalating prevalence of anxiety and depression globally, exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic and political climate.

The Sustainable Development Report's sobering assessment that "All of the SDGs are seriously off track" highlights the urgency of addressing the emotional and motivational dimensions of individuals and communities worldwide [81]. To address this challenge and suggest a documented approach for achieving goals, the dissemination of hope-teaching skills is recommended as part of the newly established International Day of Hope. Hope can act as a potent construct to mitigate mental health-related symptoms and advance SDG achievements.

Programs based on hope theory, including those developed by the author and affiliated organizations evidence-based programming for teaching hope using the Five Keys to Shine Hope framework, a mnemonic for Stress Skills, Happiness Habits, Inspired Actions, Nourishing Networks, and Eliminating Challenges. Programming is available at both the individual and community levels. At the individual level, Hopeful Minds and Hopeful

Mindsets are evidence-based programs designed to teach hope to people of all ages and across cultures. Recent research on The Shine Hope Company's Hopeful Mindsets on the College Campus demonstrated significant increases in hope among college students who used the Shine framework [12]. Additionally, research on iFred's Hopeful Minds curriculum shows that higher levels of hope are linked to increased emotional insight, resilience, confidence, self-belief, coping skills, social support seeking, and well-being in youth aged 8–14 [48, 49]. These programs are also tailored for specific subpopulations, including veterans, incarcerated individuals, workplace settings, and teenagers. Another opportunity at the individual level is encouraging individuals to write their "My Shine Hope Story," which involves reflecting on personal challenges and overcoming them using the Five Keys to SHINE hope mnemonic. At the community level, Hopeful Cities provides a playbook designed to give communities a blueprint for disseminating hope education through public marketing campaigns, advertisements, and structured programming.

Critical assessment of feasibility and challenges

While hope is a transcultural concept, allowing it to resonate globally, its integration into global policy is not without challenges. A primary limitation arises from the differing cultural conceptions of hope. In some cultures, hope is viewed as an essential component of resilience and personal agency, while in others, it may be interpreted as a passive state of waiting for external forces to effect change [7]. These cultural distinctions influence how hope is taught and learned, impacting its associated benefits. For example, Western societies often conceptualize hope as an individualistic trait tied to personal achievement, whereas collectivist societies may see hope as rooted in communal well-being and social harmony [63]. Such variations necessitate culturally sensitive adaptations of hope-teaching programs to ensure their relevance and effectiveness across different global contexts.

Another significant challenge is the practical implementation of hope-based programming within international institutions. Policymaking bodies such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, and national governments operate within complex bureaucratic frameworks that prioritize economic, security, and infrastructural concerns over psychological and motivational constructs like hope. Allocating resources and securing funding for hope initiatives requires strong empirical evidence demonstrating the direct impact of hope on socioeconomic outcomes. While existing research supports hope's benefits in mental health and resilience [87], further longitudinal studies are necessary to establish its broader effects on economic productivity, crime reduction, and educational attainment.

Additionally, scalability presents a hurdle in integrating hope education into global policy. While evidence-based programs such as Hopeful Minds and Hopeful Cities have demonstrated success in localized implementations, expanding these interventions globally requires overcoming logistical challenges, such as training facilitators, ensuring cultural adaptability, and navigating political landscapes that may not prioritize mental health education. For example, developing nations with limited access to mental health services may struggle to incorporate hope education into already underfunded educational and healthcare systems [73]. Addressing these concerns necessitates strategic partnerships with governments, non-profits, and private sector organizations to embed hope education within existing mental health and social welfare initiatives.

Strengths and limitations

Using a narrative review methodology to explore the relationship between hope and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offers both strengths and limitations. Its main advantage is flexibility and breadth, allowing the synthesis of diverse research across disciplines such as health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), poverty reduction (SDG 1), and climate action (SDG 13). This approach integrates psychological, sociological, educational, and policy literature, providing a holistic view of hope as both an outcome and a mechanism of sustainable development. Narrative reviews are particularly useful for emerging or under-researched topics, where literature is scattered or lacks consistent terminology. In the case of hope and SDGs, studies often reside in isolated domains without direct connections. This methodology bridges gaps, identifies overarching themes, and highlights theoretical and practical implications that might be missed in more rigid reviews. It also supports conceptual synthesis and critical reflection, helping build theoretical frameworks and guiding future research, especially given the varying definitions and measurements of hope across contexts.

However, narrative reviews are limited by subjectivity and potential selection bias. They lack a standardized protocol, risking omission of relevant studies and reducing reproducibility. Their interpretive nature might reflect the authors' perspectives more than empirical consensus. Additionally, they are less effective at providing quantitative conclusions or effect sizes, making it difficult to evaluate the strength or causality of associations.

Discussion

At an institutional level, persistent lack of progress toward large-scale global goals may inadvertently generate conditions that reinforce hopelessness among those

responsible for their implementation, including policy-makers, practitioners, and international staff.

Conclusion

Defined by positive feelings and inspired actions, hope is rooted in goal-directed energy and planning. Most importantly, research has found that hope is measurable and teachable (Kirby et al. [48, 49]). Hope programming has documented evidence for improving mental health and hope. Thus, teaching hope to everyone across the globe emerges as a transformative strategy to motivate individuals to set and pursue goals, take risks, and initiate action—all critical skills for attaining the SDGs. Integrating hope as a measurable and teachable construct into global policy frameworks may represent a missing link in accelerating progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

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KG and VO worked collaboratively on the entire paper between source compilation, writing, and editing.

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Data availability

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Competing interests

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