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The impact of international NGOs on refugee support and policy influence: A global analysis

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Abstract

The global refugee crisis has placed unprecedented demands on humanitarian systems, with international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) playing a crucial role in supporting refugees and influencing related policies. This comprehensive review explores the multifaceted impact of international NGOs on refugee support and policy influence across diverse global contexts. By synthesizing current research, policy documents, and case studies, this paper aims to enhance understanding of NGO contributions to essential services for refugees, their strategies for policy advocacy, and the complex dynamics between NGO activities and government initiatives.

The review examines the effectiveness of NGO interventions in key areas such as healthcare, education, and livelihood support, analyzing their methods of policy influence through advocacy, research, and direct engagement with policymakers. It also evaluates refugee perceptions of NGO support compared to government assistance, revealing varied experiences across different contexts and types of aid. Furthermore, the paper investigates the alignment between NGO activities and official government policies on refugee management, highlighting both collaborative successes and areas of tension.

The analysis reveals that while NGOs have made significant contributions to refugee welfare and policy development, challenges remain in coordination, sustainability, and adapting to diverse cultural contexts. The paper concludes with a discussion of future research directions and recommendations for enhancing NGO effectiveness in refugee support and policy advocacy, emphasizing the need for improved coordination, cultural sensitivity, and evidence-based practices in addressing the global refugee crisis.

Keywords: International NGOs; Refugee support; Policy influence; Humanitarian assistance; Global refugee crisis; NGO-government relations

1. Introduction

The global refugee crisis has reached unprecedented levels, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reporting 26.4 million refugees worldwide as of 2023 [1]. This humanitarian challenge has placed enormous

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strain on international systems of support and protection, highlighting the critical role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in responding to the crisis [2]. International NGOs have emerged as key actors in providing essential services to refugees and influencing policies that shape refugee management and protection at both national and international levels [3].

The scale and complexity of the global refugee crisis necessitate a comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of NGOs in this context. As the number of forcibly displaced people continues to rise due to conflicts, persecution, and climate change, the international community faces mounting challenges in providing adequate support and protection for refugees [4]. In this landscape, NGOs often serve as first responders, gap-fillers, and advocates for refugee rights, operating in diverse contexts from emergency humanitarian responses to long-term development initiatives [5].

The involvement of NGOs in refugee support spans a wide range of activities, including the provision of basic necessities such as food, water, and shelter; healthcare services; education and vocational training; legal aid; and psychosocial support [6]. Beyond direct service provision, NGOs also play a crucial role in shaping refugee policies through advocacy, research, and direct engagement with policymakers at local, national, and international levels [7]. This dual role of service provider and policy influencer places NGOs in a unique position to bridge the gap between on-the-ground realities and high-level policy decisions.

However, the impact of NGO interventions and their relationship with government initiatives in refugee management is complex and often contested. Questions arise regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of NGO-led programs, the potential for creating parallel systems that may undermine local capacities, and the challenges of coordinating efforts among multiple actors in often chaotic and resource-constrained environments [8]. Moreover, the political sensitivity surrounding refugee issues in many contexts can create tensions between NGO mandates and government policies, raising important questions about the role of NGOs in shaping and implementing refugee policies [9].

The evolving nature of forced displacement also presents new challenges for NGOs working in the refugee sector. Protracted refugee situations, where displaced populations remain in host countries for extended periods, require NGOs to adapt their strategies from short-term emergency response to long-term development approaches [10]. Additionally, the increasing urbanization of refugee populations has necessitated a shift in service delivery models, as NGOs must now navigate the complexities of supporting refugees dispersed throughout urban areas rather than concentrated in camp settings [11].

Furthermore, the global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and created new ones for NGOs working with refugee populations. The pandemic has not only strained healthcare systems and economies worldwide but has also led to increased restrictions on movement and access to vulnerable populations, forcing NGOs to rapidly adapt their operations and explore innovative ways of providing support [12].

In light of these complex and evolving challenges, this review paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of international NGOs on refugee support and policy influence. By examining diverse contexts and approaches, we seek to shed light on the variability in NGO impacts and the necessity for context-specific strategies. The primary objective is to analyze the effectiveness of NGO interventions in supporting refugees and their capacity to shape refugee policies globally, with the ultimate goal of informing more effective and sustainable approaches to addressing the global refugee crisis.

This review encompasses several key areas of inquiry. First, we explore how NGOs contribute to the provision of essential services for refugees, examining the range and effectiveness of interventions across sectors such as healthcare, education, and livelihood support [13]. Second, we examine the strategies employed by NGOs to influence refugee policies at national and international levels, including advocacy campaigns, research and knowledge production, coalition-building, and direct engagement with policymakers [14]. Third, we analyze refugee perceptions regarding the effectiveness of NGO support compared to government-led initiatives, considering factors such as accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and long-term impact [15]. Finally, we investigate the extent to which NGO activities align with or complement official government policies on refugee management, exploring both collaborative successes and areas of tension [16].

By synthesizing current research, policy analyses, and case studies, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of NGO involvement in the global refugee crisis. It is our hope that this review will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, NGO practitioners, researchers, and students interested in enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian responses to the refugee crisis and contributing to more equitable and sustainable solutions globally.

2. NGO Contributions to Essential Services for Refugees

International NGOs play a pivotal role in providing a wide range of essential services to refugees, often filling critical gaps in government-led support systems. Our review reveals that NGO contributions span various sectors, including healthcare, education, shelter, and livelihood support.

2.1. Healthcare Services

International NGOs play a crucial role in providing healthcare services to refugees. These organizations are often at the forefront of establishing mobile clinics in refugee camps and urban settings, ensuring that even the most hard-to-reach populations have access to basic medical care. Mental health and psychosocial support services have become increasingly important components of NGO healthcare provision, recognizing the profound psychological impacts of displacement and trauma [17]. Many NGOs also implement comprehensive vaccination programs, which are critical in preventing outbreaks of infectious diseases in densely populated refugee settlements. Additionally, maternal and child health services provided by NGOs help to address the unique vulnerabilities of women and children in refugee situations [18]. For example, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been a leader in providing emergency medical care in refugee crises worldwide [19]. Their rapid deployment capabilities and expertise in crisis situations have saved countless lives. A study reported that 78% of refugees expressed satisfaction with the quality of care received, highlighting the positive impact of NGO healthcare initiatives [20].

2.2. Education Support

NGOs contribute significantly to education for refugee children and adults, often filling gaps left by overwhelmed local education systems. Many organizations implement accelerated learning programs designed to help refugee children catch up on missed schooling due to displacement [21]. These programs are often coupled with language support initiatives, which are crucial for integration into local school systems in host countries where the language of instruction may be unfamiliar to refugee students.

For adult refugees, NGOs frequently offer vocational training programs aimed at providing skills that can lead to employment opportunities in their new environments. In emergency settings, NGOs have developed innovative education programs that can be rapidly deployed and adapted to challenging circumstances [22]. These may include temporary learning spaces, mobile education units, or digital learning platforms.

A comprehensive review highlighted that NGO-led education programs in refugee settings have shown positive outcomes in terms of enrollment rates, learning achievements, and psychosocial well-being of refugee children [23]. These findings underscore the vital role that NGOs play in ensuring that refugee children do not become a "lost generation" due to lack of educational opportunities.

2.3. Shelter and Livelihood Support

NGOs have developed innovative approaches to address the long-term needs of refugees beyond immediate emergency response. One significant area of contribution is the implementation of cash assistance programs [24]. These programs provide refugees with direct financial support, empowering them to make their own choices about their most pressing needs. This approach recognizes the dignity and agency of refugees, allowing them to prioritize their expenses based on their unique circumstances.

In addition to cash assistance, many NGOs offer job training and placement services to help refugees integrate into local labor markets [25]. These programs often include skills assessment, resume writing workshops, and connections with local employers. Some organizations have also launched microfinance initiatives, providing small loans to refugee entrepreneurs to start businesses or expand existing ones. Shelter remains a critical need for many refugees, and NGOs are involved in constructing and managing both temporary and semi-permanent housing solutions [26]. These efforts often go beyond merely providing a roof over people's heads, incorporating community spaces and considering long-term sustainability and integration with host communities.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been a pioneer in implementing cash assistance programs in multiple countries. A longitudinal study demonstrated the effectiveness of these programs among Syrian refugees in Lebanon [27]. The study found that NGO-led cash assistance not only improved the immediate living conditions of refugees but also contributed to their economic resilience over time. This research highlights how NGO interventions can have both immediate and long-term positive impacts on refugee well-being.

3. NGO Strategies for Influencing Refugee Policies

3.1. Advocacy and Public Campaigns

NGOs employ various advocacy strategies to influence refugee policies at both national and international levels [28]. One of the most visible approaches is the launch of public awareness campaigns designed to educate the general public about refugee issues and mobilize support for more humane and inclusive policies. These campaigns often leverage social media, traditional media outlets, and public events to reach wide audiences and shape public discourse.

Engaging with media is a crucial component of NGO advocacy efforts. By providing journalists with access to refugee communities, expert insights, and compelling narratives, NGOs help to ensure that refugee issues remain in the public eye and are reported on accurately and sensitively [29]. This media engagement can range from facilitating interviews with refugees to publishing op-eds and providing background briefings to journalists.

NGOs also work to mobilize grassroots support for policy changes. This can involve organizing letter-writing campaigns to lawmakers, coordinating petitions, and facilitating direct contact between constituents and their elected representatives. By amplifying the voices of supporters, NGOs can demonstrate public backing for refugee-friendly policies [30].

A notable example of successful NGO advocacy is the "I Welcome" campaign by Amnesty International [31]. This global campaign advocated for more welcoming refugee policies across multiple countries, using a combination of public events, online activism, and policy engagement. Research found that such large-scale advocacy campaigns can significantly influence public opinion and create pressure for policy changes, particularly when they coincide with high-profile refugee crises [32]. The study noted that the campaign contributed to policy shifts in several countries, demonstrating the potential impact of well-coordinated NGO advocacy efforts.

3.2. Research and Knowledge Production

NGOs contribute significantly to policy influence through their research and knowledge production efforts [33]. Many organizations conduct field studies and data collection in refugee settings, providing valuable empirical evidence to inform policy debates. These studies often fill critical knowledge gaps, especially in rapidly evolving or under-researched refugee situations.

The publication of policy briefs and reports is a key strategy for NGOs to disseminate their findings and recommendations [34]. These documents are typically tailored for policymaker audiences, presenting complex information in accessible formats and offering concrete policy recommendations. Many NGOs have dedicated research departments or collaborate with academic institutions to ensure the rigor and credibility of their research outputs.

NGOs also actively participate in academic and policy conferences, presenting their research findings and engaging in debates with other experts in the field [35]. These forums provide opportunities for NGOs to influence the broader discourse on refugee issues and to network with policymakers and other influential stakeholders. Organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University have been at the forefront of producing high-quality research that informs policy debates and decision-making processes [36].

3.3. Direct Engagement with Policymakers

NGOs directly engage with policymakers as a key strategy to influence refugee policies [37]. This engagement often takes the form of participation in official policy forums and working groups. Many governments and international bodies have established mechanisms for civil society input into policy processes, and NGOs actively seek representation in these spaces [38]. Through such participation, NGOs can provide ground-level insights and technical expertise to shape policy formulation.

Submitting expert testimonies to legislative bodies is another important avenue for NGO influence. When parliaments or congressional committees are considering refugee-related legislation, NGOs often have the opportunity to provide written or oral testimony [39]. This allows them to present evidence-based arguments directly to lawmakers and to respond to questions and concerns.

Many NGOs also position themselves as sources of technical expertise for government agencies dealing with refugee issues [40]. By offering specialized knowledge and operational insights, NGOs can influence the implementation of policies and programs, even if they weren't directly involved in their formulation. The International Rescue Committee's

involvement in the Global Compact on Refugees negotiations is a prime example of effective direct engagement [41]. This involvement helped to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of frontline refugee response organizations were reflected in the final compact.

However, it's important to note that the effectiveness of these direct engagement strategies can vary significantly depending on the political context and the receptiveness of government officials to NGO input. In some cases, NGOs may find their access to policymakers limited or their input disregarded, particularly in countries with more restrictive attitudes towards civil society involvement in policymaking [42].

4. Refugee Perceptions of NGO Support Compared to Government Initiatives

Understanding how refugees perceive the effectiveness of NGO support compared to government-led initiatives is crucial for improving humanitarian responses. The review reveals a complex picture, with refugee perceptions varying across different contexts and types of assistance.

4.1. Accessibility and Responsiveness

Refugees often perceive NGO support as more accessible and responsive to their immediate needs compared to government initiatives [43]. This perception is rooted in several factors, including the flexibility of NGO operations and their ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. The higher satisfaction rates for NGO services can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, NGOs often have a more visible presence in refugee communities, with staff members who are more likely to interact directly with refugees on a regular basis [44]. This proximity allows NGOs to build trust and understand the nuanced needs of the communities they serve. Secondly, NGOs are often perceived as less bureaucratic than government agencies, allowing for quicker response times and more personalized assistance [45].

Refugees particularly appreciate the cultural sensitivity of many NGO programs. International NGOs often employ local staff or members of the refugee community itself, which helps in bridging cultural and linguistic gaps [46]. This approach not only makes services more accessible but also contributes to a sense of dignity and understanding that refugees may find lacking in more formal government interactions.

4.2. Sector-Specific Perceptions

While the overall perception of NGO support tends to be positive, it's important to note that these perceptions can vary significantly depending on the sector of assistance. In the realm of education, for instance, the picture is more complex. A comparative study of a refugee camp found that refugees generally preferred government-run schools over NGO-operated learning centers [47]. This preference was largely due to concerns about the long-term recognition of NGO-provided education. Refugees expressed worry that certificates from NGO schools might not be as widely accepted, potentially limiting future educational or employment opportunities.

In healthcare, NGO-run clinics are often perceived as more accessible and less bureaucratic than government hospitals [48]. Refugees frequently report shorter waiting times, more personalized care, and a greater willingness among NGO healthcare providers to explain medical issues in detail. However, for more complex medical procedures or long-term care, government facilities may be preferred due to their perceived stability and more comprehensive resources.

Legal aid is another area where NGO support is often highly valued. In many countries, refugees are wary of seeking legal assistance from government agencies due to fear of deportation or other negative consequences [49]. NGOs, perceived as independent from government authority, are frequently seen as more trustworthy for legal assistance, especially in matters related to asylum claims or navigating host country bureaucracies.

4.3. Trust and Cultural Familiarity

Trust and cultural familiarity play crucial roles in shaping refugee perceptions of support systems. An ethnographic research among Afghan refugees in Iran revealed that many refugees felt more comfortable seeking support from NGOs staffed by fellow Afghans or those with deep cultural understanding, compared to government agencies perceived as less culturally attuned [50]. This cultural affinity not only facilitated better communication but also fostered a sense of community and shared experience that many refugees found comforting in their displacement.

However, it's important to note that refugee perceptions are not static and can evolve over time. Longitudinal research showed that initial positive perceptions of NGO support among newly arrived refugees tended to decrease over time,

particularly as frustrations with the overall asylum system grew [51]. This change in perception was often linked to the realization of the limitations of NGO power in influencing broader policy decisions or expediting asylum processes.

4.4. Long-term Impact and Sustainability Concerns

While refugees often appreciate the immediate assistance provided by NGOs, there are also concerns about the long-term impact and sustainability of NGO support. Some refugees express worry about becoming overly dependent on NGO assistance, recognizing that such support may not be permanent [52]. There are often concerns about the continuity of services if NGOs leave or lose funding, which can create a sense of insecurity among refugee communities.

In contrast, government initiatives, despite being perceived as less flexible or personalized, are sometimes seen as more stable and permanent [53]. This perception can be particularly important for refugees considering long-term integration into host countries. Government services, such as public education or national healthcare systems, are viewed as more integrated into the fabric of the host society, potentially offering a more sustainable pathway to inclusion.

5. Alignment Between NGO Activities and Government Policies

The relationship between NGO activities and official government policies on refugee management is often complex and dynamic [54]. Our review reveals both instances of alignment and complementarity, as well as areas of tension and potential conflict.

In many contexts, NGOs play a crucial role in implementing government policies and filling gaps in state-led refugee support systems. A case study by Abubakar on the refugee response in Uganda highlighted how NGOs effectively complemented the government's progressive refugee policies by providing specialized services and technical expertise [55]. This collaboration contributed to Uganda's reputation as a model for refugee integration.

However, tensions can arise when NGO activities are perceived to challenge or undermine government policies. Research by Mainwaring and DeBono on search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea revealed conflicts between NGOs and European governments over migration management policies [56]. These tensions highlight the delicate balance NGOs must navigate between their humanitarian mandates and the political realities of host countries.

The alignment between NGO activities and government policies can also vary across different sectors. A comparative analysis found that alignment was generally stronger in sectors like healthcare and education, where government and NGO objectives often converge. However, in more politically sensitive areas such as legal advocacy or policy reform, NGO activities were more likely to diverge from government positions [57].

Our review also identifies factors that contribute to successful NGO-government collaboration in refugee management. These include clear communication channels, formal coordination mechanisms, and the development of shared objectives. The Jordan Compact, which brought together the Jordanian government, international donors, and NGOs to support Syrian refugees, exemplifies how such collaborative approaches can lead to more coherent and effective refugee policies [58].

However, challenges remain in achieving optimal alignment between NGO activities and government policies. These include differing priorities, bureaucratic hurdles, and the need for NGOs to maintain independence while working within government frameworks [59]. Addressing these challenges requires ongoing dialogue, flexibility, and a willingness to adapt on both sides.

6. Challenges Faced by NGOs in Refugee Support and Policy Influence

NGOs face numerous challenges in their efforts to support refugees and influence related policies. One significant challenge is the increasing politicization of refugee issues, which can create a hostile environment for NGO operations. Many countries have implemented restrictive policies that limit NGO activities, citing national security concerns or anti-immigration sentiments [60]. This political climate can hinder NGOs' ability to provide services and advocate effectively for refugee rights.

Funding constraints pose another major challenge. As refugee crises become protracted, donor fatigue can set in, leading to reduced financial support for NGO operations [61]. This limitation in resources can force NGOs to scale back their programs or make difficult choices about which services to prioritize, potentially leaving critical needs unmet.

Coordination among various actors in the refugee response sector remains a persistent challenge. The multiplicity of NGOs, international organizations, and government agencies involved can lead to duplication of efforts, gaps in service provision, and inefficient use of resources [62]. Establishing effective coordination mechanisms, particularly in rapidly evolving crisis situations, is often complicated by competitive dynamics and differing organizational priorities.

NGOs also grapple with the challenge of balancing short-term emergency response with long-term development goals. The pressure to address immediate humanitarian needs can sometimes overshadow efforts to build sustainable solutions and local capacities [63]. This tension is particularly evident in protracted refugee situations, where short-term interventions may inadvertently create dependency and undermine long-term resilience.

Cultural sensitivity and local integration present additional challenges. NGOs must navigate complex cultural dynamics and potential tensions between refugee and host communities [64]. Ensuring that interventions are culturally appropriate and promote social cohesion requires careful consideration and ongoing community engagement.

Lastly, NGOs face increasing scrutiny and demands for accountability from donors, governments, and beneficiaries. Demonstrating impact and cost-effectiveness in complex and volatile environments can be challenging, particularly when dealing with intangible outcomes such as policy influence or social integration [65].

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires innovation, adaptability, and collaborative approaches from NGOs and their partners in the international community.

7. Future Directions

Our comprehensive review has highlighted several critical areas for future research and development in the field of NGO involvement in refugee support and policy influence. The complexity of the global refugee crisis demands innovative approaches and a deeper understanding of long-term impacts. Future research should focus on conducting longitudinal impact assessments to evaluate the sustained effects of NGO interventions on refugee well-being and integration. These studies should track outcomes such as economic self-sufficiency, social integration, and mental health over extended periods, providing valuable insights into the long-term effectiveness of different support strategies.

Additionally, there is a pressing need to explore innovative funding models that can enhance the financial sustainability and adaptability of NGO operations. This research could investigate the potential of public-private partnerships, impact investing, and blockchain-based donation systems in the context of refugee support. The role of technology and digital innovation in enhancing NGO service delivery and advocacy efforts also warrants further investigation. Studies should examine the application of artificial intelligence for needs assessment, blockchain for aid distribution, and social media for policy advocacy, among other technological advancements.

Another critical area for future research is the localization of aid and capacity building within refugee communities. Studies should focus on effective strategies for NGOs to build local capacities and promote refugee-led initiatives, examining models of knowledge transfer, leadership development among refugee communities, and sustainable exit strategies for international NGOs. Furthermore, research on best practices for collaboration between NGOs, governments, and the private sector in refugee support is essential. This should include examining successful models of multi-stakeholder partnerships and identifying factors that contribute to effective coordination in complex humanitarian settings. By addressing these research priorities, the international community can work towards more effective, sustainable, and humane responses to the global refugee crisis, leveraging the unique strengths of NGOs while addressing current challenges and limitations.

This comprehensive review underscores the significant and multifaceted impact of international NGOs on refugee support and policy influence globally. NGOs play a crucial role in providing essential services, advocating for refugee rights, and shaping policies at national and international levels. However, their effectiveness is influenced by complex factors including funding constraints, political contexts, and the evolving nature of refugee crises.

Our analysis reveals that NGO contributions to refugee support are most effective when they complement government efforts, adapt to local contexts, and actively involve refugee communities in program design and implementation. In policy advocacy, NGOs have shown the ability to influence discourse and decision-making, particularly when employing evidence-based approaches and collaborative strategies. The perceptions of refugees regarding NGO support compared to government initiatives vary across contexts but generally highlight the valued role of NGOs in providing flexible and culturally sensitive assistance. However, challenges remain in ensuring the long-term sustainability and integration of NGO-led interventions with national systems.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, while international NGOs have made significant contributions to refugee support and policy influence, there remains considerable scope for enhancing their effectiveness and impact. By fostering stronger partnerships, embracing technological innovations, and prioritizing refugee agency and local capacities, NGOs can continue to play a vital role in addressing one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges of our time.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, we propose several recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of NGO involvement in refugee support and policy influence. First, it is crucial to develop standardized impact measurement frameworks specifically tailored to refugee contexts, enabling more consistent evaluation of NGO interventions across different settings. This would facilitate better understanding of what works and why, allowing for more targeted and effective programming.

Second, formal mechanisms should be established for NGO participation in national and international refugee policy development processes. This would ensure that ground-level insights inform high-level decision-making, leading to more practical and effective policies. Such mechanisms could include regular consultations, joint working groups, or dedicated NGO liaison offices within relevant government departments and international organizations.

Third, comprehensive cultural competence training programs should be implemented for NGO staff working with diverse refugee populations. This would enhance the sensitivity and effectiveness of interventions, ensuring that support is provided in a manner that respects and responds to the cultural backgrounds of different refugee groups.

Fourth, dedicated funding streams should be created for innovative, technology-driven solutions in refugee support. This would encourage NGOs to leverage digital tools for improved service delivery and advocacy, potentially leading to more efficient and far-reaching interventions.

Fifth, clear guidelines and protocols for NGO-government collaboration in refugee management should be developed. These should address issues of coordination, data sharing, and complementarity of roles, fostering more effective partnerships and reducing potential conflicts or duplication of efforts.

Finally, mentorship and capacity-building programs should be established that pair international NGOs with local organizations and refugee-led initiatives. This would foster long-term sustainability and community ownership, gradually reducing dependence on external support and empowering refugee communities to take a more active role in shaping their own futures.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work towards a more effective, coordinated, and sustainable approach to addressing the global refugee crisis, maximizing the positive impact of NGO involvement while mitigating potential challenges and limitations.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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