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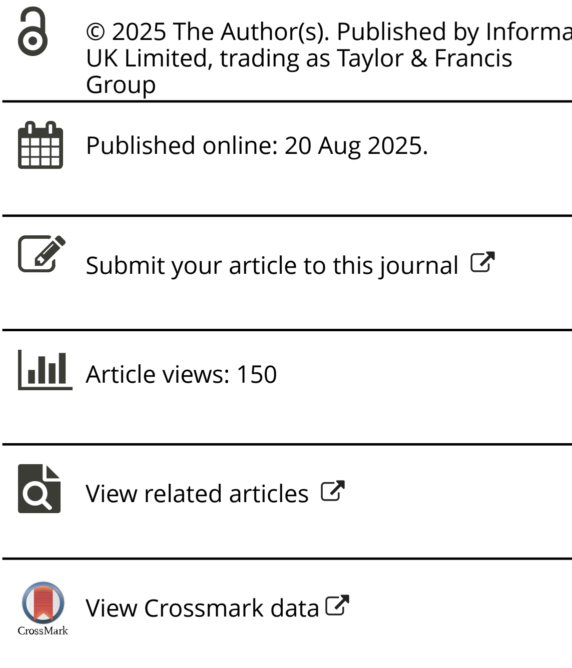

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FORTHCOMING SPECIAL ISSUE: DEVELOPMENT FUTURES

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An intersectionally aware process for securing free, prior, and informed consent in community-based research

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ABSTRACT

Free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is a fundamental ethical principle in community-based research. It ensures participants are fully informed about a study's purpose, risks, and benefits, and their involvement is voluntary and free from coercion. In participatory, community-based research, FPIC must be an ongoing process, reflecting an evolving research process and outcome. In rural Indonesia – and similar settings – effective FPIC processes for community-based research must align with local and Indigenous communities' collective decision-making, which are often grounded in deliberative dialogue, local protocols, oral agreements, and trust-based, reciprocal relations. It is equally crucial to meaningfully engage marginalised groups who may not feel fully represented by community leaders, to ensure inclusive FPIC processes and decisions. This practice note details an intersectionally aware process for securing FPIC in a participatory project in Indonesia. It shares lessons learned and insights aimed at enhancing inclusive, community-based research and development initiatives around the world.

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Introduction

Free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC, herein consent) is a fundamental principle of ethical community-based and participatory research. Before initiating any research project or development activity, a consent process must be completed with a positive outcome to ensure that participants are fully informed about the project's purpose, potential risks, and benefits (NHMRC et al. 2023, Ch. 2.2). At a minimum, this guarantees that participation is voluntary and free from coercion. As participatory and community-based research involves collaboration between communities or individuals and researchers to co-create knowledge and contribute to positive change on issues identified by collaborating participants (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007), it is important that communities involved play a central role in shaping and directing research to address issues that matter to them, in ways that respect and strengthen community relations. Consent for such evolving and adaptive projects

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must be iterative and ongoing, and accord with local practices. While ethical principles for collaborating with and learning from Indigenous communities are extensively documented in vitally important work, including by, but not limited to, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) and Australia's AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (2020),[1] there remains less practical guidance and descriptions of experience on how to obtain informed consent in ways that genuinely respect and align with the diverse cultural practices of Indigenous and local communities in community-based research in Indonesia. This practice note seeks to fill that gap.

Building on Hill et al.'s (2014) principles for informed consent in the development sector and integrating guidance on meaningfully engaging with Indigenous peoples (such as AIATSIS 2020; Smith 2021), and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), we propose adapted principles to guide ongoing consent in research-for-development and community-based research projects (Box 1). These principles emphasise that consent is a living, evolving relationship that prioritises trust, mutual respect, continuous dialogue, and equitable, inclusive participation attentive and adapted to intersectional forms of difference – particularly important in socially uneven settings.

Box 1. Definition and practice framework for inclusive, ongoing free, prior, and informed consent in community-based research.

- Free: Decisions are made voluntarily, without force, intimidation, manipulation, or undue pressure from any internal or external parties.
- Prior: Consent is sought before community participation in research design and question formation begins. Sufficient time is provided for all community members to access, consider, and discuss all relevant information, and for local and Indigenous communities to follow their own collective processes and protocols in order to make an informed decision.
- Informed: Community members receive clear, unbiased information about the project's scope, timeline, methods, activities, potential risks and benefits, data management, grievance processes, rights of refusal or withdrawal, and sources of funding (including the priorities or interests of funders). Sufficient time is allocated to build relationships and trust with key staff. Communication must take place in languages and formats that are culturally appropriate and easily understood by all community members, including marginalised or less formally educated groups.
- Ongoing Consent: Consent is not a one-off event but a continuous process. It must be actively sought and reaffirmed at each significant phase of the project, both from diverse representative groups and individual participants. This ensures that both collective and individual autonomy are respected and that consent remains fully valid throughout the life of a project.
- Reflexive: Research teams should engage in ongoing critical self-reflection about their methods, roles and relationships, including the power dynamics involved in collaborating with diverse groups. This includes reflecting on their conduct and responsiveness to community feedback, and making necessary adjustments to better align with the values, needs, and preferences of all community members.
- Inclusive: Deliberate efforts are made to identify and engage all diverse social groups, including those who are often excluded due to gender, age, language, (dis)ability, religion, ethnicity or social status. Engagement methods must be tailored to be safe, respectful, and accessible, ensuring that all voices are heard and decisions are genuinely representative.

Rather than homogenous groups, local and Indigenous communities can be highly variegated across multiple, intersecting forms of social difference – such as gender, age, class, or hereditary rank (Elias et al. 2017). Intersectionality is an approach that highlights how individuals experience and navigate socially constructed identities that shape their privilege, subjugation, and access to – or constraints from – resources and opportunities (Crenshaw 1989). To prevent exclusion and ensure that no one is left behind, an intersectionally-aware approach to consent engages all social groups – including those most marginalised – in culturally-safe and appropriate ways, ensuring their voices are heard and reflected in decisions and agreement (Elias et al. 2017). An intersectional approach recognises that researcher-participant relationships are power-laden and must be continually negotiated to share power and foster trust, reciprocity and equity – central principles of participatory and community-based research (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Smith 2021). Research ethics boards (REBs) have historically operationalised "bioethical" principles of respect, justice, and beneficence by prioritising individuated informed consent. While this approach plays an important role in protecting individual autonomy, there is also a need to align with collective

and Indigenous decision-making processes, and reflect the evolving dynamics of participatory research in socially uneven contexts (AIATSIS 2020; Butz 2008). We propose strategies for an intersectionally-aware, relational approach to community-based research that centres collective processes, power-sharing, and reciprocity, while upholding core ethical research principles.

In Indonesia, consent-seeking processes have at times fallen short of ethical principles. One-off *sosialisasi* events – often a top-down, one-way information session for selected community representatives – are common, allowing limited opportunity for dialogue, input or time to consider the information let alone ensure all community members can make informed decisions. Similarly, some research projects have also failed to obtain informed consent; for instance Rachmawaty (2017) describes a healthcare study in a rural Indonesian site that secured only verbal approval from a government district head, bypassing community leaders and individual participants entirely, raising ethical concerns. Such practices are, however, changing, as Indonesia now requires national ethics clearance for all social science research, mandating respect for human dignity, confidentiality, justice, and informed consent. While the guidelines are still evolving, there is much good practice taking place to learn and reflect on in terms of culturally grounded engagement with Indigenous and other diverse communities. This shifting space presents an opportunity to strengthen inclusive, and context-sensitive consent-seeking practices.

This practice note shares insights from our experience as a collaborative team of Indonesian and Australian researchers working on a 5-year participatory, research-for-development project in an area of degraded peatland in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. Through a participatory process, it aims to identify and support community-driven livelihood options that align with local and Indigenous women's and men's preferences and aspirations, as prerequisites for social-ecological peatland restoration. Our field team includes three indigenous Dayak Ngaju community team members – one from each of the three villages we work with – who bring translation skills and cultural knowledge. They work with an NGO – that has long-standing relationships with the village communities – and its Indonesian and Dayak Ngaju women staff, and researchers from the University of Indonesia and the University of Melbourne. Drawing on our experiences and literature on consent and participatory research, this practice note reflects on our consent seeking practices. We aim to contribute to improved practices in securing culturally appropriate, and intersectionally-aware consent in community-based research, to reshape how researchers engage with communities. We emphasise that central to seeking consent in community-based research is listening, rather than assuming communities needs and aspirations. Our practice note offers strategies that support this.

This consent-seeking process takes place in a diverse community that includes newly-arrived and long-settled migrants as well as Indigenous Dayak Ngaju people in Central Kalimantan. Various aspects and levels of local decision making are guided by a combination of state, local and customary practices and norms. Our process reflects this diverse and intersectional context.

Steps involved in securing intersectionally-aware, ongoing consent

In what follows we present the steps and principles we followed and will continue to gain intersectionally-aware, ongoing consent (Figure 1).

Step 1: Obtain ethical clearance first. Ethical clearance is required before research can begin, however preliminary discussions with community or participant representatives are important to help establish partnerships and agree on ways of working – including key processes or protocols to follow to secure consent. In some contexts, such as Australia, evidence of support for the research project from a relevant community Council or organisation that participant communities feel represent them is required for research involving Indigenous groups or communities (NHMRC et al. 2023, Ch. 4.7.2, p. 80). To apply these ethical principles in Indonesia, we followed locally appropriate and meaningful processes to represent local interests. This included initial meetings with local and customary leaders, followed by two community consultations in each village to understand

Figure 1. Five key steps we followed and will continue to implement to gain consent.

priorities, secure preliminary support for, and input on, our research project, and identify protocols to follow for the consent process, before we applied for ethical clearance.

REBs will want to see the detail of the consent seeking process planned for research projects, to ensure that it meets institutional standards. In accordance with Australia's National Statement, which outlines institutional responsibilities for ensuring voluntary and informed participation (NHMRC et al. 2023, Ch. 5.1-5.2), we obtained dual ethics clearance in both Australia (from the University of Melbourne (Reference number: 2023-27637-44427-4)) and Indonesia (from Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) (Reference number: 547 /KE.01/SK/08/2023)) before commencing the formal consent process.

Build relationships and trust, practice reciprocity and deliver local benefit

Building rapport is essential for ongoing consent, as it fosters mutual trust and respect – the basis of good relationality – and helps to reduce power relations between researchers and community partners (Smith 2021). Central to this is reciprocity; a principle that seeks to counteract asymmetrical power dynamics and extractive relationships, promoting equitable, trust-based relationships (Fitzpatrick et al. 2016; Smith 2021).

Our research project practices reciprocity through long-term engagement, reporting back and sharing knowledge by returning anonymised results in accessible formats, and offering training aligned with community-identified needs and support for community-based initiatives. The two initial consultations we held in each village (prior to holding a more formal community meeting, as detailed below) allowed us to begin building relationships with communities, gauge interest and gather input into the research focus (though, as a participatory project this will be shaped by communities throughout the project). We recognise that though more extensive relationship-building and consultation would have greatly beneficial, our geographic distance from the research sites[2] and our various work and care responsibilities limited our time in each community. To address these constraints we involved Dayak Ngaju community team members from the outset in the consent

seeking process, sought early communication with village leaders, and diverse participation in the *musyawarah*.

Iterative and ongoing

Participatory research is collaborative and open-ended, adapting and evolving as new insights emerge. Securing consent for participatory or other community-based research thus must go beyond a one-time agreement, involving instead an ongoing, iterative consent process that begins before the research and continues throughout the research project (NHMRC et al. 2023, Ch. 2.). Ongoing consent is crucial to fostering and deepening trust and relational connection between researchers and participant groups (AIATSIS 2020; Butz 2008). This should be revisited at each stage to reflect the evolving nature of community-based research or development work (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007). We will seek community consent at the beginning of three phases of our study (as well as with every participant at each point of engagement), allowing communities to provide detailed feedback and engage with each new phase in more manageable portions. Preceding the start of each new phase, we will follow the process for requesting community approval as we describe below. Alongside community meetings, community advisory groups, regular community afternoon teas and other methods of communication will help to share anonymised findings and reflections for guidance and feedback.

Follow local and Indigenous protocols and practices

In contexts involving local and Indigenous communities, consent must be obtained through culturally-appropriate processes that respect local and Indigenous decision-making (Smith 2021). This requires following local protocols, ensuring diverse voices are heard (including by creating comfortable spaces for discussion), and addressing power imbalances. Consent should be offered in multiple forms – oral, written, or technology-based – in local languages and align with cultural practices that allow families or communities to collectively decide to give or withhold consent (Fitzpatrick et al. 2016). We describe in the sections below how we aimed to ensure both our language use and the process we followed reflected and respected those of the local and Indigenous communities.

Step 2: Gain initial consent from formal and customary leaders. Research with local and Indigenous communities requires consent from respected community leaders, Traditional Owners or Elders, who determine what is acceptable to protect the interests of their communities (NHMRC et al. 2023, Ch. 4.7.2; Fitzpatrick et al. 2016). This process should follow traditional or customary structures to ensure that consent is fully valid according to local value systems – crucial to ensure community participants can feel comfortable to participate (Fitzpatrick et al. 2016).

To respect both Indonesia's state as well as local customary structures, we first met with regional government officials from several relevant agencies, village government leaders, and regional Dayak leaders, to explain the project and seek input. We sought to build trust through transparency – outlining our identities, motivations, research aims and plans, including our plans for knowledge sharing – and seek feedback and input (Smith 2021). To support this, we provided a visual project summary in two languages (Indonesian, the national language, and Dayak Ngaju, the local Indigenous language), including photos of the team members and their institutional affiliation, and images and brief explanations of the various methods we would use (see Figure 2), as well as our ethical clearance approval letters (per Indonesian government requirements).

One key challenge that emerged in our consent process was distinguishing our research from the widespread phenomena of "technical projects' that proliferate across rural Indonesia, which, as Tania Murray Li (2016) observes, often channel funds to rural elites for technical projects that are not well aligned with villagers' needs and priorities. To explain how our project differed, we explained our institutional affiliation and participatory approach, emphasising that we were not linked to

Figure 2. Project summary in Indonesian (left) and Dayak Ngaju (right).

corporations or technical initiatives. However, given the deep-rooted practice of technical development interventions and villagers' unfamiliarity with participatory research, we must consistently demonstrate our inclusive practices and commitment to transparent, community-driven outcomes throughout the project, to model our intentions.

Step 3. Hold a community meeting with representatives of diverse social groups. To foster inclusive participation, we sought guidance from village and customary leaders to organise a *musyawarah* – a familiar Indonesian forum for deliberation and decision-making. *Musyawarah* allows representatives to collectively discuss issues and agree on actions, making it a culturally valid platform for community consent seeking. The *musyawarah* discussions were led by the lead Indonesian collaborators from the University of Indonesia, drawing on their decades of experience facilitating inclusive community dialogue in rural agrarian contexts. It was also informed by our Dayak Ngaju colleagues who have extensive experience in community engagement.

During the *musyawarah* we introduced our team and outlined the participatory community-based research approach, emphasising co-design at each stage. While Dayak Ngaju society is relatively egalitarian, gender norms still limit women's voice in more formal village discussions. We observed, for example, that in the *musyawarah* in each of the three villages, women mostly sat in the back rows, despite arriving earlier than men, and tended to be quieter, reflecting socio-cultural norms that grant greater authority to those with higher levels of social power (such as government officials or customary leaders).

To encourage open dialogue, we divided attendees into two all-gender groups, which created a forum significantly more comfortable for women to share their views. Discussions varied between the all-gender groups; the women's group focussed on immediate livelihood concerns, as well as their children's health and educational outcomes, and how – due to limited livelihood opportunities locally – a growing number of men are having to work away for long periods, many in precarious artisanal gold mining. The men's discussion focussed more on land tenure and resource control.

Both groups raised concerns about the low prices for commodities grown by smallholders in the village. Yet even amongst the all-gender groups, we observed notable hierarchies – for example, middle-aged and older women spoke more than younger women, and men deferred to the *mantir adat* (village customary leader) before contributing their perspectives. To better ensure all social groups feel comfortable to share their views, we will ensure future discussions are separated by both gender and generation.

After group discussions, representatives from both groups summarised their key points in the larger *musyawarah*. These were summarised in village community consent form (*Berita Acara*), which was signed by the Village Head, customary leader, and neighbourhood heads, signalling community consent to proceed with the project's first phase.

Step 4: Hold informal, inclusive discussions to ensure marginalised groups are engaged. Marginalised groups – such as women, socio-economically disadvantaged and landless people, Indigenous peoples, or migrants – may be underrepresented or unheard even in well-intentioned participatory processes. Alternative approaches beyond formal meetings are essential to ensure marginalised groups' priorities and needs are communicated and addressed effectively. We aim to hold further informal discussions with villagers from diverse social groups, particularly targeting those more marginalised, to get early input about the research project and engage them in consent-seeking. These will take the form of community drop-in afternoon tea sessions in each village, offering an important opportunity to build rapport with those who join, and begin our work towards gaining community trust (Smith 2021).

Use visual aids and present information in multiple, accessible ways

To communicate effectively, we used multiple methods to share information, including visual aids, to ensure participants clearly understood the proposed project (Fitzpatrick et al. 2016). We sought community input on consent forms, avoided jargon or complex terms, and used graphics (for example Figure 2) to enhance understanding and bridge language and cultural barriers (Fitzpatrick et al. 2016).

Provide an anonymous feedback mechanism

Wherever possible it is important to offer participants opportunities to provide input and feedback in ways that are accessible to them and allow them to not be recognised if needed. Anonymous feedback mechanisms can help to avoid power dynamics that may otherwise affect face-to-face settings, including to allow more marginalised individuals – who may feel uncomfortable or even unsafe in more formal settings – to contribute freely.

To gather anonymous feedback, we placed feedback boxes in a central place in the village as suggested by *musyawarah* participants. We will later collate and summarise any feedback to help us reflect on our practice and processes.

Form a community advisory group

Community-based research scholars recommend forming a community advisory group (CAG) as one way to connect researchers with participant communities, providing a governance and accountability mechanism (Nelson et al. 2024). A well-designed CAG can play a vital governance role throughout the research process to identify research issues, align project aims and outcomes with local priorities, validate and interpret data, and advise on and support knowledge sharing, including communicating results in ways accessible and useful across different social groups. CAG members also offer insight into local dynamics and emerging issues that researchers might miss (Hacker 2013). Importantly, CAG members can serve as a mechanism to raise concerns or grievances about the project,

directly to researchers or, where necessary, other relevant bodies (AIATSIS 2020). To enhance inclusivity, the CAG should equitably represent the diversity of the community, including across gender, age, ethnicity, livelihood activities, and holders of Indigenous knowledge systems, amongst other identity intersections.

We will establish a CAG in each village by seeking nominations from village leaders and representatives, and also by identifying influential individuals and underrepresented social groups (through a household Census), to ensure diverse group representation. The CAG will meet every two months or so, with members receiving a form of locally-appropriate remuneration. To ensure inclusivity, discussions will be held in all-gender groups, similar to the *musyawarah* process. The CAG structure will be reviewed every two years, allowing new members to join while maintaining continuity and experience in the group.

Step 5: Gain consent from individual households and participants. It is crucial that consent is gained from each individual participant, in addition to community-based consent. In a final stage of gaining consent, we will visit each household in the village to explain the project, get their thoughts and feedback, and ask whether they are willing to participate. If they agree, we will then administer a short questionnaire aimed at conducting a full household census across the village population (with participation appropriately remunerated based on CAG advice). We will document preferences for participation and respect them throughout the study, allowing for and respecting individual preferences that may differ from the collective agreement. The household census will create a comprehensive sampling frame to ensure the inclusion of all social groups, particularly those marginalised or underrepresented in official data. Social groups identified through the census that have not been represented in community meetings or informal inclusive meetings will be targeted for further follow up and ongoing consent engagement.

Conclusion

An intersectionally-aware approach to securing ongoing free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) in participatory research challenges deep-rooted practices in technical development interventions, where often pre-designed projects arrive in communities with little input from communities. Communities may view research as just another "technical project" (Li, 2016) and fear elite control over any material benefits. For example, despite our efforts to facilitate meaningful participation in the *musyawarah*, some tensions (raised by more elite villagers) arose due to lingering disappointment from failures of past development interventions and concerns about being reduced to beneficiary targets or data points for privileged researchers. To build trust – the basis of reciprocity and equity – and manage expectations, it is essential to clearly communicate and where possible *demonstrate* potential short – and long-term benefits. We seek to do this by sharing research findings – presented in meaningful and accessible ways – with communities, and supporting their use of the results to advance their own priorities and aspirations. We will also provide training and other forms of support aligned with needs identified by the community. Through our intersectionally-aware and ongoing consent process, we aim to demonstrate our commitment to shifting power relations, by creating appropriate spaces to allow close listening to diverse voices and preferences, and for these to change throughout the project as trust builds (or should trust erode).

Inclusive consent requires understanding social stratification within communities. Relying on the same key contacts for participant recruitment can unintentionally perpetuate exclusion and inequalities. To avoid this, we propose several strategies to promote inclusivity and minimise biases. These include using accessible forms of information including public flyers, posters and individual (rather than household) invitations to raise awareness about a project and to recruit participants. We also suggest to schedule workshops and meetings at varying times to accommodate different groups' availability and holding sessions in groups separated by forms of social identity to create spaces where participants feel comfortable to share their perspectives. A Community Advisory Group

provides a crucial feedback mechanism, alongside multiple informal methods aimed at capturing marginalised voices. Demonstrating the application of our ongoing, and inclusive consent principles, we have included an additional method of conducting door-to-door visits to obtain household consent, and to administer a household census. This helps us to gain consent beyond the level of community representatives and to understand all intersections of social identity in communities, to facilitate the recruitment of underrepresented groups across all our ongoing consent seeking and participatory research methods. This helps accurately ensure all groups – and their voices, priorities and preferences – are reflected in the consent and later research process and outcomes, so that no one is left behind.

Notes

1. Ethical principles for research with Indigenous peoples are similarly articulated in other jurisdictions, such as Canada"s *TCPS 2* (2022, Ch. 9), though fewer frameworks are documented across Global South contexts. Other examples of scholarship and practice that informs our work include the practice of Indigenous and non-Indigenous collectives such as the *Bawaka Collective* or *The Institute for Freshwater Fish Futures*, and critical scholarship centring Indigenous principles of reciprocity, trust, and community control (Bainbridge et al. 2015; Rigney 1999).
2. The local team are an eight-hour journey away, the Indonesian university research team are on a different island of Indonesia, and the Australian team in a different country.

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Tessa D. Toumbourou:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Mia Siscawati:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Ariane Utomo:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Hariati Sinaga:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Shelly Adelina:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Shelly Adelina:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Shelly Adelina:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Shelly Adelina:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Shelly Adelina:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Ardianingtyas Ibni Albar:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Hevirona Bani Adam:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing; **Deti:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing; **Laura Graham:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing; **Lambang Septiawan:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Lambang Septiawan:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Andrea Rawluk:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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