

# The Role of Small Localities in the Requalification of Territories: the Case of the Grand Medea Territory, Algeria

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## Abstract

Since independence until today, the development of Algerian cities and the spread of their urban agglomerations have led to the marginalization of small localities that were once flourishing because of their various vocations: rural, historical, cultural, etc. This contribution is part of a new vision of spatial planning based on the architectural and urban requalification of heritage resources and structures as a vector of the development of poor and abandoned localities. It will be presented through the example of the large territory of Medea and its surroundings. The research is based on the identification, recognition, and enhancement of the natural, historical, architectural, and urban heritage of the territory. It is part of the main orientation of the National Land Use Planning Plan (SNAT 2023) which is the territorial rebalancing. The approach made it possible to develop a territorial revitalization program resulting from the character of the resources and potential of the site like cork factories, the recovery of abandoned farms, the creation of spas, leisure areas, etc. It also made it possible to develop a reflection on the housing typology to integrate into the rural contexts that characterize the Grand Medea's territory.

**Keywords:** Architectural and urban heritage; Grey areas; Small localities; Territorial requalification; Grand Medea.

## 1. Introduction

Today, returning to the city centers becomes an alternative to their spreading in the surrounding countryside. In the past, the city and its countryside constituted a homogeneous and inseparable territorial entity defining a typical cultural area. Indeed, the rapid urbanization of cities has created a territorial imbalance manifested by devitalized urban cores and absorbed by the disproportionate spread of neighboring urban agglomerations (Amen & Nia, 2020; Aziz Amen, 2022; Kafrawy et al., 2021; Mahgoub, 2021; Nassar, 2021). These last have become urban entities divided into specialized districts, and industrial and commercial zones. The phenomenon has systematically compromised the relationship between the city and its countryside, a symbiosis that characterized the territories of cities in the past.

In Algeria, and since independence, about half of the city's inhabitants come from the surrounding countryside. The rural exodus was one of the major factors in this population transfer. This phenomenon has generated an unbalanced territorial framework, where some towns gained the rank of large cities and others remained at the medium or small urban agglomerations stage. Other localities have degenerated, and are qualified by the National Land Use Planning Plan (SNAT 2030) as grey areas (handicapped areas) such as the large territory of Medea. These localities, despite their marginalization and impoverishment, remain places of diverse memory, places of rural, thermal, manufacturing, historical, etc., thanks to the natural resources and heritage potential they possess. They can constitute opportunities to sustain a new vision of territorial planning based on the memory of the place as a basis for the requalification of cities and territories. Through architecture and urban planning, it is possible to revitalize heritage resources and structures and develop poor and abandoned localities by restoring a socioeconomic order in their local populations and creating attractive poles for investment, employment, housing, and other activities.

In the case of the grand Medea territory, the development of the city and its surroundings is considered by the development of an Intercommunal Urban Development Master Plan (PDAU) including Medea, the capital of the district, Draa-Smar, Tamesguida, and Ouzera. Its objective is to identify free land that can accommodate the proposed programs, particularly housing, and define the main axis of urban extension.

However, is it enough to find land bases to urbanize to ensure territorial rebalancing and equity within the guidelines of the National Land Use Plan (SNAT 2030)? Also, what is the future of the grey areas (with disabilities) in the underlying reasoning of the Intercommunal Urban Development Master Plan (PDAU) of Medea, Draa-Smar, Tamzguida, and Ouzra? Hence, the interest of the territorial project as a new vision of city policy and territory.

This paper presents a new approach for developing the grey areas of the Grand Medea (Medea and its surroundings); an approach conceived on a dual scale: a territorial scale based on the principle of "thinking globally" and an urban scale based on the principle of "acting locally". The basis of reflection is the spirit of "decentralize to upgrade". Methodologically, the research is based on the prospecting of the large Medea territory, identifying and recognizing all the resources and potentialities able to ensure grey areas development. The inventory of resources and potential of various kinds constitutes the methodological tool allowing the critical analysis of the data and the interpretation of the opportunities to be envisaged for the region's development.

This document is organized into five parts. The first chapter reviews the Algerian policy on territorial planning. The second presents the fundamental principles of the methodological approach for the elaboration of the inventory of

resources and potential of the large territory of Medea. The third and fourth chapters examine the results and the main contributions of this research which will be discussed in the fifth one.

Thus, territorial planning through the urban sprawl of large cities must not remain the only alternative. On the contrary, the challenge is to understand the mastery of territorial planning by promoting the development of cities according to a studied sustainable urbanism that thinks globally and acts locally (Toussaint & Vareilles, 2013), in favor of poor and marginalized localities.

## 2. Territorial rebalancing in Algerian politics

The Algerian politic, on sustainable development, presents the National Territorial Planning Plan: SNAT 2030, according to four guidelines based on the principles of territorial rebalancing and equity through the creation of attractiveness and competitiveness of equitable territories. It stipulates, among other things, that:

“Each space is a component of national heritage and is recognized as having the right to develop and prosper. It is to consider that Man is not without roots. At the local level, it is important to create the conditions so that he can live and work in the space he wants while recreating the link with the territory. The territory acts as the matrix and crucible for the activities and lives of citizens” (journal officiel, 2010).

In its political strategy for 2030, Algeria has adopted the question of territorial planning and the structuring of cities through the exploitation of their resources to solve the problems of over-urbanization of coastal areas and large cities. The direction of national policy is defined in 20 Territorial Action Programs (TAP) developed from a diagnosis of the challenges of current spatial development. As part of this contribution, the territorial rebalancing of the Grand Medea will be approached based on the following Territorial Action Programs (TAP):

### **PAT No 5: Cultural heritage and creation of 18 heritage economy poles (P.E.P):**

However, Medea does not appear in the list predefined by the National Land Use Planning Plan “SNAT 2030” (journal officiel, 2010), although its historic center was erected as a protected sector in 2018 (Journal officiel, 2018).

### **PAT No. 6: Slowing down the over-urbanization of the coastline:**

Reorient and redeploy urbanization in depth towards the foothills and new towns. It appears one of the main cities in the urban framework rebalancing of the highlands and its development is programmed around the new city of Boughezoul.

### **PAT No. 9: The relocation of activities and production establishments:**

The action program envisages the decongestion of the North of the country, in particular the coastline. It recommends the strengthening of existing administrations (sectorial branches and services of districts), particularly at the level of the main towns, and the relocation of some central administrative services: thematic public establishments, research centers, higher education schools, etc.

### **PAT No. 15: local development:**

An inventory of the territories' local potential and heritage resources is recommended: flora and fauna, natural and cultural heritage, water resources, mining resources, social and economic resources, etc.

### **PAT N° 20: the territorial equity:**

The achievement of territorial equity through catching up and upgrading the grey areas, defined as areas with disabilities. These areas are located, in general, in the mountains of Tell, Dahra Zaccar, Ouarsenis, Beni Chougrane, Atlas Blidéen, Medea, Jijel, Skikda, Aurès, Nemenchas. According to the National Land Use Planning Plan (SNAT), these areas must be included in larger spaces allowing exchanges and complementarities.

### 2.1. Thinking globally

The territory of a city is the result of a long process of sedimentation of the “Man and Nature” throughout history. It is the reflection of the local culture (Bavay, 2013). The reflection we propose is based on consideration of the territorial heritage: all the geomorphological, infrastructural, urban and architectural, symbolic, and memory potentials of the place (Di Méo, 1995). These resources according to their character, state, and location constitute the essence of the territorial project; a contextual project resulting from the identity character of the locus.

Their identification becomes the fundamental phase for the richness and diversity of this project. It is possible only through a general prospecting of the territory in the different steps of its formation, which makes it possible to define each locality's vocation and to decide on a suitable functional program.

This program can vary according to the character and the nature of these potentials:

- **Landscape potential** considering the resources in their most natural aspect, like Lake Dhaya near the district of Tamezguida,
- **Geographical potential** such as corkwoods, small vernacular villages, etc.
- **Cultural and social potential**, historical monuments, gathering and convivial spaces, places of cultural representation, etc.
- **mnemonic potential (memory)**: tradition, knowledge, disappeared trades and arts.

## 2.2. Acting locally

Identifying natural, historical, infrastructural, and memorial resources, makes it possible to recognize the potential of each marginalized locality throughout the large territory of Medea. Their characteristics become a source from which a valorization program can be established. The realization of the project at the local scale (urban and architectural scale) is formulated by considering the configuration of each locality at the different phases of its formation to define permanency, superfluous structures, the conformation of the urban form, parcel, building typologies, and its architectural style, etc. The whole is synthesized in what we call the “morphological control plan” (Levy & Spigai, 1989), an instrument that can guarantee the connection between the different scales of the project:

Architectural project / Urban project / Territorial project

## 3. The Grand Medea and its territorial heritage (Material and Methods)

The Grand Medea, formerly the beylik of Titteri, covers an area of 13 districts and 64 municipalities. Its territory was humanized very early in history. It was consolidated around the historic city, the center of Medea, a thousand-year-old town as much as Algiers and Miliana. Beyond its historical center, the large territory of Medea contains several other human settlements that have always existed in interrelation with its center of polarity: the historic city of Medea. Today, the relationship between the city and its countryside, which characterized the territory of Medea, is interrupted; we are witnessing either a phenomenon of conurbation where the city center of Medea has swallowed up the cities of Lodi, Damiette, etc.; or a phenomenon of de-vitalization, like the localities of Tamezguida, Ouzera, Tibhirine, etc.

Located south of the Atlas Bliden (the northern mountain range of Algeria), a large part of Medea territory is found in the National Park of Chrea, such as the towns of Tamezguida and its lake Dhaya, Tibhirine and its historic monastery, etc. They all integrated into an extraordinary natural landscape covered with cedar forest (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The Grand Medea territory and its localities (Source: Google Earth).

Despite their rural character, the inhabitants of the Grand Medea lived, for a long time, in harmony with their natural environment, until the 90s. The insecurity of this period had caused their migration to other destinations (El-Affroune, Mouzaia, etc.) in the Mitidja plain against the bottom, hence the impoverishment and desertification of its localities. Identifying and recognizing the potential of the Grand Medea as a territorial heritage is the crucial phase in this research. The approach is developed through the reconstruction of the process of the formation and consolidation of its territory according to a diachronic reading to grasp its mode of implantation and the structures that generated and ordered it to achieve its most stable configuration.

This analysis made it possible to define the different types of resources and potential of the Grand Medea territory.

### 3.1. The geomorphological structure of Grand Medea

The territory of Grand Medea is characterized by high relief enclosing some fertile but narrowed plains. According to its geomorphology, four zones stand out:

-The mountainous tell, a relatively continuous strip limiting the territory to the north and west. These mountainous stretch from the Ouarsenis to the Tablat massif. It is a populated forest. It covers the localities of Haouch Messaoud, Tibhirine, Tamezguida, and Ain El-Kerma; localities capable of being revitalized according to their agricultural potential.

- **The Tell Hills:** a region of settlements that has always had an agricultural vocation where mixed farming has attained a high level of development: vines and arboriculture on the light ground, cereals, and fodder on the alluvial terraces of the main rivers.

- **The Tell Plains:** an area inserted inside the Tell Hills. Traditionally, it has been dedicated to cereal cultivation. It covers the localities of Beni Slimane and Merachda. The development of these plains during the 2000s allowed the establishment of mixed farming and the development of livestock production.

-**The southern foothills of the Tell,** a zone between the high plains and the dry region characterized by cereal cultivation.

### **3.2. The water resources**

Several rivers cross the territory of the Grand Medea, like Oued Chlef, Oued Isser, Oued L'ham, and Oued Chiffa. There are also two lakes classified as wetlands: Lake Dhaia and Lake Bouguezoul; as well as numerous sources that spring from the ground (more than 235). In addition to these surface resources, large groundwater areas are exploited by drilling and wells.

### **3.3. The mineral resources**

The large territory of Medea contains numerous mining deposits, such as the gypsum deposits at Medea and Ouzera; clay deposits at Medea, Boughezoul, Zoubairia, and Ain Boucif; sand deposits at Boughezoul and Chahbounia; as well as a stone quarry in Derrag.

### **3.4. The Heritage Resources**

The heritage resources in the territory of Grand Medea are diverse depending on their typology, their dating, or even their architectural and aesthetic aspects. Among these riches, we mention the flint station of Ain Arais, the monastery of Tinhirine, without forgetting the historic city of Medea with its historical monuments such as a section of the Roman aqueduct, Dar el-Amir, haouch el Bey, the minaret of Masjid El-Ahmar, etc. (see table below).

### **3.5. The thermal resources**

Numerous natural sources with therapeutic character exist throughout the territory of the Grand Medea, such as Hammam Chebika in Souagui, Hammam Ouled Chennef in Ain Boucif, Hammam Djerdani in Cheniguel, Hammam Touariza in Tablat and Hammam El Anceur in Chellalet El Adhouara.

### **3.6. the activity zones**

Examining the distribution of activities on the territory of the Grand Medea has revealed that some of its localities are private activity and production zones like Tibhirine, Tameszuida, El Hamdania, and Zoubairia. Others are very poorly equipped despite the availability of lots that can receive investments, such as Ain Boucif (4900 m<sup>2</sup> available) and Draa Smar (2900 M<sup>2</sup> available). Moreover, the industrial activity zones are concentrated in Harbil, Berrouaguia, and Ksar el Boukhari (ANIREF, 2022) (Figure 2).



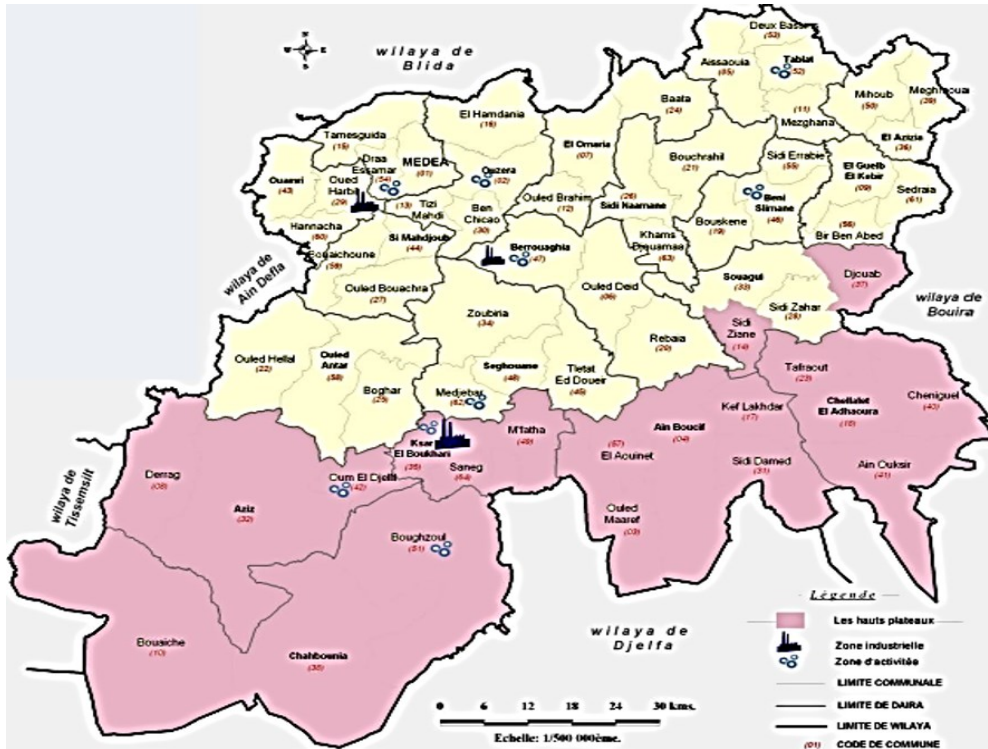


Figure 2. Activity zones on the territory of the Grand Medea (ANIREF, 2021).

**4. The Opportunities for the revitalization of Grand Medea development (Results)**

Several possibilities for revitalizing and developing the grey areas in Medea's territory can be considered for its rebalancing and territorial equity and this is according to the resources and potential of each of them.

**4.1. The revitalization program according to urban activities and functions.**

Depending on the character and nature of resources and potential, different forms of investment are proposed:

**Localities with agricultural potential**, development can be based on:

- Seed production and distribution
- Packaging, sorting, drying, and storage of agricultural products,
- Cow's milk operation, distribution, and processing,
- Recovery and processing of slaughter by-products, particularly skins and wool;

**Localities with water potential**, for example, Lake Dhaya can be a development vector of Tamezguida for its landscape, tourism, fun, and pleasure. An accompanying program could be the start of its urban center revitalization, which is in an embryonic state.

**Localities with cultural and heritage potential**, like Tibhirine and the monastery with its landscaped environment that can become a tourist resort, hotel, restaurant, etc.; Ain El-Arais with its silex station; Ain Boucif and the ruins of the ancient Achir, capital of the Zirids.

In the program of the “Permanent Plan for the Protection and Development of the Safeguarded Sector” of the historic city of Medea (PPSMVSS), it is necessary to think about recovering the traditional knowledge and know-how that have disappeared. Their revitalization can ensure its integration into the urban dynamics of the modern city while preventing it from becoming an open-air museum. For example, through reintegrating the activities that existed during the Ottoman period and that disappeared today: programs like Carpet Weaving Street, Leather Street, in particular, the manufacture of shoes, jackets, and the famous “Halwatlaanab” (grape confectionery, made from grapes, flour, nuts or almonds), etc. Woodworking is also a sector to be valued within the safeguarded sector around the Benkortbi Company that operates today outside the historic city, in the locality of Ain D'heb.



Figure 3. “Halwatlaanab”, traditional grape confectionery (<https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/30796129>).

**Localities with mining potential**, development can be based on the establishment of factories of various kinds:

- Plasterboard factories and the creation of a commercial center for the gypsum material produced in Ouzera,
- workshops manufacturing ceramic products, pottery, brickworks, etc., as well as a commercial pole dedicated to these products in Bougezoul, Zoubairia, and Ain Boucif, for the clay deposits they own,
- Manufacturing of the glassmaking sector from the sand available in Cherhbouni,
- Factories and companies of production and distribution of stone needed in historical monuments restoration, in Derrag.

**Localities with health potential** by creating a university pole around the hospital planned in the Intercommunal Urban Development Master Plan (PDAU) in Ouzera.

**Table n°1.** Potentialities of the Grand Medea localities and the possibilities for revitalization (established by Author).

Locality	character	Resources and potential	Revitalization possibilities
Haouch Messaoud	landscape	Forest region	Leisure and relaxation area
	agricultural	arboriculture	Food industry, storage, marketplaces
Tibhirine	landscape	forest and arboricultural region	Leisure and relaxation area
	cultural	Monastery	Tourist resort: hotel, restaurant...
Tamezguida	landscape	forest and arboricultural region Dhaia Lake (classified as a wetland)	Food industry, storage Climate tourism Leisure, hunting,
	industrial	copper and iron mines	Rehabilitate sites according to their potential (production or re-conversion)
Ain El-Kerma	agricultural	forest arboricultural region	Food industry, storage, marketplaces
Beni Slimane	agricultural	Forest region céréaliculture, Polyculture	Food industry, storage, marketplaces
	pastoral	stock raising	Recovery/processing slaughter products: skin and wool Textile and leather industry
Merachda	agricultural	Cereal farming Polyculture	Food industry, storage, marketplaces
	pastoral	l'élevage	Recovery/processing slaughter products: skin and wool Textile and leather industry
Médéa	industrial	Gypsum and clay deposits	Plasterboard, pottery, and ceramic factories
	Cultural	Saved sector	Revitalization of the historic city
Ain El-Arais	Cultural	Flint station	Tourist sites around prehistoric remains
Ouzera	industrial	Gypsum deposit	Plasterboard factories, commercial center
Djouab	cultural	Roman ruins of rapidum: archaeological site of Sour djouab	Protection and enhancement plan for the archaeological site

Boghar	cultural	Unclassified fortress	Historical monument to be classified
Ben Chicao	cultural	Caravanserai in dilapidated condition	Historical monuments to be classified and restored
	agricultural	Vine	Sector to promote
Ain Boucif	industrial	Clay deposit	Pottery and ceramic factories, brickworks,
	Cultural	Ruins of Achir	Plan de protection et de mise en valeur du site archéologique
	Thermal	<i>Hamam Ouled Chenef</i>	Station thermale à investir
Boughezoul	landscape	Boughezoul lak	Climate tourism: Leisure, fishing, aquaculture, etc.
	industrial	Clay and sand deposit	Industrial zones accompanying the new city planned by SNAT-2030 (Pottery, glassworks, brickworks, ceramics, etc.)
Zoubairia	industrial	Clay deposit	Pottery, brick-works, ceramics

### 5. the territorial project: functional and housing programs (Discussions)

According to the guidelines of the Intercommunal Urban Development Master Plan (PDAU) of Grand Medea, the development of its territory is oriented towards defining the main axes of urban extension and identifying areas to be urbanized to meet housing needs. In this vision, the planning of urban functions is not studied according to the concept of “thinking globally”. It is carried out on an ad hoc basis (case by case) according to the needs and the availability of the land, which is often at odds with their integration into the logic of the urban structures of the area.

This research brings a new vision of urban and territorial programming:

- activities and functions should be considered according to the nature and character of the resources and potential of the place (see Table 1)
- the programming of the housing must be seen as an accompaniment to the urban functions to be created and not concentrated in a single site as the intercommunal plan provides it. In this plan, the locality of Ouzera is scheduled to become the new housing center of this territory with a capacity of 4850 housing units in the collective housing typology.

As part of our reflection, the programming of housing must be based on four criteria:

#### 5.1. Implantation of housing programs

In our thinking, the programming housing must be subject to the fundamental logic of the decentralization approach for poor localities’ development according to their resources and potential. Thus, Housing is seen as the complement to the investment program specific to each locality (see Table no. 1). The investment generates employment that creates a local workforce according to the specificities of the activities to be introduced. However, the operation must consider the rural character of Medea’s territory, hence, an alternative other than collective housing produced in towns and large cities.

#### 5.2. Typology of new habitat

From a typological point of view, the housing that can be planned in the rural areas of the Grand Medea can be oriented towards a new form of production: “intermediate housing”, a theoretical concept that has emerged in recent years (Brun, 2016). It is also called “the small collective”: a new mode of housing allowing decent and inexpensive housing, in the form of collective houses. The independence of each family while promoting social relations (AUDIAR, 2008). It presents as a type that best fits with the contextual character of the place.

#### 5.3. Rehabilitation of existing building

The choice of rehabilitating the existing building is an alternative to the housing question and its architectural and urban qualities (CAUE, 2014).

Depending on the typology of existing homes and buildings, there are two types of rehabilitation:

-The rehabilitation of historic buildings, and their restoration without destroying them, when they present architectural, typological, historical, aesthetic, cultural, and memory characteristics worthy of being preserved and highlighted. We can cite the examples of Haouch el Bey in Médéa, agricultural farms dating from the colonial period, the monastery of Tibhirine, etc.

- Otherwise, when existing buildings are in an advanced state of deterioration and disrepair, or when they have no particular character to enhance, then densification operations can be envisaged by renovating all the buildings while preserving the structure of the urban fabric. It is an operation to improve the site and at the same time increase its capacity to accommodate more people and, consequently, more housing.

#### **5.4. The reconversion of urban wastelands**

Often, buildings from the colonial period, with agricultural potential are abandoned because their original functions are obsolete (AUCAME, 2016). Thus many wine cellars, sheds, etc., whose structures can be salvaged, reused (after being refurbished or even restored), and developed into housing of high architectural quality (Benali, 2012).

#### **6. Conclusions**

The policy of territorial project for the development of grey areas becomes, according to this reflection, the crucible in which the different synergies must complement each other to extract the best possible benefits from the resources and potential of poor and degenerate localities for their revitalization in a perspective of decentralization, rebalancing, and territorial equity.

Far from being a governmental question or a sectoral mission, it emerges as a societal project based on a vision of the future that must be concretized through a multi-stakeholder approach based on the principle of good governance and consultation with, among others, civil society.

In the approach that we are presenting, we propose to deepen and broaden the inventory of heritage resources recommended by the Nation Land Use Planning Plan (SNAT) in the Territorial Action Program: PAT 5 that considers the historic city of Medea as a unique cultural heritage omitting the potential and resources that we have outlined in the table mentioned above. Our reflection is based on the fundamental principle of decentralization according to the character of localities's resources and potential for the decongestion of the Medea district.

However, it is important to note that this contribution is research to the identification and recognition of the territorial heritage of Grand Medea. This contribution deserves to be deepened in further work. It is also worth sharing with local authorities and civil society in the district.

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#### **Conflict of Interests**

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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