

Regional Update 2017

Utrecht Office



When perspectives unite

#thepowerofmany

Together,
we can change
the world.

The year kicked off with significant leaps made within our IT project aimed at re-imagining our cross-border digital health system. With overarching goals to be a perfect fit for our purpose, environmentally friendly for the unique conditions of North Star's work, user-friendly, scalable, flexible and adaptable, the programme should provide a single, seamless networked system across all clinics. We expect that this will lead to improved working conditions, and unlock data insights and reporting capabilities.

Using a comprehensive RFI approach, the project registered interest from vendors who could see a fit with our requirements. Using the RFI as a guide, we were able to bring the selection down to five potential suppliers, who were invited to join our project manager to test their product in a real-life setting: on the ground at one of our clinics in Africa.

Our emphasis on user-friendliness meant that a broader team was set up to facilitate this test, including M&E and clinical staff from both regions. By the end of 2017, the team had identified the best match, and began negotiations to find a way that we could begin moving on the product, that allowed for the unique funding situation of being an NGO.

For our International Office, 2017 was a year of action.

The small team of eight people continued to work together closely, forming and strengthening relationships with regional colleagues and donors alike, searching for opportunities to raise North Star's profile, and take the next step in our innovative journey.

As the first year within our Strategic Outlook for 2017-2020, we worked towards meeting our targets across the five strategic objectives, with a focus on increasing access to healthcare, guaranteeing the quality of our services, strengthening data management, monitoring, evaluation and research, alongside optimising our funding base as well as enhancing governance, leadership and team engagement.



Overall, the team made enormous steps forward, and we are confident that this new system will efficiently link patients with their health records, our M&E team with our data, and paves the way for deep insights, future predictions and academic discovery.

As a step towards a truly singular organisation, a cross-regional team was set up to work on an organisational-wide remuneration project. The project aimed to uncover any imbalances across roles and countries, to ensure that our staff were paid the same rate for the same job. An external consultant first looked at all the various roles in the organisation, and then synthesised the roles across countries and regions. Payscales were developed in line with country-relevant costs, positioning our staff to be paid in line with their peers across the organisation and at market.

With the standard budgetary restrictions of an NGO, North Star plans to bring the entire organisation to a single level in a staged process – with the first stage of relevant staff receiving an initial pay increase paid as of 1 January 2017. We hope to see this project continued and released in line with funding availability.

Our senior M&E staff from Southern Africa and East Africa regions attended the Strategic Innovation for Community health (STICH) training program as conducted by INSEAD business school at the School of Monetary studies in Nairobi.

The training focused on empowering health workers, professionals, and stakeholders with skills on developing innovative ideas that respond to the health needs of the target populations in various socio-economic settings.

In line with our move to a streamlined digital health programme, the wider organisation looked to our operations and how we could improve our efficiency in working together as a single organisation. Within this, it was identified that the first step was to establish trust, transparency and unity at the top-most level of the organisational leadership. For this reason, we brought together a cross-level, -regional and -functional team of 22 of our senior managers in Mombasa, Kenya, in late September. The meeting was essential in helping us to change our culture, and essential for fulfilling our Strategic Objective Five: enhancing governance, leadership and team engagement. Through activities like team building, information sharing and looking at our internal (and external) communication practices, we shared learnings and improved cross-regional relationships, taking the first steps towards breaking down silo-ing of information, and building on our internal culture to enhance our operations.

While topics including trust, transparency and unity were positioned as the cornerstones of the week, these were taught alongside the themes of engagement, quality and sustainability; each playing key roles in our Strategic Outlook 2017-2020. It is clear to North Star that without trust, transparency and unity, we cannot implement our Strategic Objectives successfully throughout the entire organisation at a level that is sustainable. For us to grow to our full potential, we need to ease the organisation through serious growing pains and facilitate cultural change from top to bottom (and bottom to top).

Overall, our senior managers emerged feeling more closely linked, and having a better shared understanding with the wider team. These activities have already demonstrated change, with staff sharing increased links with cross-regional and -specialty colleagues, wider input is being collected, and learnings are being linked. An output of the meeting saw the formation of three taskforces, dedicated to quality, engagement and sustainability, with plans that these groups would initiate the emerging needs of developing an M&E framework, streamlining organisational SOPs, amongst others.

With the first steps taken, we plan to build on this growth in early 2018, with an increased business focus, delving into the needs and wants of our organisation, concluding with a new operational model that is formed.

The team supported our East Africa region with the production of road safety education materials, to be used in our work in Tanzania. These were developed in line with in-country trends, targeted at a truck driver audience, and produced in Kiswahili. Following feedback from clients, this tool can be replicated across the organisation.

The team were active in representing the organisation at conferences in 2017, including a speaking engagement of North Star's executive director with Wharton University's MBA students in Pennsylvania, USA, as well as the attendance of the annual SEAD programme at Duke University in Durham, USA, and the Health and Humanitarian Logistics conference in Copenhagen, Denmark.

In the second half of 2017, North Star attended the 2017 International AIDS Conference in Paris, France, where we shared exhibition-booth space with fellow Dutch-based NGO counterparts, including Aids Fonds. A small team of representatives attended plenaries and topical sessions, along with supporting the booth and networking with other delegates. With the 2018 International AIDS Conference planned for Amsterdam, our team also made steps towards securing an NGO exhibition booth, and looking and branding themes and opportunities for the upcoming conference.

In the lead-up to World AIDS Day, the network ran a week-long HIV testing blitz at all of the Blue Box clinics, significantly raising awareness in the teams and in the local communities, of the importance of testing for HIV. North Star staff managed to test an impressive 3,608 people across our network in only five days, contributing to the UN's 90-90-90 goals.

The team continued to work on streamlining the fundraising procedures and processes across the organisation. Identifying the link between programmes and impacts, we worked on producing professional programme outlines or pitches that could form a base for mass application. In this way, we aimed to build a range of key funding opportunities from which we can choose based on the interests based on the interests of a donor and relevancy to our own Strategic Outlook.

In 2018, the focus will be on realising our digital health system plans, alongside working on our sustainability and internal governance. With continued challenges in funding security and changes in the donor landscape, we look forward to working together with Sumerian Partners in 2018, where we will identify ways to generate alternative revenue, as we aim to create a strong a sustainable future for the organisation.

At the same time, we expect to enlarge our group of donors, and leverage the loyalty of our core partners, unlocking the potential of our digital health system, and raising the overall profile of North Star Alliance.

Unified, with trust and transparency, we are confident that our people can continue to grow North Star into the full potential we have. Together, we can continue to provide mobile workers and the communities with whom they interact with access to quality health services across sub-Saharan Africa.