We have engaged in continued discussions and consultation with our long standing strategic partner the Southern African Development Community (SADC), regarding the implementation of Health Systems Strengthening across the region. Supported through the Global Fund, the partnership has so far overseen the establishment of 27 clinics in 11 countries, which have subsequently been handed over to local health authorities within the respective member states. It recently materialised however, that 12 of these clinics were at risk of not fully transitioning into becoming fully operational, which as a result has opened up discussions for North Star Alliance to manage the operation of these sites for a further two years. Provided an agreement is reached, it’s anticipated that North Star will resume management of operations in July 2020. This would in turn result in North Star re-establishing its presence in four countries, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia, whilst also expanding our existing operations in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Throughout 2019 we continued our efforts to provide vital healthcare access to mobile and vulnerable workers and communities across the region. 2019 was also a year of further consolidation, as well as a period in which significant strides were taken to drive forward North Star’s future sustainability, as planning and preparations for the revenue generation pilot project at our Cato Ridge clinic were ramped up throughout the year.
It is also intended that the Crisis Response Team (CRT) programme, which is designed to protect sex workers against gender-based violence through the application of a multi-sectoral approach, will be rolled out at the 12 additional SADC sites mentioned above. This would be part of a significant scaling up of the CRT activities across both our Southern and East Africa regions, which will be supported through North Star’s newly established partnership with Grand Challenges Canada (GCC).

Funded through the Canadian Government as well as other partners, GCC supports innovators who address global health challenges, as well as programmes that are strongly and securely positioned for transition to scale. Building on the work that had effectively been delivered to date, the CRT programme will also receive additional backing through North Star’s partnership with Aidsfonds, who’ve committed to supporting the project for a further five years, from the start of 2020. This comes during a period in which there had been an alarming upsurge in gender-based violence cases in South Africa, which at one stage President Ramaphosa identified as a “national crisis”.

This unwelcomed trend, coupled with the correlation between gender-based violence and increased infections of HIV and other STIs, further vindicated the need for delivering preventative measures such as the CRT programme. In addition, evidence has already indicated that CRT activities are positively impacting the number of sex workers visiting our clinics, with increases of up to 175% at some of the sites at which the CRT programme has been introduced.

Extensive planning and preparation continued throughout 2019, for the opening of the revenue generation pilot, at our Cato Ridge clinic, just outside Durban. The purpose behind this six-month pilot is to create a supplementary income stream to strengthen our longer-term sustainability, reduce donor and subsidy dependence and above all, ensure we can secure continuity of care to the key populations we serve.

In November the clinic was temporarily closed for refurbishment as it was prepared for its reopening at the beginning of March 2020, when the fee for service model will be introduced, together with our newly recruited team of clinic staff and a fresh blue and green rebranded look and feel.

This year was also the first occasion in which North Star participated in the Merck & Co - MSD Fellowship for Global Health Programme, in which three Fellows Jérôme Sejourne, Ondřej Vosecký and Denise Ketova worked out of our Durban office for a period of three months. During their time at North Star, Jérôme, Ondřej and Denise were assigned with the task of supporting the latter stages of the planning phase for the Cato Ridge project.

This included supporting the development of a number of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) relating to the pricing model, stock management, unit economics and cash handling amongst other areas.

As a result of the support received from Sappi South Africa, as well as a one year additional community grant provided through PEPFAR, the region was able to continue with operations at our Ngodwana clinic in South Africa. We also embarked on a new partnership in Mozambique with Amend, a road safety specialist NGO that develops, implements and evaluates evidence-based programmes to reduce the number of road traffic injuries in low to middle income countries. The project, which received funding and support through Oikocredit International, works with local traffic police and government to promote road safety to truck drivers and other road users such as boda boda (motorcycle taxi) drivers, as well as school children and other pedestrians living in the community surrounding our Inchope clinic.

Looking ahead, we feel extremely optimistic and confident we have the right expertise, experience and resources in place to expand our footprint across Southern Africa, particularly if the agreement with SADC to transition the 12 additional sites across the region is ratified and approved. We’re especially excited and looking forward to the opening of the Cato Ridge revenue generation pilot clinic, and hope that over time, it proves to be a blueprint for North Star’s longer-term sustainability and potential transition towards a social enterprise model.

Above everything else, we believe these projects, together with the many other interventions we’re currently delivering across Southern Africa, will further increase access to essential healthcare services for the marginalised and hard to reach key populations we serve.