To achieve this, we developed elaborate infection prevention guidelines (IPC). In addition, North Star provided preventive personal equipment (PPE) to staff, peer educators, and put up hand washing bays at every clinic. Clients and other visitors were also educated on Covid-19 and the precautions they needed to take.

At the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, governments in East Africa imposed travel restrictions and ban on social gatherings, which had negative implications on North Star’s operations. Our outreach work, training sessions and meetings were halted at the clinics. However, later in the year, with strict adherence to ministry of health protocols and guidelines we resumed some of these activities.

That said, the pandemic made us more innovative in our service delivery mechanism. North Star staff used WhatsApp messages and calls to reach clients who needed urgent help. Donned with PPEs, the staff visited clients at their homes and hotspots to ensure continuity of care and treatment. This helped to keep patients on ARV, PrEP and TB treatment. We have continued to learn and adapt to the situations as they present.

Additional support from a variety of donors was helpful to adapt our programmes to the pandemic. We benefited for example from a donation of PPE donated by Scania, provided to 1,000 truck drivers at the Mlolongo clinic. Our longstanding partner, Trafigura and Puma Energy Foundations provided additional funding, along with Grand Challenges Canada.

The year 2020 saw the globe experience the devastating effects of the unexpected Covid-19 pandemic. Recognizing the important role North Star plays in providing quality healthcare to mobile populations and the communities they interact with, we made a conscious decision to continue with operations by keeping the clinics open.
Several projects like Aidsfonds, and Trafifgura and Puma Energy Foundation came to an end in December 2020. These projects have supported the operations of the Blue Boxes in East Africa for many years. The Aidsfonds programme organised a number of virtual meetings, which were attended by staff and peer educators. One of these events was the Africa Partners Meeting for the BtG and Pitch Programmes held in October 2020.

During the partners meeting, North Star East Africa was recognized for her ability and dedication in promoting the human, sexual, and reproductive rights of sex workers and for enabling access to quality HIV prevention, treatment, and care. North Star, closed the three “Inside the Fence clinics” in Tanzania around mid 2020, which were located at the truck parks of logistics companies associated to the foundations due to lack of future funding.

The clinics in Tanangozi, Kwampega and the outside the fence clinic in Tunduma’s Sogea area were all relocated to a new site, Uzunguni, which offers better prospects for growth and high number of clients visits. This resulted into a mega Blue Box that is currently providing services to over 100 visits per day. Continuation of collaboration with Trafifgura and Puma Energy Foundation supporting the three outside the fence clinics along the Dar transport corridor in Tanzania has been confirmed until the end of 2022.

The Kenya Innovation Challenge (KIC) TB Fund project, which is funded by the Global Fund through AMREF, and the Grand Challenges Canada (GCC) projects will end in March and June 2021 respectively. The AMREF TB project became an excellent connector between North Star Alliance and transport companies in Mombasa. North Star worked with the companies to organize TB screening events in their premises, reaching hundreds for truck drivers. Some of these companies included Prime Fuels, Pwani Oil, Grandsubterra, Rongai Workshop and Bamburi Cement among others. The visits and events laid a perfect foundation for more meaningful engagement including introducing the companies to the Star Driver programme.

The GCC project, focusing on our work with Crisis Response Teams around gender based violence, on the other hand has been instrumental in supporting North Star to engage more effectively with the public sector. In Kenya for instance, GCC has engaged their partner, the Africa Health Business to provide technical support to the GCC innovators to improve partnership with the public sector. We received positive signals of continuation of these projects after these contracts end.

Thankfully, two new partners, the Medtronic Foundation and USAID through FHI360 have started to fund project activities in EA in 2020 and 2021. The FHI360 project, dubbed Afya Nyota ya Bonde, will end in 2022 pegged on successful completion of year one while the Medtronic Foundation project will end in September 2021. The CDC funded KPIF project through its Prime Recipient, IRDO, also granted North Star a No Cost Extension (NCE) until September 2021.

Between January and June 2020 North Star Alliance embarked on a Global Consulting Project (GCP) in partnership with two students from the Rotman School of Management, Amy Lee Chong (MBA) and Adam Resnick (MMA). The main objective of the project was to analyse and assess key performance indicators relating to North Star’s Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sponsored HIV programme, for key populations (KP) in Kenya. From the study, North Star Alliance performed very strongly on HIV testing, linkage, viral suppression, and STI screening.

This includes 98% of eligible KP clients having a point of care HIV test; 98% being linked to care; 99% of KP clients being screened, of which 79% of those who tested positive subsequently being put on treatment. Perhaps, most significantly of all, 97% of KPs enrolled from 2015 onwards, remained negative in 2019.

The study further showed that in 2019 there were 151 sex worker peer educators operating across North Star’s eight clinics in Kenya who engaged with 10,929 KPs, comprising of 10,172 female sex workers (FSW), 726 men who have sex with men (MSM) and 31 people who inject drugs (PWID). The study attributes this success to our strategic hotspot mapping exercises across our Blue Boxes.

The East Africa team has been very keen on the implementation of the matrix structure. This structure has helped us to build a strong, committed and united team across the organisation, which is important for the next step of transitioning the Netherlands operations to our Eastern and Southern Africa regions. Focusing on the mission and values of North Star Alliance, the East Africa team remained committed and resilient to offer services to the target groups.

In 2021, North Star East Africa looks forward not only to continued collaboration with our key partners but also focus on fundraising and building new partnerships and keeping to our commitment in serving our clients by securing continuity of care. We sincerely thank you for your role in supporting our work of providing care and treatment to these key populations. Indeed, without your support we would not be celebrating our impact this far.