

A Re Itireleng—Let's Do It Ourselves

INTEGRATING SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH WITH CONSERVATION NEEDS

The communities of Groot Marico in South Africa's North West Province understand that their social, economic, and physical health are directly impacted by their environment. They understand that environmental degradation and climate change threaten their ability to thrive—and survive. They asked the development sector to tackle the challenges they face in a holistic way.

A Re Itireleng (Let's Do It Ourselves) responds to the community's request through an integrated population, health, and environment approach. The project brings conservation and sexual and reproductive health interventions to communities that both need and want them. The Groot Marico communities named the project, *A Re Itireleng*, conveying their deep engagement. By working together with the communities of Groot Marico and each other, Pathfinder International and the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) seek to achieve greater cumulative benefits in Groot Marico than if they were to work alone.



"We need some support in making the community economically strong, because people leave the community and only come back when they are sick or old."

RESPONDING TO HUMANITARIAN NEEDS IN NORTH WEST PROVINCE

Modern contraceptive use, all sexually active women: 50 percent ¹

Unmet need for family planning: 17 percent ¹

Total fertility rate: 2.6 ²

Life expectancy: 54-55 years+²

Unemployment rate: 345 out of every 1,000 people¹

Running water inside Groot Marico households: 17 percent ³

¹ Demographic and Health Survey, 2015-2016

² 2011 Census

³ South Africa Municipality Survey, 2016

Groot Marico, located in the Marico River catchment area, is a semi-arid area in North West Province that forms the headwaters of the Limpopo River Basin. This area is plagued by drought and erosion, which has immediate negative impacts on the farming communities living there. Few free-flowing stretches of river remain in South Africa, and Groot Marico is home to one of those stretches. Many of the 150,000 people living in Groot Marico depend on the river, a highly threatened water resource, for their livelihoods. The Marico River flows into the Limpopo River and is therefore of critical importance to not only the North West, but nationally to every ecosystem downstream.

Communities in North West Province, including Groot Marico, face high rates of unemployment and lack of access to quality sexual and reproductive health services including contraception. Women who are unable to determine if and when to have children are unable to plan for the future, and consistently earn a sustainable livelihood. Pathfinder improves the quality of sexual and reproductive health services offered to women in Groot Marico. Women's empowerment, through a rights-based approach, and engagement of male partners to encourage contraceptive use, are central to the well-being of the Groot Marico community, and their resilience to climate change.

INTEGRATING COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Pathfinder and EWT educate the community of Groot Marico on:

- Sexual and reproductive health, including healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies (HTSP) and sexual and gender-based violence
- HIV prevention and treatment
- Local livelihoods
- Climate change and natural resource management

The EWT works with the communities to protect and conserve water resources and aquatic biodiversity. The EWT has also supported 25 small farmers to use climate-smart, water-efficient agricultural practices, and green businesses such as beekeeping and sewing. Those trained on beekeeping and manufacturing honey include youth. Pathfinder also educates the community on HTSP and HIV to increase demand for sexual and reproductive health services. This integrated approach to community education expands the audience for learning by creating multiple entry points for discussion.

Figure 1. POPULATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENT



*Infographic created by Pathfinder International and DSW

INCREASING ACCESS TO QUALITY SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

Pathfinder builds the clinical capacity of six health clinics to offer quality services, ensuring that interventions and training are tailored to the needs of each facility. Pathfinder conducted a baseline assessment at each clinic that informed health systems strengthening action plans. Pathfinder supports each clinic to carry out its action plan. This includes monitoring services to ensure compliance with national standards; supporting staff to use data effectively; and training providers.

Provider trainings have focused on topics including: counseling on and providing the full range of contraceptive options including long-acting reversible contraceptives; counseling women who may have experienced sexual and gender-based violence; pre-contraceptive counseling to address unintended pregnancy; the menstrual cycle and women’s fertility; and contraception and HIV.

Pathfinder works through “values clarification” exercises with providers to help them assess deeply held attitudes about sexual and reproductive health, and to separate their beliefs from their mission to service clients.

In Groot Marico, most young girls are not at school three to five days each month during their periods because they cannot afford sanitary towels. A *Re Itireleng*, with the Bakwena Tribal Council and the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa, launched a reusable sanitary pads initiative in two schools to keep young girls in school. The team gave health talks about menstrual hygiene with communities and the impact of disposable sanitary towels on the environment. The team provided reusable sanitary pads to the girls and taught them how to use them. This initiative has created a relationship between the project and the schools. Principals from both schools have asked the team to conduct regular health talks at their schools on different subjects. Given that half of Groot Marico’s population is younger than 15 and most of them attend primary school, the project will continue to work to ensure environmental and reproductive health education in schools.

SCALING UP FOR IMPACT

The project will continue to work toward developing a model that can be used in South Africa and beyond to protect natural resources and the health of the most vulnerable communities. The project continues to monitor, evaluate, and document learnings to determine the impact of the integrated approach. A *Re Itireleng* founding partner, the Population Sustainability & Network (PSN), is seeking to bring in academic and donor partners to replicate the model at others sites and add to the integrated population, health, and environment evidence base.

The integrated population, health, and environment approach is an emerging one in South Africa and can serve as a “proof of concept” to inform adaptation and scale-up to other sites. Since the EWT works in 14 countries in Southern Africa, there is great potential for this model to be scaled up in the region. Pathfinder, the EWT, and PSN are advocating to other conservation NGOs for their concerted efforts to respond to community health needs using a holistic approach in collaboration with health partners.

RESULTS



17,000+

women received sexual and reproductive health services at project-support facilities.

300

clinical staff reached with family planning and integrated population, health, and environment approach.



17,700+

community members reached with education on sexual and reproductive health and conservation.



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Sexual and reproductive health
without fear or boundary

PATHFINDER INTERNATIONAL
9 Galen Street
Watertown, MA, 02472-4501, USA

PATHFINDER INTERNATIONAL is driven by the conviction that all people, regardless of where they live, have the right to decide whether and when to have children, to exist free from fear and stigma, and to lead the lives they choose. Since 1957, we have partnered with local governments, communities, and health systems in developing countries to remove barriers to critical sexual and reproductive health services. Together, we expand access to contraception, promote healthy pregnancies, save women’s lives, and stop the spread of new HIV infections, wherever the need is most urgent. Our work ensures millions of women, men, and young people are able to choose their own paths forward.

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