



Addressing SA's Mental Health Crisis Through Transformative Corporate Social Investment

Written by Deidré Vrede, board member of the [JOG \(Joy of Giving\) Trust](#), governing body of the [Santa Shoebox Project](#).

Stress levels among South Africans have reached alarming heights, making it increasingly difficult for many to cope with life's demands. Over [70%](#) of South Africans admit to grappling with stress. Worse still, more than half are so overwhelmed by it that at times they cannot go to work. Health economists estimate that unaddressed mental health conditions cost the country's economy approximately [R161 billion](#) per year, while depression and anxiety alone cost the global economy nearly US\$1 trillion, according to the World Health Organization.

As the [demand](#) for mental health services in South Africa grows, many expect employers to step in and assist. A growing body of [research](#) highlights the profound psychological impact that Corporate Social Investment (CSI) initiatives have on employees' perceptions, attitudes, behaviours, and mental health. This includes increased alignment with the values of the organisation, job satisfaction, and prosocial behaviour, which, in turn affect [employee engagement, organisational commitment, and job performance](#). [Additional benefits](#) identified by local companies include attracting top candidates, professional development, and improved retention rates – all key factors for a successful organisation.

Beyond Philanthropy: Building psychological connections

While [79%](#) of South African companies participate in CSI because it is “the right thing to do,” many might not grasp the full potential of giving back. CSI goes beyond simply ticking a box – it has a profound psychological impact on everyone involved. The connection between businesses, their employees, and the communities they serve is deeply psychological. When a company mobilises genuine CSI efforts that demonstrate care and authenticity, it fosters a sense of connection, strengthening the psychological bond between all parties.

While the positive psychological ripple effects across stakeholders undeniably contribute to a company's success, the most transformative impact of CSI lies in fostering lasting psychological well-being within beneficiary communities.

Putting Psychological Needs First

Generations of trauma often leave a deep mark on disadvantaged communities, making psychosocial support an essential element of effective CSI programs. Simply providing material support isn't sufficient. To create lasting change, we must also address the underlying emotional and mental health needs of individuals.

Building strong psychosocial support among beneficiary communities starts with empathy. By taking the time to listen to the stories of the people who live there and agreeing on appropriate interventions with them, businesses can embark on a meaningful journey, inviting employees along for the shared experience of giving back.

Dala, an arts and crafts materials manufacturer, is a shining example of the impact that companies' involvement in CSI initiatives can have. Recognising that art is often overlooked in schools – particularly those that are resource-limited – the company donates art supplies for inclusion in Virtual Santa Shoeboxes which are allocated to underprivileged children living in remote areas. Limpho Molomo, the company's Head of Marketing and Communication, explained that when you allow children to be creative, you positively influence their mental and emotional development as well as their academic performance.

Additionally, many of Dala's employees, like most South Africans, have a shared experience in overcoming adversity. This awareness fosters a culture of empathy and purpose within the organisation and employees take pride in knowing that they can have a significant effect on the lives of children-in-need. Each crayon moulded and each bottle of paint can spark joy, inspire creativity, and ultimately, change lives. Through its CSI efforts, the company's work transcends the factory floor, creating a legacy of hope.

CSI is no longer a peripheral concern. It's a strategic imperative that unlocks the potential for profound transformation. By investing in the psychological well-being of beneficiary communities, employees, and even customers, businesses can foster a ripple effect of positive change.

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About the author

Deidré Vrede currently serves as Senior Manager: Corporate Social Investment and Wellness at the V&A Waterfront and is a registered counsellor with experience in working with at-risk youth in the education sector. This, coupled with a history of supporting non-governmental organisations (NGOs), has given her a unique understanding of the challenges faced at grassroots level, which, when applied to corporate strategy, produces positive results for all involved. She believes that it is her mandate to foster and bring meaningful, lasting change to individuals and the communities in which they live. Vrede recently joined the board of trustees of the JOG (Joy of Giving) Trust.

About the Santa Shoebox Project

Traditional Santa Shoebox: Over the last 18 years, 1 226 756 Santa Shoeboxes, each containing eight specified items of treats and essentials, have been given to underprivileged and socially vulnerable children throughout South Africa and Namibia. From 01 September each year, Santa Shoebox donors choose their beneficiary child/ren by name, age and gender and are given the child's clothing size. Each personalised shoebox reaches the very child for whom it was pledged.

Virtual Santa Shoebox: These shoeboxes are purchased online by donors and are available year-round, meeting the needs of donors who live too far from drop-off points, are too busy to shop or have health issues. Components are chosen by the donor on the Santa Shoebox website, the shoeboxes are packed by the Santa Shoebox Team and delivered to children attending far-flung rural facilities. A VSS contains the eight specified items, as well as additional items, such as a lunchbox and books, and costs R450 plus an optional delivery fee of R30.

SSP Legacy: All Santa Shoebox Project operating costs are covered by corporate sponsors. Privately donated funds and surplus funds generated by the sale of Virtual Santa Shoeboxes accrue to the SSP Legacy, and are used to bring permanent change to the lives of Santa Shoebox beneficiary children and the impoverished communities in which they live. SSP Legacy initiatives have thus far reached more than 95 000 children.

Fiduciary information: As a Level One Contributor to B-BBEE, the Santa Shoebox Project earns 100 points on the generic scorecard, and with Section 18A status, is able to provide a tax-deductible receipt in recognition of donations. The Project is an initiative of the JOG Trust (IT2671/2009). The Trust is registered as a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO-930031301), a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO 102-098) and holds a current ICPR in support of 100% SED compliance.

Social media:

TikTok: @santa.shoebox

Facebook: /SantaShoebox

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Instagram: /santashoebox

YouTube: The Santa Shoebox Project

Pinterest: /santashoebox