

How shopping centres can be a force for good within the communities they serve

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Fortress Reit last month hosted a webinar that unpacked how shopping centres can be a force for good within the communities in which they operate. Moderated by conversation strategist Nozipho Tshabalala, the panellists tackled issues around engagement, public and private partnerships with communities as well as how retail spaces could be designed better to uplift and empower society.



Mall of Thembisa

Participants included Tim White, CEO of Profica; Lynda Toussaint, CEO of Unjani Clinics NPC; Vuso Majija, executive director at Fortress Reit; and Vuyiswa Ramokgopa, who until recently was the CEO of the South African Institute of Black Property Practitioners (Saibpp).

Community engagement critical

White kicked off the conversation saying, "Ultimately, malls become the centres of action or CBDs in township or rural areas and so community engagement is critical to making them a success."

Community engagement needs to start well before a developer breaks ground to ensure the success of a new development, he said. As an example, White pointed to the Gugulethu Square development in Cape Town. Profica had engaged with the ward councillors, advertised for local artisans and sub-contractors, and set up training programmes for the surrounding community very early on in the project.

Basic service delivery

Making space for basic services is another viable way to connect with communities around shopping malls. Toussaint runs a private clinic network that serves low-income communities, particularly the employed but uninsured market who can't afford to wait long hours in public facility queues. Unjani Clinics empowers Black women professional nurses to operate and own their own clinics, 16 of which are located in the parking areas of malls. Of its 110 facilities across SA, it's these clinics that generally see higher patient numbers than those that are community-based.

"It's about enhancing access to primary healthcare for communities in a convenient way, reducing waiting times and transportation costs. Using retail spaces enhances that convenience quite significantly," said Toussaint.

Other advantages of operating from a mall include the high foot traffic, the security for a nurse to run her clinic safely, and some property developers have even allowed the nurses to operate rent-free, she explained.



Community retail centres tick all the boxes, but tenant mix must be well planned

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Engaging with municipalities

In terms of creating meaningful partnerships that are beneficial to all stakeholders, Ramokgopa said that there also needs to be upfront engagement with the municipality. This could help close the gap, she said, between government meeting their service delivery responsibilities and the developer creating a retail environment for the community.

Developers could, for example, make financial contributions towards further infrastructure development or host social services facilities, said Ramokgopa.

She said that local government officials approving developments need to be well capacitated in understanding how the development process works. "They need to have research and data available to them, and there needs to be facilitation of constructive discussion and engagement between the private players, government, and, of course, the community," Ramokgopa said.

Reflecting on how centres could be better designed, she said "conscious development" should be employed, particularly to include the micro-economy that usually emerges outside shopping centres. "Retailers really need to start becoming a lot more conscious of integrating local content into the tenant mix."

"We need to find a way to be more responsive, more consumer and community-led and less developer-led. And I think that requires a much greater level of integration and understanding of the community up front," Ramokgopa said.



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Public-private partnerships for community upliftment

Retail needs to evolve and strengthen its partnerships, Majija said. This is what was needed during the Covid-19 pandemic and it ultimately helped limit business closures and unemployment. He noted that the retail sector employs about 21% of the workforce and is the fourth largest employer in South Africa. "It's in everyone's interests to develop shopping centres to address the problem of unemployment," he said.

Majija also highlighted the opportunity for public-private partnerships. While construction around a development is temporary work, the public infrastructure in surrounding areas usually requires continuous maintenance and upgrades. Government and developers could work together to allow for this continuity and further upskilling programmes.

He said that locals are also beginning to understand the value that retail centres bring to their communities. This was evident during the July riots last year and how the taxi operators came out and started working with the centres' security guards to help in defending the malls.

"I do think, though, that the shopping centre industry needs a lot more PR," Majija said. "We need to spread awareness and show how shopping centres contribute positively to communities. And that is starting to happen now."

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