



Matlhatsi Jood



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Funding: First Rand Foundation bursary

More about Matlhatsi

Favourite subjects: Mathematical methods and modelling.

Interests: Dance and literature.

Community activity: Tutoring grade 10 and 11 maths and science in a disadvantaged school.

Inspired by: My mother, Renaissance polymath Leonardo da Vinci and Jesus Christ.

Main achievements: Top 10 provincial public speaking and maths Olympiad; finishing my degree in record time.

What I love/hate about South Africa: I love the diversity in terms of culture, languages and cuisine; I dislike the socioeconomic disparities.

In 10 years' time I see myself... having an established consulting/insurance company, and having travelled to at least six countries.

ESSAY SYNOPSIS

In South Africa, where unemployment remains persistently high and economic growth subdued, protectionist measures such as import tariffs are frequently proposed as a means to revive domestic industries. The theoretical rationale for protectionism is rooted in the “infant industry” argument, which suggests that young sectors in developing economies require temporary protection to build competitiveness, writes Matlhatsi.

After 1994, South Africa moved from a relatively closed economy to one of the most liberalised among emerging markets, and tariffs were reduced sharply. Although these reforms expanded market access, they also exposed vulnerable sectors such as textiles and clothing to intense global competition, with significant job losses between 1994 and 2002. Current tariff structures aim to balance WTO obligations with industrial goals, protecting labour-intensive and vulnerable sectors while liberalising inputs to support downstream industries.

In the short term, tariffs have helped safeguard jobs by limiting import competition; however, long-term employment gains are less certain. Without parallel investments in productivity, skills and technology, protected industries risk stagnation. Comparative evidence from Brazil, India and Nigeria shows that tariffs can maintain domestic output temporarily but rarely lead to sustained competitiveness without broader industrial upgrading.

South Africa’s experience, especially in the automotive sector, demonstrates that combining protection with company-level productivity measures is more effective than reliance on tariffs alone. Policymakers must therefore ensure that protective measures form part of a broader industrial strategy that promotes innovation, competitiveness and long-term job creation.