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THE SOUTH AFRICA I WANT TO BUILD

When I hear the word *budget*, I do not only think about billions of rands, economic growth, or government expenditure. As a South African university student, I think about something much closer to home: Can my family afford the food we need? Can I afford the clothes I need? Can I buy the stationery and study materials needed for university? And after graduation, will there be a job waiting for me? These questions may seem personal, but they are economic questions. They are questions that millions of South Africans face every day. This is why I believe a national budget should not only be judged by the numbers announced by government, but by whether those numbers eventually improve people's lives. The 2026 Budget projects economic growth of 1.6% and places significant emphasis on infrastructure, employment, and economic development. These are important steps. However, as a young South African, I believe the real challenge is turning these plans into opportunities that people can actually experience.

The cost of being a student

For a university student, the cost of living is not an abstract economic concept. It is something I experience when I go to the shop and realise that the same amount of money no longer buys what it used to. Food is expensive. Transport costs money. Clothes are necessary. Stationery, textbooks, data, and other study materials add up. University fees and accommodation can place additional pressure on students and their families. When the cost of necessities increases faster than people's incomes, families are forced to make difficult choices. A parent may have to choose between buying enough groceries and paying another important bill. A student may postpone buying a textbook, reduce meals or rely on resources that are not always enough. This is where I believe the Budget must become more than a financial document. It must become a tool for protecting people's ability to take part in the economy. Government cannot control every price in the economy, but it can create conditions that make South Africa more productive and competitive. Supporting local agriculture, improving transport infrastructure, reducing unnecessary costs in supply chains, and encouraging competition can help address some of the pressures that eventually reach consumers. As a university student, I would also prioritise students who are financially excluded from higher education. NSFAS has helped many South African students access university, but there are still students who are unfunded, defunded, waiting for appeals or struggling with delays in funding. Education should not only mean paying tuition fees. Students also need food, accommodation, transport, data, stationery, and other basic necessities. If I were the Minister of Finance for a day, I would therefore push for better support for students who genuinely cannot afford these costs, while also making sure that funding is managed fairly and reaches students on time.

Jobs: What happens after graduation?

As a university student, I also think about the future. Getting a qualification is an achievement, but it should not be the end of the journey. What happens when thousands of graduates leave university and discover that there are not enough opportunities for them? South Africa needs economic growth that creates jobs, especially sustainable jobs for young people. If I were Minister of Finance for one day, I would increase the focus on industries that can create long-term employment, including agriculture, renewable energy, manufacturing, tourism, technology, and infrastructure. I would also strengthen partnerships between universities and businesses. Students should have more opportunities to gain practical experience, internships, and workplace skills before graduating. Businesses that train and employ young people could receive stronger incentives, provided that these programmes lead to meaningful employment rather than simply temporary opportunities.

Our resources cannot be taken for granted. Another issue I would prioritise is resource scarcity, especially water. South Africa cannot build a successful economy if it cannot provide reliable water and energy. Agriculture needs water. Businesses need water. Schools and universities need water. Families need water. The 2026 Budget recognises water security and infrastructure as major areas for economic development.

But I would ask a tricky question: Are we doing enough to protect what we already have? If I were Minister for one day, I would place greater emphasis on maintaining existing infrastructure, reducing water losses and ensuring that municipalities have the capacity to manage essential services properly. Building new infrastructure is important, but maintaining what already exists can be just as important.

If I had one day to make a difference

If I became Minister of Finance for one day, I would not promise to solve every problem in South Africa. That would be unrealistic. Instead, I would focus on three things:

First, I would invest in people.

Education, skills development and practical work experience should prepare young South Africans to take part meaningfully in the economy.

Second, I would invest in opportunity.

Small businesses and young entrepreneurs should have better access to finance, markets, mentorship, and infrastructure so that they can create jobs rather than wait for jobs.

Third, I would demand accountability.

When government allocates money to a project, South Africans should be able to see where the money went, whether the project was completed and what difference it made. Government plans to spend more than R1 trillion on infrastructure over the medium term. That is a major opportunity, but the value of this investment will depend on implementation. A budget allocation is only a promise until the promised project actually reaches the people it was intended to serve.

The economy is personal

As a young South African, I do not want to look at the economy only through statistics. I want to know that my family can afford nutritious food. I want to know that students can access the resources they need to succeed. I want to graduate knowing that my qualification can lead to an opportunity. I want entrepreneurs with innovative ideas to have a chance to build businesses. I want communities to have reliable water, electricity, roads, and public services. And I want to know that every rand collected from taxpayers is treated with responsibility. That is the economy I want to be part of.

South Africa has limited resources, but it has unlimited potential in its people. Our young population can become our greatest economic advantage if we invest in their education, skills, and ideas. Therefore, if I were given one day as Minister of Finance, I would not ask only, *“How much money does South Africa have?”*

I would ask:

“How can we use what we have today to give the next generation a better tomorrow?” Because the success of a Budget should not only be measured by whether government balances its books. It should be measured by whether a student can afford to eat, learn, graduate, and dream about a future in which there is a place for them in South Africa’s economy. That, to me, is what economic excellence should mean.