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MARKET READINESS: MAKING THE
MOST OF CHINA'S ZERO TARIFF
OPPORTUNITY**

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FROM MARKET ACCESS TO MARKET READINESS: MAKING THE MOST OF CHINA'S ZERO TARIFF OPPORTUNITY



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A Historic Shift

On May 1, China's zero tariff policy for African countries entered full implementation, marking a significant milestone in Africa–China economic relations. For the first time, African exporters have near-complete tariff-free access to one of the world's largest and most dynamic consumer markets. It is a development many have long called for—an opening that signals both deepening cooperation and expanding economic opportunity.

Yet, as historic as this moment is, it does not mark the finish line. Market access, while essential, does not automatically translate into increased exports, stronger industries, or sustained trade gains. The removal of tariffs lowers barriers, but it does not resolve the structural realities that shape competitiveness in global markets.

China has opened its market—now the real work begins.

What Has Changed: From Access Barriers to Opportunity

China's zero tariff policy represents a clear shift from selective preferences to near-comprehensive market openness. By eliminating tariffs on 100% of goods from African countries with diplomatic relations, the policy removes one of the most visible cost barriers that has historically shaped trade flows. In practical terms, African exports—from agricultural produce to light manufactured goods—can now enter the Chinese market on more competitive terms.

This marks a departure from earlier trade arrangements such as African Growth and Opportunity Act and Everything But Arms, which provided important but often partial and conditional access. China's approach signals a broader opening, one that repositions Africa–China trade within a more expansive framework of economic cooperation.

For the first time, market access is no longer Africa's primary constraint in trading with China.

The Real Pivot: Market Access vs Market Readiness

With tariffs no longer the primary barrier, the conversation must now shift from *market access* to *market readiness*. Market readiness goes beyond the ability to export—it reflects whether firms and systems can consistently meet the requirements of a competitive, large-scale market like China. This includes compliance with quality and safety standards, the capacity to supply at scale, reliable logistics, and access to trade finance.

In practical terms, a Ghanaian cocoa processor may now face zero tariffs when exporting chocolate to China, but success will depend on meeting strict packaging, labeling, and food safety requirements, as well as maintaining consistent volumes across shipments. Similarly, fresh horticultural exports—such as pineapples or vegetables—require cold-chain logistics and timely delivery to remain viable in a distant market. Even in light manufacturing, small producers may find that while demand exists, scaling production to meet bulk orders remains a constraint.

This is not a shortcoming of the policy—it is the natural next phase of engagement. As access improves, competitiveness becomes the decisive factor.

The question is no longer whether Africa can enter the Chinese market—but whether it is ready to compete in it.

Key Readiness Gaps: Where the Work Lies

Turning zero tariff access into real trade outcomes requires closing a set of practical readiness gaps across the export ecosystem.

i. Standards and Certification

Access to China's market depends on meeting stringent quality, safety, and phytosanitary standards. For example, exporting processed foods or fresh produce requires compliance with detailed inspection and certification procedures—from pesticide residue limits to packaging and labeling requirements. Many SMEs struggle with certification processes, not due to lack of demand, but due to limited technical capacity and awareness.

ii. Scale and Consistency

China's market rewards suppliers who can deliver large volumes consistently. Yet across many African countries, production remains fragmented. A cashew exporter may secure a buyer in China but struggle to aggregate sufficient quantities from smallholder farmers to meet contractual volumes over time.

iii. Logistics and Trade Infrastructure

Efficient logistics are critical, especially for perishable goods. Weak cold-chain systems, port delays, and high shipping costs can undermine competitiveness. For instance, delays in transporting fresh fruits can erode quality before arrival, making exports less viable despite zero tariffs.

iv. Trade Finance

Exporting at scale requires working capital—yet many firms face limited access to credit, export insurance, and financing tools needed to fulfill large orders.

Bridging these gaps is not a barrier to opportunity—it is the pathway to it.

The Role of African Governments and Institutions

As the zero-tariff policy takes effect, the role of African governments and institutions becomes increasingly central in translating access into tangible export gains. This requires a deliberate shift toward China-focused export strategies, grounded in market intelligence, sector prioritization, and targeted support for exporters.

Across the continent, export promotion and investment institutions must step up their coordination and technical support. Examples include Ghana Export Promotion Authority, Kenya Export Promotion and Branding Agency, Morocco Agency for Investment and Export Development, Agence Nationale pour la Promotion des Investissements, and Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal (Southern Africa). These

institutions will need to deepen engagement with Chinese market requirements, support certification processes, and connect exporters to buyers.

At the same time, governments must invest in standards authorities, certification systems, and export ecosystems, while aligning industrial policy with export opportunities—for instance, supporting agro-processing to move up the value chain.

Policy must now shift from enabling access to enabling competitiveness.

The Role of China: Deepening the Opportunity

China's zero tariff policy creates a strong foundation for trade expansion, but its full impact can be amplified through deeper, complementary cooperation. One key area is technical support—including training on standards, certification processes, and market requirements—so that African exporters can better align with the expectations of Chinese consumers and regulators. Institutions such as Ministry of Commerce of China and General Administration of Customs of China can play important roles in information-sharing and trade facilitation.

There is also growing scope to strengthen industrial cooperation, particularly through support for industrial parks, processing zones, and joint ventures. Encouraging Chinese firms to partner with African producers—especially in agro-processing and light manufacturing—can help build local capacity while integrating supply chains.

In this context, market access becomes a starting point rather than an endpoint. The next phase of cooperation lies not only in opening markets, but in building the capacity to supply them.

The Role of Development Partners: Financing Readiness

Development partners have a critical role to play in ensuring that zero tariff access translates into real export outcomes. While tariffs have been removed, **financial** barriers remain significant, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking to scale production and meet export demands. Targeted interventions—such as trade finance, blended finance instruments, and export readiness programs—can help bridge this gap.

Institutions like the African Development Bank and other development finance institutions can support by de-risking exporters, providing working capital, and financing critical infrastructure linked to trade. For instance, credit guarantees and export insurance can enable firms to take on larger orders with confidence.

Beyond financing, technical assistance in packaging, standards compliance, and market intelligence will be equally important.

Zero tariffs reduce cost—but readiness requires investment.

Conclusion: From Opportunity to Execution

China's zero tariff policy marks a decisive shift in Africa–China trade relations—but its true significance will be determined by what follows. The pathway is now clear: from access to readiness, and from readiness to results.

Governments must align policy with competitiveness, institutions must support exporters more effectively, and businesses must rise to meet the demands of scale, standards, and consistency. At the same time, China and development partners have a role to play in strengthening the ecosystem that enables trade to thrive.

This is a shared moment of opportunity—but also of responsibility.

China's zero tariff policy has opened the door. What happens next will depend on how Africa chooses to walk through it.



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