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Market Access Is Not Market Success

China’s zero-tariff initiative presents Ghana with an important opportunity to expand its exports into one of the world’s largest consumer markets. For a country seeking to strengthen foreign-exchange earnings, create jobs and reduce dependence on a narrow range of commodities, improved access to the Chinese market could be significant. Yet market access alone does not guarantee market success.

Ghana’s export economy remains heavily associated with cocoa, including raw beans and semi-processed products, raising a more important question: can the country use this opening to compete beyond cocoa? Zero-tariff access can support export diversification and industrialisation, but only if it is matched by stronger domestic production, greater value addition, compliance with Chinese standards, efficient logistics and a private sector capable of responding to new market opportunities.

Ghana’s Cocoa Dependence and the Diversification Challenge

Cocoa has long occupied a central place in Ghana’s economy. It supports rural livelihoods, contributes significantly to export revenues and remains an important source of foreign exchange. Its economic and social importance should therefore not be underestimated. However, Ghana’s continued dependence on cocoa, gold and a limited number of other primary commodities also exposes the economy to considerable risk.

Changes in global commodity prices can sharply affect export earnings, while climate change, disease and declining soil productivity threaten agricultural output. Exporting raw or minimally processed products also means that Ghana captures only a limited share of the final value generated along global supply chains.

This weakens industrial employment creation and contributes to recurring foreign-exchange pressures whenever export receipts decline. The policy objective should not be to move away from cocoa. Rather, Ghana must extract greater value from it through processing, branding and finished products, while simultaneously developing new export sectors in agriculture, agro-processing and light manufacturing.

Where Ghana Could Realistically Compete

China's zero-tariff initiative creates opportunities across a range of sectors where Ghana already possesses a comparative advantage or has the potential to build one. Rather than concentrating on increasing the volume of traditional commodity exports, Ghana should prioritise products that generate greater value before they leave the country. Processed cocoa products—including chocolate, cocoa powder and cocoa butter—offer a logical starting point. Similarly, cashew kernels, shea butter and shea-based cosmetics can command higher returns than raw agricultural produce. Tropical fruits such as pineapple, mango and coconut, alongside fruit concentrates and juices, also present promising export prospects as Chinese consumer demand for healthy and premium food products continues to grow.

Beyond agriculture, fisheries and selected seafood products, spices and other agro-processed goods could strengthen Ghana's export portfolio if quality and consistency are maintained. There is also scope for garments, textiles and selected light manufactured products to benefit, particularly as Ghana seeks to integrate more deeply into regional and global value chains.

The real opportunity, however, lies not in exporting more containers of raw commodities but in exporting products that have undergone processing, packaging, branding and quality enhancement within Ghana. Every additional stage of production creates jobs, supports local manufacturing and retains a larger share of export value domestically. In this sense, agriculture should increasingly serve as the foundation upon which competitive manufacturing and export-oriented industries are built.

The Real Barriers Are Behind the Border

While China's zero-tariff policy removes an important trade barrier, the more significant constraints lie within Ghana's own production and export ecosystem. Many exporters continue to struggle with limited production volumes and inconsistent supply, making it difficult to fulfil large and recurring orders demanded by international buyers. At the same time, meeting China's sanitary, phytosanitary and quality standards requires certification systems, accredited laboratories and reliable product traceability.

Production costs also reduce competitiveness. High electricity tariffs, expensive financing and operational inefficiencies raise the cost of manufacturing and agro processing. These challenges are compounded by inadequate cold-chain facilities, storage infrastructure and transport networks, particularly for perishable agricultural exports. Logistics remains another major constraint, with shipping costs, limited direct maritime connections and longer delivery times reducing the competitiveness of Ghanaian products in distant markets.

Equally important is the need to better understand the Chinese market itself. Successful exporting increasingly depends on attractive packaging, product branding, consumer preferences and effective distribution partnerships, not simply on producing quality goods. Many Ghanaian small and medium-sized enterprises also lack access to affordable export finance, preventing them from investing in improved production capacity, certification and market development.

Unless these structural constraints are systematically addressed, China's zero-tariff initiative risks becoming an underutilised opportunity. Preferential market access may open the door, but only competitive production, efficient logistics and export-ready businesses will enable Ghana to walk through it successfully.

From Trade Preference to Industrial Policy

China's zero-tariff initiative should be viewed not simply as a trade concession, but as a catalyst for Ghana's broader industrial transformation. Rather than focusing solely on increasing exports, policymakers should leverage this opportunity to expand domestic production, deepen manufacturing capabilities and strengthen value addition across key sectors. This requires greater investment in agro-processing and light manufacturing, enabling Ghanaian firms to move beyond exporting raw commodities towards producing finished and semi-finished goods for international markets.

Equally important is the promotion of strategic partnerships between Ghanaian and Chinese firms that facilitate technology transfer, skills development and managerial expertise. Such collaborations can improve productivity while helping local businesses meet international quality standards and integrate into global supply chains. Industrial parks and Special Economic Zones should also be positioned as export-oriented production hubs, providing the infrastructure and business environment needed to attract investment and support manufacturing.

AfCFTA and the SME Opportunity

Ghana's opportunity extends beyond direct access to the Chinese market. As host of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat, the country is well positioned to leverage regional integration to strengthen its export competitiveness. Through AfCFTA, Ghanaian firms can source inputs from neighbouring countries, aggregate production across regional value chains and achieve the scale required to compete in large international markets such as China. This dual access to African and Chinese markets also makes Ghana an attractive destination for export-oriented investment.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) must be central to this strategy. While many possess innovative products and entrepreneurial potential, they often lack the capacity to export independently. Targeted support in aggregation, affordable finance, certification, packaging, digital marketing and market intelligence can help SMEs participate in international value chains. Equally important is facilitating direct connections with Chinese importers, distributors and e-commerce platforms, ensuring that smaller Ghanaian businesses can benefit from opportunities that have traditionally been dominated by larger exporters.

What Ghana Must Do Now

To maximise the benefits of China's zero-tariff initiative, Ghana requires a focused and coordinated export strategy. Rather than attempting to promote every product, government should identify five to ten priority export products with the strongest commercial potential in the Chinese market and develop tailored strategies for each. This should be supported by stronger laboratories, certification systems and standards-compliance services to help exporters meet Chinese regulatory requirements.

Ghana's embassy and trade institutions in China must also play a more proactive role in providing market intelligence, identifying emerging consumer trends and facilitating business-to-business linkages. At the same time, exporters need greater access to affordable export finance and insurance, alongside investments in cold-chain facilities, aggregation centres and efficient port logistics. Finally, investment promotion efforts should prioritise export-oriented manufacturing, ensuring that new investments contribute to value addition, job creation and long-term export competitiveness.

Competing Beyond Cocoa

China's zero-tariff policy presents Ghana with a valuable opportunity, but it is not a guarantee of export success. The real challenge is whether Ghana can use improved market access to diversify beyond its traditional commodity exports and build a more competitive, value-added economy. Achieving this will require coordinated investments in production, industrialisation, logistics, standards and private-sector capacity.

If these foundations are strengthened, Ghana can transform preferential market access into sustainable export growth and higher-quality jobs. China has opened a wider market door, but Ghana must build the productive capacity, export discipline and industrial competitiveness required to walk through it.

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