

Promoting Algeria's Non-Hydrocarbon Exports: Opportunities and Challenges- Algeria's Strategy for Export Promotion through Free Zones and Border Crossings

Nabil Berriche^{1*}, Kamel Mehenni²

^{1*}University M'hamed Bougara of Boumerdes, Algeria
berrichenabil70@gmail.com

²University of Algiers 1, Faculty of Law, Saïd Hamdine, Algeria
k.Mehenni@univ-alger.dz

Abstract

In light of accelerating international changes, fluctuations in oil prices, and the growing global trend toward reliance on renewable energy and the abandonment of fossil fuels, the search for new export alternatives outside the hydrocarbon sector has become imperative for the Algerian state. In this context, economic free zones and border crossings have attracted widespread global attention and have come to occupy a leading position among the instruments used to increase export value, expand production and exports, stimulate trade flows and commercial exchanges, develop the country's foreign-exchange resources, reduce unemployment, acquire knowledge, and localize technology.

Through this paper, we seek to clarify the concept and types of free zones, with particular reference to Algeria's strategy for promoting its exports through the establishment of industrial export free zones and the opening and activation of border crossings, as well as the role they play in developing and encouraging exports.

Keywords: free zones; industrial export free zones; export promotion; Algerian exports.

Introduction

Algeria's pursuit of economic development requires the adoption of multiple approaches, including adaptation to local, regional, and global changes in order to benefit from available opportunities, confront the challenges that hinder development, and respond to international developments, particularly in light of the trade agreements previously concluded with the European Union, which did not have the desired impact on the national economy.

Within this framework, the new Algeria has moved toward developing its foreign trade by adopting a new strategy for the development and promotion of non-hydrocarbon exports. This strategy is based on the establishment of free zones and the development of border crossings, while targeting the African market, which includes more than one billion people, in addition to the Arab and European markets.

The concept of free zones has long been recognized in foreign trade as a means of promoting international commercial activity. The first free area was established on the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea two thousand years ago. The concept subsequently spread across many countries around the world. Initially, these zones relied mainly on trade and the storage of goods; with the development of modern economic methods, new forms of free zones emerged, including service free zones and industrial export free zones.

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Given the benefits that countries derive from establishing such zones within their territories, they have increasingly granted customs and tax exemptions in order to encourage and attract domestic and foreign investment in these zones. They have also provided various facilities to create a favorable environment for investment stability and to limit the outflow of domestic investment.

For a long period, the Algerian economy has depended on revenues generated by petroleum exports, on which foreign trade is centered, while other economic sectors such as agriculture, industry, and services have been neglected. This exposes the economy to major risks, particularly amid price volatility, international crises, and the rapid worldwide shift toward renewable energy as an alternative to fossil fuels. To confront these risks and their repercussions on the national economy, the depreciation of the national currency, and the decline in national income, the Algerian government has had to accelerate the formulation and implementation of an action plan to promote, develop, and encourage non-hydrocarbon exports by opening the way for free zones and activating border crossings with the aim of integrating into the global economy beyond hydrocarbons.

To address this topic, the following research question is raised:

- What role do free zones and border crossings play in promoting Algerian exports?

The main themes of the paper are as follows:

- The concept and development of free zones;
- The strategy for establishing free zones in Algeria;
- Free zones and border crossings as a mechanism for promoting exports in Algeria.

I. The Concept of Free Zones

1. Origin and Development of Free Zones

The concept of free zones dates back approximately two thousand years to the era of the Roman Empire. The first known free zone was the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea, where the concept involved the transshipment, storage, and re-export of goods crossing the borders of the empire.

During the Middle Ages, countries located in the Mediterranean basin relied on commercial activity using the free-zone system. With the emergence of colonies, European countries established small zones in port cities to facilitate trade between themselves and their colonies. Examples of zones established during that period include:

- Gibraltar (1704);
- Singapore (1819);
- Hong Kong (1842).

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of free ports developed rapidly in Europe. After the Second World War, when international trade began to grow quickly, free zones during this period were used primarily as centers for storage and re-export activities.[1]

However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a new form of free zone began to emerge. It was based not only on commercial activity but also on export industries, with the associated creation of employment in the host country. The Shannon Free Zone in Ireland, established in 1959, was the first example of this type and represented a turning point in the global concept of commercial free zones, shifting from purely commercial activity toward industrial activity.

Within this context, many commercial and industrial zones—taking multiple forms and involving different activities—have emerged since the 1950s in many countries around the world to encourage industry, increase export volumes, create employment opportunities, and raise the rate of economic growth.[2]

2. Definition of Free Zones

Several definitions of free zones may be cited:

- Free zones are enclosed and uninhabited areas into which many non-prohibited goods may enter without formal customs entry procedures.[3]

- A free zone is that part of the territory of a state located at, or near, its land, sea, or air entry points; it is geographically delimited by fences and isolated from the rest of the state's territory, is subject to specific legal rules, and remains under the full sovereignty of the state.[4]
- A free zone is a defined area designated by a higher legislative or administrative authority and isolated from the rest of the state's territory, where the import, storage, and re-export of goods and the establishment of industrial and other investment activities are permitted independently of regulatory and administrative restrictions, within the limits established by the laws governing its creation.[5]
- A free zone is a small, geographically defined area in which industrial or commercial activities benefit from a special tax regime; such taxation may be reduced and is often eliminated. Goods also benefit from a special customs regime, whereby products enter and leave without being subject to customs control or duties. However, such duties become payable when the products enter the national territory in which the free zone is located.[6]

On the basis of the preceding definitions, the following definition may be derived: a free zone is a geographically defined area belonging to a state and hosting a range of investment, commercial, industrial, or financial activities. This area benefits from customs and tax exemptions on goods entering and leaving it, within the limits of the laws governing its establishment.

3. Characteristics of Free Zones

Free zones share a set of common characteristics and features that may be summarized as follows:

- Location: free zones are located near or within a port, on a plot of land within a state, at airports, or in inland locations intended to develop particular regions. When they first emerged, these zones were established over limited areas; later, they came to occupy larger areas that may include entire cities or ports. According to a World Bank study, the area generally covered by such zones ranges from ten to three hundred hectares.[7]
- Flexible tax regime: one of the most important characteristics of free zones is their reliance on a distinctive and flexible tax system and a special incentive regime intended to encourage and attract foreign economic operators to invest their capital within the free zone.
- Inclusiveness and global openness: this refers to openness to external investment by all economic operators wishing to establish investment projects in these zones, regardless of the investor's nationality or the nationality of the capital.
- Equality: all investors, whether national or foreign, enjoy the same rights and obligations within the economic zone, as well as the same privileges, incentives, and guarantees.
- Absence of administrative complexity: free zones are characterized by the absence of administrative bureaucracy and by flexible, rapid, and simple administrative procedures.[8]

4. Importance of Free Zones

The economic importance of free zones lies in their role as a flexible mechanism through which countries can adapt and respond to international and regional economic changes and requirements, thereby enhancing economic competitiveness in the context of economic openness and stimulating capital flows between countries. The economic importance of free zones may be highlighted through the following points:[9]

- Attracting foreign and domestic investment, which contributes to supporting the balance of payments through foreign-currency inflows;
- Promoting trade exchanges in general and transit trade in particular, because the systems governing these zones allow the free movement of goods and services without customs or quantitative restrictions, in addition to flexible procedures that reduce costs for investors and increase their competitiveness;
- Encouraging the establishment of technologically advanced industries and sophisticated production methods that enable high-quality and efficient production, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of such industries in world markets;
- Providing employment opportunities and enabling workers to acquire technical skills that can be transferred to sectors outside the zones, with a positive effect on the productivity of those sectors;
- Contributing directly and indirectly to the development of the regions and territories in which free zones are established, in addition to the positive impact on various economic sectors linked to free-zone activities, such as transport, insurance, and customs clearance;

- Exploiting natural resources—primary and raw materials—so that, instead of exporting them in their primary form and at low prices, industrial projects can process and transform them, adding value, raising their prices, and generating financial surpluses;
- Participation in the production process: the model of joint free zones provides investors from the countries concerned with the opportunity to participate in production operations and exchange managerial and other expertise, thereby increasing their ability to compete in global markets.

In addition, host countries establish free zones within their territories in order to achieve one or more of the following objectives:[10]

- Establishing industrial production projects whose primary objective is export, thereby increasing the state's foreign-currency receipts;
- Establishing production projects that meet domestic consumption needs as a substitute for imports of both consumer and production goods, attracting foreign capital, and stimulating internal and external trade;
- Reducing population pressure in some large cities and developing certain regions in order to achieve social and economic balance between them and other areas.

5. Types of Free Zones

Free zones can be classified into three main groups according to the number of activities located within them, the type of activity carried out, or the number of member states participating in their establishment.

First group: according to the number of activities

This group is divided into the following categories:[11]

- General free zones: characterized by freedom of economic activity for all operators and across all economic and financial activities.
- Special free zones: zones established to achieve a specific and defined economic purpose, such as industry or storage.

Second group: according to the type of activity undertaken

This group includes:

- Commercial free zones, which take several forms, the most important of which are:
 - Free port: a free zone established inside a seaport, including warehouses and sometimes small factories serving the port. The free zone may extend to include the entire city in which the port is located; in that case, the city is considered a free port, where commercial transactions by individuals or companies are not subject to customs duties or taxes. Current examples include Hamburg in Germany, Copenhagen in Denmark, Port Said in Egypt, Singapore, and Hong Kong.
 - Duty-free shops: an extension of the concept of commercial free zones, specializing in buying and selling operations and generally located at ports, airports, and railway stations.
 - Free warehouses: this type of warehouse allows operations extending beyond simple shipment and storage to activities permitting the treatment or adjustment of goods stored in the free zone without taking customs duties and charges into account.[12]
- Industrial free zones: these constitute a base for domestic and foreign industrial units and have the right to import investment goods, equipment, and raw materials necessary for production. They are supervised by the customs service and include industrial export free zones, enterprise free zones, and employment or labor zones.
- Free service zones, divided into financial free zones and tax zones:
 - Financial free zones: including free banking zones and free insurance zones.
 - Tax zones: the common name currently used for these areas is tax havens. These are countries or territories that grant resident natural or legal persons a special regime compared with neighboring countries or the general international level, allowing them to benefit from tax advantages that enable them to avoid taxes in their countries of origin or to benefit from a more favorable tax regime, especially with regard to income tax.

- Tourism zones: consisting of tax-free outlets located at airports; these zones generally facilitate the retail sale of consumer goods to tourists.[13]

Third group: according to the number of participating member states

This group is divided into two categories:[14]

- National free zones: these concern a single state and are established within its political territory.
- International (joint) free zones: these zones may take any of the previously mentioned forms and may be established either in border areas or in any part of the territories of the participating countries.
- Industrial free zones: relatively small free zones intended to support the needs of a specific industry, such as jewelry, gas, electronics, or clothing. Companies investing in this type of zone may establish themselves at any suitable location. Examples include Indian jewelry manufacturing zones, and similar arrangements in Bermuda, Japan, South Korea, Panama, and Taiwan.
- Free zones with specified activities: zones that contract only with investors meeting particular criteria, such as reaching a specified export level and adhering to a defined technological standard. Examples include Indian export-oriented factories, Mexico, and China.

II. Algeria's Strategy for Establishing Free Zones

1. Establishment under the 1993 Investment Law

The idea of establishing free zones in Algeria took shape under Investment Law No. 93-12 dated 5 October 1993, which devoted an entire chapter to authorizing the establishment of free zones throughout the national territory for export, import, storage, processing, service, and industrial activities. The law provided for simplified procedures aimed at developing export activities and allowed part of the output to be marketed in the domestic market. This was implemented through Executive Decree No. 94-320 dated 7 October 1994 concerning the establishment of free zones, which led to the creation of the Bellara Free Zone in Jijel Province.[15]

2. Reinforcement under Law No. 22-15

After the free-zone regime was abolished under Ordinance No. 03-08 relating to investment for several reasons, Law No. 22-15 dated 22 July 2022, which defines the rules governing free zones, once again consolidated the rules for establishing free zones in Algeria following the entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area in 2021. This law contains 21 articles defining the recognized rules for the establishment of free zones. In particular, it provides for the creation of free zones on land belonging to the state domain and entrusts their management to a national company for the management of free zones.

III. Free Zones and Border Crossings as a Mechanism for Promoting Exports in Algeria

1. Concept of Exporting

Exporting refers to operations involving goods and services supplied on a definitive basis by residents to non-residents of the country. In other words, exports represent foreign demand for goods and services produced within the country, which leads to an increase in national income. Exports are therefore classified among injection factors, that is, factors that add new strength to the flow of aggregate expenditure.[16]

A. Importance of Exports for Countries

Exports make it possible to increase GDP growth rates by expanding the size of the market, of which access to foreign markets is one of the most important elements, and they help remove obstacles to economic development.

B. Export Development Policies

Three types of policies for developing the export sector can be distinguished:[17]

- Support and subsidy policies:
 - Direct financial support;
 - Tax exemptions, such as exemption from profit tax;
 - Exemption of imported production inputs from customs duties;

- Providing loans to finance exports at nominal interest rates and adjusting the exchange rate in favor of exporters;
- Indirect support, such as subsidizing water and electricity services for export activities.

C. Customs Policies

Customs policies are used to facilitate and encourage export activities. Among their most common instruments are:

- The customs-duty drawback system for inputs used in the production of exported goods after exportation;
- The temporary admission system or full exemption from customs duties on inputs used in the production of exported goods;
- The bonded-deposit system, which refers to suspending the collection of customs duties imposed on inputs used in the production of exported goods for a specified period;
- Free zones: the establishment of free zones aims to encourage and develop export industries.

D. Directive and Strategic Policies

Directive policy consists of reforms and programs aimed at creating an environment conducive to the development of the export sector. The importance of such policies stems from the fact that trade and industrial policies are no longer sufficient to support the competitiveness of exports in international markets in the context of economic globalization and the liberalization of international trade.

2. Algeria's Experience in Establishing Free Zones

A report by the Arab Investment and Export Credit Guarantee Corporation ranked Algeria last in terms of the number of free zones, together with Djibouti, Yemen, and Kuwait. It indicated that Algeria had only two free zones, a situation that contributes to keeping the volume of intra-Arab trade at low levels. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia respectively occupied the top three positions among Arab countries in terms of the number of free zones. The total number of Arab free zones, including airports and entry points, was reported as 123.[18]

2.1. Bellara Industrial Export Free Zone in Jijel Province

The industrial export free-zone project in Algeria is a major project which, once developed according to international standards, is expected to increase investment and stimulate development, especially as Algeria seeks to diversify its resources and expand production capacity in order to reduce imports.

Interest in the Bellara industrial zone in the municipality of El Milia, in eastern Jijel Province, revived following renewed activity at the port of Djen Djen and the zone's attraction of substantial investment, including the construction of an iron and steel complex under an Algerian-Qatari partnership between the Sider Group and Qatar Steel International, which was expected to enter production by 2017. Bellara, which had been designated as a free-zone project since 1997, was 90% developed to accommodate projects and possessed the factors required to become an important industrial hub.

The iron and steel plant project in the Bellara area dates back to the early 1980s, when the area was designated for development in preparation for the start of works, but the project was not implemented. In 1997, the area was classified as a free zone following a study prepared by the National Agency for Spatial Planning, and it was selected from among 16 provinces. The free-zone classification was then cancelled by Decree No. 05/01 dated 5 April 2005. The area later regained importance within the Algerian economy because of its economic significance. The iron and steel complex was expected to transform the image of the entire area, have positive short- and long-term effects, encourage investors to invest in the province, and reduce unemployment by creating 2,000 permanent jobs. The Bellara area was reported to be 90% developed and to have all the attributes required to become a major industrial hub because of its strategic location and proximity to Djen Djen Port, Ferhat Abbas Airport, and the power-generation station, which facilitates the commencement of project works.[19]

2.2. Bir Oum Grein Industrial Zone on the Mauritanian-Algerian Border

This free-trade zone was established in cooperation with Mauritania and is located on the Mauritanian-Algerian border. It is regarded as a catalyst for cooperation and trade between the two countries and as a gateway for Algeria

to access West African countries, which comprise more than 350 million inhabitants. Under the law establishing the zone, contractors and economic operators benefit from a special incentive regime. A dedicated Mauritanian-Algerian company was also established to manage the free-trade zone.

2.3. Effects of Establishing Industrial Export Free Zones on Exports and the National Economy

The importance of industrial export free zones in foreign trade lies in their ability to serve as a base for export growth in host countries. This can be achieved through the expansion of exports from projects operating within these zones to external markets, in addition to other economic and social effects, as follows:[20]

- Diversifying sources of income by expanding the productive, industrial, and service base in order to create sources of income other than oil;
- Freeing the national currency from dependence on the dollar and determining the exchange rate against a basket of international currencies according to trade relations with those countries;
- Diversifying national exports and avoiding dependence on a single type of export; these zones therefore provide momentum for overcoming dependence on oil, from which the Algerian economy has long suffered;
- Developing industrial exports, which is one of the principal reasons for establishing this type of free zone in Algeria. This is related to high production costs and, consequently, the inability to withstand competition in foreign markets, while projects located in these zones bring access to export markets with them;
- The direct result of increasing exports, especially industrial exports, is an increase in the state's foreign-currency resources, which contributes to economic growth and equilibrium;
- The establishment of export industries in these zones acts as an incentive for the development of supporting industries. The provision of raw materials, simple goods, and services from the domestic market can become a key driver of improvements in the technical level of domestic industries, enabling them to meet international standards and thereby advance industrial development in Algeria;
- Through industrial export free zones and products characterized by strong competitiveness and experience in international trade, these zones contribute to increasing Algeria's share of global trade;
- The effect of these zones on export promotion becomes direct when joint ventures are established with local operators through partnership and knowledge-transfer arrangements;
- These export free zones contribute to the transfer of technology to host countries, for example through the training of local labor and the acquisition of skills and experience by local companies;
- These zones also absorb unemployed youth, especially graduates and skilled workers, thereby helping to reduce the migration of national competencies abroad;
- The incentives characterizing these zones help attract foreign direct investment, including customs and tax exemptions.

3. Border Crossings

3.1. Zouerate-Tindouf Border Crossing

Located on the Algerian-Mauritanian border, this is the first border crossing between the two countries since independence. It includes numerous facilities and administrative structures intended to facilitate and simplify procedures. The value of trade between the two countries reached USD 8.7 million during the last quarter of 2020.[21]

Products expected to be exported include:

- Food products, including canned tomatoes, Sim Ben Omar products, and others;
- Smartphones and household electrical appliances, including Iris, Condor, and Brand products;
- Agricultural products;
- Algerian cement.

It should be noted that the first export operations through the area began at the start of 2019, with exports comprising 220 tonnes of agricultural products,[22] 40 tonnes of household electrical appliances, 120 tonnes of food products, and 20 tonnes of health-related products.

3.2. Border Crossings between Algeria and Tunisia

The preferential agreement between the two countries entered into force in 2014. Algeria hosts more than 600 Tunisian operators, while Tunisia hosts more than 60 Algerian companies. These crossings can be used to export chemical products, food products, and minerals.

3.3. Debdeb Crossing between Algeria and Libya

This crossing can be used to export agricultural products to Libya, particularly from El Oued Province, which has become an important agricultural hub, especially in light of the improvement in Libya's security conditions.

3.4. Border Crossings with Mali and Niger

Algeria has revived barter trade with the southern countries, especially Mali and Niger, while establishing new conditions in the context of strengthening Algeria's African depth. Among the most important products permitted for trade are animal feed, livestock, and some agricultural products such as mangoes and peanuts. The volume of trade in 2020 was estimated at more than DZD 70 billion.

The Trans-Saharan Highway

Algeria is relying on the Trans-Saharan Highway to make it a major artery for connecting with its African depth and intensifying Algerian exports to African countries, starting from El Hamdania Port in northern Algeria, passing through Tunisia, Niger, and Mali, and reaching Nigeria over a distance of 9,900 km, of which 2,315 km are within Algeria, at a total cost of up to USD 6 billion.

Conclusion

The objective of establishing industrial zones, as well as rehabilitating and opening additional border crossings, is to help host countries liberalize their economies and create an effective and competitive industrial base capable of integration into the global economy. This is supported by various incentives aimed at attracting foreign investment to these zones. The launch and activation of different free-trade zones also demonstrate Algeria's strong desire to establish more projects and free zones in order to expand its economic activity and diversify its exports without concentrating on hydrocarbons.

Results

The results of the study can be summarized as follows:

- Exploiting Algeria's African depth by activating exports through border crossings and developing free-trade zones provides access to a very large market comprising more than 1.3 billion inhabitants.
- Using free zones, Algerian ports, and the Trans-Saharan Highway would enable Algeria to increase trade to more than 52%, compared with 20% at present.
- The barter market in southern Algeria with Mali and Niger constitutes an existing exchange base that should be developed and strengthened.
- Exploiting the free-trade zone with Mauritania would provide access to Mauritanian ports and allow their use for exporting minerals and iron, as well as for accessing West African countries, which comprise more than 350 million inhabitants.

Recommendations

- Invest in maritime transport, develop the infrastructure of Algerian ports, and use them for exports to West African countries.
- Industrial export free zones should form part of the reforms that can be undertaken within a comprehensive development strategy because of their positive effects on the national economy.
- Expand Djen Djen Port in Jijel and connect it with African countries.
- Develop bilateral agreements and partnership arrangements with foreign institutions with the aim of acquiring skills and strengthening technical cooperation.
- Direct industrial export free zones toward specific areas of specialization. Specialization refers to the field that allows available resources to be used in a way that creates opportunities for success in the host country, while

directing incentives toward investors within a framework that generates advantages and added value for the country.

- Accelerate the strategy of opening banking agencies in African countries, following the example of Algerian bank branches opened in Dakar, while ensuring the availability of an efficient and outward-looking banking system that keeps pace with global developments in technology and regulatory systems in order to facilitate transactions, together with laws and legislation that protect investors from any abuse or injustice.

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