

Basel, Geneva and Africa

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The companion volume on Geneva devotes a part to Geneva as an African business hub, examining the commodity trading companies, the banks, the international organisations and the francophone networks that connect Geneva with Africa. Basel's connections with Africa are different. They pass through the mission and its trading company, which were active in English-speaking West Africa and in Cameroon, and through the chemical and pharmaceutical industry, which sells medicines and agricultural chemicals in Africa and conducts research on tropical diseases. The Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, founded in Basel in 1943 and today associated with the University of Basel, is one of the leading institutions of research on tropical diseases and global health, with long-standing research programmes in Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire and other African countries.¹

A further connection concerns the recovery of illicit assets. Switzerland has returned to African countries large amounts of assets that had been deposited in Swiss banks by corrupt rulers and their associates. The most prominent case concerns the assets of the former Nigerian ruler Sani Abacha, of which Switzerland returned several hundred million dollars to Nigeria in several tranches from 2005 onwards, under agreements that provided for the monitoring of the use of the funds by the World Bank and civil society.² The Basel Institute on Governance, founded in Basel in 2003, has supported African governments in the tracing and recovery of stolen assets through its International Centre for Asset Recovery. The Federal Act on the Freezing and Restitution of Illicit Assets held by Foreign Politically Exposed Persons, in force since 2016, provides the legal framework for such restitutions.³

Basel's relationship with Africa thus runs from the missionaries of the nineteenth century, who founded schools and churches and traded in cocoa, to the researchers, the pharmaceutical companies and the asset recovery specialists of the twenty-first. Each generation has combined, in

its own way, economic interest, moral purpose and the ambivalences of the relationship between a wealthy European city and a continent marked by colonial history.

1 Notes

1. On the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH), founded in Basel in 1943, and its research programmes in Africa (e.g. Ifakara Health Institute, Tanzania; Centre Suisse de Recherches Scientifiques, Côte d'Ivoire), see the publications of Swiss TPH. To be verified. ↩
2. On the return of assets of the late Nigerian head of state Sani Abacha from Switzerland to Nigeria (about 700 million dollars in 2005 and 321 million dollars under an agreement of 2017, disbursed from 2018/2020 under World Bank monitoring), see the publications of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. Federal Act of 18 December 2015 on the Freezing and Restitution of Illicit Assets held by Foreign Politically Exposed Persons (Foreign Illicit Assets Act, FIAA, SR 196.1), in force since 1 July 2016. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-basel-geneva-and-africa