

Education as investment

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The mission schools were the most lasting contribution of the Basel Mission to the societies in which it worked. In the Gold Coast, the mission founded primary schools in the villages, middle schools in the towns and a teacher training college at Akropong in 1848, one of the oldest institutions of higher education in West Africa. The schools taught reading, writing, arithmetic, religion and practical skills, first in the local languages and later increasingly in English. They trained the teachers, clergy, clerks and craftsmen who formed the first educated African middle class of the colony.¹

The investment in education had economic consequences that the missionaries did not fully foresee. The educated converts became the clerks of the trading firms and the colonial administration, the teachers of the growing school system, the entrepreneurs of the cocoa economy and, eventually, the leaders of the nationalist movement that achieved Ghana's independence in 1957. Economic historians have found that regions of Africa where Protestant missions were active in the colonial period show higher levels of education and income today, a finding that echoes the argument about literacy and Protestantism discussed in Part B.²

The Basel Mission's investment in education thus illustrates a principle that runs through the history of Basel: the long-term return of investment in human capital. The council of Basel that financed the university in 1460, the reformers who founded schools after 1529 and the missionaries who founded schools in Akropong and Mangalore all invested in education in the expectation of benefits that would only appear over generations. The modern pharmaceutical industry of Basel, which depends on highly educated researchers, is the beneficiary of this long tradition.

1 Notes

1. On the educational institutions of the Basel Mission in the Gold Coast, including the teacher training college at Akropong (founded 1848), see the literature on the history of education in Ghana. To be verified. ↩
2. On the long-term effects of colonial-era missionary education in Africa on literacy and income, see the economic literature (e.g. the work of Nathan Nunn and others on missions and development). To be verified. ↩

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