

The Dreiland as a functional region

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Geographers describe the area around Basel as a functional region, meaning a territory whose inhabitants live, work, shop and spend their leisure time across administrative boundaries. The Dreiland, as the region is called in German, comprises the two Basel half-cantons and parts of the cantons of Aargau, Solothurn and Jura on the Swiss side, the districts of Lörrach and Waldshut in southern Baden and the southern part of the French département of Haut-Rhin, which since 2021 forms part of the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace. Its centre is the city of Basel, whose employment market, hospitals, university and cultural institutions serve a population far larger than that of the canton itself.¹

The Federal Statistical Office treats Basel as one of the few Swiss agglomerations that extend across a national border, alongside Geneva, Lugano and Kreuzlingen-Konstanz. Its trinational agglomeration counts something approaching one million inhabitants, of whom roughly half live in Switzerland and the remainder in Germany and France.² The figure illustrates a structural fact. The economic hinterland of Basel lies to a large extent abroad, which means that the policies of the canton in matters of transport, housing, spatial planning and labour supply can only succeed when they are coordinated with authorities in Lörrach, Freiburg, Colmar, Strasbourg and Paris.

The region is also marked by asymmetry. Basel-Stadt is a small canton with a very high density of jobs, a concentration of headquarters and research centres and a level of wages far above that of the neighbouring regions. The adjacent districts of Baden and Alsace have lower wages, lower housing costs and a larger supply of land. The result is a division of functions in which Swiss employers provide jobs and the neighbouring regions provide housing and part of the labour force, while Swiss residents use the shops and services across the border.³ This division creates mutual

dependence, together with recurrent political tension about traffic, tax revenue and the distribution of public costs.

1 Notes

1. On the delimitation of the trinational agglomeration of Basel and its population, see the publications of the Trinationaler Eurodistrict Basel (TEB) and the Federal Statistical Office on the agglomerations of Switzerland. On the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace, created on 1 January 2021 from the départements of Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin, see Loi n° 2019-816 du 2 août 2019 relative aux compétences de la Collectivité européenne d'Alsace. To be verified. ↩
2. On the cross-border agglomerations of Switzerland and the population of the trinational agglomeration of Basel, see Federal Statistical Office, Raum mit städtischem Charakter 2012 and subsequent updates, and the statistical publications of the TEB. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the asymmetry of wages, employment density and land prices in the trinational region, see the reports of the Oberrheinkonferenz and of the Trinationale Metropolregion Oberrhein, and the regional statistics of the Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt, the Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg and INSEE Grand Est. To be verified. ↩

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