

A long-standing relationship: missions, trading, independence, International Geneva — overview and summary

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Relations between Geneva and Africa go back well before contemporary commodity trading. They run through the Protestant missions of the nineteenth century, through the merchants and bankers who took part in colonial trade, through the Geneva institutions that accompanied the independence movements and through International Geneva, where Africa found, from the 1960s onwards, a platform and partners. This chapter traces that history and shows how it prepared the ground for today's economic and financial relations.

1 In five sentences

1. Relations between Geneva and Africa go back to the Protestant missions of the nineteenth century and to colonial trade, in which Swiss capital and Swiss houses took part despite the absence of colonies.
2. Independence made International Geneva a platform for the African states, and Geneva a centre of humanitarian action, development cooperation and debate on the continent's development.
3. The French language links Geneva to some twenty African countries, whose elites found in Geneva partners who spoke their language and understood their institutions.
4. The 1980s and 1990s saw an influx of African fortunes, the Mobutu and Abacha cases revealing their sometimes illicit origin, while relations with apartheid South Africa remain a sensitive matter.

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5. In the twenty-first century Geneva is asserting itself as a crossroads of African business, with the Africa CEO Forum created in 2012 and a quarter of Africa's state-owned oil purchased by Swiss companies between 2011 and 2013, despite the weakness of direct investment.

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