

“African quality” fuels: the toxic fuels affair

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Geneva’s trading sector sells part of its fuels to Africa, an activity that was the subject, in September 2016, of a Public Eye investigation that left its mark on the financial centre. After three years of research in eight West African countries, including Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Senegal and Benin, the organisation showed that the fuels sold by Swiss traders contained up to 378 times more sulphur than the European limit of 10 parts per million, and that these blends, known in the trade as “African quality”, were produced to meet the lax standards of the destination countries. The investigation implicated Vitol, Trafigura and the Addax and Oryx group for their distribution networks, and Glencore, Mercuria, Gunvor and Litasco for wholesale trading.¹ The traders replied that their products complied with the legal standards of the importing countries. Several West African states subsequently lowered their sulphur thresholds, which Public Eye presents as the result of its campaign.²

The affair carries a lesson that Chapter VI takes up: compliance with local laws is not enough when those laws are manifestly below the standards that the company applies elsewhere. A financial centre that hosts the World Health Organization and sells, a few kilometres away, fuels whose health effects are documented exposes itself to a contradiction that Geneva’s civil society was able to exploit. The affair also shows that pressure can come from the African countries themselves, whose regulators, once alerted, raised their requirements faster than the traders had anticipated.

1 Notes

1. Public Eye, “Dirty Diesel”, publiceye.ch (accessed September 2026); “‘Dirty Diesel’ : des négociants suisses accusés de vendre des carburants toxiques en Afrique” (Swiss traders accused of selling toxic fuels in Africa), France 24, 16 September 2016. ↩

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2. Public Eye, “Dirty Diesel”, cited above. ↩

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