

Cotton

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Cotton from West Africa — Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Cameroon — is one of the main export crops of the Sahel region, where it provides a livelihood for millions of people.¹ It is marketed by national or privatised cotton companies, which sell to international traders, several of which are established in Switzerland.² The Swiss tradition of cotton trading goes back to the house of Volkart, whose role in the nineteenth century was recalled in Part G.

African cotton was at the centre of one of the great trade disputes of the World Trade Organization, established in Geneva. From 2003 onwards, four West African countries denounced the subsidies granted by the United States and the European Union to their producers, which depressed world prices to the detriment of African farmers.³ This case illustrates the link between commodity trading, Geneva's economic diplomacy and African development.

1 Notes

1. FAO, Characterizing the cotton market in the C-4 countries (openknowledge.fao.org), for Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad; Wikipedia (en), art. "Volkart Brothers" (fourth largest cotton trader in the world until 1999, trading activities taken over by Paul Reinhart, Winterthur); Public Eye, "La flotte géante des négociants suisses" (The giant fleet of the Swiss traders), 17 January 2024 (Louis Dreyfus Company, 200 to 250 vessels under contract). ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), art. "Volkart Brothers": Winterthur house, fourth largest cotton trader in the world until 1999, whose trading activities were brought together in Paul Reinhart Ltd (Winterthur) on the dissolution of 1989, the Reinhart family having taken over the business following the marriage of Lilly Volkart to Theodor Reinhart in 1912;

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Wikipedia (en), art. “ECOM Agroindustrial” (Pully; cotton, coffee, cocoa); Public Eye, 17 January 2024 (Louis Dreyfus Company). ↩

3. Sectoral initiative in favour of cotton submitted on 10 June 2003 by Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad, presented at the Cancún ministerial conference; Sub-Committee on Cotton established on 19 November 2004; World Trade Organization, “Établissement du Sous-Comité du coton” (Establishment of the Sub-Committee on Cotton), wto.org, 19 November 2004. ↩

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