

Geneva, an African crossroads in the 21st century

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At the turn of the 21st century, Geneva established itself as a crossroads of African business. The Africa CEO Forum, presented as the largest international conference of the African private sector, was created in Geneva in 2012 by the press group Jeune Afrique, together with the International Finance Corporation. Its first edition brought together some 500 participants. The fifth, held in Geneva on 20 and 21 March 2017, welcomed more than a thousand African and international leaders, including the President of Senegal and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia.¹ Geneva had been chosen in order to underline the dynamism of African capitalism in an international city. The forum has since alternated between Geneva and Abidjan.²

In 2017 the *Tribune de Genève* described Geneva as the ephemeral capital of Africa and recalled the economic ties: the trading of natural resources, which contributed a tenth of Geneva's gross domestic product; Africa, the second-largest region of origin of commodities traded in Switzerland, after Europe, according to a study published that same year; the Société générale de surveillance and its Geneva competitor Cotecna, which were bringing the major African ports up to standard; and the Geneva shipping group MSC, active from Lomé, where it operates a port terminal, to Bulawayo and Arlit.³ The Swiss-African Business Circle at that time brought together some eighty member companies, among them traders, carriers, inspection companies and hotel groups.⁴

The same article noted, however, that barely 1 per cent of Swiss direct investment was directed towards the continent, and that the ties of France and England with their former colonies remained proportionally more intense.⁵ The relationship between Geneva and Africa is thus marked by a contrast: considerable intensity in commodity trading and in wealth management, set against a relative weakness in productive investment.

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An Africa Hub was created in Geneva in 2012 as a platform for representing and supporting African companies; it presents Geneva as the world's leading commodity trading centre and as an important financial centre for trade finance.⁶ Bilateral chambers of commerce, diaspora associations and university programmes complete this network, which Chapter V will describe.

1 Notes

1. Swiss Press Club, "Focus on business opportunities for Swiss companies in Africa", 2017; article "Africa CEO Forum", Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. "Fifth Africa CEO Forum", GB News, accessed September 2026; "La Suisse mise sur une Afrique chaotique, mais prometteuse" (Switzerland bets on a chaotic but promising Africa), Le Temps, March 2018. ↩
3. "Genève, capitale éphémère de l'Afrique" (Geneva, ephemeral capital of Africa), Tribune de Genève, 21 March 2017. ↩
4. "Genève deviendra la capitale de l'Afrique" (Geneva will become the capital of Africa), Bilan, 27 January 2017. ↩
5. Tribune de Genève, 21 March 2017, cited above. ↩
6. Hub Afrique à Genève, presentation, africahubgeneva.net (accessed September 2026). ↩

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