

Geneva and French-speaking Africa

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The French language constitutes a particular link between Geneva and some twenty African countries, the significance of which Part J will analyse. After independence, the countries of French-speaking Africa retained French as their official or working language. They also inherited legal, administrative and accounting systems modelled on the French example. Geneva, a French-speaking city with a civil-law tradition, shared with these countries a language, a set of references and a way of doing things.

This proximity favoured business relations. The elites of French-speaking Africa found in Geneva bankers, lawyers and advisers who spoke their language and understood their institutions. Geneva's commodity traders developed relationships with the national companies and administrations of the French-speaking countries, from Senegal to the Congo. Geneva's universities and institutions welcomed French-speaking African students and researchers.

Switzerland is a member of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie. Geneva hosts institutions connected with the Francophonie.¹ Swiss development cooperation long concentrated a significant part of its efforts on French-speaking countries of West Africa, such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin and Chad.²

This linguistic and cultural proximity also has its ambiguities. It facilitated legitimate relationships, but also the reception of assets diverted by French-speaking leaders, and several of the restitution cases described in Chapter IV concerned countries of French-speaking Africa. It exposed the Geneva financial centre to criticism from the civil society of those countries, whose organisations are often active in Geneva.

Period	Relations between Geneva and Africa
18th century	participation of Geneva capital in the Atlantic trade

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Period	Relations between Geneva and Africa
19th century	Protestant missions, Swiss trading houses in Africa, trading in tropical products
1945-1960	commodity trading settles in Geneva, beginnings of the African humanitarian work of Geneva organisations
1960-1975	independence, African missions in Geneva, UNCTAD, development cooperation
1980-2000	rise of African commodity trading, cases involving the assets of ousted leaders, criticism from civil society
since 2000	restitution of assets, criminal proceedings, business forums, new investment

The milestones in this table, which summarise the developments set out in the present chapter, call for verification of the precise dates in the sources cited in the notes.

1 Notes

1. Member of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie since 1996 and the organisation's third-largest contributor, according to the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, "La Suisse au sein de l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie" (Switzerland within the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie), eda.admin.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. SDC, "Pays d'intervention de la DDC" (SDC countries of operation) (deza.eda.admin.ch): priority countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe; "The four priority regions of Switzerland's international cooperation strategy 2021-2024 [...] remain relevant and are maintained for the period 2025-2028"; on Mali: "Switzerland supports the people of Mali by combining humanitarian aid, development and peace, in order to strengthen governance, protection and economic resilience". ↩

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