

Independence and International Geneva

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

The African independences, between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, transformed the relationship between Geneva and the continent. The new states opened permanent missions to the United Nations Office at Geneva, where they found a platform from which to make their positions heard on decolonisation, development, trade and human rights.¹ The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, created in 1964 and established in Geneva, became the forum in which developing countries pressed their demands for a new international economic order.²

The World Health Organization, the High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Labour Organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Geneva-based non-governmental organisations made Africa one of their principal fields of action, particularly during the famines, epidemics, conflicts and population displacements that marked the continent. African diplomats, international civil servants and experts formed a substantial community in Geneva, whose members often went on to hold prominent positions in their home countries.

This institutional presence had economic and financial consequences. The African missions, their diplomats and their delegations needed banking services. African leaders visiting Geneva built relationships with the financial centre. African international civil servants constituted a clientele. And the organisations themselves made Geneva the centre of programmes devoted to Africa, financed by considerable contributions.

International Geneva was also the setting for critical debate about the financial centre. African organisations and non-governmental organisations denounced there the flight of African capital to Swiss banks, tax evasion by multinationals and the role of commodity traders in the plundering of resources. These criticisms, voiced in Geneva itself, contributed to the developments described in Parts E and H.

1 Notes

1. Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations Office at Geneva, “La Genève internationale en faits et chiffres” (International Geneva in facts and figures), dfae.admin.ch (accessed September 2026), on the presence of permanent missions of almost all states. ↩
2. First United Nations Conference on Trade and Development held in Geneva from 23 March to 16 June 1964; Joint Declaration of the Seventy-Seven Countries of 15 June 1964 founding the Group of 77; “Le Groupe des 77 à ses débuts” (The early days of the Group of 77), UN Chronicle, un.org (accessed September 2026). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-independence-and-international-geneva