

Infrastructure: ports, refineries, warehouses

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The trade in African commodities depends on infrastructure whose condition determines costs and risks. African ports, often congested and poorly equipped, lengthen loading and unloading times. The Geneva inspection companies, among them the Société générale de surveillance (SGS) and Cotecna, contribute to bringing them up to standard. The Geneva group MSC, for its part, operates a terminal in Lomé.¹ African refineries, few in number and often outdated, force the crude-producing countries to import refined products, which creates flows in the opposite direction from which the traders benefit.² Warehouses, silos and pipelines complete this picture.

The Geneva traders sometimes invest in this infrastructure — terminals, depots, service stations, distribution networks — according to the partner model described above. These investments create local value and secure the flows, but they expose the traders to political risk and tie them to the governance of the countries. They are also one of the areas where the contribution of trading to African development can be most tangible.

1 Notes

1. “Genève, capitale éphémère de l’Afrique” (Geneva, ephemeral capital of Africa), Tribune de Genève, 21 March 2017. ↩

2. Wikipedia (en), art. “Dangote refinery”: Lekki refinery (Lagos), “the largest single-train refinery in the world”, inaugurated on 22 May 2023, in production since January 2024 (petrol since September 2024), investment of more than USD 19 billion, announced capacity of 650,000 and later 700,000 barrels per day, “capable of supplying 100% of Nigeria’s oil needs, with a surplus for export”; expansion to 1.4 million barrels per day announced in October 2025; TheCable, 29 January 2024 (NNPC crude-for-products swaps). ↩

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