

Inspection: the Société générale de surveillance

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Inspection guarantees that the goods delivered correspond to the goods sold. The Société générale de surveillance, established in Geneva since 1915 and presented as the world's number one in inspection, is its emblematic player.¹ It employs tens of thousands of people around the world, in laboratories, ports, mines, refineries and warehouses, and issues the certificates of quantity and quality on which payment for cargoes depends.² Other inspection companies, Swiss and foreign, are present in Geneva.³

Inspection fulfils a function of trust comparable to that of the inspectors of the medieval fairs described in Part A. It allows parties who never meet, and banks that never see the goods, to deal in safety. The inspection certificate is one of the documents required under documentary credits. Its reliability conditions the whole chain.

Inspection also has a dimension of responsibility. Inspection companies certify the conformity of products with health, environmental and safety standards. They also take part in the verification of supply chains against sustainability and human rights requirements. Their role thus extends from the measurement of quantities to the attestation of responsible conduct, which places them at the heart of the debates described in Part H.

1 Notes

1. Le Temps, 16 February 2023, cited above. ↩
2. SGS, “Our History”, sgs.com (accessed September 2026): more than 99,250 employees, 2,700 laboratories and sites, presence in almost every country. ↩

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3. Cotecna, “Notre histoire” (cotecna.com): “Cotecna was founded in Switzerland in 1974 by Mr Elie Georges Massey”, established in Geneva since 1975, more than 6,000 employees in more than 50 countries; Wikipedia (en), article “Bureau Veritas”: founded in Antwerp in 1828, head office in Neuilly-sur-Seine, 82,000 employees, more than 1,500 offices and laboratories in 140 countries; article “Intertek”: descended in particular from the firm Caleb Brett (1885), head office in London, more than 45,000 employees in more than 100 countries; article “SGS S.A.”: founded in Rouen in 1878 by Henri Goldstuck for the inspection of grain cargoes, head office transferred to Geneva in 1915, the name Société Générale de Surveillance adopted on 19 July 1919, 2,600 offices and laboratories, 99,600 employees (2023). ↩

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