

The United Nations Convention against Corruption and asset recovery

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The Swiss framework forms part of a multilateral setting. The United Nations Convention against Corruption, the only global agreement in this field, brings together 191 states parties. Switzerland ratified it on 24 September 2009. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs coordinates the review of its implementation, and Switzerland publishes all of the related documents in full.¹ Chapter V of the Convention, devoted to asset recovery, lays down the principle that assets derived from corruption are to be returned to the state of origin, organises cooperation between states for detection, freezing, confiscation and restitution, and requires financial institutions to exercise vigilance towards persons entrusted with prominent public functions.² Switzerland was one of the promoters of this chapter. Since 2001 it has organised a series of seminars bringing together asset-recovery practitioners in Lausanne, from which guidelines for the efficient restitution of stolen assets have emerged.³

This framework has two consequences for the financial centre. The first is that African states have, under international law, a title to restitution and a cooperation network, which they use with the support of organisations established in Basel and Geneva. Requests are multiplying and becoming more professional. The second is that the peer review provided for by the Convention exposes Swiss practices to the scrutiny of other states, including African states, which has contributed to the reforms described in this chapter. International Geneva, where the human-rights bodies and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development have their seats, is one of the places where illicit financial flows are denounced. The Geneva financial centre is one of the places where they are handled. This dual presence, which few cities share, carries obligations.

1 Notes

1. Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, “Convention des Nations Unies contre la corruption” (United Nations Convention against Corruption), eda.admin.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Chapter V of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (Art. 51 to 59): Art. 51 (fundamental principle of return), Art. 52 (prevention and detection of transfers of proceeds of crime, enhanced scrutiny of persons entrusted with prominent public functions), Art. 54 and 55 (freezing, seizure, confiscation and international cooperation), Art. 57 (return and disposal of assets); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Chapitre V – Recouvrement des avoirs, articles 51-59” (Chapter V – Asset recovery, Articles 51–59), unodc.org (accessed September 2026). ↩
3. Lausanne seminars organised since 2001 by the Directorate of International Law of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, with the International Centre for Asset Recovery of the Basel Institute on Governance and the StAR initiative of the World Bank and UNODC; “Lignes directrices pour le recouvrement efficace des biens mal acquis” (Guidelines for the efficient recovery of stolen assets), 2014, learn.baselgovernance.org (accessed September 2026); tenth seminar from 27 February to 1 March 2017, Federal Council press release of 1 March 2017, admin.ch. ↩

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