

Timber, fertilisers and the other flows

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Beyond the major products, other flows link Africa to Geneva trading. Tropical timber from Central Africa — Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo — is exported to Europe and Asia under conditions that raise questions of deforestation, the legality of logging and the rights of local populations, and that the European regulation on deforestation now governs.¹ Fertilisers, imported by African countries for their agriculture, are traded by Geneva houses. Their price, highly sensitive to energy crises, determines the food security of the continent.²

Refined products — petrol, diesel, kerosene — are imported by most African countries, whose refining capacity is insufficient. The Geneva traders are among their main suppliers. These imports have been the subject of controversy over the quality of the fuels delivered, some investigations having shown that they contained sulphur levels far above European standards.³ These controversies led several African countries to tighten their standards and the traders to adapt their practices.

Cereals — wheat, rice — imported by African countries, many of which depend on world markets for their food, are traded from the Lake Geneva region. The crisis of 2022, which disrupted exports from the Black Sea, showed the vulnerability of these countries and the role of the traders in their supply. Geneva trading is thus present on both sides of the African flows: it buys the commodities that the continent exports and it sells the continent part of what it imports.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (en), art. “EU Regulation on Deforestation-free products”: Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 adopted on 31 May 2023 and in force since 29 June 2023, applicable to timber, cocoa, coffee, palm oil, soya, rubber and cattle; application initially scheduled for 30 December 2024,

postponed in December 2024 to 30 December 2025 (30 June 2026 for micro and small enterprises), then postponed and simplified again on 26 November 2025, with application now expected for the end of 2026.

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2. African Development Bank, press release of 20 May 2022: African Emergency Food Production Facility of USD 1.5 billion for 20 million smallholder farmers; “the price of wheat has soared in Africa by over 45% since the war in Ukraine began”, fertiliser prices up 300% and a shortfall of 2 million tonnes of fertiliser, food deficit of at least 30 million tonnes (wheat, maize, soya imported from Russia and Ukraine); Wikipedia (en), art. “Black Sea Grain Initiative” (agreement of 22 July 2022, 57% of the grain exported to developing countries). ↩
3. Public Eye, “Dirty Diesel”, September 2016, publice.ch: sulphur levels up to 378 times the European limit of 10 parts per million in the fuels sold in eight West African countries; France 24, 16 September 2016; see the section devoted to this case later in this chapter. ↩

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