

# The Swiss-South African Association

Autor(en): **Schrafl, Anton E.**

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## THE SWISS–SOUTH AFRICAN ASSOCIATION

**Anton E. Schrafl,**

born 1932 in Zurich; 1956 Diploma in Mechanical Engineering at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich; Master of Business Administration, Harvard Business School; PhD with a thesis on Operational Research at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich. 1969 Managing Director of «Holderbank» Finanzière Glaris Ltd.; Former President of the European Cement Association (CEMBUREAU); Former Member of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce; Former Member of Parliament of the Canton of Zurich. Currently Deputy Chairman of «Holderbank» Finanzière Glaris Ltd.; President of the Swiss–South African Association.

*South Africa's future will depend largely now on whether it can continue to be successful in reinforcing the peaceful co-operation existing between the various racial and population groups. For this to happen, one of the most important preconditions is a functional and increasing level of economic prosperity, and open foreign trade.*

The Swiss–South African Association was founded as a private organization a good forty years ago (in November 1956) by prominent representatives of a few larger Swiss corporations with activities in South Africa. From the very beginning, the Association was economically orientated, but nevertheless it also cultivated contacts with the representatives of the South African government.

Following the election results of 1994 which established the ANC as the majority party, the question was raised as to how the Swiss–South African Association should continue to be active. It was clear that the focus would remain on economic and political contacts. The objective of the Association continues to be to cultivate relations between the Swiss and the South African economies, but given the special interconnectedness between South Africa's economic and political challenges, it became necessary to pay increased attention to developing contacts with the representatives of the current government. Besides, these representatives well understand that solving the country's economic challenges, especially overcoming unemployment, is very high on the list of priorities for the future. In this connexion, *Nelson Mandela* favoured us with an entire day during his 1997 trip to Switzerland, during which he paid a visit to various industrial and service companies and had a lively exchange of views and information with Swiss business leaders over a lunch held in his honour.

At present, the Swiss–South African Association organizes three to five events each year. As a rule, these events take place in Zurich, where South African business leaders and government representatives tell us about their problems, views and wishes.

The Association's purpose was recently reformulated as follows:

*«The purpose of the Swiss–South African Association is to foster the relationship between Switzerland and modern South Africa and to enhance the understanding of the Swiss for the various challenges of South Africa. This is not only the case for economic issues, but also for political and social questions. The Swiss–South African Association is aware of the key role South Africa plays in the development of the whole continent.»*

In order to reach this goal the association organizes speeches by leaders of South Africa's political and economic life as well as of people experienced in its social and ethnical problems on a regular basis. The Association organizes contacts between government offices, development organizations, universities, economic organizations and companies of both countries. In this context the Association supports the initiatives of authorities and organizations and coordinates its efforts with them. It informs its members and the public about its endeavours, as well as about the development and the challenges facing South Africa.

The future outlook for the Association is based on these objectives. It is not only a question of gaining an improved understanding of the great challenges South Africa is facing; we want to make a positive contribution, within the limitations of the opportunities and resources available, toward solving the problems and helping build the South African economy.

For me, the following challenges are vital (I refer here to an article by Prof. *Erich Leistner*, Director of the Africa Institute in Pretoria, published in the quarterly journal of «asa» 1999).

In general, economic growth is too slow. This has a number of different causes. To begin with, there is the unacceptable spread of crime (which above all spells danger for the further growth of tourism);



*The Ulco cement factory in Kimberley, which belongs to Alpha Ltd., a South African subsidiary of Holderbank.*

the educational system, which has still substantial scope for improvement, the fact that a large number of well-educated professionals are emigrating; corruption; Aids (the spread of which is posing enormous challenges to the healthcare system and overall demographic development); as well as labour legislation which is in fact hostile to the labour markets, based on outdated concepts of protecting wages and jobs and which therefore prevents any possibility of breaking the vicious circle of population growth – unemployment – poverty. Unemployment at a rate of upwards of 40 percent cannot be conquered by means of labour and social legislation but rather above all through accelerated economic growth.

In order to get this economic growth into gear, however, long-term investments from abroad are needed and wanted. Unfortunately, today investments are limited mainly to short-term investments (trading investments) instead of direct equity investments of a long-term nature. The reason for this is that there is not yet enough confidence in the country's political stability, but much more so even in the country's economic situation, which is still restrained by a partial exchange control. The economy and more particularly the banking sector is stifled by a suffocating bureaucracy. It makes it not easy to react flexibly to changing conditions. Another challenge lies in the fact that, following the collapse of the Eastern Block,

numerous countries in Eastern Europe and Asia have now recovered economically and thanks to their success, are casting doubts on South Africa's competitiveness with respect to wage levels, education and performance.

However, in addition to all these negative points, there are also many positive aspects to be found. There is significant potential in South Africa owing to its great wealth in natural resources. Of increasing importance, too, are factors such as its incomparable beauty and favourable climate, which combine to give its inhabitants the possibility of a high quality of life and form an excellent basis for the expansion of tourism. Thanks to the new basis of equality under the law, South Africa's pluralistic society – one hopes – should no longer be regarded as a burden to bear, but in future should even prove to be an impulse to development in its own right.

In addition to the cultivation of contacts and exchange of information carried out till now, in future the Swiss–South African Association intends to develop further initiatives. At present, the idea of founding and supporting an institute of higher education «Switzerland–Southern Africa» is being looked at. Such an institution could form cooperative ventures with various other, similar, institutions. This would enable us, on the one hand, to support the South African economy and,

on the other hand, to promote cooperation between the South African and Swiss economies. To accomplish this objective, one prerequisite, however, would be to expand our membership and especially strengthen our numbers of younger members. But this is difficult at a time when young people no longer want to pin their plans for the future to one geographical and economic region in the world, and when, moreover, the possibility of cultivating individual, tailored contacts via the Internet has become almost limitless. Nevertheless, based on my professional experience

and as the President of the Swiss–South African Association for many years, I will dare to say in conclusion that even in an age of globalisation and electronic networking, the regular contact and exchange between a group of individuals with many years of foreign experience in a particular region – a region whose ties with Switzerland lie not only in the fact that our two countries are both rich in spectacular scenery but are also based on historical relationships – offers opportunities to all of its participants which cannot be had elsewhere.

### **Zusammenfassung**

*Die Swiss–South African Association wurde vor gut 40 Jahren (im November 1956) als privatrechtliche Vereinigung von prominenten Vertretern aus grösseren schweizerischen Unternehmen gegründet, welche Aktivitäten in Südafrika entfalten.*

*Zweck der Vereinigung ist die Pflege der Beziehungen zwischen der schweizerischen und der südafrikanischen Wirtschaft. Angesichts der besonderen Vernetzung von wirtschaftlichen und politischen Herausforderungen, welche sich nach der Wahl Mandelas und der Überwindung der Apartheid noch akzentuierte, pflegt die Vereinigung auch vermehrt Kontakte mit Regierungsvertretern. So gab uns 1997 Nelson Mandela anlässlich seines Besuchs in der Schweiz während eines ganzen Tages die Ehre. Gegenwärtig veranstaltet die Swiss–South African Association drei bis fünf Anlässe im Jahr, die in der Regel in Zürich stattfinden und an denen uns südafrikanische Wirtschaftsführer und Regierungsvertreter ihre Probleme, Ansichten und Wünsche darlegen.*

*Südafrika steht vor grossen Herausforderungen, die hier – gestützt auf einen Artikel von Erich Leistner – nur in Stichworten erwähnt seien: hohe Kriminalitätsrate, Arbeitslosigkeit, Engpässe im Bildungswesen, Abwanderung von Fachleuten, Korruption und Aids. Demgegenüber verfügt es über reiche Rohstoffvorkommen, über eine touristisch reizvolle Landschaft und eine entwicklungsfähige und -willige, pluralistisch zusammengesetzte Bevölkerung. In Zukunft möchte die Swiss–South African Association neben der bisherigen Kontaktpflege und dem Informationsaustausch auch weitere Initiativen entfalten. Geprüft wird zur Zeit die Gründung und Mitträgerschaft eines Hochschulinstituts «Schweiz – südliches Afrika». Ein solches Institut könnte mit ähnlichen Instituten zusammenarbeiten. Damit können wir einerseits die südafrikanische Wirtschaft unterstützen und andererseits die Zusammenarbeit zwischen der südafrikanischen und schweizerischen Wirtschaft fördern. Voraussetzung dazu ist allerdings, dass wir im Hinblick auf dieses Ziel unsere Mitgliedschaft erweitern und vor allem auch mit jüngeren Mitgliedern verstärken können. Aus jahrzehntelanger beruflicher Erfahrung und als langjähriger Präsident der Swiss–South African Association wage ich aber aus Überzeugung folgende SchlussThese: Die regelmässige Kontaktpflege und der Erfahrungsaustausch in einem Kreis von Persönlichkeiten mit langjähriger Ausländerfahrung in einer bestimmten Region, die mit der Schweiz nicht nur wegen der landschaftlichen Schönheiten, sondern auch aufgrund der geschichtlich gewachsenen Beziehungen verknüpft ist, bietet auch im Zeitalter der Globalisierung und der elektronischen Vernetzung allen Beteiligten Chancen, welche durch nichts anderes ersetzt werden können. ♦*