

FORUM CeSPI

The Mattei Plan: Opportunities, Ambitions, and Points of Debate

By Andrea Stocchiero, CeSPI

Contextual Notes

Africa has not featured so prominently in Italian politics¹ since the Radical Party's campaign against hunger in the early 1980s². That initiative led to a significant increase in resources for cooperation, thanks to Law 73 of 1985 (Italian Aid Fund), followed by the 1987 legislative reform, which strengthened development cooperation as part of Italy's foreign policy.

For years, there has been a call to adopt a global and forward-looking perspective to understand the potential growth or decline of our country. National development is increasingly tied to international events. Within this context, the relationship between Italy, Europe, and Africa takes on special significance. Various aspects of this relationship have been highlighted: the growing demographic and per capita income disparity, the technological, scientific, and financial gap, and their consequences for international stability. While these disparities pose complex challenges, they also offer opportunities for forging new relationships: both Europe and Italy are proposing a more balanced and sustainable partnership with Africa.

However, this approach must be capable of delving deeper to avoid simplistic and flawed assumptions, such as the idea that the demographic imbalance will automatically lead to an African invasion of Europe. In reality, the largest migration flows are and will continue to be intra-African, directed towards the Arabian Gulf. As Marco Zupi³ notes in a recent CeSPI document, "A broad look at the African continent reveals vast differences between states, where enormous contradictions coexist—some inherited from the past, others resulting from globalization." Yet, there are general commonalities: "These are mostly very poor economies, often registering high growth rates, heavily reliant on foreign markets and specializing in only a few sectors. Regional and continental economic integration remains underdeveloped, while Asia, particularly China, is emerging as the main commercial partner."

For years, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa⁴, the African Development Bank⁵, and the African Union have emphasized the importance of promoting industrialization and diversifying national and regional markets to overcome the "resource curse" and foreign dependency,

¹ Even though an increasing attention towards Africa can also be seen in previous governments, up to the Partnership with Africa in 2020: [Presentazione del documento strategico "Il Partenariato con l'Africa" – Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale](#)

² :: [Radicali.it](#) ::

³ [L'Africa e le trasformazioni in corso | CeSPI](#); and [Geopolitica ed economia dell'Africa: i principali attori statali esterni in campo e i conflitti in corso](#)

⁴ [United Nations Economic Commission for Africa | Ideas for a prosperous Africa \(uneca.org\)](#) e [African Development Bank Group | Making a Difference \(afdb.org\)](#)

⁵ [Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. | African Union \(au.int\)](#)

fostering more widespread and equitable development by investing in local dynamic forces, particularly young people.

In recent months, significant youth protests have erupted against local governments in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, reminiscent of the Arab Spring in 2011. These demonstrations demand jobs, dignified incomes, more rights, and greater freedoms. Several African states are governed by entrenched elites, and in some cases, kleptocracies. These elites have maintained relationships with Western governments for decades, and more recently with new powers like China, India, Turkey, and Russia, to extract personal profits while leaving their lower classes to suffer.

Africa is at the center of geopolitical and economic competition for access to strategic resources, including new critical minerals essential for the ecological transition. It seems condemned to corruption, the continuation of the "resource curse", a rent-based economy, and capital flight, exacerbating debt problems. The burden of this debt is then placed on the lower classes by reducing social spending, as demanded by international financial institutions that come to these economies' aid. These institutions are led by the same countries fueling the competition.

Young people are challenging a system that has burdened African nations for decades. As noted in an ISPI analysis⁶, resentment is growing, as is the sense of being constantly subject to interference and injustice. Thus, an African discontent is emerging against both old and new colonialisms, and against pre-packaged solutions that are increasingly misaligned with traditional powers.

This discontent arises while the world faces a crisis of multilateralism and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Interconnected crises—from climate change to COVID-19, from wars to inflation and stagnation—have worsened the impacts, inequalities, and tensions, with Africa's most vulnerable populations again suffering the most tragic consequences.

The Mattei Plan

Against this backdrop, the Italian government has introduced the Mattei Plan. This ambitious initiative goes beyond development cooperation, as the Prime Minister's Office seeks to coordinate Italy's major foreign relations with Africa. It aspires to be a major foreign policy initiative capable of establishing a true partnership between Italy and Africa, with mutual benefits in the economic, social, environmental, and cultural fields, grounded in a convergence of national interests. The Plan sets out 17 areas of intervention⁷: from development cooperation to promoting exports and investments, from education to research and innovation, from health to agriculture and food security, and more.

Following several communications (notably the one at the Migration and Development Conference in July 2023⁸), the government presented Decree-Law No. 161 on November 15, 2023, which was later amended and converted into Law No. 11 of January 2024, establishing the Steering Committee for the Mattei Plan. The decree creates "the framework within which the various state administrations must carry out their programming, impact assessments, and interventions, each within their respective competencies"⁹. The Steering Committee is tasked with promoting, coordinating, and monitoring interventions. However, as the Plan has evolved, the Committee has also taken on decision-making

⁶ [Is Africa Turning Against the West? | ISPI \(ispionline.it\)](#)

⁷ Dossier XIX Legislature, Draft DPCM for the adoption of the Italy-Africa Strategic Plan: Mattei Plan, Parliamentary Study Service.

⁸ [Conferenza internazionale su sviluppo e migrazioni. Impegni e soluzioni condivise per il Mediterraneo e l'Africa | www.governo.it](#)

⁹ Ibid.

responsibilities. As a result, a Mission Structure and the Steering Committee have been established at the Prime Minister's Office, meeting twice so far (in March and April 2024¹⁰). The Committee includes representatives from several ministries, state entities, the business world, and non-governmental organizations¹¹.

The founding Decree-Law establishes a four-year timeframe, with the possibility of periodic updates. The Plan is meant to be co-designed with African states and is described as “a programmatic and operational platform open to constant collaboration with African nations during both the definition and implementation phases of interventions”¹². The Plan's general guidelines were presented at the "Italy-Africa Summit" held on January 29, 2024, with representatives from 46 African nations¹³ in attendance. However, the African Union representative criticized the Plan's lack of prior consultation with African states¹⁴. Nevertheless, the Italian government remains in continuous dialogue with various African states, as evidenced by numerous high-level missions and the work of Italian embassies.

The Decree-Law outlines a wide range of sectors for intervention and calls for the development of specific territorial strategies for certain regions of Africa. Nine African countries have been identified for pilot projects: Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Republic of the Congo, and Mozambique.

In July 2024, the government presented the "Draft Decree for the Adoption of the Italy-Africa Strategic Plan: Mattei Plan"¹⁵ to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate for parliamentary review. The draft was assigned to the Foreign Affairs Committee of both chambers for evaluation. As stated on page 56 of the draft decree, "The Prime Minister's Decree of adoption will be signed, and the subsequent implementation report will be transmitted," with the report "approved by the Steering Committee, indicating the Plan's progress and possible measures to improve implementation and enhance the effectiveness of interventions in relation to the set objectives"¹⁶.

The current version of the Plan (as of August 2024) outlines some potential new cooperation initiatives, along with others already in progress. These initiatives, which are being negotiated with African counterparts through embassies and various entities involved in the Steering Committee, aim to establish a non-exploitative partnership “to ensure that economic and social benefits remain within the local territory and serve as a stable resource for future growth. The Plan's interventions will emerge from direct preliminary contacts with African representatives to ensure national ownership throughout the entire implementation process”¹⁷.

The Plan reflects the involvement of both cooperation and technical/entrepreneurial sectors. Cooperation is evident in areas like education, health, and water, with clear references to sustainable development goals. In contrast, technical and business expertise is more prominent in agriculture, water, energy (with a focus on strategic projects), and physical and digital infrastructure. Several pilot projects already underway or in the early stages are highlighted, including major companies such as

¹⁰ [Prima riunione della Cabina di regia per il Piano Mattei: intervento di apertura del Presidente Meloni | www.governo.it](#); [Seconda riunione della Cabina di regia sul Piano Mattei | www.governo.it](#)

¹¹ See the list of participants in Dossier XIX Legislature and new participants in [Piano Mattei, ecco i nuovi componenti della cabina di regia - Policy Maker \(policymakermag.it\)](#)

¹² Dossier XIX legislatura, op. cit.

¹³ [Italia-Africa. Un ponte per una crescita comune | www.governo.it](#)

¹⁴ [Ecco il piano Mattei, ma l'Unione africana gela Meloni - RSI Radiotelevisione svizzera](#)

¹⁵ In [getTesto.ashx \(camera.it\)](#)

¹⁶ Dossier XIX legislatura, op. cit.

¹⁷ Idem

Recent analyses suggest that in the context of growing geopolitical and economic competition, there is an increasing trend toward a transactional approach to international cooperation²², one that sidelines policies based on human rights and support for democratic processes in favor of more immediate and transactional goals. Italy and the European Union are negotiating with both authoritarian African governments and those engaged in democratization processes. However, there is a need to avoid paternalistic and controlling approaches, acknowledging that Europe and Italy are themselves experiencing democratic crises and human rights issues, particularly when it comes to the exploitation of African migrants in fields and factories, with increasing racism and discrimination. How should cooperation under the Mattei Plan be shaped? How can Italy's foreign policy balance national interests, democracy, and human rights when dealing with various African states?

Moreover, there is the question of balancing multilateralism and bilateralism in foreign policy. The Italian government has clearly prioritized national interests, signaling its intention to redefine the balance between aid provided through multilateral organizations and that offered bilaterally. How does the Mattei Plan fit into the multilateral framework, and how does it relate to the role of the European Union? Can this relationship support multilateralism, the 2030 Agenda, and the emerging discussions from the Summit for the Future? These aspects seem to be missing from the current draft of the Plan.

Additionally, the relationship between Italy and the European Union toward Africa must be considered: both aim to offer a new partnership²³, particularly with the Global Gateway initiative, which aligns with the direction of the Mattei Plan. Europe, as recently reiterated by the United States²⁴, is proposing a more equal partnership that supports the creation of added value in African countries for widespread and equitable growth. However, many initiatives remain focused on creating development corridors for the extraction of strategic resources destined for European markets. How much will genuinely benefit local development, and how much will perpetuate the “resource curse” and African dependency?

The Voice of Africa

An important question arises: whose voice is being represented in this dialogue with Africa? Is it the voice of the elites, with whom deals can be negotiated (even with the new military elites in Sahelian countries²⁵), or the voices of the people, the youth, and civil society organizations demanding respect for their rights, including the right to local development? It is crucial that the Mattei Plan adopts a systemic approach to international relations: on one hand, it is essential to maintain and condition relationships with authoritarian governments, ensuring that national interests are aligned with respect for human rights; on the other hand, Italy must enhance its ability to foster closer ties with the most dynamic and open African societies and economies.

Beyond the Steering Committee, it would be critical to establish local dialogues in African countries with civil society, researchers, and emerging entrepreneurs to seize the best opportunities for equitable and sustainable local development. Strengthening the ability to network socially and economically within and with African countries is as important—if not more so—than the work of the Steering Committee in Rome. Additionally, the Committee should involve the voices of Africans

²² [What is driving change in Europe's international cooperation agenda? Part 1 - ECDPM](#)

²³ [EU – Africa cooperation | EU4AFRI](#)

²⁴ [U.S.-Africa: Enduring Partnership - United States Department of State](#)

²⁵ [Difesa, Esteri e ora intelligence. Gli incontri Italia-Niger - Formiche.net](#)

in Italy, represented not only by state diplomats but also by diasporas and their descendants. This could include the newly formed "Italian Coordination of Diasporas for International Cooperation"²⁶, a national entity supported by Italian cooperation, which could serve as a bridge between Italy and the African countries involved. Furthermore, there is a lack of involvement from internationalist organizations that have been studying the internal and geopolitical dynamics of the African continent for years, such as the newly created Foreign Policy Community established by MAECI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation), which could provide valuable expertise.

Given climate change, it has become evident that politics must rely on deep and updated scientific knowledge. The scientific community itself calls on politicians to consider environmental and social evidence, without which political decisions risk ineffectiveness. It would be truly innovative and reflect good international practice to establish an Italian-African scientific panel to support political debate, drawing on the expertise of our university system, think tanks, and cooperation with African universities and research centers.

This political issue also raises the question of coherence—not only in Italy's external relations with Africa but also between its domestic policies and its relationship with the African continent. In an interdependent world, everything is connected. For example, is there coherence between developmental cooperation and economic internationalization? Do both aim to foster local industrial growth in African countries, create dignified jobs, protect the environment, and promote sustainable local development? In this sense, coherence would require that if cooperation supports economic initiatives based on principles and practices of genuine sustainability, economic internationalization should also adopt tools capable of assessing the social and environmental impact of investments and trade beforehand to ensure a genuinely non-predatory partnership in a transparent manner. In this direction, the implementation of European due diligence regulations should be encouraged, from timber and conflict minerals to deforestation and the recently approved general due diligence law²⁷. These are rules that require companies to inform and account for the risks of their social and environmental impacts and, if necessary, take corrective measures and provide compensation for damages caused to local populations.

The Mattei Plan originated from the Migration and Development Conference, and although it has since taken on an increasingly economic dimension, it launched the Rome Process for shared and responsible management of migration, involving countries of origin, transit, and Italy, with a particular focus on combating human trafficking. Italy's approach, in line with that of Europe, is increasingly based on externalization, delegating transit countries to retain and repatriate irregular migrants and recently even to host hotspots, as in the case of Albania. In return, material and financial aid is provided. However, this policy continues to raise significant problems, especially concerning the lack of respect for human rights along the coasts and land borders, and because it deviates from asylum principles based on individual situations ~~not~~ to nationality. The Sahara, like the Mediterranean Sea, has become a mass grave²⁸. This doesn't even take into account the treatment of migrants in some transit countries and in Italy itself. Additionally, the belief that development aid will automatically reduce migration is an oversimplification, as analyses show that migration flows actually increase with development. The issue is more complex and requires a more nuanced approach.

²⁶ [È nato il Coordinamento Italiano delle Diaspore per la Cooperazione Internazionale – Summit Nazionale delle Diaspore \(summitdiaspore.org\)](https://summitdiaspore.org)

²⁷ [Directive - EU - 2024/1760 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1760/oj)

²⁸ [Two times more migrants die in the Sahara than at sea \(unric.org\)](https://www.unric.org/en/two-times-more-migrants-die-in-the-sahara-than-at-sea)

There is also a need for coherence between development cooperation and military cooperation. Unfortunately, the Steering Committee seems to lack representation from the Ministry of Defense, at a time when military cooperation and missions play a crucial role in relations with African countries. Considering the social tensions, youth protests, the use of force to stop migrants and human rights defenders, and the criminalization of critical social organizations, it is urgent to establish an effective interaction between foreign policy, development cooperation, and military cooperation. Moreover, strong and transparent conditionality mechanisms are needed to avoid supporting regimes that are compliant but oppressive of freedoms.

The Mattei Plan is ambitious but lacks adequate resources. No additional resources are planned beyond those already allocated to development cooperation and the Italian Climate Fund. These resources are necessary to leverage multilateral and European funds. While there is much discussion about increasing military spending to meet NATO's target of 2% of GDP, little is said about achieving the 0.7% Gross National Income (GNI) target for Official Development Assistance (ODA). In fact, in 2023, this target was reduced to 0.27%. A Mattei Plan without the backing of development cooperation is not very credible²⁹. This revives the decades-old issue of how our political class remains largely unaware of the importance of cooperation for foreign policy. Only during the Craxi-De Michelis period in the late 1980s to early 1990s did the ODA/GNI ratio reach 0.4%, when cooperation was considered important for Italy's international relations and economy.

In addition to the quantitative issue of resources, there is also the qualitative aspect concerning the terms and impacts of funding. The Climate Fund and part of development cooperation are presented in the form of concessional loans, meaning they come with interest rates, grace periods, and long-term capital repayment terms. In some African countries, these conditions have contributed to debt problems. Unfortunately, the debt crisis is regenerating, and many African countries are cutting social spending to pay for international debt servicing. Foreign policy is therefore linked to financial policy, and the Mattei Plan cannot ignore this issue in its direct relationships with African countries. For example, it would be appropriate to update Law 209 of 2000 on debt cancellation and conversion, as well as engage in discussions at the G7, OECD, and United Nations levels.

Alongside public resources, which are closely intertwined with them, there are also private resources. As seen, the draft of the Plan already involves several large enterprises, and for the past 50 years, it has highlighted the opportunity to involve small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which could also serve as a model for African entrepreneurship. However, analyses in recent years show a volatility and reduction in foreign private investments in Africa³⁰ due to international crises, local instability, and the new economic geopolitics focused on security and the restructuring of supply chains according to the new concept of "friendshoring." Meanwhile, African governments are trying to exploit opportunities and geopolitical competition within a fluid set of relationships generated by a multipolar world.

In light of this situation, the role of the private sector is emphasized in public-private partnership programs aimed at catalyzing and multiplying resources for development. Unfortunately, beyond anecdotal evidence, there is a lack of independent analyses on the actual mobilization of resources and their tangible impact. A recent literature review by the World Bank on partnerships in infrastructure projects found a positive impact on service quality and labor productivity but provided little evidence in terms of job creation and poverty reduction. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt measures to evaluate the impacts of non-predatory public-private partnerships that are functional to

²⁹ See Campagna 070 ([home - campagna 070](#))

³⁰ [Regional Trends: Africa \(unctad.org\)](#)

local sustainable development. In this context, institutions like Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP), SIMEST, and SACE should play a greater role. What evaluation matrices could be used? On which interventions should scarce public resources be concentrated? How can maximum transparency be ensured throughout the process?

The Mattei Plan and pilot projects partly focus on creating long supply chains oriented from Africa toward the Italian and European markets, referring to approaches that position Italy as a central player in economic relations. But how much of this value remains locally in African countries? What is the balance between investments still tied to carbon (gas and biofuels) and those aimed at renewable energy? What are the priorities and relationships between long and short supply chains in the food system, especially considering that world hunger, particularly in Africa, has increased in recent years³¹? What role should African farmers play? What investments are planned to ensure their autonomy?

It is clear that a non-predatory partnership depends on the real transfer of skills and technology³², which are the central elements of every economic and social evolution. More specifically, it requires investment in technological and social hybridization aimed at fostering the growth of local knowledge. The future is built on a productive relationship between scientific research and society (including the economic dimension). The Italian university system has multiple and widespread connections with African universities, as do civil society organizations. This is an existing and effective added value on which to focus, but it is underappreciated in the Mattei Plan. A truly new, equal partnership encourages a redistribution of power, which today is mainly technical³³ and concentrated in a few hands.

The Mattei Plan raises many questions. Awareness and knowledge of these questions are the first steps toward building a truly fair and sustainable pact between Italy, Europe, and Africa within a multilateral context that needs reform. The solutions and results are neither simple nor easy to achieve. Above all, there is a need to deeply rethink historical colonial and neo-colonial relationships that, despite all the rhetoric, continue to perpetuate themselves. An ambitious plan cannot be realized in just a few years or within a single legislative term. It requires a shared, deep, and medium- to long-term vision. A bipartisan approach to foreign policy is essential, as is the promotion of global citizenship education to build as broad a consensus as possible. Responding to the questions raised is the first step in laying the foundations for a renewal of foreign policy with Africa.

The Forum, promoted by CeSPI, invites experts and practitioners to engage in an in-depth discussion on how Italy can turn the ambitions of the Mattei Plan into reality. We invite participants to reflect on the ideas presented and to formulate concrete proposals for more impactful actions by Italian and European actors in the African context.

³¹ [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024 \(fao.org\)](https://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition-2024/)

³² It is important to highlight Target 17.6 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which focuses on knowledge sharing and cooperation to ensure access to science, technology, and innovation; Target 17.7, which promotes sustainable technologies in developing countries; and Target 17.8, which aims to strengthen technical and scientific capacities in least developed countries. In this context, please refer to: [Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development - Our World in Data](#)

³³ The technical term should be understood in the philosophical sense of *techné*.

EDITORIAL GUIDELINES:

We invite participants in the Forum to send their contributions, up to a maximum length of 4 pages (approximately 7,200 characters), to the following email addresses: barbara.debenedictis@cespi.it and cespi@cespi.it.

To facilitate the editorial process, please include all necessary bibliographic references directly in the text, avoiding the use of footnotes.

The selected contributions will be published on the CeSPI website and later collected in a CeSPI report within a dedicated series published by Donzelli.