

Italy and Africa: “Value Oriented Diplomacy” in Action

by Fabrizio Lobasso

During a public videoconference on 15 December 2020, Luigi Di Maio, Italy’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, launched “A Partnership with Africa”, a new policy document aimed at strengthening ties with the African continent.¹

The nature of this event, together with its pertinent timing (given the rapid social, political and economic changes taking place across Africa), its pragmatic subdivision into areas of action and intervention, and the fact that for the first time the foreign ministry has been equipped with the operational tools to establish well-structured relations with the continent, all serve to highlight the importance of this document.

The “Partnership with Africa” outlines present and future scenarios for the

¹ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), *A Partnership with Africa*, December 2020, https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2021/01/a_partnership_with_africa_en.pdf.

African continent and the role Italy can play in pursuing its national interests while genuinely contributing to the further development and well-being of African states and societies.

On the one hand, the document highlights specific thematic priorities (such as peace, security, human rights, development cooperation, commercial, cultural and environmental collaboration); on the other, four geopolitical areas of intervention (the Mediterranean, Horn of Africa, Sahel and Southern Africa) are identified, given that the continent, far from being a monolith, deserves diversified and multidimensional approaches.

The announcement marks a moment of complete syncretism for Italy, between its vision of Africa and, at the same time, the perception we believe African countries have of us: an interpretation that requires trust and mutual respect, leading to concrete initiatives which pursue the fulfilment of national

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interests as well as the sustainable development of our overseas partners.

This virtuous coming together of the two perspectives must take place on a profound level, within a shared dimension of identity in which dialogue is equal, inclusive and multi-centric. An intercultural dialogue, in other words, in which current terms connoting a certain type of activity aimed at cooperative development, and characterised by their profound "humanity", such as "people-to-people" or "community based" approaches, assume an almost Grundnorm-like role, becoming basic norms. Norms according to which one is prepared to face the dangers associated with diplomatic work in complex and troubled areas – and even to risk one's life –, as the recent tragic case of Italy's Ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Luca Attanasio, attests.²

It is through this syncretic lens that Italy is developing the best possible understanding of its relationship with Africa. It will continue to do so over the coming years, by choosing to deal with the themes and complexities of the African continent, through "value-oriented diplomacy" – a sort of softpower 2.0, the positive narrative of which should be reinforced, and is aimed at working together to achieve the stability, security and development of our African partners and to open new channels for improved politico-

institutional and trade relations.

"Value oriented diplomacy" is grounded in two, key premises: the pursuit of common, value-related encounters and the absence of hidden geopolitical agendas.³ In both cases, Italy has an advantage over many other international players. A tendency to carve out its own approach to foreign affairs with regards to ethical values such as solidarity, inclusivity, resilience, respect for human dignity, creativity, a multidimensional approach, courtesy and – last but not least – beauty, and the absence of a predatory trait in relations with its partners, render Italy a trustworthy, impartial and moderate interlocutor on the continent.

The need for dialogue with Africa on an equal footing, particularly in a European context,⁴ has become a distinguishing feature in the drawing up of new Italian parameters in the relationship with the continent, and in upholding both the desire for, and scale of, intervention.

³ "Value oriented diplomacy" is one dimension of a wider concept, intercultural diplomacy, theorised and promoted by the author since 2014 and grounded in an appreciation for diversity, dialogue, mutual understanding and peaceful resolutions of disputes in all domains of international relations. See Fabrizio Lobasso, "Brevi note di diplomazia interculturale", in *La Comunità Internazionale*, Vol. LXIX, No. 4/2014, p. 477-506, <https://www.editorialescientifica.com/index.php?plugin=jklibs&file=TGE1MjBjb211bml0JUMzJUEwJTlWNTF8yMDE0JTlWLSUyMEdyYXR1aXRvJTlWLS0ucGRmRp2Ja&download=1>.

⁴ The Italian Partnership with Africa fits into a broader EU-Africa relationship embodied by the recently announced EU-Africa strategy. See, European Commission, *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (JOIN/2020/4), 9 March 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0004>.

² Much has been written on the tragic killing of Italy's ambassador to the DRC on 22 February 2021. An article by the Secretary General of Italy's MAECI, is worth recalling. See Elisabetta Belloni, "Goodbye, Colleague and Friend. We Are Proud of You", in *Corriere della Sera*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.esteri.it/mae/tiny/41302>.

It is moreover important that African partners continue to collaborate with the European Union in order to forge a new, shared partnership, which sets itself apart from the now outdated "benefactor/beneficiary" dynamic.⁵

If this relational trend were to continue over the coming years, Italy would have an important opportunity to reaffirm its position as a forerunner in Africa, simultaneously taking on the role of "building bridges" to the benefit of other willing European and international partners. This may also expand opportunities for inclusive dialogue based on mutual respect, with an intent to make room for genuine yet pragmatic exchanges, and to negotiation-based solutions in crisis zones (and areas of Italian interest) such as Ethiopia, Libya, the Sahel and Mozambique.

As such, "value-oriented diplomacy" can become a concrete instrument for the efficient fulfilment of Italy's geostrategic priorities in Africa, and for a better pursuit of its national interests. A focus on values has the potential to progressively improve mutual comprehension and intercultural dialogue, building on the common assumption that better, reciprocal understanding lead to more concrete and productive results, especially in those areas where disagreements are common and often inevitable.

⁵ One of the pillars of the Italian strategy towards Africa relies on the reinforcement of continental multilateralism, self-sustainability and regional integration. Against this backdrop, during Italy's 2021 G20 presidency, Rome will direct particular attention to the newly established African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), especially as far as customs union improvement is concerned.

Peace and security, governance and human rights, the management of migratory phenomena, commercial alliances and investments, cooperative development, the fight against climate change, cultural and scientific cooperation are all issues of primary importance. These are domains in which Italy will continue to focus its attention in Africa – with an expectation that such efforts are met with an acknowledgement of the importance of pursuing a satisfactory level of shared values and mutual respect by African partners as well.

A number of concrete examples of Italian engagement with Africa can be provided to better frame this approach.

Investing in training and education

Training and education initiatives, and more generally all maieutic activities, carried out by Italy abroad can be a vehicle for transmitting profound messages, rooted in the value-related bedrock of our country.⁶ This in turn can help increase Italian credibility with its African partners, and in particular new generations of African citizens. It is precisely through training and education that Italy can reinforce the tangible signs of shared values such as solidarity, adaptability and creativity with Africa.

Italy's participation in international missions in Africa, such as the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) and Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP)

⁶ See Luigi Di Maio, "Success and Joy Built on 'Soft Power'", in *Avvenire*, 10 October 2020, <https://www.esteri.it/mae/tiny/40303>.

in Somalia, among others, are but one component of Italian engagement.⁷ These missions are assisting host nations in the fight against terrorism, piracy and organised crime. The preparation of Italian trainers and their inclusive capacity to adapt to local surroundings render our nation's collaboration with Somalia – and, similarly, with other West African countries – highly admirable.⁸

Another example is the promotion of educational modules by Italian universities in Africa in the fields of good governance, inter/intra-institutional relations, urban-rural dialogue, the rule of law and the management of electoral processes.⁹

A number of countries in the Sahel region (Nigeria and Mali in particular) benefit from Italian programmes on the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, characterised by an approach that is never dogmatic.

⁷ For a comprehensive overview of Italy's participation in and financial contribution to international missions in Africa (2019–2020) see, Italian Chamber of Deputies-Research Department, *Autorizzazione e proroga missioni internazionali nell'anno 2020*, 10 December 2020, https://temi.camera.it/leg18/provvedimento/autorizzazione-e-proroga-missioni-internazionali-ultimo-trimestre-2019_d.html.

⁸ See, for instance, Gianluca Di Feo, "Dalla Somalia al mondo. I Carabinieri inventano le polizie di stabilità", in *La Repubblica*, 6 June 2020, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2020/06/06/dalla-somalia-al-mondo-i-carabinieri-inventano-le-polizie-di-stabilita23.html>.

⁹ In the electoral field, in 2020, the Italian MAECI began funding an important project – InnovElections – which promotes training and capacity building across Africa. For more information see the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES) website: *Innov-Elections*, <https://www.eces.eu/en/innoelections>.

Instead, it is shaped by inter/intra-ethnic community dialogue, in order to boost local awareness on the means and modalities to confront challenges tied to socio-economic sustainability, violent extremism and radicalisation, as well as working together to rebuild institutions and maintain peace, while respecting existing international agreements.

Encouraging local growth and development

Juxtaposed with self-evident attempts to expand Italian commercial markets in the continent, working to reinforce the value-related element grounded in mutual respect is just as important in terms of advancing Italy's national interests in Africa. It is through the experiential and professional opportunities offered by Italy, as well as the capacity to give rise to burgeoning entrepreneurial ideas in cooperation with Italian businesses supporting start-ups, and in African-run family businesses (self-)identifying with our own similar tradition, that a genuine sense of African identity and shared values can be reinforced and inspired.

This is true even (and especially) with regards to gender equality, the creative dynamics of which – far from being simply exportable to other parts of the world – can give rise to new tools for emancipation, in harmony with identity-based traditions and, at the same time, the necessary innovative force to take positive steps towards greater awareness of gender issues.

Sudan's delicate transition to democracy, the strengthened sense of identity in civil society and the recent changes in

legislation with a view to modernising Sharia law in the country were brought about also thanks to the crucial role played by women – something which has undoubtedly fostered creativity and injected new life into the whole country.¹⁰

In that sense, contributions by Italy's development cooperation in Sudan, which works to promote programmes dedicated to raising awareness of gender issues and achieving gender equality in areas such as health, nutrition, community and work, has been significant over the last years, and has undoubtedly contributed to some improvements, still noticeable today, across Sudan.¹¹ One small but pertinent example is Italy's contribution to the organisation of a community theatre in Khartoum, an initiative that has helped to raise awareness on gender, migration and social inclusion in the country.¹²

¹⁰ See, for instance, Siona Jenkins, "How Sudan's Women Brought Down a President", in *Financial Times*, 5 December 2020, <https://on.ft.com/2Lqv1f3>.

¹¹ In terms of Italy's development partnerships, Sudan is one of the eleven priority countries in Africa and hosts an important division of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), with regional competences. Over the last five years, Italy has invested more than 100 million euro in development projects, emergency initiatives and the management of large European projects (the so-called EU delegated cooperation). Likewise, Italian contributions in terms of multilateral networking and advocacy to foster local consciousness on social themes like mine action (with the 2016–2018 Chair of UNMAS Mine Action Support Group), nutrition (with the 2017–2019 Chair of the UNICEF/WHO/WFP Scaling Up Nutrition project) and finally with the creation in 2019 of the International Group of Friends of People with Disability.

¹² See AICS Khartoum, *Community Theater in Khartoum: The Life at the Curve of the Nile*, September 2019, <https://khartoum.aics.gov.it/>

Promoting culture

This is not simply a question of reaffirming Italy's status as a world leader in artistic terms, or praising our noteworthy capacity for an integrated promotion of the innumerable examples of Italian appeal. The discussion runs deeper, going right to the root of the word culture, the most ancient connotations of which include fire, light, strength and energy, an absolute value for all of humanity.

The energy and freedom of creativity and creative thought, the unifying understanding of shared art forms, the inherent brotherhood of artistic collaboration and the courage of a new idea: these aspects all relate to identity and values and are hugely underestimated resources on the path towards self-awareness across the African continent, also helping to promote the rediscovery of shared and common values. The African Union has itself announced that 2021 will be the year of "Arts, Culture and Heritage",¹³ indicating a growing awareness about the importance of such issues, and some potential room for collaboration with Italy in these domains.

The "Italy, Cultures, Africa" initiative, promoted by the Italian Foreign Ministry (in collaboration with what was then known as MIUR: the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research) since 2019,¹⁴ is another example of

[en/2019/9911](https://www.mfa.gov.it/en/2019/9911).

¹³ African Union website: *2021: Arts, Culture and Heritage*, <https://au.int/en/taxonomy/term/1503>.

¹⁴ "Italia, Culture, Africa" started in 2019 and is an integrated promotional programme, part of the wider initiative "Vivere ALL'Italiana"

Italian engagement. The initiative has a holistic, intercultural approach, addressing complex themes such as migration or social unease among younger generations across sub-Saharan Africa, inspiring a profound coming together of Italo-African values through art, music, dance, theatre and popular traditions.

Ultimately, Italy's "Partnership with Africa" represents an important moment of political self-reflection by the Italian foreign ministry and diplomatic corps. This also draws on past experiences, including the lights and shadings of Italy's own historical experiences in Africa, with the objective of better understanding and tailoring Italian present and future foreign policy towards the continent.

This will provide a new lens that we hope will result in wiser perspectives and understandings of mutual interests as well as challenges between Italy and Africa and Europe and Africa. Such positive narratives, however, will not survive through self-aggrandisement.

Only through further and inclusive efforts to understand and invest in

("Living the Italian Way"), implemented by the Italian MAECI in sub-Saharan Africa. Dance, music, theatre, visual arts, cultural heritage, research and science are among the areas of mutual cooperation and exchange, with the aim not only of telling the story of "being Italian" but, above all, of stimulating encounters and mutual. Cultural cooperation tools therefore complement existing development cooperation activities, strengthening the Italian presence and commitment; an effective team effort, carried out in collaboration with local institutions and partners and other Italian government organisations, such as the Ministry for Culture. See MAECI website: *Italia, Culture, Africa*, <https://www.esteri.it/mae/tiny/28064>.

the real needs of African citizens and nations will Italy be able to preserve a role as protagonist in pursuing both its national interests and the overall development of its African partners.

Inclusion requires effort and long-term commitments, especially when the encounter with diversity imposes the hard law of a dialogue on values. Italy, among its European companions, is particularly gifted at doing so. Value oriented diplomacy in Africa embodies the capacity of intercepting its multiple and ever-changing identity and utilising it for the mutual benefit of both sides.

This is a challenge that Italy, together with Africa and Europe, can win together.

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