

# The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?

by Filippo Simonelli, Maria Luisa Fantappié and Leo Goretti

Italy inaugurated its year of G7 presidency with the Italy-Africa summit on 28-29 January in Rome, an event representative of the current government's ambitions.<sup>1</sup> The long-awaited meeting was the first test for the strategy of "cooperation as equals" with African states that Giorgia Meloni has repeatedly proposed as central to her government's foreign policy. It was also the first occasion to test the real scope of the so-called Mattei Plan for Africa, the project with which the Italian government wants to substantiate this strategy but whose official strategic outline has yet to be announced.

## *Great (political) expectations*

Rome hosted the summit to achieve several political goals: first, to strengthen its international profile thanks to its ability to gather the African

leaders at its table and thus to present itself towards its European partners as a driving force in relations with the continent's governments. Second, the government had a domestic policy objective: that is, to demonstrate to its voters the intention to systemically tackle the issue of irregular immigration, which grew by almost 50 per cent in 2023,<sup>2</sup> offering long-term solutions by engaging the countries of origin and transit and contributing to assert "the right not to be forced to emigrate" of African people.

The third aim was to seek economic partnerships, also involving the Italian private sector, by opening new trade channels with, and investment opportunities in, African countries. This last line of action encompasses the idea, already actively promoted by

<sup>1</sup> Italian Government, *President Meloni's Opening Address at the Italia-Africa Summit*, 29 January 2024, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/24861>.

<sup>2</sup> Italian Ministry of the Interior, *Cruscotto statistico giornaliero*, 31 December 2023, [http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_31-12-2023.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2023.pdf).

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Rome through bilateral agreements in the past years, of making Italy an 'energy hub' in the Mediterranean for Europe. The Italy-Africa Summit was meant to be an opportunity to articulate these objectives around the idea, central to the Mattei Plan's narrative, of developing a "non-predatory" approach to the African continent.

### *Attendants and absentees*

The summit certainly marked a novelty compared to the recent past: the previous Italy-Africa conferences, inaugurated in 2016 by the Gentiloni government, had seen participation limited to the ministerial level. Of the 46 countries participating in the 2024 summit, instead, 21 sent top figures as heads of state (among them, those of Tunisia, the Republic of Congo, Somalia, Kenya and Mozambique) or heads of government (including those of Libya, Ethiopia and Morocco).<sup>3</sup> Equally significant was the presence of representatives of both European institutions and international organisations, such as Ursula von der Leyen, Roberta Metsola and Charles Michel, and African ones, prominent among them African Union Commission President Moussa Faki, as well as African Development Bank Group President Akinwumi Adesina and representatives of United Nations agencies and other multilateral institutions.

Nonetheless, notable was the absence of Africa's most populous country,

<sup>3</sup> The full list of participants is available on the Italian government website: <https://www.governo.it/en/node/24853>.

Nigeria, as well as the lower-level delegation sent by another key state, such as South Africa, which was represented by its deputy foreign minister. Most of the Sahel countries' governments – a region that is a crucial pathway of irregular migration towards Europe – did not show up either.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the involvement of civil societies – both Italian and African – was evidently quite limited.<sup>5</sup> This seemed indicative of an approach primarily focused on leaders-to-leaders relations and deals as the overarching framework for the 'new' Italy-Africa relations.

### *Cooperation as equals – but who's 'equal'?*

The January summit shed light on the fact that Italy's 'pivot to Africa' is certainly generating international attention and potentially innovative, but also presents a number of potential shortcomings and drawbacks, both in its narrative and implementation. Some of these were laid bare in the speech by African Union Commission President Moussa Faki during the summit. While

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly enough, on Sunday 28 January, the first day of the summit, three major Sahel countries, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, announced their withdrawal from the West Africa regional organisation Ecowas. See Boureima Balima and Tiemoko Diallo, "Three West African Junta-led States Quit ECOWAS Regional Block", in *Reuters*, 28 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/niger-mali-burkina-faso-say-they-are-leaving-ecowas-regional-block-2024-01-28>.

<sup>5</sup> Daniela Fassini, "«Piano Mattei, più ombre che luci». Il vertice secondo missionari e Ong", in *Avvenire*, 31 January 2024, <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/piano-mattei-piu-ombre-che-luci-il-vertice-sec>.

welcoming the “paradigm shift” called for by Giorgia Meloni in relations with Africa, Faki also voiced critical remarks: first, he lamented the lack of consultation of its institution by the Italian government before announcing the Plan, although still hoping for future cooperation in the Partnership. He also stressed the urgent need to match words with deeds and remarked upon the autonomy of the African Union in engaging in Partnerships “not based on any block”.<sup>6</sup>

Faki’s speech highlights that, in engaging African counterparts, the articulation of the Italian narrative of a non-patronising partnership between equals must be implemented in a thorough and consistent manner. This directly calls into question who the ‘equals’ involved really are. There is a risk that this narrative simply translates into elite-level foreign policy practices based on personal trust between European and African personalities in the absence of a broader engagement with different segments of states and societies. Without a wider approach that also factors in societal concerns and voices, deals between European and African leaders may surely deliver short-term results in decreasing migration flows and striking private sector contracts; at the same time, however, inasmuch as they sustain a patrimonial personality-centred system, accelerate the crisis of representation at the expenses of civil society and amplify intra-elite competitions conducive to

<sup>6</sup> African Union, *Speech by H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, at the Italy – Africa Summit: A Bridge for Common Growth*, 29 January 2024, <https://au.int/en/node/43449>.

military coups, such deals and relations may well be a good recipe for instability in the long run.

### *How to (not) Europeanise the Plan*

For their part, the representatives of EU institutions welcomed Italy’s Plan. President von der Leyen praised the Plan as consistent with the broader European Global Gateway initiative, which includes a Europe-Africa investment package of 150 billion euros.<sup>7</sup> An integration of the Mattei Plan into a EU frame will indeed be essential to meet its ambitions as the initial pool of resources announced by Giorgia Meloni during the summit – 5.5 billion euros – are clearly not enough to develop a continent-wide strategy.<sup>8</sup>

To ‘Europeanise’ the Plan, Italy may try to replicate the *modus operandi* it tested in Tunisia with the Memorandum of Understanding signed in July 2023.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> European Commission website: *Global Gateway*, [https://commission.europa.eu/node/5445\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/node/5445_en).

<sup>8</sup> While in Rome, Ursula von der Leyen met with African Development Bank Group President Adesina to define a new Financial Framework Partnership Agreement to boost infrastructural investments in Africa. See European Commission, *Global Gateway: European Commission and African Development Bank Group Unlock New Funding for African Infrastructure Projects*, 28 January 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_24\\_443](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_24_443); Italian Government, *President Meloni’s Opening Address at the Italia-Africa Summit*, cit. On the issue of resources and financing for the plan see also Daniele Fattibene and Stefano Manservigi, “The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy’s Development Cooperation Policy?”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|10 (March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18219>.

<sup>9</sup> Luca Barana and Asli Selin Okyay, “Shaking Hands with Saied’s Tunisia: The Paradoxes and

That includes working to obtain the support of a few like-minded EU member states and the President of the Commission with the aim of mainstreaming its Africa policy across the EU institutions and in coordination with other EU member states. This mechanism is agile and seemingly holds benefits for all the parties involved. It fits in with Italy's ambition to lead European policies in Africa and to benefit from EU funds in developing shared ventures with African counterparts. It also helps European governments to demonstrate that they are taking concrete actions on the migration issue. And, finally, it fulfills the President of the Commission's ambition to deliver on trade, financial and infrastructural agreements.

As much as it benefits specific EU member states and individuals, this *modus operandi* may however potentially erode the foundations of an EU common framework on Africa, undermine EU institutions and their normative profile, and encourage competition among EU member states rather than common action. Legitimising elite-to-elite deals that involve authoritarian leaderships and neglect local civil societies seriously undermines the credibility of the EU as an international actor championing human rights; furthermore, a purely transactional approach focused on reaping short-term benefits carries the risk of fuelling a sort of zero sum competition between member states, to the detriment of the overall effectiveness of EU policy towards

Trade-offs Facing the EU", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|40 (August 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17362>.

the region. The involvement of other key European states such as Spain, France and Germany – that were not represented at the January summit in Rome – will be necessary to prevent this potential fragmentation from materialising in the future.

### *A possible pathway*

An official text of the Mattei Plan has yet to be published. So there remains room to adapt this ambitious vision, also considering what emerged during the summit. The main critical issues concern not only the resources available, but also the actual ability to create a virtuous and genuinely equal interlocution with all relevant African counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to reiterate that the latter cannot be limited to the representatives of more or less democratic governments. If the Plan's ambition is really to trigger positive development processes in the medium to long term, involvement must be extended beyond leader-to-leader diplomacy in the partner countries. Italy should move from words to action in its plea for a new equal-to-equal diplomacy, making sure to establish solid relations with institutional counterparts and diverse segments of the society. In the same way, integrating the Plan into a broader European framework – at the level

<sup>10</sup> President Adesina, who was among the African representatives who welcomed positively the plan, has pointed out some projects, already designed by the Bank, as a pathway to follow. See African Development Bank, *Italy to Collaborate with the African Development Bank Group as It Unveils Its \$5.95 Billion Strategic Plan for Africa*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.afdb.org/en/node/68468>.

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both of continental institutions and of member states – is an indispensable prerequisite to guarantee adequate support in terms of resources and expertise and to avoid triggering potentially detrimental competition dynamics.

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