

The Italian G7 Presidency: Spearheading Progress on Food Systems in Africa



by Cecilia D'Alessandro

As of January 2024, Italy has assumed the presidency of the G7, setting an ambitious agenda reflecting its domestic priorities and foreign policy interests. Alongside energy, migration and ongoing conflicts as top issues on the agenda, the presidency has made food security and sustainable food systems a priority, with particular attention to the needs of Africa.¹ This aligns with Italy's interest in the continent, exemplified by the recently launched Mattei Plan – an ambitious initiative meant to guide Italy's renewed partnership with African nations.²

¹ FAO, UNGA: *FAO and the G7, UN Food Systems Summit+2 and COP28 Presidencies Join Hands to Position Agrifood Systems Transformation High on the International Agenda*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/unga--fao-and-the-g7--un-food-systems-summit-2-and-cop28-presidencies-join-hands-to-position-agrifood-systems-transformation-high-on-the-international-agenda/en>; and Italian Government, *President Meloni's Speech at the United Nations Food Systems Summit*, 24 July 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/23272>.

² Daniele Fattibene and Stefano Manservigi,

Addressing food security and sustainable food systems

The renewed focus on food security and sustainable food systems is a positive and necessary move. Food insecurity has been rising globally since 2017, driven by climate change, conflict, economic shocks and persistent poverty and inequality. This trend has been exacerbated by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine with its ripple effect on food and fertiliser prices.³ In 2022 alone, about 800 million people worldwide faced hunger,⁴ with Africa

³ "The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|10 (March 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18219>.

⁴ Hanne Knaepen and Koen Dekeyser, "Russia's Invasion Leaves North Africa with a Food Crisis – What Can Europe Do?", in *ECDPM Commentaries*, 14 March 2022, <https://ecdpm.org/work/russias-invasion-leaves-north-africa-food-crisis-what-can-europe-do>.

⁴ FAO et al., *The State of Food Security and*

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being the continent where the food crisis is most severe.⁵

At the same time, food systems are major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss and freshwater consumption.⁶ They are also heavily impacted by climate change, which disrupts production and exacerbates food insecurity, especially in Africa. The critical need to transition to more sustainable food practices and adapt to the changing climate is evident.

With only six years left to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, coordinated international action is more urgent than ever. In this context, the Italian G7 presidency has a crucial opportunity to spearhead progress on global food security, build resilience and promote sustainable food systems.

Setting the Italian G7 priorities

At the upcoming G7 Leaders' Summit in June, the Italian presidency will unveil the Apulia Food Systems Initiative (AFSI).⁷ Although specifics are not yet fully disclosed, its title draws inspiration from precedents such as the 2009 G8

L'Aquila Food Security Initiative and the 2021 G20 Matera Declaration.⁸ The AFSI prioritises Africa, recognising its vulnerability to food insecurity, underinvestment and climate change, while acknowledging its significant agricultural potential. Two main interrelated priorities will be at the core of the AFSI: (i) advancing efforts to address the food-climate nexus and (ii) scaling up finance and investments for food security and sustainable food systems.

Regarding the food-climate nexus, the AFSI will contribute to implementing the COP28 UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action,⁹ endorsed by 159 Heads of State. The Declaration calls for scaled-up financial and technical support to align policies and investments to reduce carbon emissions from the food and agriculture sectors, while also building resilience and helping food producers adapt to climate change, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).¹⁰ Italy pledged to channel 10

Nutrition in the World 2023, Rome, FAO, 2023, p. vii, <https://doi.org/10.4060/CC3017EN>.

⁵ Sevil Omer, "Africa Hunger Crisis: Facts, FAQs, How to Help", in *World Vision*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.worldvision.org/?p=17548>.

⁶ Massimo Crippa et al., "Food Systems Are Responsible for a Third of Global Anthropogenic GHG Emissions", in *Nature Food*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (March 2021), p. 198-209, DOI 10.1038/s43016-021-00225-9.

⁷ Global Summitry Project website: *G7Italy2024, Apulia Summit*, <https://globalsummitryproject.com/?p=3677>.

⁸ G8 et al., *L'Aquila Joint Statement on Global Food Security - L'Aquila Food Security Initiative*, 10 July 2009, <https://g7g20-documents.org/database/document/2009-g7-italy-leaders-leaders-language-laquila-joint-statement-on-global-food-security-laquila-food-security-initiative;G20,MateraDeclarationonFoodSecurity,NutritionandFoodSystems,29June2021,http://www.g20italy.org/italian-g20-presidency/ministerial-meetings/g20-foreign-affairs-and-development-ministers-meetings.html>.

⁹ COP28, *Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action*, 10 December 2023, <https://www.cop28.com/en/food-and-agriculture>.

¹⁰ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Opening Remarks by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Edmondo Cirielli at UNGA78 Side Event co-organized by Italy "Catalysing Global Action for*

million euros over the next two years to a programme devoted to supporting the Declaration's implementation, co-led by the UAE, World Bank and FAO.¹¹ Additionally, President Meloni committed to using 70 per cent of Italy's 4.2 billion euro Climate Fund to finance adaptation and mitigation objectives in African countries through the Mattei Plan, utilising a mix of loans, grants and blended investments.¹² The commitment to bolstering adaptation action, including in the food and agriculture sectors, has also been reaffirmed at the G7 Climate, Energy and Environment Ministerial in April.¹³

As for the second priority area of finance and investment, the Italian presidency aims to promote innovative solutions to stimulate public, private and public-private investments to transform food systems and achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2, Zero Hunger. The food systems' finance gap is vast, with projections indicating an additional 350 billion US dollars needed annually by 2030.¹⁴ However,

Sustainable and Resilient Agri-Food Systems Transformation to Accelerate the SDGs, 20 September 2023, <https://italyun.esteri.it/en/?p=5406>.

¹¹ CGIAR, *CGIAR Joins Global Commitments at COP28's Food, Agriculture and Water Day*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.cgiar.org/news-events/news/cgiar-joins-global-commitments-at-cop28s-food-agriculture-and-water-day>.

¹² "Meloni Pledges €100 Million, Global South Food Security Efforts at COP28", in *Decode39*, 1 December 2023, <https://decode39.com/?p=8408>.

¹³ G7, *Climate, Energy and Environment Ministers' Meeting Communiqué*, Turin, 29-30 April 2024, https://www.g7italy.it/wp-content/uploads/G7-Climate-Energy-Environment-Ministerial-Communique_Final.pdf.

¹⁴ International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), *2022 Global Food Policy Report: Climate*

this investment could yield significant returns, translating into annual net benefits of 5 to 10 trillion US dollars by reducing unaccounted health and environmental costs.¹⁵

The Italian public development bank, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, has led efforts to foster collective action among public development banks and development finance institutions from G7 countries. This resulted in a joint Statement of Intent highlighting the banks' ambition to increase operational cooperation on co-investment and risk mitigation initiatives and strengthen incentives to attract private sector capital to food-related projects.¹⁶

Given the limited fiscal space and high debt vulnerability of many LMICs in Africa,¹⁷ the G7 leaders could significantly contribute to easing these constraints by exploring innovative solutions to debt relief such as debt swaps. Under this arrangement, sovereign debt could be forgiven in exchange for a country's commitment to allocate the freed-up funds towards

Change and Food Systems, Washington, IFPRI, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896294257>.

¹⁵ Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi et al., *Global Policy Report: The Economics of the Food System Transformation*, Food System Economics Commission, February 2024, p. 7, <https://foodsystemeconomics.org/policy/global-policy-report>.

¹⁶ Cassa Depositi e Prestiti et al., *G7 Public Development Banks and Development Finance Institutions Statement of Intent. Leveraging the Role of G7 Development Finance in Addressing Global Challenges during the 2024 G7 Italian Presidency*, 9 May 2024, https://www.cdp.it/resources/cms/documents/2024_G7_Development_Finance_Statement_of_Intent.pdf.

¹⁷ FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises, *2024 Global Report on Food Crises*, May 2024, p. 168, <https://www.fsinplatform.org/grfc2024>.

investments in food security and sustainability. Similar approaches have proven effective in other sectors.¹⁸

Rechannelling special drawing rights (SDRs) – an international reserve asset issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that can be traded for hard currency – to bolster food security efforts is another crucial opportunity.¹⁹ This move would inject much-needed liquidity into countries grappling with severe food crises, enabling them to invest in adaptation actions and support vulnerable populations. Regrettably, the Stresa Communiqué adopted by G7 Finance ministers falls short of seizing these opportunities: it lacks guiding principles for a new approach to debt and notably overlooks any mention of SDRs.²⁰

Aligning with African needs and priorities

Finance, investments and the food-climate nexus are critical

areas for Africa's agri-food system transformation. However, the devil lies in the details.

First, while more finance is needed, it must reach the thousands of African small-scale farmers and micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, especially women and youth, who struggle to access the financial resources they need to develop viable and more sustainable business models.²¹ The G7 initiative needs to focus on creating a more supportive financial ecosystem for these actors by scaling up innovative de-risking strategies, developing products that meet their specific needs, building inclusive financial and business support services, and finding innovative ways to channel resources directly to the farmers and their organisations. Additionally, climate finance for food systems adaptation must increase dramatically, as only 1.7 per cent of global climate finance currently targets smallholder farmers.²²

Moreover, focusing solely on investments poses a risk of leaving least-developed countries behind. G7 resources must also reach fragile and conflict-affected regions, not just those more attractive to private capital. These resources should go beyond emergency

¹⁸ SDG2 Advocacy Hub, *Unlocking Finance to End the Cycle of Food Crises*, 10 April 2024, <https://sdg2advocacyhub.org/?p=9676>.

¹⁹ On the rechannelling of SDRs to promote investments in food systems see Francesco Rampa et al., "Using Special Drawing Rights for Climate-Resilient Food Systems and Food Security", in *ECDPM Commentaries*, 4 December 2023, <https://ecdpm.org/work/using-special-drawing-rights-climate-resilient-food-systems-and-food-security>; and San Bilal et al., "Rechannelling Special Drawing Rights for Food Security and Sustainable Food Systems", in *ECDPM Briefing Notes*, April 2024, <https://ecdpm.org/work/rechannelling-special-drawing-rights-food-security-and-sustainable-food-systems>.

²⁰ G7, *G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors' Communiqué*, Stresa, 23-25 May 2024, <https://www.g7italy.it/wp-content/uploads/Stresa-Communique-25-May-2024.pdf>.

²¹ Cecilia D'Alessandro, "Is Anyone Worried about the Farmer? Don't Just Express Worry in Words, Do Something about It", in *ECDPM Commentaries*, 30 October 2023, <https://ecdpm.org/work/anyone-worried-about-farmer-dont-just-express-worry-words-do-something-about-it>.

²² Daniela Chiriac and Baysa Naran, *Examining the Climate Finance Gap for Small-Scale Agriculture*, Climate Policy Initiative, November 2020, p. 4, <https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/?p=32593>.

response and finance anticipatory actions to prevent future crises.

Second, supporting the integration of food and climate plans, as committed at COP28, is essential. For too long, these interconnected issues have remained in siloes.²³ However, guidance for implementing this commitment remains vague.²⁴ Concrete options for integrating these plans need to build on existing African and international policy processes. A key opportunity lies in the ongoing formulation of the next phase of the African Union's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) – the continent's main policy framework for agri-food systems transformation since 2003.²⁵ The revision of countries' climate plans – known as Nationally Determined Contributions – in 2025 presents another crucial opportunity to enhance ambitions for climate adaptation and mitigation in the agri-food sector.²⁶

Moreover, while it is commendable that G7 countries prioritise support for the most vulnerable countries in addressing the food-climate nexus, it is important

to recognise that this nexus and the imperative to transform food systems are equally relevant in G7 countries – with significant incoherencies existing between agricultural subsidies and climate commitments within G7 nations. Although politically sensitive, these inconsistencies must be acknowledged and addressed to ensure comprehensive and effective action on the transition to more sustainability.

Beyond finance and climate, other domains require attention. First, Africa urgently needs to reduce its import dependency to decrease its vulnerability to disruptions in global value chains and international price shocks.²⁷ This requires boosting intra-regional food trade through the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) through policies and investments in regional value chain development, infrastructure and improved processing, storage and market access.²⁸ In this regard, Italy's G7 presidency should connect the AFSI to its efforts to revitalise the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), for instance through flagship projects in selected corridors supporting industrialisation based on crop and livestock transformation.

²³ Thin Lei Win, "Food Systems Take the Stage at COP28: But Will Actions Match Rhetoric?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|68 (December 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17918>.

²⁴ Lauren Evans, "At COP 28, Countries Pledged to Transform Their Food Systems. Now What?", in *Devex*, 27 February 2024, <https://www.devex.com/news/107121>.

²⁵ African Union, *African Union Launches the 4th CAADP Biennial Review Report and Post-Malabo Roadmap*, 20 March 2024, <https://au.int/en/node/43649>.

²⁶ Haseeb Bakhtary et al., *COP28 Agriculture, Food and Climate National Action Toolkit*, Gland, WWF, 2023, <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9049en>.

²⁷ Francesco Rampa, "Russia's War against Ukraine Should Trigger Structural Solutions to Food Insecurity", in *ECDPM Commentaries*, 20 June 2022, <https://ecdpm.org/work/russias-war-against-ukraine-should-trigger-structural-solutions-food-insecurity>.

²⁸ Poorva Karkare, "What It Would Take to Provide Structural Solutions to Food Insecurity in Africa", in *ECDPM Commentaries*, 4 July 2022, <https://ecdpm.org/work/what-it-would-take-to-provide-structural-solutions-food-insecurity-africa>.

Second, with low agricultural yields in Africa being a key constraint to more sustainability,²⁹ G7 countries should commit to strengthening Africa's fertiliser industry, investing in greener and organic fertilisers and promoting efficient fertiliser use. Investment in integrated soil and water management practices is also crucial for enhancing soil health, nutrient efficiency and climate resilience – as highlighted in the Nairobi Declaration recently endorsed at the Africa Fertiliser and Soil Health Summit.³⁰ Also, investing in research and innovation to promote the uptake of climate-resilient agricultural practices tailored to Africa's heterogeneous agricultural systems is key.

Third, food security initiatives in Africa should deliberately support the strengthening of social protection and safety nets to help food-insecure households build resilience in the face of recurrent food crises and afford healthy diets.³¹

Lastly, with almost two-thirds of African women employed in agrifood systems as food producers, agro-dealers, processors, distributors and traders, a transformation to sustainable food systems cannot be achieved without measures to promote gender equality

and support women's empowerment.³² Committing to support to the roll-out of the recently endorsed CFS' Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the context of food security and nutrition, would offer G7 countries the opportunity to advance these interconnected agendas.³³

Key conditions for success

A true partnership approach is needed for the G7 initiative to achieve its goals. With the plethora of international initiatives in the food systems space, it is key to ensure Africa is in the driver's seat, with the AFSI building on existing continental, regional and national food- and climate-related policy processes and plans. Bottlenecks constraining the implementation of such plans need to be identified and addressed, and the capacities of institutions and actors to strategise, innovate, coordinate and regulate should be strengthened at all levels. This includes promoting horizontal and vertical coordination across governments and integrated policies across agriculture, water, environmental, trade, industrial and energy objectives. Mutual accountability, inclusivity

²⁹ Hannah Ritchie, "Increasing Agricultural Productivity across Sub-Saharan Africa Is One of the Most Important Problems this century" in *Our World in Data*, 4 April 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/africa-yields-problem>.

³⁰ African Union, *Nairobi Declaration. Africa Fertilizer and Soil Health Summit*, 9 May 2024, <https://au.int/en/node/43771>.

³¹ SDG2 Advocacy Hub, *A Global Plan to End Food Crises and Transform Food Systems*, April 2024, <https://sdg2advocacyhub.org/?p=9667>.

³² Katrin Glatzel et al., *Bridging the Gap: Policy Innovations to Put Women at the Center of Food Systems Transformation in Africa*, Malabo Montpellier Panel, June 2023, <https://www.mamopanel.org/resources/reports-and-briefings/bridginggappolicyinnovations-put-women-center-f>.

³³ UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), *Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the Context of Food Security and Nutrition*, 14 June 2023, <https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/node/71037>.

and leveraging the voices of diverse stakeholders are also essential.

Building momentum and maintaining coalitions for change require strong leadership and coordination, addressing donor fragmentation and focusing on impactful initiatives while coordinating the deployment of bilateral and multilateral resources. This includes synergising efforts with the Brazilian G20 Presidency and its proposed Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty,³⁴ and ensuring continuity across global policy milestones such as COP29, the UN Food Systems Summit+4 and the South African G20 presidency leading up to COP30. This collaboration can pave the way for ambitious and long-lasting results towards more inclusive and resilient African agri-food systems.

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³⁴ G20, *Task Force for a Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty*, 2024, <https://www.g20.org/en/tracks/sherpa-track/hunger-and-poverty>.

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