

The Mattei Plan One Year On

by Filippo Simonelli

On 28-29 January 2024, the Italian Senate hosted the Italy-Africa Summit, bringing together 21 heads of state and government from African countries, along with other representatives of African, European and global organisations. The African representatives were gathered by the announcement that Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni would publicly present the Mattei Plan, a project with which the Italian government wants to redesign relations with the continent based on “equal-to-equal” collaboration. A year later, it is possible to take a first stock of announcements, projects and weaknesses that have emerged so far.

The 2024 of the Mattei Plan

The Mattei Plan, as it was presented in January 2024, is a project that brings together cooperation projects managed by Italian public and private companies in nine African countries, under the

supervision of a steering committee,¹ headed by Ambassador Fabrizio Saggio and reporting directly to the Prime Minister’s Office, for a planned duration of four years.² In its first formulation, the Plan had five “pillars”: education and training, health, agriculture, water, and energy. Later in 2024 a sixth pillar was added, that of physical and digital infrastructures. Significantly absentees are the areas of defence and security, which were meant to be present in the preliminary formulations of the Plan.

The criteria by which the projects included in the Plan are selected remain nebulous; based on the initial initiatives announced, the choice of

¹ ‘Cabina di Regia’ in Italian.

² Details are available here: Italian Chamber of Deputies-Research Department, “D.L. 161/2023 - Disposizioni urgenti per il «Piano Mattei» per lo sviluppo in Stati del Continente africano”, in *Provvedimenti*, 10 January 2024, <https://temi.camera.it/leg19/provvedimento/disposizioni-urgentiper-il-piano-mattei-per-lo-sviluppo-in-stati-del-continente-africano.html>.

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companies and projects already well-established in the area seems to have prevailed, with hopes that they may act as forerunners for future initiatives.

Notwithstanding these limitations, in principle, the Mattei Plan represents a significant novelty for Italian foreign policy on several fronts.³ First, the Plan has achieved remarkable significance in the government's agenda, which is unusual for a foreign policy initiative. Moreover, it introduces a substantial renewal of Italy's Africa policy, with an overview lacking in previous initiatives towards Africa.⁴ During 2024, a series of actions and formal steps accompanied the grounding of the Plan. The most important event was the January 2024 summit, which, in addition to African representatives, was attended by the EU leaders.

This event was followed by initiatives that were more of a procedural nature than political. Between February and November 2024, hearings were held with relevant actors. In the summer, the government published the first documentation on the Plan, containing fact sheets for the countries involved and the projects. These materials were

³ Giovanni Carbone and Lucia Ragazzi, *Il Piano Mattei: rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*, Rome, Aspen Institute Italia et al., August 2024, https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ISPI_FPC-Piano-Mattei.pdf.

⁴ It is worth noting anyways that this commitment builds on the well-established tradition of the Italy-Africa summits inaugurated in 2016, albeit at a ministerial level, and before that, the Italy-Africa initiative by then-Foreign Minister Emma Bonino already at the end of 2013. It also builds on the legacy of the work carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in recent years, which has seen Italy open five new diplomatic offices in the continent.

finally included in the implementation status report sent to the Parliament's Chambers on 11 November, which gave an overview of 21 projects at various implementation stages.⁵

Italy's image in Africa

As it has been conceived and developed so far, the Mattei Plan seems aimed at strengthening Italy's image with African interlocutors, mostly institutional ones. Starting from countries with which there has been a solid relationship for years – which often correspond to those that sent the highest-level representatives to the Italy-Africa summit in January 2024 – a dialogue has been developed mainly aimed at facilitating the entry of Italian activities and businesses in these countries. So far, the approach has been primarily top-down, revolving around government-led initiatives on both sides, with limited involvement of the respective civil societies.⁶

This is also reflected in the lack of a systematic public diplomacy strategy to accompany the Plan, which could result in a wider appreciation of the Italian efforts among public opinion. For the Mattei Plan to have a long-

⁵ The original text of the report is available here: Italian Chamber of Deputies-Research Department, "Relazione sullo stato di attuazione del Piano Mattei, aggiornata al 10 ottobre 2024", in *Documentazione e ricerche*, No. 134 (19 November 2024), <https://temi.camera.it/leg19/dossier/OCD18-20828/relazione-sullo-stato-attuazione-del-piano-mattei-aggiornata-al-10-ottobre-2024-doc-ccxxxiii-n-1.html>.

⁶ Filippo Simonelli, Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Leo Goretti, "The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|11 (March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18220>.

term perspective, it is necessary to think of a proper communication strategy first: indeed, information is still scattered across too many different documents and websites, which does not help to send a clear and consistent message about the Plan. This issue, paired with the relatively small amount of resources that have been allocated to the Plan, reinforces the perception of a coherence deficit and gives the impression of a series of projects brought together without a clear strategy, which could have been funded as part of Italy's development policy also absent the overall umbrella of the Plan.

Furthermore, the Italian government's approach has raised some eyebrows due to the lack of involvement of the African counterparts in the design of the Plan. Moussa Faki, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, already highlighted the issue at the January 2024 summit.⁷ A softer and more optimistic approach was instead taken by the leadership of the African Development Bank, another major multilateral institution of the continent involved in it.⁸

Despite all these criticalities, the Mattei Plan has still made its way onto the Italian agenda and is becoming a well-

known expression among African business communities, particularly in the Mediterranean Belt.⁹ It is difficult to understand whether this initiative will contribute to improving the perception of Italy among African partners, but based on preliminary anecdotal evidence, two fundamental elements emerge:¹⁰ Italy can leverage a pre-existing entrepreneurial presence in African countries, especially in the north of the continent, perceived as capable to "deal with difficult situations". Rome's interest in training new skilled professionals on the continent assumes great value in the eyes of African interlocutors, as it could help stem the diaspora that is seen as a long-term demographic issue in many of the continent's countries.

Economic and political resources – and the 'national' vision

The Plan is still at an early stage, but one can already ask questions about its future prospects. First, the resource issue: the 5.5 billion euros earmarked may be a substantial or inadequate amount, depending on the perspective that one takes.¹¹ The continent's overall investment needs are of course of another magnitude.¹² Indeed, the

⁷ 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>.

⁸ The dialogue between the parts went on during G7 meetings as well: African Development Bank and G7, *Joint Press Statement between Italy and the African Development Bank Group, G7 Heads of State and Government Summit*, 15 June 2024, <https://www.afdb.org/en/node/71929>.

⁹ This was the case, for example, of the two-day event held on 14 and 15 November 2024 in La Spezia, entitled 'A Bridge to Africa', in which government representatives took part, but without the institutions being directly involved on the organisational front. See the event website: <https://www.abridgetoafrica.it>.

¹⁰ Author's conversation with local researchers, Rabat, 5 October 2024.

¹¹ Author's conversations with local officials, Casablanca, 7 October 2024.

¹² Just think about the 500 billion estimated by the London School of Economics to

largest investment made by the Italian government is political: African governments are recognised as equal partners, with a view to strengthening opportunities in a rapidly expanding continent.

This political capital, however, is not, and should not be, partisan. While it is normal for the governing parties to be at the forefront, it is necessary for such an ambitious initiative to go beyond political contingencies. This year, there have been voices even in the opposition parties that have proposed modifications or alternative formulations to the Plan without aiming to alter it radically or to obliterate it.

Looking ahead

The answer to the Mattei Plan's key issue, resources, could come from the EU. The first von der Leyen commission, among its efforts to revive the economy and image of Europe in the post-Covid world, had launched the Global Gateway project with the ambition of stimulating economic growth at the global level. The programme, combining public and private funding, vaunts a budget of 150 billion euros earmarked for investments in Africa.¹³ The inclusion of the Mattei Plan into a broader and

provide energy access to the continent's population. See Vera Songwe, Nicholas Stern and Amar Bhattacharya, *Finance for Climate Action: Scaling Up Investment for Climate and Development*, London, London School of Economics and Political Science, November 2022, p. 26, <https://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/49154>.

¹³ See the website of the European Commission-DG International Partnerships: *EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package*, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/2530_en.

financially more solid framework could benefit the future of the Italian project, with the Plan providing in turn a clearer "equal-to-equal" vision for Europe-Africa relations.

Indeed, during her first press conference of 2025, Giorgia Meloni suggested linking the two initiatives,¹⁴ and there are projects, such as the Lobito Corridor, where this is already happening. But to ensure the success and the future of the Mattei Plan, it is quintessential for it to be strengthened at the Italian level, offering greater transparency to the public and the international community, both in Europe and in Africa, providing better information and a clearer and whole-of-society perspective on the implementation of the Plan, and adding other multinational projects after the example of the Lobito Corridor that signal a higher level of ambition.

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¹⁴ Italian Government, *Conferenza stampa di inizio anno del Presidente Meloni*, 9 January 2025, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/27435>.

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