IAI COMMENTARIES 25 | 47 - JULY 2025
ISSN 2532-6570

Istituto Affari Internazionali

Good Intentions in Need of Good Governance: The Unclear State of the Mattei Plan

by Diego Caballero-Vélez and Filippo Simonelli

In June 2025, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen met in Rome for a long-awaited meeting on synergies between Italy's and Europe's plans for international cooperation, the Mattei Plan and the Global Gateway, respectively.[1] The meeting, together with the updated report to Parliament published in July,[2] provided a clearer account of the projects launched, the financial commitment and the upcoming institutional steps. However, both the summit and the report revealed persistent shortcomings and did not manage to dispel the lack of operational clarity on how the Plan's ambitious objectives will actually be achieved.

[1] Italian Government, President Meloni's Press Statement at 'The Mattei Plan for Africa and the Global Gateway: A Common Effort with the African Continent' Summit, 20 June 2025, https://www.governo.it/en/node/29090.

[2] Italian Government, Relazione sullo stato di attuazione del Piano Mattei, aggiornata al 30 giugno 2025, 8 July 2025, https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/443840.pdf.

Flagship projects: Ambitions without roadmaps

Eighteen months have passed since the official launch of the Mattei Plan at the end of January 2024. Still, despite the proliferation of high-level meetings and declarations of intent in the last year and a half, the institutional and financial architecture of the Plan remains ambiguous. According to the report to Parliament, most of the 33 projects underway build on pre-existing initiatives rather than representing entirely new endeavours. The Plan continues to rely on two main public instruments: Italy's Development Cooperation Agency (AICS) and the Climate Fund established under the Draghi government. The updated report provided some clarity on project scope, financial allocations and intended outcomes, particularly in the renewable energy domain, where eleven projects have been approved to advance a 'green growth' model in partner countries. Within this context,

Diego Caballero-Vélez is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Messina. Filippo Simonelli is a Junior Researcher in the Italian Foreign Policy Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and PhD candidate at the University of Siena.

IAI COMMENTARIES 25 | 47 - JULY 2025 ISSN 2532-6570

small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are seen as central in delivering local economic transformation.

However, both the report and the June 2025 Rome summit highlighted a persistent lack of operationalisation: timeline, governance mechanisms and dedicated financing for flagship initiatives all remain vague. Medlink, a proposed high-voltage direct-current (HVDC) energy corridor linking Algeria, Tunisia and Italy,[3] exemplifies this gap. While embodying the vision of the Plan and being part of the EU's Global Gateway, the project has yet to move beyond the conceptual design stage: its implementation roadmap, regulatory alignment and funding commitments remain undefined.

The 5.5 billion euro headline figure associated with the Plan provides an overall amount, but does not detail concrete, project-specific investment. This pattern also applies to other initiatives announced in the July 2025 report, such as the healthcare projects in Abobo (Ivory Coast) and Shire (Ethiopia), the Brazzaville water infrastructure upgrade (Congo) and the proposed extension of the Blue Raman digital cable to East Africa. All these are described as priorities in the report, yet uncertainty remains about their scheduling, oversight arrangements and specific funding plan.

Overall, this suggests that the report mostly repackages prior initiatives while struggling to deliver real added value. Governance remains fragmented and opaque, with African civil society, SMEs and diaspora communities still relegated to the margins of decision-making. The reliance on large Italian corporations dominates the landscape at the expense of more inclusive, locally-driven solutions, and the promised green growth narrative is further undermined by ongoing investment in fossil fuels that contradicts climate objectives and may saddle African partners with long-term liabilities. This approach risks alienating local stakeholders, creating perceptions of neo-colonialism and missing opportunities to build genuine local ownership and long-term capacity in partner countries. The July 2025 report itself acknowledges these tensions but offers little clarity as to how they will be resolved, underlining the need for a more coherent, operational and balanced approach if the Plan is to fulfill its ambitions.

Widening the pillars: Towards a regulatory framework

Emerging sectors such as digital innovation, sustainable water management, and marine economies are increasingly recognised as priorities in the Euro-African partnership agenda, reflecting both the EU's Global Gateway strategy and Italy's ambitions under the Mattei Plan.[4] Integrating

[3] European Commission DG for Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf, *EU-Southern Neighbourhood Flagship Projects*, January 2025, https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/document/download/d530ee55-8104-42fc-94f7-37723b65dfae_en.

[4] European Commission DG for International Partnerships, *The Mattei Plan for Africa and Global Gateway: A Common Effort with the African Continent*, June 2025, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/4028_en.

© 2025 IAI ISSN 2532-6570 IAI COMMENTARIES 25 | 47 - JULY 2025

these domains more systematically would strengthen the Plan's alignment with broader European strategies and African development needs. Yet, as underscored in the July 2025 report and reaffirmed at the Rome summit, these initiatives can only achieve lasting impact if supported by clear regulatory frameworks, coordinated institutional arrangements and credible oversight mechanisms. To address these gaps, discussions are advancing slowly at both the national and EU levels.

At the national level, the report acknowledges the absence of a unified governance framework and underlines the need for stronger cross-ministerial coordination and better alignment with EU instruments. While the existing Technical Committee plays an important role in evaluating and approving projects under the Italian Climate Fund,[5] its mandate remains largely administrative and project-specific. It lacks the strategic authority required to drive regulatory harmonisation with EU frameworks, to oversee long-term planning and to ensure inclusiveness beyond government actors. In this regard, the Rome summit proposed creating joint Italy-EU-African dialogues aimed at defining common regulatory standards for energy and digital markets, as well as at leveraging EU instruments such as NDICI-Global Europe to fund and monitor projects in line with such standards.[6]

Regulatory clarity and institutional capacity are particularly crucial in the context of green and inclusive development, where fragmented or inconsistent rules undermine both investment incentives and development outcomes. In this sense, the Mattei Plan's challenge is to create a regulatory and governance architecture capable of translating investment flows into tangible and lasting benefits. In absence of a clear governance framework, even well-funded initiatives risk duplication, inefficiency and limited impact on the ground.

Debt conversion as a potential turning point

During the 20 June summit, the idea of writing off part of the debt of Africa's poorest countries came up again. The debt issue is no novelty in the Italian approach to cooperation with the continent, as evidenced by Rome's support for previous dedicated campaigns such as *Sdebitarsi*. A new project, presented by Meloni during the summit, aims to convert the entire amount of debt of low-income countries (as defined according to World Bank criteria) and to reduce by 50 per cent that of lower middle-income nations.

[5] The Technical Committee (*Comitato tecnico* in italian) is composed of representatives from the Italian Government (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Environment), as outlined in the report; it has a deliberative functions with regards to the Mattei Plan's project that involve funding from the Italian Climate Fund or resources from Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, a major Italian public development bank. The official description of the Fund is available on the Italian Ministry of Environment website: https://www.mase.gov.it/portale/the-fund.

[6] European Commission website: *Global Europe: Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument*, https://commission.europa.eu/node/5059_en.

IAI COMMENTARIES 25 | 47 - JULY 2025 ISSN 2532-6570

The entire operation, to be carried out over the next ten years, would allow for around 235 million euros of debt to be converted into development projects to be implemented locally.

The debt relief issue could also be used to gather international consensus around the Plan and graft it onto major multilateral initiatives. For example, on 30 June 2025, the 4th UN International Conference on financing development gathered its parties in Seville, Spain. The resulting final document aims explicitly to address the debt crisis.[7] The issue is also present in other European countries' African strategies, as exemplified by the Spain-Africa Strategy 2025-2028.[8] The Mattei Plan could take a step forward by advocating for a coordinated EU approach to debt-for-development swaps that promote green and inclusive investment in sectors like health, education and sustainable infrastructure. Adding a debt relief initiative could help the Mattei Plan move beyond the national dimension, gathering the support of other likeminded partners.

Trying to fill a gap: The Lobito Corridor, and its limits

More generally, in an international development aid context marked by Washington's abrupt withdrawal as epitomised by the dismantling of USAID, the Mattei Plan could try to fill a gap. While the resources at hand are by no means comparable to the US's, the Plan may outline an alternative model to the current development paradigms and act as a blueprint for broader infrastructure development and the inclusion of non-African partners in coordinated, multi-actor initiatives.

Italy's 250 million euro pledge to the Lobito Corridor[9] exemplifies this approach. Conceived as a joint effort with African governments, the European Union, the United States, development banks and the private sector,[10] the Corridor is intended to enhance African trade connectivity, secure critical raw materials for Europe and diversify transport routes away from vulnerable maritime chokepoints. Strategically, it seeks to offer African partners an alternative to Chinese Belt and Road Initiative-related projects and limit Russia's growing presence in resource supply chains.

Yet this ambition remains unfulfilled in many respects. Italy's participation in the Corridor is limited relative to larger partners such as the African Development Bank and the US, but still remarkable: while not determinant for the success of the Corridor per se, it is the biggest contribution of a European country to the project to date. Still, it

[7] *Compromiso de Sevilla: Outcome Document of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development*, 16 June 2025, https://financing.desa.un.org/ffd4/outcome.

[8] Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, *Spain-Africa Strategy 2025-2028*, November 2024, https://www.exteriores.gob.es/en/Comunicacion/Noticias/Paginas/Noticias/Estrategia-España-África-2025-2028-relación-estratégica.aspx.

[9] Italian Government, *President Meloni's Press Statement*, cit.

[10] European Commission and Italy, *Joint Press Release by the European Commission and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of Italy*, Rome, 20 June 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_1582.

is unclear if and how Rome will try to translate its financial commitment into meaningful industrial participation for Italian companies, nor are there clear mechanisms in place to de-risk private investment in the Corridor's territories that remain politically unstable, or any binding commitments to environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards, which are central to the EU's trade and investment policy.

Without a stronger definition of Italy's institutional role and a clearer operational framework, the Lobito Corridor risks becoming not a model of coordinated, equitable engagement, but rather a mostly symbolic contribution with limited impact. Concerns that also apply to the Mattei Plan as a whole, until its governance and actions are more firmly embedded in, and accountable based on, European standards.

24 July 2025

ISSN 2532-6570

© 2025 IAI
ISSN 2532-6570

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
Phone +39 066976831
www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)