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Building the Bridge: The Mattei Plan for Africa and Italy's Repositioning as a Mediating Power in EU-Africa Relations

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Thesis Pitch

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Statuary Declaration

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Matilde Bonomi

19/07/2026

Acknowledgments

To my mother and my father, thank you for handing me a compass instead of a map. You could have charted every turn for me; instead, you let me get gloriously, necessarily lost, trusting I'd find my own way. Watching from a distance is a strange kind of love, its quiet, patient, and somehow stronger than any instruction could have been. This thesis as much yours as it is mine.

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Abstract

The Mattei Plan for Africa, launched by the Meloni government in January 2024 and formally aligned with the European Union's Global Gateway initiative at the Rome summit of June 2025, has been read in the existing literature primarily as a development framework, an energy strategy, or an instrument of migration management. This thesis argues that these readings, while not without merit, underestimate the Plan's more fundamental novelty: its construction of Italy as a ‘bridge power’ capable of mediating between the European Union's multilateral architecture and African partner governments. Drawing on middle power theory and multi-level governance, the thesis develops a two-level bridge model in which Italy's claim to intermediary status rests on two conditions: an upward condition, concerning the degree to which the Plan is anchored within EU institutional and financial frameworks, and an outward condition, concerning the extent to which African partners perceive the relationship as substantively rather than rhetorically equal.

Using a single-case-study design, the analysis draws on Italian and EU policy documents, media sources, and semi-structured interviews with practitioners involved in the Plan's implementation. It traces the Plan's institutional architecture and its discursive and governance break from Italy's previous cooperation model, the mechanics through which the upward bridge to Brussels has been constructed, and the more contested evidence bearing on the outward bridge to African governments and civil society. The findings show that the upward condition is comparatively well established, with Italy building durable co-financing instruments and gaining recognition in Brussels as the EU's most structured national actor on Africa policy, while the outward condition remains unevenly met, as concrete mechanisms of African co-decision coexist with persistent civil-society scepticism about the depth of local ownership. The thesis concludes that the Mattei Plan constitutes a genuine, although still-consolidating, paradigm shift in Italian foreign policy and closes with targeted recommendations for narrowing the gap between the Plan's institutional design and its perceived legitimacy among African partners.

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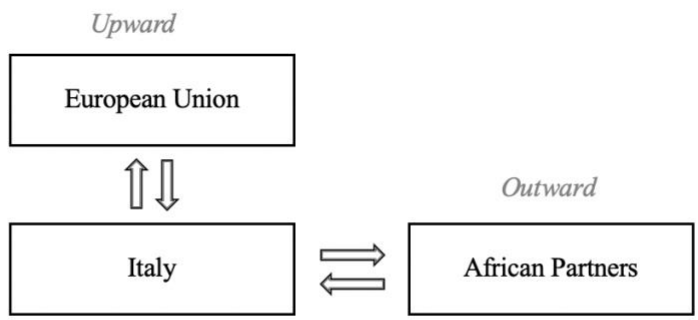
Introduction

On 20 June 2025, The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the President of the Council of Ministers of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, co-chaired the high-level event ‘The Mattei Plan for Africa and Global Gateway: A common effort with the African Continent' in Rome. The event was held to announce a formal alignment between Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa and the European Union's Global Gateway initiative (European Commission, 2025).

The summit signalled something arguably unprecedented: Rome no longer sought merely to participate in EU-Africa relations, but to help shape them from within, positioning itself as an indispensable intermediary between Brussels and the African continent.

This thesis departs from that moment and asks what it reveals about Italy's broader strategic transformation. The Mattei Plan, launched by the Meloni government in January 2024, has been variously described as a development framework, an energy strategy, and a migration management instrument (EC-OECD, 2026). This thesis argues that these readings, while not without merit, miss the more fundamental novelty of the Plan: its construction of Italy as a bridge power. Italy with this plan presents itself as a medium-sized European state capable of mediating between the EU's multilateral architecture and African partner governments in ways that larger powers cannot. Understanding the conditions under which this claim is plausible, and the extent to which it represents a genuine paradigm shift in Italian foreign policy, is the central aim of this research.

Diagram 1.0 Italy's Bridge Power Model



Source: Author's own elaboration.

1.1 Africa’s Geopolitical Reconfiguration and the Emergence of Italy’s Intermediary Role

The geopolitical landscape in which the Mattei Plan emerges is one of accelerating realignment. Over the past decade, Africa has become the central arena of an increasingly competitive international order. China's infrastructure diplomacy, institutionalised through the Belt and Road Initiative, has transformed the scale and terms of external engagement on the continent. By coupling financing with a non-interference discourse and a rapid delivery model, Beijing offered African governments an alternative to the conditionality-heavy frameworks traditionally associated with Western donors (Brautigam, 2009), posing a challenge to European influence.

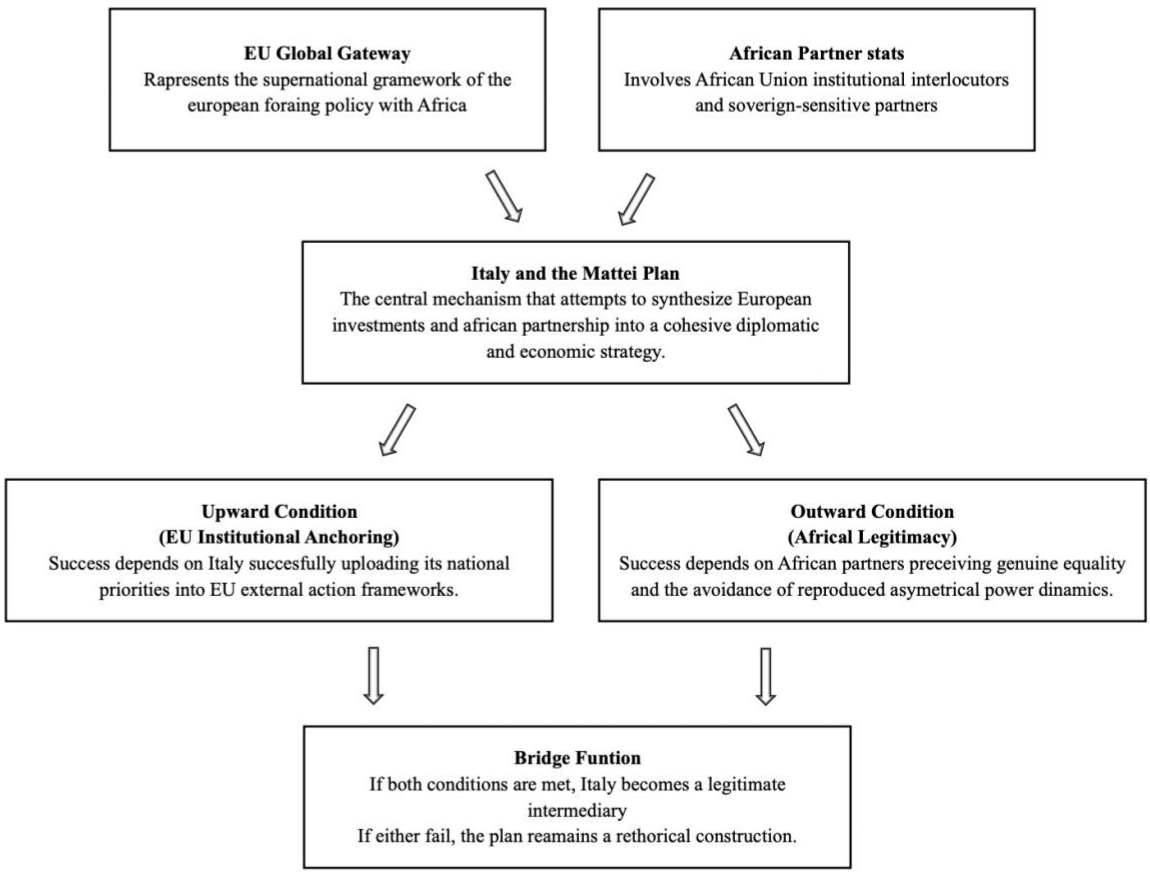
Simultaneously, Russia's expansion into the Sahel has accelerated the unravelling of France's historical sphere of influence in West and Central Africa. The deployment of the Wagner Group, subsequently rebranded as Africa Corps, and the forging of security partnerships with post-coup governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have not only displaced French and EU military presences but have also lent ideological oxygen to a broad anti-Western sovereignty discourse (Ramani, 2023). France's military withdrawals between 2022 and 2024, and the diplomatic expulsions that accompanied them, have left a strategic vacuum in a region long considered central to European security calculations (Radio Free Europe, 2022).

For the European Union, this double pressure, Chinese economic competition and Russian security opportunism, has exposed a deeper problem: a credibility and implementation deficit in its relationship with African governments (Aidoo and Hess, 2015). The EU's self-image as a 'normative power' (Manners, 2002), projecting values-based partnership, has repeatedly collided with the postcolonial realities of an asymmetric relationship. The Global Gateway initiative, launched in 2021, represents the EU's most ambitious attempt yet to close this gap; but it has so far struggled (Bordachev, 2022) to translate its large financial envelope into on-the-ground delivery.

It is within this context that Italy's strategic opening becomes legible. Unlike France, Italy carries a comparatively lighter colonial burden in sub-Saharan Africa (Interviewee EA1). Unlike Germany or the Nordic states, Italy has deep material and historical ties to the continent: ENI's energy partnerships, the Mediterranean migration corridor, and a commercial presence stretching across North and East Africa. And unlike smaller member states, Italy possesses the diplomatic weight and institutional heft to act as a meaningful partner to both EU institutions and African governments. The Mattei Plan, this thesis argues, is Italy's attempt to convert these structural advantages into a coherent strategic doctrine, and in doing so, to claim for itself the role of preferred European intermediary in a reconfigured Africa.

The thesis advances the following hypothesis: the Mattei Plan constitutes a genuine paradigm shift in Italy's foreign development policy insofar as it introduces a new foreign policy logic and satisfies two conditions: Italy's capacity to anchor the Plan within EU institutional frameworks (the upward condition), and the extent to which African partners perceive the partnership as substantively rather than rhetorically equal (the outward condition). Where both conditions are met, Italy's claim to intermediary status is self-reinforcing; where either fails, the bridge risks becoming a rhetorical construction without structural foundations.

Diagram 2.0 Conditions of the Mediation



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Theoretical framework & literature review

2.1 Middle Power Theory: From Behaviour to Strategy

The concept of the middle power has its genealogy in International Relations theory. Classical formulations, notably those of Holbraad (1984) and Wight (1978), defined middle powers primarily in structural terms: states occupying an intermediate position in the international hierarchy by virtue of their capabilities, neither great powers nor minor states. This ontological approach, however, offered limited analytical traction when applied to the actual foreign policy conduct of such states. The more productive turn came with the behavioural strand of the literature, which shifted the focus from what middle powers *are* to what they *do*. Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993) provided the foundational contribution to this reorientation, arguing that middle powers are best understood through their proclivity for coalition-building, multilateral institution-building, and, above all, *niche diplomacy*. Niche Diplomacy is defined as the strategic concentration of diplomatic resources in specific issue areas where a state can exercise disproportionate influence relative to its overall weight. This behavioural framework proved far more operational than structural typologies, allowing for the comparative analysis of middle power foreign policies across different systemic contexts.

A further refinement was introduced by Jordaan (2003), who drew a sharp distinction between *traditional* and *emerging* middle powers. Traditional middle powers (Canada, Australia, the Netherlands) are established Western states whose intermediate status derives from decades of institutional engagement and normative entrepreneurship within the liberal international order. Emerging middle powers, by contrast (Brazil, India, South Africa), are rising states in the Global South whose claim to middle power status is bound up with processes of domestic transformation and a revisionist, if not always disruptive, posture toward existing global governance arrangements. Italy's position within this taxonomy is deliberately ambiguous. Structurally, Italy qualifies as a traditional middle power: it is a founding member of the G7, a NATO ally, and one of the largest economies in the world. Yet its foreign policy conduct has historically underperformed relative to its structural endowments. The analytical challenge, therefore, is not to classify Italy as a middle power, but to understand its current bid for re-activation, a deliberate effort to translate latent structural assets into effective diplomatic leverage.

One conceptual instrument that has gained increasing salience in this context is the notion of the *bridge power*: a sub-category of middle power behaviour in which a state positions itself as an indispensable intermediary between larger blocs or competing powers. The bridge power does not seek to challenge the structural hierarchy; rather, it exploits its relational position to generate influence through connectivity. The bridge claim rests on the argument that the intermediary is not merely a passive conduit but an active architect of dialogue, capable of reducing transaction costs between parties that are unable or unwilling to engage directly. I argue that Italy's recent foreign policy discourse maps directly onto this sub-category.

More recent scholarship has sharpened these foundations. Aydin (2021) has drawn renewed attention to the structural vulnerability of middle power activism under conditions of deglobalisation and liberal order contestation, arguing that the foreign policy trajectories of middle powers are increasingly shaped by domestic democratic reversals as much as by systemic incentives. Abbondanza (2022), working comparatively across the Indo-Pacific, has proposed a novel framework for assessing middle power strategies that disaggregates the concept along the axes of institutional alignment and regional positioning. Finally, Mayer and Afterman (2023), assess that effective middle power strategy requires operating through multiple, simultaneously active frameworks, rather than sequentially committing to a single institutional anchor, prefiguring the two-level bridge model developed in this paper.

The theoretical gap this paper addresses is, however, more fundamental. Middle power theory, whether in its behavioural or bridge-power variant, has been developed almost exclusively with reference to states acting in the global arena as unitary actors. It has been strikingly silent on the question of middle powers operating *within* a supranational framework such as the European Union, where formal sovereignty is pooled, agendas are co-determined, and influence necessarily flows through institutional channels. The EU context imposes structural constraints that classical middle power theory does not anticipate, but it also offers distinctive enabling conditions, including access to collective bargaining weight and the legitimising resources of EU foreign policy instruments. Applying middle power theory to an EU member state therefore requires both a critical extension of the existing framework and an interrogation of its tacit assumptions about state autonomy.

2.2 Multi-Level Governance: Concepts and Extensions

The theory of multi-level governance (MLG) emerged from the study of EU regional policy in the early 1990s as a direct challenge to state-centric accounts of European integration. Hooghe and Marks (2001) provided its canonical formulation: the observation that EU structural funds were being negotiated and implemented through a set of arrangements in which supranational institutions, national governments, and subnational authorities (regional and local) were simultaneously engaged, without any single level exercising hierarchical authority over the others. The state, in this account, was not displaced but disaggregated; its constituent parts each cultivated autonomous relationships with the European level, bypassing the national government as gatekeeper. Hooghe and Marks (2001) further distinguished between two ideal-typical forms: Type I MLG, characterised by stable, general-purpose jurisdictions nested in a limited number of levels; and Type II MLG, composed of flexible, task-specific jurisdictions that proliferate and overlap. The analytical power of the framework resided precisely in its capacity to capture the non-hierarchical, polycentric quality of EU governance without reducing it either to intergovernmental bargaining or to proto-federal supranationalism.

The initial focus on subnational regions has progressively given way to a broader application of MLG logic to states within states. That is, to member states themselves as actors who simultaneously occupy multiple levels of a governance architecture they did not design and cannot unilaterally control. In this extended reading, a member state is not simply a participant in EU decision-making; it is a node in a multi-scalar network, whose domestic institutional configurations, resource endowments, and discursive strategies shape both its upward capacity to influence EU-level outcomes and its downward capacity to translate European mandates into national policy. This extension is theoretically significant because it reframes the question of national agency within the EU from one of sovereignty preservation to one of *positional entrepreneurship*: the capacity of a member state to exploit its structural position across governance levels in order to advance distinctive policy projects that it could not realise through purely national means (Perkmann, 2007).

A critical complement to the structural logic of MLG is provided by Vivien Schmidt's framework of discursive institutionalism (2008, 2010). Where historical and sociological institutionalisms privilege the constraining power of established rules and norms, Schmidt insists on the constitutive role of ideas and discourse in processes of institutional change. She distinguishes between the *coordinative discourse* through which policy actors construct and negotiate policy programmes among themselves, and the *communicative discourse* through which those programmes are legitimised to the broader public. Crucially for the present analysis, Schmidt argues that actors do not merely respond to institutional constraints, rather they use discourse to redefine what those constraints mean, to construct new problem framings, and to position their own initiatives as necessary and appropriate responses to shared challenges. Applied to Italy's Mattei Plan, this framework illuminates a dynamic that purely structural accounts would miss: Italy has invested heavily in *discursive pre-construction*. It has articulated a vision of itself as Europe's indispensable southern gateway *before* the institutional architecture capable of sustaining that vision has been consolidated. Discourse, thereby, create the cognitive and normative conditions that make subsequent institutional change legible and legitimate.

The original framework was conceived with reference to the internal architecture of EU governance, yet the logic of multi-scalar governance applies with equal force to the EU's external action, where the question of who speaks, who commits resources, and who implements policy is structurally analogous to the internal case. Scholars working on European foreign policy (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014; Rhinard & Sundelius, 2010) have noted that member states do not disappear from the external arena upon accession; they continue to maintain bilateral diplomatic relationships, to deploy national development finance instruments, and to seek selective alignment between national and EU-level agendas. The relevant analytical question is therefore how a member state inserts a national initiative into the EU-level governance architecture as a strategic act of agenda-setting and positional consolidation.

The analytical framework adopted in this paper integrates these theoretical resources into a two-level bridge model. The model posits that Italy, through the Mattei Plan, is simultaneously engaged in two distinct governance vectors. An *upward* vector, directed toward EU institutions: Italy seeks to upload its national initiative onto the European agenda, shaping the design of EU external action instruments in ways that amplify Italian priorities and consolidate Italy's role as a lead actor in Mediterranean and sub-Saharan engagement. And an *outward* vector, directed toward African partner states and regional organisations: Italy seeks to position itself as a privileged interlocutor, offering a model of engagement framed as equitable, non-extractive, and development-oriented, that differentiates it from other European competitors. The bridge function, in this model, is a governance strategy that exploits Italy's position as an EU member state with distinctive southern exposure to generate influence at both levels simultaneously. The analysis that follows (Ch. 4) will assess the extent to which this two-level strategy has produced measurable institutional outcomes.

2.3 The EU-Africa Relationship: Normative Power and Its Limits

The dominant self-understanding of the European Union as a global actor has long been anchored in Ian Manners' (2002) concept of *normative power Europe* (NPE). Manners (2002) argues that the EU's distinctiveness in international relations lies not in its military or economic weight but in its capacity to shape the preferences and behaviour of third parties through the diffusion of norms: democracy, rule of law, human rights, multilateralism. The NPE framework proved enormously influential, but it attracted a sustained and increasingly forceful postcolonial critique. Scholars such as Staeger (2015) and Abrahamsen (2004) have argued that the EU's normative self-presentation functions ideologically, concealing asymmetric power relations beneath a universalist vocabulary. The projection of European norms onto African partners, they contend, reproduces colonial logics of tutelage and civilisational hierarchy, even when articulated in the language of partnership and mutual benefit. The EU, in this reading, is not a post-Westphalian normative actor but a post-colonial one: its soft power is structurally entangled with histories of extraction and domination that neither development aid nor rhetorical egalitarianism can simply dissolve.

The tension between egalitarian rhetoric and structural asymmetry is nowhere more legible than in the career of the phrase *partnership of equals*, which has functioned as the governing trope of EU-Africa relations since at least the Cotonou Agreement (2000) and was reaffirmed, with renewed emphasis, in the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) of 2007. An analysis of the JAES (2007) and its successive implementation frameworks reveals a persistent disjuncture between the formal architecture of the relationship, which does indeed inscribe African agency through the African Union as a co-equal institutional interlocutor; and its operative logic, in which the EU retains agenda-setting authority, conditions market access and development finance on compliance with governance benchmarks of its own design, and consistently frames African priorities through the lens of European security concerns, most notably irregular migration and counter-terrorism (Jebbour, 2026).

The EU's most recent attempt to reframe its engagement with the African continent is the Global Gateway initiative, launched in 2021 as a geopolitically explicit alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, with a headline commitment of 300 billion euros in public and private investment by 2027 (European Commission, 2025). The Global Gateway represents a significant discursive shift: it abandons the development-aid paradigm in favour of an infrastructure and investment logic, explicitly acknowledges the competitive dimension of EU external engagement, and moves away from conditionality-based frameworks toward a model of mutual economic interest. Yet the initiative has attracted substantial scepticism. Critics have noted the continued dominance of European corporate interests in project design, and the absence of meaningful African ownership in priority-setting. The gap between the transformative ambitions of the Global Gateway's framing and the institutional reality of its implementation reproduces, in updated form, an egalitarian surface concealing a governance logic in which European actors define the terms of engagement.

Overall, the existing literature on the EU-Africa relationship, substantial as it is, exhibits a characteristic blind spot: it is overwhelmingly focused on Brussels-level actors: the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament, and on the aggregated outputs of EU foreign policy. The role of individual member states as active shapers of that relationship, operating simultaneously at the national level and within EU institutional channels, has received comparatively little systematic attention. This is a significant omission. Member states are not passive recipients of EU external policy; they bring national interests, historical relationships, and distinctive diplomatic cultures to bear on the design and implementation of EU-Africa engagement, and they retain substantial autonomous instruments that operate in parallel with, and sometimes in tension with, the EU framework.

Italy, in particular, represents an analytically under-studied case: a member state with deep Mediterranean exposure, a significant migration management stake, and an explicitly articulated national strategy, the Mattei Plan, that positions it as a would-be reformer of the EU-Africa relationship from within. Bridging this gap between the Brussels-centric literature on EU-Africa relations and the middle power literature on national foreign policy strategy is a central contribution of the present paper.

2.4 Italian Foreign Policy toward Africa: State of the Literature

The academic literature on Italian foreign policy toward Africa has expanded considerably since the launch of the Mattei Plan in 2023, though it remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries and policy-oriented outlets. The most systematic empirical mapping to date is provided by Carbone and Ragazzi (ISPI, 2024), whose survey of Italy's engagement with sub-Saharan and North African partners traces the evolution of Italian development cooperation, energy diplomacy, and migration governance across successive governments. Their account is valuable above all for its granularity: it documents the institutional discontinuities and resource constraints that have historically prevented Italy from translating its Mediterranean exposure into durable influence, and it identifies the Mattei Plan as a structural attempt to overcome this pattern by consolidating previously dispersed instruments such as ENI's energy partnerships, the Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo

(AICS) development portfolio, and the bilateral migration compact framework, under a single strategic umbrella.

A more theoretically ambitious contribution is offered by Hanau Santini and Baldaro (2025), who situate Italian Africa policy within the broader structural dilemma they describe as navigating Italy's three circles of foreign policy commitment: the Atlantic alliance, the European integration framework, and the Mediterranean and African neighbourhood. Drawing on a long-standing trope in Italian strategic discourse they argue that Italy has historically struggled to integrate these three vectors into a coherent grand strategy, oscillating between Atlanticist alignment, European multilateralism, and Mediterraneanist bilateralism without ever fully committing to the logic of anyone. The Mattei Plan, in their reading, represents the Meloni government's attempt to assert the third circle, the southern neighbourhood, as Italy's primary zone of comparative advantage, while maintaining the other two as enabling frameworks rather than constraining commitments. This is an analytically productive framing, but it operates at a level of abstraction that leaves the micro-mechanisms of EU-level insertion underspecified: it tells us that Italy seeks to rebalance its strategic posture southwards, but not precisely *how* the EU institutional architecture is being engaged to make that rebalancing durable.

A third strand of the literature, associated with researchers at the University of Trieste working on Italian strategic posture in the post-pandemic order, has developed what may be termed the *reasserting middle power southwards* argument. This account draws explicitly on middle power theory to interpret the Mattei Plan as Italy's attempt at middle power re-activation since the Andreotti-era Mediterranean policy of the late Cold War period. The argument is that Italy, confronted with a multipolar environment in which its traditional Atlantic and European anchors offer diminishing returns in terms of autonomous influence, is seeking to carve out a distinctive niche in Africa-related where its specific assets give it a credible claim to leadership. The Trieste strand represents the closest existing approximation to the analytical framework adopted in this paper, and this work builds directly on its insights.

The positioning adopted here accepts the middle power frame as the most productive available lens for interpreting Italy's Africa strategy but argues that it is analytically insufficient in two respects that the existing literature has not adequately addressed. The first concerns what might be called the *EU-anchoring condition*: the claim that Italy can function as a bridge power and a niche diplomat in Africa is only credible insofar as it is grounded in Italy's capacity to shape, rather than merely align with, EU-level governance instruments. A middle power strategy that operates in parallel to the EU framework, or that treats Brussels as a constraint to be managed, is structurally weaker than one that succeeds in uploading national priorities onto the European agenda and thereby multiplying their reach and legitimacy. Whether the Mattei Plan meets this condition is an empirical question this paper sets out to investigate. The second gap concerns the *African legitimacy condition*: middle power theory has been developed almost exclusively from the perspective of the aspiring middle power itself, with insufficient attention to how its self-positioning is received and assessed by the putative beneficiaries of its intermediary role. A bridge that African partners do not recognise as legitimate or that they perceive as reproducing the asymmetric logic of earlier European engagement under a more palatable rhetoric is not a bridge but a projection. Integrating the reception side of Italy's Africa strategy into the analytical framework is therefore not a supplementary concern but a constitutive one, and it is here that this paper makes its most distinctive theoretical contribution.

Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

3.1.1 Situating the Research Gap

After analysing the existing literature on Italian African relations (see 2.4), this sub-chapter will examine the specific research gap concerning the Mattei Plan. The existing scholarship on the Plan can be grouped into three principal interpretive strands. One body of work reads the Plan primarily as a migration governance instrument, a second strand foregrounds Italy's energy security imperatives, pointing to the prominent role of the national energy sector among the Plan's beneficiaries and to Italy's structural dependence on African gas as a post-Russian supply alternative, lastly, a third body of literature approaches the Plan with scepticism, noting that a significant proportion of its active projects do not appear to be genuine policy innovations.

Each of these readings captures an important dimension of the Plan's political logic. However, none of them examines what the Mattei Plan makes possible at the institutional and ideational level: namely, Italy's construction of a mediating role between the European Union's external action framework and African partner states, and the conditions under which such mediation may be sustained. Applying middle power theory and multi-level governance analysis to an EU member state operating within the Union's institutional architecture constitutes a genuine lacuna in the existing literature, and one with meaningful implications for how scholars and practitioners conceptualise the architecture of EU-Africa relations.

3.1.2 Main Research Question and Sub-Questions

The overarching research question guiding this thesis is:

To what extent does the Mattei Plan enable Italy to reposition itself as a mediating power between the European Union and Africa, and what are the conditions under which a national development initiative can become a lever of multi-level governance?

This question is operationalised through three sequential sub-questions:

SQ1: In what ways does the Mattei Plan represent a discursive and institutional break from Italy's previous development cooperation model?

SQ2: How does Italy articulate and enact its role as a strategic intermediary between the EU's external action framework and African partners? Could these mechanisms be replicated by other EU middle powers?

SQ3: To what extent does the Mattei Plan translate into genuine African agency, and does it foster positive perceptions among African partners?

3.1.3 Alignment of Sub-Questions

Together, the three sub-questions map onto a progression: from institutional genesis (SQ1) to governance enactment (SQ2), to relational legitimacy (SQ3). This sequencing reflects the analytical logic of the study: before assessing whether Italy has effectively positioned itself as a mediating power, it is necessary to establish what has changed institutionally and discursively, and to interrogate the equity conditions on which any claim to genuine intermediary must ultimately rest.

SQ1 institutional and discursive break: The primary aim is to assess whether the Mattei Plan's institutional architecture and rhetorical framing represent a genuine departure from previous cooperation models, or whether they reproduce familiar logics in new discursive packaging.

SQ2 intermediary enactment: This sub-question examines how Italy articulates and enacts its role as a strategic intermediary between the EU and African partner states by embedding the Mattei Plan within the EU's external action framework and translating this positioning into practice. It further seeks to identify the conditions that enable Italy to perform this intermediary role and assesses whether these conditions could be replicated by other middle powers within the European Union.

SQ3 African agency and asymmetry: This sub-question addresses whether the Plan's partnership framing reproduces structural asymmetries beneath a new normative register, or whether it creates meaningful space for African voice and ownership.

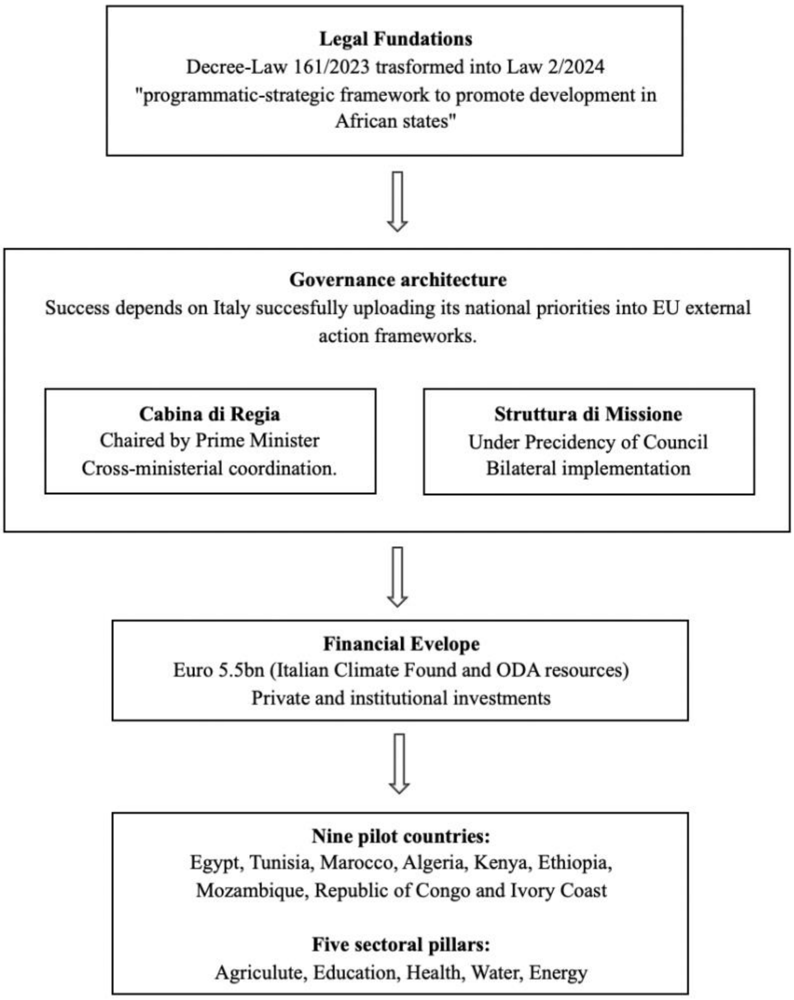
3.2 Case study: the Mattei Plan

The empirical object of this thesis is the Mattei Plan for Africa (*Piano Mattei per l'Africa*), Italy's flagship foreign and development policy initiative launched formally on 29 January 2024 at the Italy-Africa Summit in Rome. The Plan takes its name from Enrico Mattei, the post-war leader of the state energy company ENI, whose profit-sharing formula offered African producer states more favourable terms than those of the Anglo-American oil majors (Cerami, 2024). The invocation of this legacy is not incidental: the Plan deploys the Mattei brand to construct a historical lineage for Italy's contemporary Africa engagement, positioning the current initiative as a recovery of an interrupted tradition rather than a rupture with the past (Carbone and Ragazzi, 2024)

The Plan's legal foundation is Decree-Law No. 161 of 15 November 2023, later converted into Law No. 2 of 11 January 2024 (Camera dei Deputati, 2024). Article 1 of the Decree defines the Mattei Plan as a "programmatic-strategic framework" designed to promote development across African states, with a particular emphasis on digital infrastructure, renewable energy, and the circular economy. The Decree introduce a new unified command architecture consisting of a *Cabina di Regia* chaired by the Prime Minister and a *Struttura di Missione* embedded in the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Fattibene and Manservisi, 2024). The strategic framework approved by ministerial decree in October 2024 subsequently articulated five sectoral pillars for intervention: agriculture and food security; education and training; health; water resources; and energy, including renewable sources (Italian Government, 2024).

The Italy-Africa Summit of 28-29 January 2024 brought together 21 heads of state and government from the African continent alongside the Presidents of the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament (Fattibene, 2024). Prime Minister Meloni presented the Plan as a model of "cooperation between equals", explicitly rejecting both the donor-recipient logic of classical development aid and what she characterised as the extractive or predatory paradigms associated with other external actors on the continent (Italian Government, 2024). The Plan was initially operationalised in nine pilot countries: Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Republic of Congo, and Tunisia; and was subsequently extended to eighteen countries. The initial financing envelope was set at approximately €5.5 billion, drawn primarily from the Italian Climate Fund (*Fondo Italiano per il Clima*) and existing development cooperation resources, with an additional mobilisation target for private and institutional investment (Fattibene, 2024). The Plan's first annual implementation report, submitted to Parliament in November 2024 pursuant to Article 5 of Decree-Law 161/2023, identified 21 projects at various stages of development across the pilot countries, while acknowledging that a significant proportion of active initiatives represented continuations of pre-existing cooperation instruments rather than entirely new ventures (Struttura di Missione, 2024).

Diagram 3.0 The Mattei Plan for Africa: case study overview



Sources: Camera dei Deputati, 2024; Struttura di Missione, 2024; Italian Government, 2024

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Approach and Justification

This study adopts an entirely qualitative research design. Within the broader qualitative tradition, the study is best characterised as an interpretivist, theoretically informed design. The analytical frameworks applied are not used as predictive models but as sensitising lenses that orient attention toward specific relational, institutional, and discursive dynamics. This approach is consistent with the constructivist and critical traditions in EU studies and foreign policy analysis, where social reality (including the political significance of institutions and initiatives) is understood as constituted through the meanings actors attach to it, rather than existing independently of those interpretive processes (Wendt, 1999).

3.3.2 Single-Case Study Logic

The Mattei Plan constitutes the primary empirical object of analysis. The decision to centre the study on a single case reflects a deliberate methodological choice rather than a practical constraint. The Mattei Plan presents what George and Bennett (2005) would recognise as a theoretically significant case: its combination of explicit multi-level ambition, post-pandemic geopolitical context, and contested reception among African partners makes it a case of high analytical leverage.

Rather than seeking to generate statistically generalisable findings, the analysis aims for what Yin (2018) terms analytical generalisability: the proposition that the causal mechanisms and governance conditions identified here carry explanatory relevance for understanding how other medium-sized EU member states more broadly could seek to leverage national initiatives within the Union's external action framework. The value of the case lies not in its typicality but in the density and theoretical traction of its institutional and discursive dynamics.

3.4 Data Collection

The empirical base of this study is constructed through three complementary data collection methods: document analysis, media analysis, and semi-structured expert interviews. Their integration follows a triangulation logic in which each source type compensates for the blind spots of the others. Official policy documents provide the institutional record but suppress contestation; media sources capture public discourse but may lack analytical depth; expert interviews supply interpretive insight that neither documents nor media can fully provide. Moreover, I acknowledge the use of Claude, an artificial intelligence system created by Anthropic (Anthropic, 2026), in the preparation of this work. Specifically, AI-generated assistance was limited to language refinement and organizational editing of written content, on the basis of analysis, reasoning, and sources independently gathered and elaborated by the author. The intellectual ownership of all conceptual frameworks, empirical results, interview materials, bibliographic references, and final conclusions rests entirely with the author.

3.4.1 Document Analysis

Document analysis constitutes the methodological backbone of the empirical inquiry and serves as the primary instrument for SQ1, while also providing the institutional and legal basis for SQ2 and SQ3. The corpus of primary documents encompasses: the Mattei Plan's founding text and subsequent governmental communications; ministerial and parliamentary records pertaining to its implementation; documentation produced by AICS; EU-level instruments including the Global Gateway investment framework; and the AfDB institutional documents. Together, these sources enable a reconstruction of the Plan's legal architecture, its stated governance objectives, and the official narrative through which it is presented to domestic and international audiences. In addition to primary policy documents, the analysis draws extensively on secondary scholarly literature. This encompasses peer-reviewed academic scholarship on Italian foreign policy, EU-Africa relations, and the political economy of development cooperation, as well as think tank assessments produced by institutions such as the IAI. These policy-oriented analyses offer timely and expert evaluations of the Mattei Plan's strategic positioning, its reception among African partner states, and its coherence with broader European frameworks.

3.4.2 Media Analysis

Media analysis is employed as a second data collection method, targeting the communicative and discursive dimensions of the Mattei Plan that official policy documents cannot fully capture. While institutional texts record formal positions, media coverage reveals how those positions are contested, reframed, and received in wider public and policy arenas. The analytical scope encompasses both Italian-language sources and English-language international commentary, including African policy platforms and specialist publications focused on EU-Africa relations.

This dual-language scope serves a specific analytical purpose. Italian sources illuminate the domestic communicative register through which the Plan is constructed as a foreign policy achievement, while African and international sources provide an external vantage point from which the Plan's claims can be assessed critically. The latter are particularly central to SQ3, where understanding how the Plan is received outside Italy is analytically indispensable. Priority is given to outlets with a demonstrated track record in EU-Africa policy coverage, including pan-African policy platforms and European think-tank publications. User-generated and social media content are excluded from the analytical corpus.

3.4.3 Semi-Structured Expert Interviews

The third data source consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with experts and practitioners whose professional work intersects with the Mattei Plan, Italian foreign and development policy, specifically, African development policy. The semi-structured format was chosen because it combines the analytical benefits of a thematic interview guide, ensuring systematic coverage of the research questions, with the flexibility to pursue threads of analytical significance that arise organically in the course of the conversation.

The interview guide was developed iteratively from the research questions and the secondary literature and structured around three thematic clusters. The first cluster addresses the Mattei Plan's institutional design and its relationship to preceding Italian cooperation frameworks. The second concerns Italy's engagement with EU-level instruments (in particular the Global Gateway) and the mechanisms through which upward governance linkages are constructed and maintained. The third cluster focuses on African perceptions of and responses to the Plan, and on the conditions for a genuinely equitable relationship. The guide was provided to participants in advance to allow preparation and to ensure transparency in the research process.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, prioritising individuals with direct professional engagement with Italian, European or African institutions involved with the plan. All interviews were conducted via video call, recorded if prior consent was given, and subsequently transcribed and coded. To preserve participant anonymity, all interviewees are referenced using institutional speaker codes throughout the text.

Table 1.0 Composition of the Interview Sample

Code	Affiliation	Area of Expertise	Interview Date
IP1	Italian foreign-policy foundation (Mediterranean-Africa focus)	Regional security, geoeconomics, Mediterranean-Africa relations, Horn of Africa	08/05/2026
PU1	Italian university, with research affiliation at a South African university	Politics and history of international relations and development in Africa	03/07/2026
AB1	Pan-African multilateral development bank	Blended climate/energy finance; institutional co-financing mechanisms linked to the Mattei Plan	24/06/2026
AB2	Pan-African multilateral development bank	Donor and sovereign-partner mobilization, replenishment negotiations, EU and non-traditional donor relations	02/07/2026
EA1	Southern African civil-society and media sector	African governance, development finance, reception of external partnership frameworks	19/02/2026

Prior to each interview, participants received a written information sheet setting out the purpose, scope, and intended use of the research. Participants were informed that all contributions would be used exclusively for academic purposes, and that participation was voluntary in all respects. Participants were advised of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis

Qualitative methods form the backbone of the analytical approach taken here, with thematic analysis applied consistently across all three categories of data. This choice reflects the method's key strength: it does not require researchers to lock in a coding framework before engaging with the material, which leaves room for unexpected or complex patterns to surface as the analysis unfolds (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given that the subject matter here is discursive and relational, this kind of flexible, exploratory approach proves especially valuable, since it can accommodate the messiness and variation inherent in the data.

3.5.2 Stages of Analysis

The analytical process unfolds across three sequential stages, each corresponding to a progressively more integrative level of interpretation.

In the first stage, documentary and media evidence is systematically reviewed and coded against the three sub-questions. This produces a structured account of the Mattei Plan's institutional architecture, its insertion within EU-level frameworks, and its reception across African and international commentary. The discursive institutionalism framework is applied at this stage to distinguish between the coordinative discourse through which the Plan is negotiated within Italian institutional settings, and the communicative discourse through which it is presented to external audiences.

In the second stage, interview transcripts are subjected to a two-pass coding procedure. The first pass applies a deductive framework derived directly from the thematic clusters of the interview guide, ensuring systematic coverage of the research questions across all available interviews. The second pass adopts an inductive reading, identifying themes that emerge from the expert testimony beyond those anticipated in the initial framework. This dual-pass approach allows the analysis to remain both systematically grounded and responsively open to the evidence.

In the third and final stage, documentary, media, and interview data are synthesised in an integrated thematic analysis. Moving from description to explanation, this stage assesses the degree to which the Mattei Plan satisfies the two analytical conditions identified in the theoretical framework: the upward condition of effective EU institutional anchoring, and the outward condition of African legitimacy and ownership.

3.6 Limitations

Five limitations bear on the scope and confidence of the findings.

Access constraints and interview scope: the most significant limitation is the restricted size and institutional range of the expert interview sample. Securing access to senior officials directly engaged in the Mattei Plan is inherently difficult within a thesis timeframe. Where primary corroboration is absent, the analysis draws explicitly on secondary sources.

Temporal dynamics: formally launched in January 2024, the Mattei Plan continues to evolve. Key developments have been incorporated, but subsequent changes may disqualify some findings.

The strategic character of discursive evidence: official communications and media content are inherently interest-laden and cannot be taken at face value. The triangulated design is intended to guard against this risk, but the possibility that the analysis of Italy's bridge-power identity relies partly on the very discourse it seeks to interrogate cannot be fully eliminated.

The mediation of African perspectives: sources drawn on are predominantly in English and Italian, meaning African voices reach the analysis largely as filtered through European channels. This risk is mitigated by prioritising African-authored policy commentary and AU institutional documents, but the constraint and its implications for SQ3 are acknowledged.

Analytical generalisability: as already mentioned (see 3.3.2) a single-case study is not statistically generalisable. The study does, however, claim analytical generalisability: that the mechanisms and governance dynamics identified carry explanatory relevance for understanding how medium-sized EU states more broadly seek to leverage national initiatives within the Union's external action framework, a claim advanced with appropriate epistemic caution throughout.

Analysis and Results

4.1 The Mattei Plan as Discursive and Institutional Break

4.1.1 Italy's Pre-Mattei African Policy

Any credible assessment of the Mattei Plan’s novelty must begin with a precise characterisation of the policy landscape it entered. Italy’s engagement with Africa before 2023 was not defined by a coherent strategy but by its structural absence (Interviewee AB2). Development cooperation, energy diplomacy and migration governance each operated through separate institutional channels, governed by separate ministries, and oriented toward separate political objectives with no unified political command capable of aligning them (Fattibene & Manservisi, 2024). Law 125/2014, the framework statute governing Italian development cooperation at the time, distributed operational responsibilities across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and the Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, producing what Fattibene and Manservisi (2024) aptly describe as a patchwork of isolated initiatives (Italy, 2014). Energy policy was conducted bilaterally through ENI's network of African concessions (Carnevali, 2000). Migration governance was managed through unilateral executive agreements, most consequentially the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding with the Libyan Government of National Accord, which effectively outsourced border control and search-and-rescue functions to Libyan coastal authorities without any European coordination dimension (Zambisi and Albarosa, 2025). The result was a policy apparatus that was bilateral where multilateralism was required, reactive where strategy was demanded, and chronically caught between ENI's commercial imperatives and the securitisation logic of migration management (Fattibene and Manservisi, 2024).

This structural fragmentation was compounded by a deeper historical pattern. Italy's post-colonial engagement with Africa reproduced, in successive institutional forms, the same underlying asymmetry. Enrico Mattei's 75/25 profit-sharing formula was genuinely more favourable to producer countries than the standard terms offered by the Anglo-American majors, but it remained a formula conceived in Rome and extended to African states as a finished proposition rather than co-designed with them (Cerami, 2024). The anti-colonialism embedded in Mattei's doctrine was real but instrumental: Italy supported African independence movements insofar as they displaced British and French monopolies and opened market space for ENI's commercial penetration (Carnevali, 2000). The decades following Mattei's death in 1962 did not resolve this asymmetry; they dispersed it across an increasingly incoherent institutional apparatus. Italy's persistent rivalry with France in the Sahel and the Maghreb, the bilateral energy agreements negotiated outside EU frameworks, and the unilateral management of the Libyan migration corridor all reproduced the same operative logic: Africa as a space for Italian bilateral manoeuvre, not as a partner in a shared framework.

That baseline also has a European dimension. Italy's Africa policy was historically conducted not merely in parallel to EU frameworks but frequently in competition with them. As Carbone and Ragazzi (2024) document, successive Italian governments treated the EU's external action architecture as a constraint to be managed rather than an amplifier to be engaged. The consequence was a double structural weakness: Italy lacked the bilateral instruments of a major power and the multilateral leverage of an EU anchor state. It is this conditions that constitute the structural baseline against which the Mattei Plan's claims that novelty must be assessed. The Mattei Plan's departure from this pattern is therefore analytically significant on two distinct dimensions: the national and the European.

4.1.2 The Mattei Plan's Institutional Architecture: What Genuinely Changed

Decree-Law 161/2023, converted into Law 2/2024, does not introduce substantively new legal instruments for development cooperation (Interviewee PU1). It creates no new categories of official development assistance, no independent financial vehicle with its own legal personality, and no new treaty obligations with African partner states (Camera dei Deputati, 2024). Examined on its own legal terms, the act is better characterised as a governance rationalisation than as the creation of a genuinely new cooperation regime (Interviewee PU1). What it does introduce and what constitutes the analytically significant departure is a unified political command structure anchored at the apex of Italian executive power (Interviewee PU1, Interviewee AB2).

The law establishes two operational bodies. The *Cabina di Regia* is chaired by the Prime Minister and convenes ministers from eight departments alongside institutional actors from the private sector and civil society in a variable-geometry format that adapts its composition to each thematic agenda (Interviewee IP1). The *Struttura di Missione*, embedded within the Presidency of the Council and operational from March 2024, functions as the executive arm: conducting bilateral missions to partner countries, identifying and co-designing projects with partner governments, liaising with international financial institutions and ensuring cross-ministerial coherence (Struttura di Missione, 2024). The significance of this architecture lies not in its formal novelty but in what it resolves: for the first time, a single political-administrative command is capable of aligning energy policy, development finance, export promotion, migration governance and cultural diplomacy toward a coherent continental strategy.

The Plan's early implementation record provides measurable evidence that this governance model is producing coordination gains rather than merely adding an institutional layer to pre-existing fragmentation. The *Fondo Italiano per il Clima* has allocated approximately €265 million across six Committee sessions. SACE has deployed around €2 billion in guarantees supporting approximately 200 Italian firms across partner countries. The *Struttura di Missione* has conducted dozens of bilateral missions and brought concrete projects to signature across nearly every partner country within eighteen months of operation, a pace notably faster than comparable Italian development initiatives of the preceding decade (Struttura di Missione, 2025). External corroboration of this coordination effect comes from outside the Italian government's own reporting, indeed, the Cassa Depositi e Prestiti has become significantly more active in Africa since the Plan's launch, opening a new office in Abidjan in 2025 and planning a further office in Nairobi (Interviewee AB1) succeeding in aligning previously dispersed financial instruments behind a single strategic direction.

Moreover, the mandatory annual reporting requirement under Article 5 of D.L. 161/2023, approved by the Cabina di Regia and transmitted to Parliament, establishes a degree of democratic accountability that is structurally unusual for Italian foreign policy instruments and compares favourably with analogous European initiatives in its granularity and public accessibility.

The most structurally significant departure, however, is the Plan's explicit and operational alignment with the European Union's Global Gateway strategy. Where Italy previously conducted Africa policy in competition with European partners, the Mattei Plan is designed to operate within the EU framework while retaining a distinct national identity and direct bilateral relationships that Brussels alone cannot provide. This dual positioning, simultaneously Italian and European, is precisely what the preceding three decades of Italian Africa policy failed to achieve, and its consolidation marks the clearest institutional break with the bilateral incoherence that defined the pre-Mattei baseline.

4.1.3 The Discursive Break: Applying the Schmidt's Framework

As established in the theoretical framework (see 2.2), Schmidt's discursive institutionalism distinguishes between the coordinative discourse through which policy actors negotiate programmes among themselves and the communicative discourse through which those programmes are legitimised to broader publics. Applied to the Mattei Plan, the framework reveals that the break it represents is not only institutional but ideational: Italy has used discourse to redefine the meaning of its Africa engagement before the institutional architecture capable of fully sustaining that redefinition has been consolidated.

At the coordinative level, the shift is concrete. The Plan replaces the previous organising logic (energy security and migration containment; ENI/Ambasciata d'Italia ad Algeri, 2022) with five development pillars, which are energy, agriculture, education, health and water infrastructure (Jaldi and Cercaci, 2025), that explicitly foreground African development needs alongside Italian strategic interests. The Cabina di Regia's cross-ministerial composition institutionalises a mode of deliberation that the siloed architecture of Law 125/2014 structurally precluded, and the multi-ministerial engagement documented across both implementation reports confirms that this new problem framing has been internalised by Italian institutional actors rather than remaining confined to political communication (Struttura di Missione, 2024; Struttura di Missione, 2025).

At the communicative level, the invocation of Enrico Mattei's name is not incidental: it performs what Schmidt (2010) terms *background ideational work*, thus, mobilising a historical narrative in which Italy figures as a distinctively cooperative European actor, one associated with anti-colonialism and favourable terms for producer countries, and positioning the contemporary Plan as the recovery of that tradition after decades of incoherence. The communicative discourse thereby creates the cognitive and normative conditions under which the institutional architecture becomes legible and legitimate, both to domestic audiences and to African interlocutors (Cerami, 2024). Yet Interviewee EA1 suggests this discursive work could be further exploited. In his view, Italy's Foreign Ministry does not sufficiently narrate Mattei's own historical involvement in African decolonisation, leaving what he describes as a "massive soft power asset" underused in diplomatic practice.

4.1.4 The Governance Break: A Multi-Level Governance Analysis of the Mattei Plan

The dimensions of MLG previously analysed (see 2.2) illuminates a distinct dimension of what is genuinely novel in the Mattei Plan, sustaining the argument that the break represents is simultaneously structural, relational, and ideational.

The most analytically precise entry point is Hooghe and Marks's (2001) distinction between Type I and Type II multi-level governance. Italy's pre-Mattei Africa policy exemplified a pathological variant of Type II governance: an uncoordinated proliferation of task-specific actors (ENI in energy, AICS in development cooperation, the Interior Ministry in migration) each operating according to its own institutional logic. The Mattei Plan's central institutional innovation is precisely the introduction of a Type I-style command architecture composed by the *Cabina di Regia* and the *Struttura di Missione* anchored at the apex of executive power (Interviewee IP1). The analytical significance of this move is not merely administrative: it signals a shift in Italy's mode of engaging the EU governance architecture, creating the structural conditions for coherent upward engagement. From a Hooghe and Marks (2001) perspective, the Mattei Plan represents Italy's transition to a multi-scalar system.

Keukeleire and Delreux (2014) sharpen this structural reading by distinguishing member states that function as policy takers from those that function as framework shapers. Italy's pre-Mattei posture corresponded to the former: successive governments treated EU external action instruments as constraints to be managed rather than amplifiers to be engaged, conducting Africa policy bilaterally and often in competition with EU frameworks (Carbone and Ragazzi, 2024). The Mattei Plan marks a deliberate bid to shift into the latter category, most visibly through the June 2025 summit co-chaired by Meloni and Von der Leyen, which produced eleven agreements and formalised alignment between the Mattei Plan and the Global Gateway. Italy is no longer preserving autonomous bilateral space alongside EU frameworks but embedding its national initiative within them as a constitutive element. Applied here, the framework identifies the critical governance condition for Italy's bridge-power claim: whether Italy can sustain the framework-shaper role or reverts under implementation pressure to the bilateral-manoeuvre logic that defined the pre-Mattei baseline.

A complementary perspective comes from Rhinard and Sundelius (2010), who argue that actors embedded in densely interdependent governance systems face a dual logic: their autonomy is structurally constrained by the obligations and dependencies of multilateral participation, but this same embeddedness generates structural capital, relational resilience unavailable to purely bilateral actors. Italy's decision to anchor the Plan within the Global Gateway rather than keep it a standalone national instrument accepts EU-level constraints (alignment with Commission frameworks, operation within Team Europe parameters, shared credit with Brussels) in exchange for institutional resilience that a nationally standalone Plan, dependent on a single government's political continuity would lack. This reveals a dimension purely structural accounts would miss accepting interdependence is itself a governance strategy, trading short-term autonomy for long-term durability.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the Mattei Plan represents more than a new foreign policy initiative; it constitutes a shift in Italy's mode of governance, creating a qualitatively new form of policy engagement across multiple governance levels.

4.2 Enacting the Upward Bridge: the Global Gateway and the Mechanisms of EU Anchoring

4.2.1 The Global Gateway as an Opportunity Structure

The starting point is the Global Gateway initiative itself, which must be understood as both a policy instrument and, crucially, an opportunity structure. Launched in 2021 with an envelope of €300 billion in public and private investment (of which €150 billion earmarked for Africa) the Global Gateway represented the EU's most deliberate attempt to project collective economic statecraft onto the African continent (European Commission, 2026). Its design logic differed markedly from the conditionality-heavy frameworks that had characterised earlier EU-Africa engagement, moving from infrastructure and energy to digital connectivity and value chains (Adesina, 2025). The Global Gateway could aggregate financial pledges and set strategic priorities; it could not, however, offer what bilateral engagement delivers: a named interlocutor, coordination between the EU countries, private sector engagement roadmap, and the political will to co-design projects with partner governments (Ergenc, 2025). This is the gap Italy is positioned to fill: as a sovereign state, it can in principle supply what Brussels structurally cannot: a single government counterpart, an established diplomatic presence, the ability to mobilise Italian private investors, and the political latitude to negotiate projects directly with partner governments. The Mattei Plan represents Italy's attempt to convert this positional advantage into practice.

The Team Europe framework, institutionalised as the operational modality for delivering Global Gateway commitments, formalises the role of member states within EU external action in ways that earlier development cooperation architectures did not (IDOS Research, 2021). Under the Team Europe approach, member states are not merely donors aligning with a Brussels-defined agenda; they are co-architects of Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs), contributing bilateral diplomatic relationships, national development finance instruments, and implementing agencies to a common delivery structure (European Commission, 2026). Italy was the first member state to present such a comprehensive and strategically articulated foreign policy initiative within the Team Europe system (Interviewee AB2) and its capacity to structure and operationalize the Mattei Plan was recognized and valued in Brussels (Interviewee IP1). The framework of Team Europe was built in a way that favoured exactly what the Mattei Plan offered: an existing bilateral network, a clearly defined geographic focus, and a governance structure able to commit resources and run missions on its own schedule, free from the institutional delays typical of EU programming. The Global Gateway, in short, provided the normative and institutional vocabulary through which Italy could claim that its bilateral Africa engagement was simultaneously a European contribution (Interviewee IP1).

4.2.2 The Mechanisms of the Upward Bridge

The mechanisms through which Italy has pursued this upward anchoring are best understood through three moves: discursive alignment, institutional co-production and financial interlocking.

Discursive alignment precedes and conditions the others. From its inception, the Mattei Plan aimed at contribution to Europe's collective strategic posture toward Africa as well as to its own. The Plan's founding decree (D.L. 161/2023) embeds a European dimension: among the Cabina di Regia's functions, Article 3.f, explicitly tasks it with promoting initiatives aimed at accessing resources made available by the European Union and international organizations (Italy, 2023). This positions Italy's engagement within the broader context of EU-Africa partnership and the Global Gateway's investment logic (Camera dei Deputati-Servizio Studi, 2024). This discursive groundwork was progressively reinforced through concrete institutional steps, beginning with the January 2024 Italy-Africa Summit, explicitly framed as an Italy-Africa-EU architecture (Italian Government, 2024), from which the relationship has grown steadily.

Institutional co-production builds on this discursive groundwork and is where the upward bridge becomes most visible. The Rome Summit of 20 June 2025 is its clearest expression. Co-chaired by Prime Minister Meloni and Commission President von der Leyen under the title "The Mattei Plan for Africa and Global Gateway: A Common Effort with the

African Continent", the summit produced eleven concrete agreements and commitments totalling €1.2 billion, and it formalised a mode of co-governance between a national initiative and an EU-level framework that has few direct precedents in European external action (Africa-EU Energy Partnership, 2025; European Commission, 2025). Critically, the summit's institutional outputs produced a Letter of Intent between the European Commission, Italy, and the World Bank, alongside specific co-financing commitments and a joint factsheet issued by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships, instruments that carry operational weight and signal a durable architecture of cooperation (European Commission, 2025). The summit architecture itself embodied the bridge logic: African heads of state were present alongside the heads of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group, and the African Development Bank, constructing a governance forum in which Italy functioned simultaneously as a national host, an EU interlocutor, and a facilitator of multilateral dialogue. The African Development Bank's President, Adesina, explicitly endorsed the Bank's role as a key implementing partner for both the Mattei Plan and the Global Gateway, affirming an institutional interlocking that extended the governance architecture well beyond the bilateral Italian-EU axis (AfDB, 2025). Von der Leyen's framing at this event made the coordinative discourse explicit, describing the Mattei Plan as a "perfect example" of how the European Global Gateway was being shaped together with Italy, and characterising the summit itself as "Team Europe at work", a joint effort with Africa (Spazio50, 2025). Meloni, meanwhile, framed Italy as the actor redefining the method of Europe-Africa relations, not simply channelling Brussels policy (Spazio50, 2025; Donatio, 2025).

This institutional co-production is corroborated at the level of Brussels perception itself. Interviewee IP1 observes that European Commission officials increasingly regard Italy as the EU member state with the most structured *"sistema paese"* approach to development cooperation in Africa, a coordinated national system spanning ministries, development finance institutions, and commercial actors.

Financial interlocking is the third and most operationally concrete move, translating discursive and institutional alignment into capital flows. The GRAF platform (the Mattei Plan-Rome Process Financial Facility, co-established with the African Development Bank) represents a mechanism through which Italian public capital is channelled into a multilateral instrument: the RPFF draws on grant resources from two Italian ministries, the Ministry of

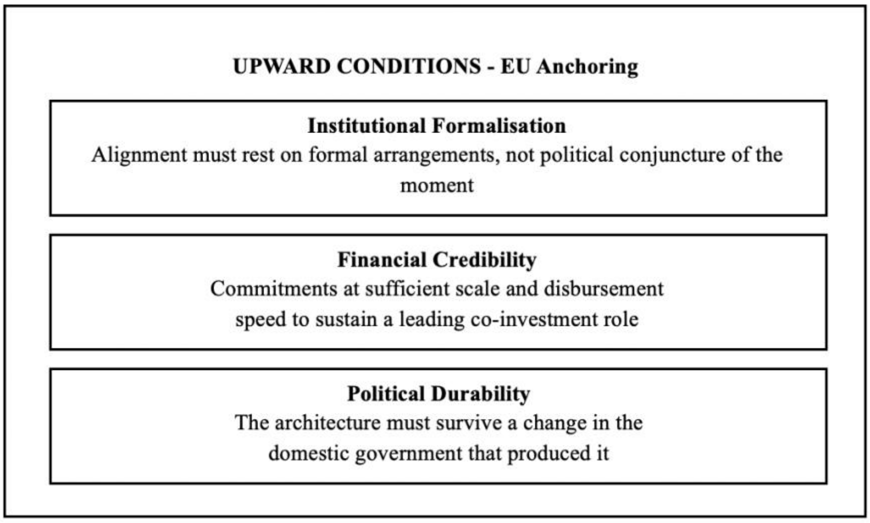
Environment and Energy Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, alongside concessional resources contributed by Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (Interviewee AB1). More analytically significant is the facility's donor base beyond Italy that the Plan was able to mobilise: the UAE has joined as a co-donor, marking, according to the same source, the first time the UAE has directly supported a trust fund at the Bank, alongside a further contribution from Denmark (Interviewee AB1).

The EU-IFC guarantee instrument (€291 million within the Better Futures Programme framework), introduced in 2025, illustrates how limited public guarantees within the Global Gateway architecture can unlock significantly larger volumes of private investment (IARI, 2025). Italy's participation in these blended finance structures through the Fondo Italiano per il Clima (approximately €265 million across six committee sessions) and SACE's €2 billion in guarantees supporting approximately 200 Italian firms (Struttura di Missione, 2025), positions it as a co-financier within a European investment architecture. The Struttura di Missione's reports document dozens of bilateral missions across partner countries, with concrete project signatures achieved within eighteen months of operational launch (Struttura di Missione, 2025). In the specific domain of digital infrastructure, the Blue Raman submarine cable initiative, co-funded by the European Commission (€37 million) and involving Italian digital infrastructure operator Sparkle, exemplifies the pattern of national-European co-investment that the June 2025 summit formalised as the model for Mattei-Global Gateway convergence (Governo italiano, 2025).

Each of the projects in which Italy and the EU collaborate falls within the priority sectors that both frameworks claim as shared ground, reinforcing the cognitive equivalence Schmidt's (2010) framework predicts: national and European initiatives are presented not as parallel or competing tracks, but as a single, mutually reinforcing investment architecture.

4.2.3 Conditions for Sustainable EU Anchoring: A Critical Assessment

Diagram 4.0 Assessing the Condition for Sustainable EU Anchoring



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Having established the mechanics of the upward bridge, the analytical framework requires an assessment of whether the conditions for durable EU anchoring have been met or whether the institutional alignment achieved to date remains primarily conjunctural.

The first is institutional formalisation: the alignment between a national initiative and EU-level instruments must be embedded in formal governance arrangements rather than reliant on political conjuncture. This is an area where the Mattei Plan has already made tangible progress. The June 2025 summit produced concrete institutional outputs: the Letter of Intent between the European Commission, Italy, and the World Bank, the co-financing commitments, and the joint factsheet from the Directorate-General for International Partnerships, all of which carry weight beyond declaratory politics (European Commission, 2025). Domestically, the mandatory annual parliamentary reporting requirement under Article 5 of D.L. 161/2023 introduces a built-in accountability mechanism that disciplines the national architecture and creates a recurring opportunity for course correction and refinement. The Fondo Italiano per il Clima's Technical Committee, while currently an Italian national body, provides a ready-made institutional anchor that could be extended toward EU governance integration as alignment deepens.

The second condition is financial credibility: the upward bridge must be supported by financial commitments of sufficient scale and disbursement speed to sustain Italian claims to a leading role in EU-Africa co-investment. This represents Italy’s strongest assets as the Mattei Plan's financial architecture totals approximately €5.5 billion, a figure that is not trivial relative to Italy's historical development cooperation budgets. The amount was drawn deliberately from at least ten distinct channels rather than a single fund, spanning from the Fondo Italiano per il Clima, multilateral co-financing with institutions like the World Bank and AfDB, and SACE's commercial guarantees, which extend Italy's footprint well beyond public capital alone (IARI, 2025; Struttura di Missione, 2025). Italy spreads risk broadens its donor and investor base and unlocks complementary forms of capital. The integration of pre-existing AICS and ENI engagements within this framework can likewise be read as a strength allowing the Plan to build on established operational capacity and relationships while channelling new resources toward shared strategic priorities, reinforcing continuity and coherence rather than starting from scratch (IAI, 2025, February).

The third condition, political durability, fares better here than an institutional reading alone would suggest. IP1 is confident that “the spirit of the Mattei Plan will continue regardless of the current government", since no prior Italian government has given Africa this level of coordinated attention. Two features support this reading. First, the Plan is framed as an economic and energy-security imperative rather than a partisan foreign policy project, giving it a broader potential base of support than the government that launched it. Second, its Europeanisation functions as a structural safeguard: to the extent that projects are co-financed through the Global Gateway, they become partially insulated from Italy's domestic budget cycles (see 4.2.2). PU1 arrives at a similar conclusion from a different angle, characterising the Mattei Plan less as a break with past practice than as a "cosmetic operation" layered onto longer-standing Italian development cooperation that has already been evolving in step with shifting international frameworks, implying that its underlying logic would likely persist even if the label itself did not. This confident assessment sits alongside two caveats worth noting. EA1 points out that the Plan's concentration of political ownership within the Presidency of the Council also concentrates political vulnerability, since a future government could in principle dissolve the coordinating architecture, consistent with the literature's identification of chronic discontinuity in Italian external strategy (Hanau Santini and Baldaro, 2025). AB1 adds that the global contraction of development aid, occurring just as Italy pushes for greater national content, creates a tension between bilateral commercial imperatives and multilateral financing norms, placing part of the durability question outside Italy's control.

Overall, the three conditions point toward a positive verdict on the upward bridge. Institutional formalisation has moved decisively beyond declaratory politics, financial credibility is underpinned by a genuinely diversified architecture rather than a single vulnerable funding line, and political durability, the condition most exposed to domestic volatility, turns out to be the one where EU anchoring does the most protective work. On balance, then, the evidence assembled here supports reading the current institutional alignment as a durable upward bridge between national initiative and EU-level engagement in Africa.

4.2.4 Replicability: Could Another EU Middle Power Build the Same Bridge?

The conditions for sustainable EU anchoring identified above are specific to Italy's circumstances, yet the analytical question posed by this thesis goes a step further aiming at understanding whether the underlying mechanism (a member state converting a national initiative into co-architecture of an EU external action instrument) is generalisable to other medium-sized EU states, or whether it depends on a configuration of assets that is essentially unrepeatable.

Three observations support an affirmative answer. First, the opportunity structure itself is not Italy-specific. The Global Gateway's structural gap, the Commission's inability to supply a named bilateral interlocutor, an established diplomatic network, or the political latitude to co-design projects directly with partner governments, is a generic feature of EU external action, and the Team Europe framework was explicitly designed to absorb member-state contributions of this kind (IDOS Research, 2021). Any traditional middle power with an existing regional foreign-policy footprint, comparable to Spain's relationship with Latin America, or Poland's engagement with the EU's Eastern Partnership countries, occupies a structurally analogous position: a state too large to be a passive policy-taker, but lacking the unilateral weight to act independently of the EU framework, and therefore incentivised to convert regional ties into a framework-shaping role (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014).

Second, the sequence Italy followed (discursive alignment, institutional co-production through a unified command structure, and financial interlocking via blended-finance instruments) does not depend on idiosyncratic Italian features. The Cabina di Regia/Struttura di Missione model is, in Hooghe and Marks's (2001) terms, simply a shift from pathological Type II fragmentation to a Type I coordinating apex; any member state whose Africa or neighbourhood policy is currently dispersed across competing ministries could in principle replicate this rationalisation, since the legal innovation required, as Decree-Law 161/2023 demonstrates, is comparatively modest. Third, the Schmidt-style discursive pre-construction that underpinned the Mattei Plan's legitimacy (the invocation of a historical figure and a "cooperation of equals" framing) is a resource available, in some form, to most European states with a colonial or post-colonial history in the target region; the raw material for this kind of communicative discourse is not unique to Italy, even if the specific Mattei brand is.

However, the case study also identifies conditions whose absence would make replication considerably harder. The Mattei Plan's financial credibility rests on the deliberate aggregation of pre-existing instruments (ENI's commercial relationships, AICS's operational infrastructure, SACE's guarantee capacity, and the Fondo Italiano per il Clima) into a single architecture (IARI, 2025; Struttura di Missione, 2025). A state lacking this density of pre-existing bilateral instruments in the relevant region would face a steeper start-up cost, since the bridge strategy described here is better understood as a re-organisation and re-framing of existing assets than as the creation of new ones. Similarly, the political durability condition (see 4.2.3) suggests that the bridge's sustainability depends on the initiative being framed in terms, energy security, migration, economic interest, broad enough to outlast the government that launched it; a middle power attempting this manoeuvre through an instrument that remains identifiably partisan would be more exposed to the discontinuity that the Italian literature itself identifies as a chronic risk (Hanau Santini and Baldaro, 2025).

The analytically generalisable finding, then, is not that any EU middle power could replicate the Mattei Plan as such, but that the two-level bridge mechanism, upward anchoring within an EU external-action instrument combined with an outward claim to privileged regional access, constitutes a viable strategic repertoire for traditional middle powers operating within the EU's multi-level governance architecture. This is possible only provided that the three preconditions hold: an existing regional asset base that can be aggregated rather than built from scratch, an EU-level instrument with a structural gap that member-state contributions can fill, and a discursive framing durable enough to survive domestic political turnover. Where these three conditions are met, for example Spain vis-à-vis the Global Gateway in Latin America, the

Italian case suggests the mechanism could plausibly recur; where they are absent, the bridge-power strategy is likely to remain a discursive construction without structural foundations.

4.3 Enacting the Outward Bridge: Recognition and Limitations

4.3.1 Italy's Comparative Advantage in Africa

Italy's claim to comparative advantage in Africa rests on four structural assets. The first and most commercially substantial is ENI's continental presence. Unlike France, which disperses its African engagement across governmental agencies, diplomatic channels and private firms, or Germany, which channels influence primarily through development finance institutions (Michelino, 2025), Italy relies on a single state-aligned energy operator whose operational history across North and sub-Saharan Africa pre-dates the Mattei Plan by decades (Eni, 2026). ENI is already among the most significant foreign energy investors across Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Mozambique, Congo-Brazzaville and Angola, generating relational capital through direct government negotiation that development-finance instruments alone cannot replicate (Eni, 2024). Its April 2025 announcement of approximately €24 billion in planned investment across Algeria, Libya and Egypt (Egypt Oil & Gas, 2025) dwarfs the Mattei Plan's public envelope and signals that Italian economic presence in Africa is both pre-existing and expanding (Arab News, 2025).

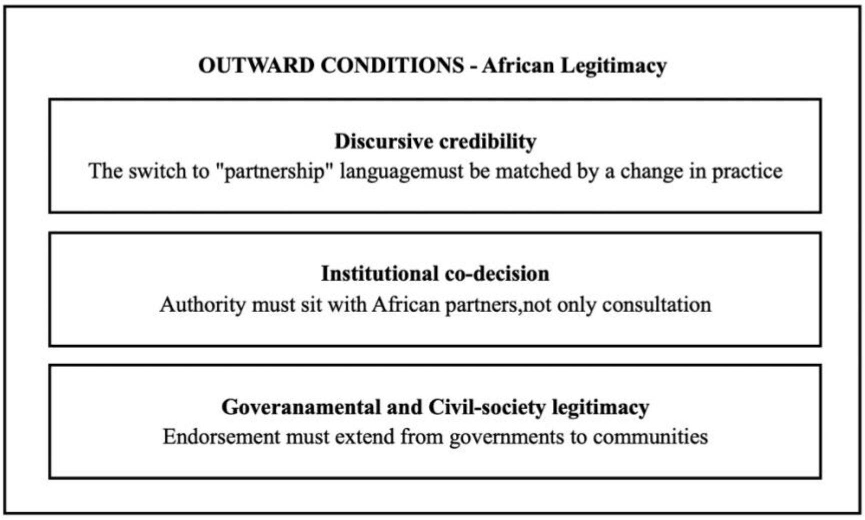
The second asset is geographic and infrastructural. Italy's position as the southern European landmass closest to Africa translates directly into its bid to function as Europe's primary energy gateway. The TransMed pipeline from Algeria already terminates on Italian soil (AUDI, 2025); the ELMED electricity interconnector under development between Tunisia and Sicily would extend this logic into renewable electricity, positioning Italy as the physical conduit for African solar and wind generation entering the European grid (GIS Reports Online, 2025).

The third asset is diplomatic scale and institutional capacity. Italy is sufficiently large to be taken seriously while sufficiently constrained in unilateral capacity to have a structural interest in multilateral frameworks. France and Germany can operate largely independently of EU mechanisms when political will exists; Italy cannot. The Mattei Plan's alignment with the Global Gateway is therefore a structural necessity, and this constraint carries a paradoxical upside: Italy's investment in EU-level co-governance is more credible than that of larger member states precisely because it is the only viable multiplier Italy has (Tocci, 2021).

The fourth asset is temporal rather than structural: Italy is expanding precisely when the traditional donor field is contracting. This is a moment of broad retreat among historical development actors: USAID has been dismantled, British cooperation has been substantially downsized because of the war in Ukraine, German cooperation (GIZ) has reportedly cut its budget by 30-40 percent (Fürstenau, 2026), and the Swedish cut its 2026 development funding by 3 billion (Ahmed, 2025) (an estimated cut above 40 percent; Interviewee PU1). Set against this recession in international cooperation financing, the Mattei Plan functions as a counter-trend signal, and this positioning carries its own strategic value independent of the plan's absolute size: as competitor donors withdraw, Italy's relative visibility and bargaining position rise automatically, granting it room to manoeuvre that would not have been available five to ten years ago, when other powers were still investing heavily in the same countries (Interviewee PU1).

4.3.2 The Architecture of Inclusion: Discursive Credibility and Institutional Co-Decision

Diagram 5.0 Assessing the Condition for African Legitimacy



Source: Author's own elaboration.

As Diagram 5.0 sets out, African legitimacy is treated in this chapter as conditional: it rests on three distinct requirements that the Mattei Plan must satisfy on its own, outward-facing side. The first, discursive credibility, requires that Rome's shift toward the vocabulary of "partnership" be matched by a genuine change in practice rather than remaining a rebranding of aid. The second, institutional co-decision, requires that formal authority over the Plan's content and resources actually sit with African partners, rather than African partners being merely consulted. The third, governmental and civil-society legitimacy, requires that endorsement of the Plan extend beyond African governments to reach the communities it claims to serve. This subchapter addresses the first two of these conditions, before the following two subchapters turn to the third.

Before asking whether African partners recognise the Mattei Plan as a genuine bridge it is necessary to establish what Italy has actually built on its own side of that bridge. The following analysis treats the Plan's architecture as a design choice open to empirical scrutiny, distinguishing between the language of inclusion Rome has adopted and the concrete mechanisms through which African actors have been given a role in shaping and financing the Plan's content.

The rhetorical register is well established. Since the Plan's announcement, Italian officials have consistently avoided the vocabulary of aid, presenting the Mattei Plan instead as, in Prime Minister Meloni's own words, a “non-predatory, non-paternalistic” model built on “an approach of equals” (CNN, 2024). This register echoes a wider shift in international cooperation discourse toward “horizontal partnerships” that move beyond traditional donor-recipient welfare logics, language that is becoming standard across the development sector, without being unique to Italy (Interviewee PU1). However, what distinguishes an institutional architecture aimed at inclusion from one that merely announces it is the presence of decision-making bodies in which African actors hold actual authority.

On this count, two design choices stand out. The first is the Plan's decision to route a substantial share of financing through the African Development Bank rather than exclusively through bilateral Italian channels. The AfDB functions as “a primary implementing partner for the Mattei Plan” for its multilateral component, and the two institutions have “co-designed instruments to implement the plan” (Interviewee AB2). This is given operational form through the Rome Process/Mattei Plan Financing Facility (RPFF), whose Governing Council seats African institutional representatives alongside Italian and other donor officials in a body with actual disbursement authority (IAI, 2025), type of co-decision body that is absent in the Global Gateway's (CONCORD, 2026).

The second design choice concerns project origination. The projects operated through the Mattei Plan founds are country-led and originated by African nations themselves, rather than being imposed, with Italy contributing at least 50 per cent of resources under standard co-financing agreements and the remainder coming from the Bank or other partners (Interviewee AB2). Framed this way, Italy's financial contribution functions less as a directive instrument than a catalytic one, crowding in resources behind an agenda African institution have already set within their own portfolios. This description converges with Fattibene's (2025) independent characterisation of the Plan as shifting official development assistance from primary channel to de-risking instrument.

Taken together, these two choices constitute a more concrete design for inclusion than the rhetoric of “equal partnership” alone would suggest. Whether African partners themselves experience these mechanisms as substantively different from prior European engagement, or as a more polished version of the same asymmetry, is the question the next subchapter takes up.

4.3.3 The Bridge Received: Governmental Legitimacy

Having established in the previous subchapter whether the Plan's architecture satisfies the first two conditions for African legitimacy, discursive credibility and institutional co-decision, attention now turns to the third: governmental and civil-society legitimacy, that is, whether endorsement of the Plan extends from African governments all the way down to the communities it is meant to serve. Because this condition concerns two distinct constituencies, it is examined across two subchapters. The present subchapter addresses the governmental and institutional half of the equation, asking how that architecture has actually been received at the level of African states and multilateral institutions; the subchapter that follows turns to the more contested civil-society half. The case for governmental-level legitimacy rests on three overlapping bodies of evidence: high-level governmental endorsement, independent policy analysis, and a political momentum that favours Italy, giving it comparative advantage over other European actors.

At the governmental level, the participation of more than twenty-five African heads of state at the January 2024 Italy-Africa Summit, together with the AfDB's active role as co-financing partner, suggests recognition that exceeds diplomatic politeness (Simonelli, Fantappiè and Goretti, 2024). AfDB President Akinwumi Adesina has publicly described the Bank as a “key strategic financial partner” for the Plan, positioning the Bank's involvement as a guarantee of African institutional ownership (AfDB, 2025). This framing gained operational substance with the RPFF's approval by the Bank's Board of Governors in February 2025, which in its first year alone approved four operations worth €28 million spanning water access in Ethiopia, agricultural infrastructure in Angola, renewable energy in Mauritania, and clean cooking in Kenya (AfDB, 2026). At the Bank's 2025 Annual Meetings, Angola's Minister of Economy and Planning described the Plan as an opportunity to diversify away from oil dependency, while Congo's counterpart identified it as a pathway to food security (AfDB, 2025).

Independent policy analysis, less constrained by diplomatic protocol, offers a more autonomous test of the same claim. Fattibene's (2025) assessment for IAI describes the Plan as a genuine pivot from aid logic toward a co-financing model in which official development assistance functions to de-risk private investment rather than serve as the primary channel of European largesse. Carbone and Ragazzi's (2024) ISPI policy paper reaches a structurally similar, if more cautious, conclusion: after decades in which Italy lacked any coherent strategy toward the continent, the Mattei Plan constitutes, whatever its remaining ambiguities, the first serious attempt to organise Italian engagement with Africa as a single, purposive national project rather than a series of disconnected initiatives.

A further dimension of positive reception concerns comparison with other European and historical powers, more specifically the comparative lightness of Italy's colonial burden in sub-Saharan Africa. Italy's colonial history (concentrated in Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021) is neither minor nor without consequence: the brutalities of the 1930s Ethiopian occupation (SIPRI, 2009) remain live grievances. Nevertheless, in the Sahel and West Africa, the sub-regions most convulsed by the anti-French backlash of 2022-2024, Italy is not historically legible as a colonial power (Interviewee EA1). Unlike France, whose Françafrique networks remain targets of sustained political critique, Italy carries no equivalent sovereignty liabilities where demand for alternative European partners is most acute (ISS, 2026). Several independent analyses converge on this observation, noting that Italy's comparatively limited colonial footprint relative to France's gives it room to be perceived as a more neutral interlocutor in regions where French influence has visibly receded (FRS, 2024; GIS Reports, 2025).

This claim, however, needs handling with more caution than an unqualified "Italy as preferred partner". In the Sahel, for example, "France does not have a good reputation, but it's hard to say Italy has a better one … perception depends on whether you are talking to a project counterpart or a local community" (Interviewee PU1). The claim of an Italian advantage is therefore best read not as evidence that African partners actively prefer Italy, but as evidence that Italy benefits from a comparative absence of the specific reputational costs now weighing on France, a distinction that matters for how durable any Italian advantage is likely to prove.

A more unambiguous comparative advantage emerges on institutional coordination rather than colonial legacy. Italy's systemic, whole-of-government approach is a model "many countries have discussed but few have put into practice". Germany and France are both now attempting to replicate the coordinated structure Italy has built around the Cabina di Regia (Interviewee AB2), representing one of the more concrete markers of institutional endorsement available: emulation by peer donors, rather than mere applause from the Plan's own architects.

4.3.4 The Bridge Received: Civil-Society Legitimacy

This subchapter continues the assessment of the third condition for African legitimacy, governmental and civil-society legitimacy, by turning from the governmental and institutional endorsement surveyed above to the more contested civil-society half of that same condition. The evidence surveyed above does not go uncontested and setting it against a substantial body of critical literature is necessary to test whether endorsement of the Plan genuinely extends to African communities or remains confined to governments and elites.

The most direct challenge concerns consultation. The open letter addressed to Prime Minister Meloni ahead of the January 2024 Summit, signed by more than eighty African civil society organisations coordinated under the "Don't Gas Africa" coalition, stated plainly that the Plan was formulated without meaningful consultation of African civil society (Don't Gas Africa, 2024). African Union Commission Chair Moussa Faki Mahamat made a related point from within the Summit itself, telling delegates that African countries "would have liked to have been consulted" before the Plan was presented to them (CNN, 2024). Moreover, the "Don't Gas Africa" coalition argued that the Plan's embedding within Italy's migration governance agenda subjects the partnership to a European security logic that African governments and civil society did not set and cannot easily contest without forfeiting access to Italian finance (Don't Gas Africa, 2024). This argument sits close to the Washington Institute's (2024) concern that the Plan risks reproducing the “migration conditionality” logic of earlier Italian-Libyan compacts

A second limit concerns whether the language of “ownership” describes anything beyond a rhetorical exercise. The independent expert interviewed for this research was explicit on this point: because the Plan operates in “very strategic sectors”, the concept of ownership “is often more of a rhetorical exercise here”, and the Plan's flagship mega-projects risk becoming, in her words, “cathedrals in the desert” built by Italian companies rather than initiatives African communities have actually shaped (Interviewee PU1). He noted that the initiatives he considered genuinely effective, such as the Community of Sant’ Egidio’s healthcare work, were not new creations of the Plan at all, but pre-existing projects folded under the “Mattei umbrella”, a practice that raises the question of how much of the Plan's headline achievement reflects new value added rather than relabelled continuity (Interviewee PU1).

Read together, these limits do not straightforwardly contradict the evidence surveyed in the previous subchapter so much as they complicate it: African governmental and institutional endorsement is real, but it coexists with a persistent civil-society verdict of exclusion. Whether the Plan's outward bridge proves sustainable will likely depend less on resolving any single one of these tensions than on whether Italy is willing to genuinely take African voices and concerns into consideration and address them in practice.

Discussion of Findings

5.1 Answering the Research Question

This thesis set out to establish the extent to which the Mattei Plan enables Italy to reposition itself as a mediating power between the European Union and the African partners, and under what conditions a national development initiative can function as a lever of multi-level governance. The analysis pursued this question through three sequential sub-questions, moving from institutional genesis to governance enactment to relational legitimacy, and the evidence assembled across documentary, media and interview sources supports a qualified but genuinely affirmative answer.

On SQ1, the Mattei Plan represents a real, if partial, break from Italy's previous cooperation model. The break is not primarily legal, as Decree-Law 161/2023 creates no new instruments of official development assistance, but governance-institutional and discursive: for the first time, a single political-administrative command, the Cabina di Regia and the Struttura di Missione, is capable of aligning energy policy, development finance, export promotion and migration governance behind a coherent continental strategy. This reading is corroborated by practitioners closest to the Plan's operation, who describe Italy's approach as unusually "systemic" for a European donor and note that Germany and France are now attempting to replicate the same coordinating architecture (Interviewee AB2, Interviewee PU1).

On SQ2, the thesis finds that Italy has constructed the upward bridge to the EU through a recognisable three-step sequence: discursive alignment, institutional co-production, and financial interlocking, culminating in the June 2025 Rome summit and its formal alignment with the Global Gateway. This upward anchoring is not merely declaratory: it has produced concrete co-financing instruments (the Rome Process/Mattei Plan Financing Facility, the EU-IFC guarantee line, the Blue Raman cable) and has changed how Italy is perceived in Brussels, where officials increasingly regard it as the member state with the most structured "sistema paese" approach to Africa (Interviewee IP1). The thesis further finds that this mechanism is analytically generalisable, though not automatically transferable. It depends on three preconditions: an aggregable regional asset base, a structural gap in the EU instrument that a member state can fill, and a discursive framing durable enough to survive domestic political turnover. Other traditional middle powers, such as Spain, could in principle replicate this system, but that cannot simply be assumed.

On SQ3, the picture is the most contested of the three. Italy has built concrete mechanisms of African co-decision that exceed rhetoric alone, most notably the routing of financing through the African Development Bank's own governance structures and the country-led origination of individual projects, with Italy typically providing a co-financing share rather than a directive mandate (Interviewee AB1, Interviewee AB2). Yet this architecture coexists with a persistent verdict of exclusion from African civil society, with scepticism about whether "ownership" is substantive or rhetorical in strategic sectors (Interviewee PU1), and with unresolved questions about the transparency of the Plan's internal budget allocation (Interviewee PU1). The outward bridge, in short, is more developed in its institutional design than in its perceived legitimacy, and the gap between the two is the central unresolved tension this thesis identifies.

5.2 Revisiting the Two-Level Bridge Model

Read against the two-level bridge model developed in Chapter 2, the findings suggest an asymmetric picture. The upward condition, thus the EU institutional anchoring, has moved beyond conjuncture: institutional formalisation, financial credibility and, more surprisingly, political durability all point toward a structurally consolidating bridge. On the other hand, the outward condition, thus the African legitimacy, is comparatively less settled. Governmental and institutional endorsement is genuine, and the emulation of Italy's coordinating model by other European donors is a meaningful marker of peer recognition (Interviewee AB2, Interviewee AE1), but this coexists with a persistent civil-society critique of insufficient consultation and with reception that varies sharply depending on whether the audience is a project counterpart or a local community (Interviewee PU1). The claim that Italy's comparatively lighter colonial footprint automatically confers a legitimacy advantage over France should therefore be treated with some caution: the practitioner evidence gathered here is split between those who regard Italy's absence of colonial baggage as a genuinely differentiating asset in African perception (Interviewee AE1), and those who regard it as largely immaterial next to the more decisive question of additionality: how much finance and opportunity the partnership actually delivers (Interviewee PU1). Where both conditions are met, this thesis concludes, Italy's bridge-power claim is self-reinforcing; where the outward condition lags, as the evidence suggests it currently does, the bridge risks being read in Africa as a better-managed version of a familiar asymmetry rather than as a genuine departure from it.

5.3 Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived directly from the practitioner testimony gathered for this research. They are organised around the three audiences the Mattei Plan actually addresses: Italian domestic institutions, the outward, Africa-facing dimension of the Plan, and the EU-Italy relationship.

5.3.1 For Italian Institutions

The single most consistent critique across the interviews conducted for this research concerned the difficulty of locating strategic documents or understanding how budgets are allocated through Italian embassies, a problem attributed directly to the high degree of centralisation of the Plan's governance. Institutionalising transparency in the Cabina di Regia, for instance by publishing a standardised, embassy-level budget and project ledger rather than relying solely on the annual parliamentary report, would convert the Plan from what one interviewee called a "personalised political project" into a genuinely systematised model of cooperation (Interviewee PU1, Interviewee AB2).

A second, equally consistent theme was the absence of a business-to-business layer. Practitioner testimony converged on the observation that the Plan remains predominantly a government-to-government instrument, in contrast to the trade-facilitation model pursued by China, the Gulf states, Turkey and India, all of which invest directly in platforms connecting firms rather than states. Concrete steps identified in the interviews include expanding SACE's export-guarantee capacity toward smaller Italian exporters, creating reciprocal channels for African firms to access Italian and European markets and financing (mirroring how African trade with China is now facilitated through direct commercial access), and increasing direct air connectivity between Italy and African commercial hubs, which currently represents a structural disadvantage relative to Gulf carriers (Interviewee AE1).

5.3.2 For the Outward, Africa-Facing Bridge

It is worth stating from the outset, as one interviewee (PU1) put it plainly, that foreign aid is never disinterested: it always serves the donor's own strategic, economic or reputational interests to some degree. This is not a flaw specific to the Mattei Plan but a structural feature of aid and development cooperation as such, and it should be treated as a normal starting point for analysis. The relevant policy question is therefore not whether Italian self-interest is present, but whether the instruments through which that self-interest is pursued also produce genuine, locally owned outcomes on the African side.

Judged against that standard, the routing of financing through African Development Bank-governed instruments, with African-led project origination and Italy typically contributing a co-financing share rather than a directive mandate, is the clearest evidence of substantive rather than rhetorical partnership identified in this research. This model of co-design should be treated as a base line: extending it to a larger share of the Plan's flagship, high-visibility projects, rather than concentrating it in smaller facilities, would help close the gap between institutional design and civil-society perception.

This matters because practitioner scepticism concentrated specifically on the Plan's mega-projects, which several interviewees described as risking becoming "cathedrals in the desert" built by Italian companies rather than shaped by the African communities they are meant to serve. The clear implication is that Italy should expand support for locally originated, sector-specific initiatives (Interviewee PU1).

Closing the outward bridge also requires a formal channel for African civil-society consultation ahead of major summits. African states often remarked how they would have preferred to be consulted before the Plan was presented (see 4.3.4). This signals a specific and addressable institutional gap: the absence of a standing consultative mechanism distinct from existing state-to-state and bank-to-state channels. Establishing such a mechanism, even in a modest initial form, would directly answer the most consistent critique the Plan's outward-facing dimension currently faces.

5.3.3 For the EU-Italy Relationship

On the European front, the recommendation is comparatively modest and is offered here more as a suggestion for continued attention than as urgent corrective measure. Practitioners close to the Plan's implementation were explicit that "Europeanising" the Mattei Plan does not mean surrendering it to a generic EU agenda (Interviewee IP1), but rather ensuring that Italy's most effective national projects benefit from the Global Gateway's far larger financial envelope, a mechanism they see as important for sustaining the Plan's ambitions as Italian domestic fiscal space is squeezed by low growth and rising defence spending (Interviewee AB1).

That said, the European-facing adjustment should not distract from a more fundamental imbalance in how the Plan's political energy is currently allocated. The Plan's European dimension arguably already receives disproportionate attention relative to its actual strategic weight. Recent policy analysis of Italy's Wider Mediterranean strategy notes that Meloni has consistently sought to reframe the Mattei Plan as "not just an Italian initiative, but a strategy with a European and international scope", using European fora such as the European Parliament to stake this claim (Petillo and Varvelli, 2025). This pattern is consistent with the broader argument, made across the literature on Meloni's foreign policy, that her domestic and European political project rests heavily on positioning Italy as a leading agenda-setter on migration and development policy within the EU, extracting political capital from Brussels-facing visibility as much as from outcomes on the ground (Rosina and Fontana, 2025; Petillo and Varvelli, 2025). Read this way, "Europeanising" the Mattei Plan looks less like a strategic necessity dictated by the Plan's own logic, and more like an instrument of Meloni's wider bid for European leadership.

The risk is that this focus on securing European approval and European co-financing crowds out attention to the outward, African side of the Plan, where Italy is, in reality, one option among many. African governments and regional institutions are actively pursuing "geostrategic diversification", building parallel relationships with China, India, Turkey, Gulf states and Western actors precisely in order to expand their own bargaining power and reduce dependence on any single partner (Ikpa, 2025). This is not simply passive courting by external powers but a deliberate exercise of African agency, in which continued Western and European centrality can no longer be assumed (Brown and Harman, 2013). Gulf states in particular have moved well beyond financing gestures, underwriting infrastructure and security packages across the Sahel and Horn of Africa that go far beyond what Italy alone could offer (Ikpa, 2025), while established regional partners of the Mattei Plan, such as Algeria and Egypt, are simultaneously deepening defence and energy ties with China and Russia even as their relationship with Italy improves (Petillo and Varvelli, 2025). African governments and institutions, in short, have no shortage of alternative partners and are not dependent on Italian or even European validation.

If Italy's comparative advantage in the Wider Mediterranean lies in agile, bilateral, partnership-based engagement (Petillo and Varvelli, 2025), then channelling scarce diplomatic bandwidth into intra-European positioning, however useful for Meloni's standing in Brussels, may come at the direct expense of the outward-facing credibility that keeps African partners engaged in the first place.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to establish the extent to which the Mattei Plan enables Italy to reposition itself as a mediating power between the European Union and its African partners, and under what conditions a national development initiative can function as a lever of multi-level governance. The evidence assembled supports an affirmative answer to that question, and the argument can be drawn together along the three lines pursued in the analysis.

On the question of institutional genesis, the Mattei Plan represents a real, if partial, break from Italy's previous cooperation model. The break is not primarily legal, since Decree-Law 161/2023 creates no new instruments of official development assistance, but governance-institutional and discursive: for the first time, a single political-administrative command is capable of aligning energy policy, development finance, export promotion and migration governance behind one continental strategy. France and Germany are now attempting to replicate elements of the same architecture, an indirect but telling marker of its novelty.

On the question of governance enactment, the thesis finds that Italy has constructed the upward bridge to the EU through a recognisable sequence of discursive alignment, institutional co-production and financial interlocking, culminating in the June 2025 Rome summit and its formal alignment with the Global Gateway. This anchoring has produced concrete co-financing instruments, among them the Rome Process/Mattei Plan Financing Facility, the EU-IFC guarantee line and the Blue Raman cable, and it has changed how Italy is perceived in Brussels, where officials increasingly regard it as the member state with the most structured national approach to Africa. This mechanism is analytically generalisable, in that it depends on identifiable preconditions, an aggregable regional asset base, a structural gap in the EU's own instruments, and a discursive framing durable enough to survive domestic political turnover.

On the question of relational legitimacy, the picture is the most contested of the three. Italy has built mechanisms of African co-decision that exceed rhetoric alone, most notably the routing of financing through the African Development Bank's own governance structures and the country-led origination of individual projects, with Italy typically providing a co-financing share rather than a directive mandate. Yet this architecture coexists with a persistent verdict of exclusion among African civil-society actors and with unresolved questions about the transparency of the Plan's internal budget allocation.

Read against the two-level bridge model, these findings describe an asymmetric structure rather than a uniform one. The upward condition has moved beyond conjuncture: institutional formalisation, financial credibility and political durability all point toward a structurally consolidating bridge to the European Union. The outward condition is comparatively less settled: governmental and institutional endorsement is genuine, and the emulation of Italy's coordinating model by other European donors is a meaningful marker of peer recognition, but this coexists with civil-society critique of insufficient consultation and with a reception that varies sharply depending on whether the audience is a project counterpart or a local community.

These findings also ground the recommendations advanced in Chapter 5. For Italian institutions, closing the transparency gap around embassy-level budgets and project allocation, and building a business-to-business layer alongside the Plan's currently government-to-government logic, would help convert what one interviewee called a personalised political project into a systematised model of cooperation. For the outward, Africa-facing bridge, extending African Development Bank-style co-design beyond smaller facilities to the Plan's flagship, high-visibility projects, and establishing a standing consultative mechanism for African civil society, would directly address the critique that mega-projects risk becoming showcases built by Italian companies rather than shaped by the communities they are meant to serve. For the EU-Italy relationship, the European-facing work should not be allowed to crowd out attention to African partners, who are themselves pursuing geostrategic diversification and are not dependent on Italian or European validation.

The Mattei Plan is best understood, in light of all this, not as a finished model of equal partnership but as a genuine, still-consolidating attempt to build one. Its institutional architecture has done more, and more durably, than either the aid-instrument reading or the energy-and-migration reading of the Plan credit it for; its claim to represent a partnership of equals, however, remains ahead of the evidence. The recommendations above are not a case against the bridge-power strategy Italy has adopted, but a specification of what would need to change, concretely and institutionally, for the outward condition to catch up with the upward one. Whether it does so will determine whether the Mattei Plan is remembered as the moment Italy became a durable intermediary in EU-Africa relations, or as a well-constructed bridge that African partners ultimately declined too fully cross.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

This appendix lists the questions asked to each interviewee, organized by interview code. Interview codes correspond to the transcripts as follows: IP1, PU1, AB1, AB2, AE1.

IP1

1. Could you describe -- role within the Mattei Plan, how it fits into the overall governance of the plan, and what the priority areas of intervention are in Africa and the wider Mediterranean?
2. How does -- coordinate with European institutions, particularly the European Commission?
3. Do you believe the Mattei Plan is strengthening Italy's negotiating weight at European tables?
4. In the medium-to-long term, how should Italy act to maintain this influence?

PU1

1. From your perspective as a historian and political scientist, how do you judge the Mattei Plan in the broader context of the history of relations between Italy and Africa?
2. How is Italian aid perceived in the countries interested in the plan compared to other European powers with larger colonial legacies, like France, or those with less diplomatic connection, like Denmark?
3. Does this create a more positive perception of Italy compared to France or other powers?
4. Does the African perspective have adequate space in the public debate, or does it remain predominantly Italian and European?
5. Can you indicate one or two successful projects that are working?
6. Looking to the future, what should change for the Mattei Plan to become a different model of cooperation?
7. Does the plan have the possibility of surviving if the Meloni government is not re-elected?

AB1

1. The Mattei Plan has explicitly chosen the African Development Bank as its primary financial partner, citing the institution's African governance structure as a mark of genuine co-creation. As a director at the African Development Bank, how do you assess this partnership in practice?
2. Does Italy's engagement with the bank represent a substantially different model of cooperation compared to other European bilateral initiatives, or does it broadly reproduce familiar donor dynamics under new framings?
3. From your perspective at the institutional level, how coherent and effective has the blended finance architecture proven to be?
4. My thesis argues that Italy is positioning itself as a bridge power between the EU and Africa, leveraging the Mattei Plan to shape the Global Gateway from within. Does the African Development Bank perceive this dual positioning as an asset, or does it create ambiguity?
5. Italy presents itself as a more neutral European actor due to its "lighter" colonial history. Does this meaningfully differentiate Italy in the eyes of African governments?
6. How could Italy keep engaging with the AfDB in the future, perhaps after the Mattei Plan?

AB2

1. My thesis examines the Mattei Plan and Italy's role as a potential middle power between Africa and the European Union. I am focusing on two conditions for the plan's credibility: its integration into European institutional frameworks and the extent to which African partners perceive the partnership as equal. From the AfDB perspective, does this partnership feel equal?
2. Could you walk me through how the AfDB is involved in shaping projects and the movement of financing?
3. Does this design foster real knowledge transfer or help close the skill gap between partners?
4. If a project fails, is there a framework for how losses are split?
5. How does Italy's approach compare to other actors like China or the Gulf States?
6. Where does the Italian system still need to mature?

7. Does the plan have the political support to outlast the current government?

AE1

1. What is your assessment of Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa? What has it done well, and where do you think it could be improved?
2. Can I ask you how you would see this business-to-business approach implemented practically?
3. How is Italy's initiative perceived relative to other external actors? Is it perceived as a European representative or as a national actor pushing its own strategy?
4. Could this approach influence political, economic, and migratory relations between Italy and Africa? Perhaps you could also develop how these might change in the future.
5. What competitive advantage does Italy realistically offer in such a crowded partnership landscape, beyond Europe, compared to China, the Gulf States, or Turkey?
6. Since the Mattei Plan also addresses infrastructure and energy, can Italy actually compete with the financial capacity of the Gulf or China?
7. Do you think this plan could survive if there were a change of government in Italy?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Interview - Master's Thesis

Joint Master in Global Economic Governance & Public Affairs (GEGPA)

Institut européen - CIFE | LUISS School of Government

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1. Researcher & Study Information

Student / Researcher	Matilde Bonomi - matilde.bonomi@student-cife.eu
Thesis Supervisor	Chigozie Nweke-Eze – University of Oxford
Thesis Title	*“Building the Bridge: The Mattei Plan for Africa and Italy's Repositioning as a Mediating Power in EU-Africa Relations”*
Academic Year	2025 – 2026

2. About the Research

This thesis examines Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa as a foreign and development policy instrument through which Italy is repositioning itself as a mediating power between the European Union and Africa. The research applies middle power theory and multi-level governance analysis to argue that the Plan's credibility rests on two conditions: its capacity to anchor itself within EU institutional frameworks (the upward condition), and the extent to which African partners perceive the partnership as substantively rather than rhetorically equal (the outward condition).

The study combines document analysis, media analysis, and semi-structured expert interviews to produce a triangulated, qualitative assessment of the Plan's institutional architecture, its discursive construction of Italy as a bridge power, and the governance conditions under which a national initiative can become a lever of multi-level EU-Africa engagement.

Your participation in this interview will provide contextual insights, expert perspectives, and practitioner knowledge that cannot be fully captured through official documents alone. Your contribution is therefore invaluable to the rigour and depth of this research.

3. Interview Questions

The questions below are tailored to your profile and area of expertise. They will guide our conversation and may be adapted or expanded upon as the interview proceeds.

Q1.

Q2.

Q3.

Q4.

Q5.

Privacy & Data Use Statement

I, Matilde Bonomi, hereby confirm that the information shared during this interview will be used exclusively for academic research purposes in the context of my Master's thesis. The data collected will not be disclosed to third parties, shared for commercial purposes, or used in any context other than the scholarly analysis contained in my thesis and any directly related academic outputs.

If you consent to being identified, your name and affiliation may be cited in the thesis. If you prefer to remain anonymous, your contributions will be referenced without any identifying information. You may withdraw your participation at any time prior to the submission of the thesis without consequence.

Any recording of the interview will be stored securely, accessed only by the researcher, and deleted upon completion of the thesis.

5. Consent: Please Tick All That Apply

☐ I agree to participate in this research interview. I understand that my contribution will be used solely for academic research purposes as described above.

☐ I consent to this interview being audio-recorded. I understand that the recording will be stored securely and used only for transcription and analysis within the scope of this research.

☐ I understand that my contributions will be included in the research without any identifying information.

6. Signatures

Participant

Name: ______________________________

Signature: ___________________________

Date: _________________________________

Researcher

Name: Matilde Bonomi

Signature: ___________________________

Date: _________________________________