

Italy's Migration Policies Amidst Climate Change: An Assessment

by Chiara Scissa

Since the 1990s, Italy has progressively become a country of destination for migration movements especially from Africa and South Asia. In 2022, Italy received a total of 84,289 claims for international protection. The main nationalities of origin were Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Tunisia and Nigeria.¹ The causes of migration are multiple and complex, and could refer to political, economic, social and/or cultural grounds. Yet, and not without hurdles, another relevant factor that contributes to driving people to move to a different country has started to emerge: climate change (and its related impacts on disasters, environmental degradation and other environmental factors). Although the nexus between climate change and migration is complex to define and to identify, it is relevant to note that many protection-seekers in Italy come from countries most exposed to climate change that, in certain cases,

¹ Italian Ministry of the Interior, *I numeri dell'asilo. Confronto dati anno 2021-2022*, <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/node/97>.

may have played a role either in directly shaping migration movements or in exacerbating more proximate causes of migration, such as worsening conflicts over scarce resources, violence, poverty or discrimination dynamics in the aftermath of a disaster.² Against this backdrop, in the following, I will first examine how the climate change-migration nexus has been approached by the Italian legal system, to then move to the Meloni government's political strategy in the field of migration governance, followed by an assessment of their respective efficacy.

Legislative actions endorsed by Italy

Not only have Italian courts and tribunals long recognised that

² Chiara Scissa, "The Weaponization of Natural Resources and Disasters during Conflict: The Refugee Convention's Relevance for Syria and Yemen", in *Baker Institute Policy Briefs*, May 2024, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/node/77231>; David Cantor et al., "International Protection, Disasters and Climate Change", in *International Journal of Refugee Law*, Vol. 36, No. 1-2 (March/June 2024), p. 176-197, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeae012>.

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protection needs can arise from climate and environmental factors, but decision-makers have acknowledged the influence of climate change and disasters on migration too. This is a first and extremely relevant point to stress. Unlike most countries in the EU and beyond, Italy has explicitly recognised the nexus between climate change and migration through the adoption of specific pieces of legislation. This is not common in the EU or elsewhere, where either such a link has been simply ignored, or it has been sporadically addressed through fragmented and *ad hoc* measures, usually in an emergency context. What makes Italy stand out as a pioneering case study is that the country's judicial system incorporates the different types of protection needs that can stem from climate and environmental factors, hence providing for different protection statuses. These refer to temporary protection due to natural disasters (Art. 20 Testo Unico Immigrazione – TUI), a six-month and renewable residence permit as a result of calamities (Art. 20bis TUI), and special protection where the return to the country of origin would violate basic human rights (Art. 19 TUI).³ In addition, humanitarian protection, which although repealed could still apply on pending cases that had been lodged before the Decree-Law No. 113/2018

³ Administrative and judicial authorities have recognised that returning claimants back to countries affected by sudden-onset events would be contrary to Art. 19 TUI and granted special protection. Chiara Scissa, "Human Mobility in the Context of Disasters, Climate Change and Environmental Degradation in the Euro-Mediterranean Region: Challenges and Insights", in *EuroMed Rights Reports*, February 2024, p. 31-32, <https://reliefweb.int/node/4040562>.

repealing humanitarian protection entered into force, has covered cases of sudden- and slow-onset disasters, such as droughts, earthquakes, floods etc. Notably, these provisions complement the statuses available at the EU level – that is, the refugee status and subsidiary protection – that have also been recognised by judicial authorities to people fleeing climate change.

Although not shielded from flaws, these legislative measures have the merit to concretely and explicitly address protection needs stemming from climate and environmental factors and have been considered noteworthy in several institutional settings. The latter include the Platform of Disaster Displacement, which is a state-led initiative aiming at enhancing protection for people displaced across borders in the context of disasters and climate change, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.⁴

⁴ Among many, Walter Kälin and Hannah Entwisle Chapuisat, *Protection of Persons Displaced across Borders in the Context of Disasters and the Adverse Effects of Climate Change. A Review of Literature, Legislation and Case Law to Support the Implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees*, Geneva, UNHCR, June 2024, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/lpprs/unhcr/2024/en/148128>; Walter Kälin and Hannah Entwisle Chapuisat, *Policy Brief: Protection of Persons Displaced across Borders in the Context of Disasters and the adverse Effects of Climate Change*, Platform on Disaster Displacement and UNHCR, December 2023, <https://www.preventionweb.net/quick/82217>. For an in-depth analysis of pros and cons of Italian protection statuses concerning the climate change-migration nexus, see Chiara Scissa, "Populism and Environmental Migration: The Peculiar Italian Duo", in Lorenzo Figoni et al., *Climate Change Knows No Borders. Addressing Protection Gaps and Enhancing Policy Responses to Climate Mobility featuring In-Depth Research from The*

The Meloni government and the Mattei Plan

In addition (and sometimes in opposition) to essential provisions at the national level aimed at *protecting* migrants from climate change, the current Meloni's government is implementing a series of political initiatives in the field of migration governance that may have an impact also on migration movements in the context of climate change.

A first set of initiatives delves around building ties with African countries in the field of migration management in order to *prevent* migration flows. Arrangements signed, renewed or promoted with strategic countries, such as Albania, Libya and Tunisia, have been harshly criticised for violating human rights and the constitutional and international obligations of the Italian state.⁵ In particular, such informal arrangements foresee Italy's technical and financial support in externalising

asylum processing (such as in the case of Albania) and curbing migration flows (such as in the case of Libya and Tunisia), thus hampering migrants' right to asylum, including those fleeing climate change.

The second line of initiatives sponsored by the Meloni government is about investing in partnership and cooperation with Africa. Among others, the Mattei Plan for Africa seems to inaugurate a new and comprehensive approach in Italy's relations with Africa, through which "the Italian government intends to trigger a paradigm change in the relations with the African continent and build a partnership on an equal footing, which rejects the paternalistic and compassionate approach as well as the predatory approach, and which is able to generate benefits and opportunities for all".⁶ The Mattei Plan engages with key thematic areas of utmost importance for both Italy and Africa, including food security; energy, water and natural resources; healthcare; education; research and innovation; climate change and environmental protection; migration, among others.⁷ In principle, therefore, it seems that

Gambia, ActionAid International Italia, April 2024, p. 37-43, https://actionaid-it.imgix.net/uploads/2024/06/Report_Gambia_ENG.pdf.

⁵ Amnesty International, *The Italy-Albania Agreement on Migration: Pushing Boundaries, Threatening Rights*, 19 January 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur30/7587/2024/en>; Mathias Hatleskog Tjønn and Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, "Migration across the Mediterranean: Shaping Italy-Libya Relations over Time", in Ricard Zapata-Barrero and Ibrahim Awad (eds), *Migrations in the Mediterranean. IMISCOE Regional Reader*, Cham, Springer, 2024, p. 53-69, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42264-5_4; Vasja Badalič, "Tunisia's Role in the EU External Migration Policy: Crimmigration Law, Illegal Practices, and Their Impact on Human Rights", in *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (February 2019), p. 85-100, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-018-0596-7>.

⁶ Author's translation from Italian Government, *Schema di decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri di adozione del Piano strategico Italia-Africa: Piano Mattei*, 17 July 2024, p. 3, <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1424398.pdf>.

⁷ Daniele Fattibene and Stefano Manservigi, "The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|10 (March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18219>; Filippo Simonelli, Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Leo Goretti, "The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|11 (March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18220>.

managing migration and reducing African countries' vulnerability to climate change are relevant elements in the architecture of the Mattei Plan.

The Plan envisages key climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies for Africa as well as actions to limit desertification and water scarcity. Interventions and programmes in these areas will benefit from the funding available under the Italian Climate Fund – that is, the principal instrument to achieve the commitments endorsed through international agreements on climate change and managed by public development bank Cassa Depositi e Prestiti. Yet, these initiatives are not detailed nor well-defined in the document. If and how the Mattei Plan will concretely foster environmental protection, communities' resilience, and a just transition in Africa is therefore still not clear. Similarly, and crucially, the way in which the Mattei Plan will combine with other multilateral actions in the field of climate change, such as the EU Global Gateway and the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, is still uncertain. Indeed, although the Mattei Plan itself mentions these initiatives as part of its synergies with EU and international programmes, the document only provides a brief description of these instruments and does not clarify to what extent and how these will interact with the Mattei Plan, or what kind of financial support these could provide to which particular areas, priorities and projects.

Likewise, migration seems prominent in the goals and objectives of the Mattei Plan. Emblematically, it argues that the

initiatives set forth therein are aimed at granting African youth “the right not to migrate” and to remain in Africa.⁸ Yet, this topic seems scarcely addressed as the word “migration” appears only ten times in a 102-page-long document. In addition, migration is not included in the six priorities of the Mattei Plan (education; healthcare, water, agriculture, energy, infrastructure). Actions to ensure “the right not to migrate” are mainly indirect, vaguely defined, and clustered in broader socio-economic initiatives, such as 1) the possibility to open regular pathways for labour migration to work in Italian small and medium industries; 2) the need to improve access to food security in rural and poor urban areas where internal and cross-border migration flows are more intense; 3) strengthening the school system in Ivory Coast (the first nationality of irregular migrants in Italy according to the Mattei Plan); the intention to support job creation and sustainable agriculture in those regions of Tunisia where migration rank is high. The fact that migration seems to be a key goal of the Mattei Plan but is absent from its priorities might then imply that the six pillars are the means through which the Italian government aims to achieve its main objective.

At the same time, it is important to recall that key transit countries, such as those of the Sahel region, did not attend the Italy-Africa Summit of January 2024, thus questioning the relevance that partnership on migration management may play for strategic African states. Finally, although

⁸ Italian Government, *Schema di decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri*, cit., p. 5.

development cooperation could surely contribute to eradicating poverty and other plagues that trigger migration flows within and from Africa, this result crucially depends on how development cooperation is intended and pursued.⁹ In this regard, it is undisputed that development cooperation in the so-called Global North is increasingly directed to deter migration, based on the simplistic assumption that improving the living conditions of communities in vulnerable third countries would result in reduced emigration.¹⁰ Such a narrative, however, has already proven to be flawed.¹¹

All in all, not only are actions towards climate change and migration superficially addressed, but the nexus

between the two is not mentioned in the Mattei Plan. Whereas Italy's engagement in providing protection to people compelled to flee because of climate and environmental factors is strongly present at the legislative level and is able to capture different types of causes and migration movements linked to climate stressors, Italy's political actions under the Meloni government raise questions regarding their responsiveness to the challenges posed by climate change on migration movements as well as their effectiveness in fairly managing migration. As currently envisaged, the Mattei Plan seems to fit in the established political trend of using development cooperation in third countries as a means of governing migration flows.

Time is needed to evaluate the next steps of the Mattei Plan and its concrete potential in such delicate areas. The Italian government needs to frame the projects it intends to pursue under the Mattei Plan with reference to migration and to climate change more explicitly, as well as how multilateral initiatives may support national efforts. In particular, the Italian government still has the opportunity to acknowledge the intersections between climate stressors and migration movements by unveiling their interconnections in Africa and in strategic African countries. Adequately addressing rooted climate and environmental causes of migration in a way that is in line with international standards would bring Italy's political action closer to its laudable legislative level.

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⁹ Matthew Scott, "Adapting to Climate-Related Human Mobility into Europe: Between the Protection Agenda and the Deterrence Paradigm, or Beyond?", in *European Journal of Migration and Law*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 2023), p. 54-82, https://brill.com/view/journals/emil/25/1/article-p54_3.xml; Stephanie Pope and Zina Weisner, "From Development to Deterrence? Migration Spending under the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)", in *Oxfam Briefing Papers*, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.21201/2023.621536>; Estela Casajuana and Georgia Jana Pintus, *Beyond Borders, Beyond Boundaries. A Critical Analysis of EU Financial Support for Border Control in Tunisia and Libya*, ARCI et al., November 2023, <https://actionaid.org/node/729179>.

¹⁰ Sarah Louise Nash, "The Developmentalisation of Climate Mobilities Policy in Denmark and Sweden", in Miriam Cullen and Matthew Scott (eds), *Nordic Approaches to Climate-Related Human Mobility*, London/New York, Routledge, 2024, p. 68-84, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003460985-5>.

¹¹ Michael Collyer, "Border Work: Frames, Barriers, and Disingenuous Development", in Tanja Bastia and Ronald Skeldon (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Migration and Development*, London/New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 63-73.

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