



The Mattei Plan as a hydro-geopolitical stabilization strategy

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Abstract: Water scarcity is increasingly recognized as a key driver of socio-economic fragility and political instability throughout the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. The article examines the Mattei Plan as a contemporary tool of diplomacy, assessing its potential to strengthen regional stability through water-focused development strategies. The analysis is based on the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem (WEFE) Nexus and the human security framework. It employs a comparative qualitative approach focused on Ghana, the Republic of the Congo, and Côte d'Ivoire. It aims to investigate how migration trends, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and water-related stressors interact. The findings suggest that the initiative can improve resilience by addressing the root causes of instability. Its impact will be linked to the inclusivity of governance mechanisms, their adaptation to local contexts, and the capacity to support long-term interventions.

Keywords: Water security, Hydro-diplomacy, Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem (WEFE) Nexus, Development cooperation, Mediterranean stability.

1. Introduction

Water stress is recognized as one of the main factors contributing to socio-economic fragility and political unrest in the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. The increasing pressures on water systems due to climate change, unsustainable reserves management, and population growth are having significant implications for food security, migration, and conflict dynamics. In this context, water security is no longer viewed solely as an environmental issue but progressively as a fundamental dimension of regional and international security.

Italy's Mattei Plan represents an ambitious attempt to redefine cooperation with African countries through an equal partnership and a joint development strategy. Although the programme is largely framed in terms of energy diplomacy and economic cooperation, its contribution to guaranteeing secure access to water remains to be fully defined.

The analysis aims to determine whether the Mattei Plan can be viewed as a tool of water diplomacy capable of contributing to regional stability by tackling structural vulnerabilities linked to water scarcity. The perspective benefits from the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem Nexus, complemented by a human security framework. It examines how measures related to water resource management, regenerative agriculture, and capacity-building can help reduce instability and alleviate migratory pressures.

It is worth noting that the project deals with a series of vulnerabilities shared by many African countries:

- Most of the population lives in rural areas, where the economy depends considerably on family-run farms;
- Inadequate water infrastructure and substantial reliance on rainwater;
- Lack of integrated governance for the sustainable use of hydric resources, exacerbated by episodes of pollution;
- Financial vulnerability and public debt tighten local governments' planning autonomy.

Focusing on case studies from Ghana, the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and Côte d'Ivoire, the paper analyzes how the Mattei Plan can foster local resilience and enhance water management through a multi-level governance framework. In doing so, the study also intends to contribute to the debate on how cooperation strategies can effectively link environmental sustainability with geopolitical stability.

2. Theoretical Framework

Water security is regarded as a central component of human security, extending beyond state-centered conceptions of security. Traditionally, the notion of security, as a threat to state sovereignty, dates back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Such threats concerned the compromise of territorial integrity, issues related to political stability, military and defense agreements, as well as economic and financial activities (Jolly and Basu Ray, 2006). In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, United Nations agencies harboured hopes for a more peaceful world and shifted their conflict-management strategy from containment to prevention. Developing countries were plagued by various internal conflicts that took on a different character compared to traditional tensions between social groups. Most of these conflicts were linked to deteriorating domestic conditions, including worsening economic situation, environmental threats, identity-based politics, and the influence of criminal organizations.

In an effort to address these transformations, former Pakistani Finance Minister Mahbub ul Haq, supported by the economist Amartya Sen, developed the concept of "security framework" as part of a broader approach to human development pursued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In 1994, the Human Development Report summarized this new theory along with related

actions and policies. The report also identified seven elements that together constituted the fundamental needs of human security: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (UNDP, 1994). As early as thirty years ago, one of the most pressing environmental threats was already water.

According to the human security framework, secure and sufficient access is essential not merely for environmental sustainability but also for livelihoods, public health, and socio-economic stability. The methodology emphasizes protecting individuals and communities from risks and threats at several levels, including those arising from environmental degradation and resource scarcity.

In water-stressed regions, especially across sub-Saharan Africa, scarce availability of water exacerbates vulnerabilities in agricultural production, food supply, and income generation. These interactions disproportionately affect rural populations, where economies rely predominantly on rainfed agriculture (95% of the cultivated land in sub-Saharan Africa) and where water supply is frequently entrusted to family or community contexts rather than institutional ones (Biazin et al., 2012).

Water shortage can act as a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities and contributing to regional instability. Hence, its close connection with patterns of forced migration, as environmental stressors increase the likelihood of displacement. Addressing the security of water supply is therefore not just an environmental or development priority but also a strategic component of policies aimed at reducing migratory pressures.

Water Politics and Hydro-Hegemony

Water resource management is inherently political. The field of water politics examines how power relations, institutional settings, and geopolitical interests shape access to and control over water. Consequently, water resource management reproduces broader patterns of cooperation, competition, and asymmetry among stakeholders.

Scholars such as Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner (2006) developed the concept of hydro-hegemony to describe situations in which dominant actors, whether states or institutions, exercise control over shared hydric resources through a combination of material, political, and narrative power. Gaps in capacity, funding, and knowledge can compromise water governance outcomes, especially at the expense of the most vulnerable.

In the African context under analysis, water-related political interplay is not limited to transboundary river basins. However, it emerges within national contexts, where disparities between urban and rural areas, or between industrial and agricultural users, determine access to water. Weak governance structures, weak regulatory capacity, and environmental degradation, such as pollution from extractive activities, further complicate the situation.

In this light, international cooperation initiatives, such as the Mattei Plan, can be seen as tools of water diplomacy. Their effectiveness, however, depends on their ability to promote inclusive governance, participatory development spaces, and support local ownership. A design process shared

with stakeholders is important to prevent interventions from reinforcing existing inequalities or being perceived as a form of neocolonial influence.

The Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem Nexus

The WEFE Nexus provides an outline for understanding the interdependencies between natural resources and socio-economic systems. It gained momentum around 2010-2012, with key contributions from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Partnership for Research & Innovation in the Mediterranean (PRIMA) launched by the European Union. Rather than addressing water, energy, and food security issues separately, the Nexus-based frame highlights their interconnected nature and the need for coordinated governance.

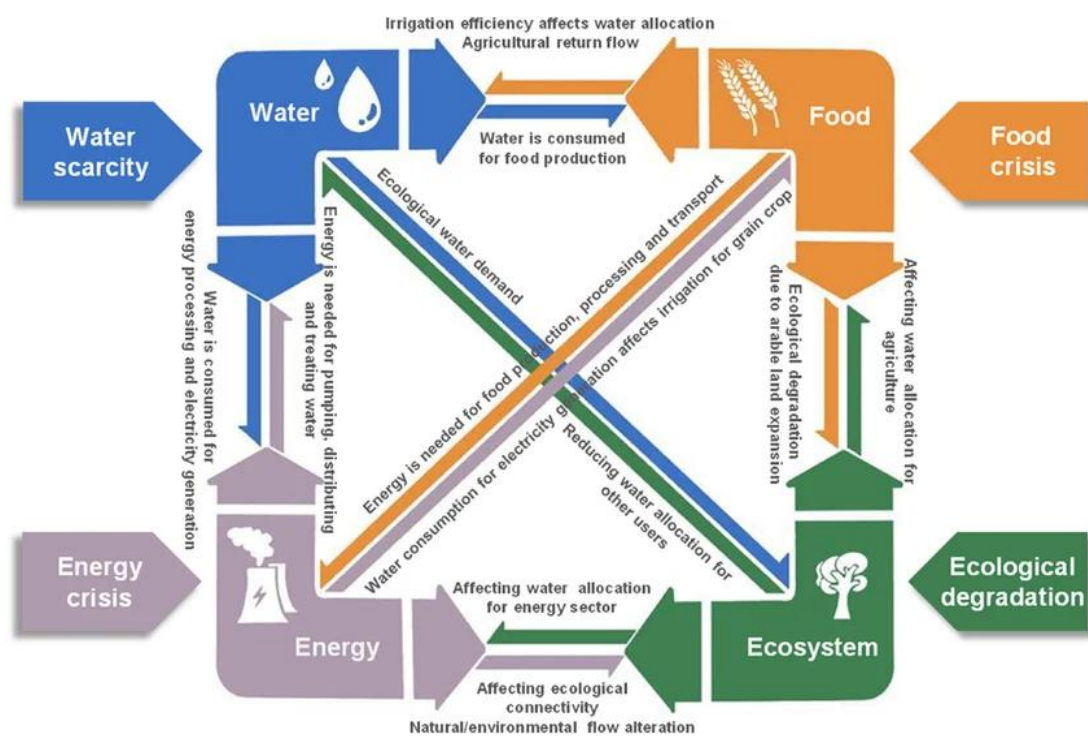


Figure 1. The Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem (WEFE) Nexus relationship with some of the links between each feature identified and explained (Yuan M. et al., 2024).

Water is a vital element in agricultural production and energy generation, while energy is necessary for the extraction, treatment, and distribution of water. At the same time, water and energy systems directly impact ecosystems, which in turn provide basic services such as soil fertility, climate regulation, and biodiversity. Disruptions in one sector can thereby ripple through the others.

The approach is specifically relevant in regions characterized by high climate variability and structural vulnerabilities. In sub-Saharan Africa, dependence on rainfed agriculture, limited infrastructure, and exposure to extreme weather events increase the sensitivity of these systems to

external shocks. Policies that fail to account for cross-sectoral linkages can undermine long-term sustainability.

The Nexus framework has been defined as “a paradigm shift” in the international development agenda, moving from sectoral development interventions to holistic resource use. Nexus interactions are based on three pillars: evidence, scenario development and designing and appraising response options. Promoting dialogue among stakeholders is key to adapting the context-specific needs of people and the environment.

Indeed, one of the objectives of the Mattei Plan is to combine initiatives in the infrastructure and water management sectors, with a focus on sustainable agricultural development, and to build on existing communities’ capacities.

Among other initiatives recently implemented (February 2026), one carried out in Nairobi stands out, involving a collaboration between Italian and African universities to deliver an “Advanced Skills Course” on ecological transition. The course is part of the WAGON2AFRICA project and concerns the management of natural resources within the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus model.

Training a new generation of experts is clearly one of the goals of the Mattei Plan, and Italy seems eager to consolidate its dialogue and cooperation.

The Plan can also be seen as an attempt to put a Nexus-based scheme into practice: it requires factual coordination across sectors, institutions, and levels of governance, as well as the integration of local knowledge and community participation.

Environmental Stressors and Migration

The link between environmental stress, resource scarcity, and migration has recently been the focus of a growing body of literature. Although water shortages do not directly cause conflicts or displacement, they interact with socio-economic and political factors, increasing the likelihood of precariousness and driving people to migrate.

Zhou and Chi (2024) conducted an in-depth analysis of the environmental stressors that trigger migration. Their findings suggest that environmental variables tend to be contextual factors that interact with other pre-existing migration drivers. The environmental stressors are mostly precipitation-related (35%), followed by disaster-related (26%) and temperature-related (24%). They can be classified as rapid or slow-acting, leading to different outcomes. In the absence of coping strategies that mitigate the impact of migration, the response triggered by sudden climatic changes or natural disasters may turn out to be a forced action rather than a voluntary choice (Berlemann & Steinhardt, 2017). Different levels of regional resilience shape coping mechanisms to environmental change and, consequently, influence migration trajectories.

Researchers such as Wolf and Dinar have lately brought an additional element to the discussion: they argue that water-related tensions are more likely to lead to cooperation than to conflict when functional institutions and governance mechanisms are in place (Silva & Wolf, 2025). Nevertheless, in

contexts characterized by weak governance, economic marginalization, and limited adaptive capacity, water stress can exacerbate grievances and fuel social unrest (Dinar et al., 2015).

In rural areas, declining water availability and environmental degradation can reduce agricultural productivity, leading to income losses and food insecurity. These conditions habitually act as push factors for migration, notably among young people. Meanwhile, rapid urbanization driven by internal migration can further strain urban water systems, creating new forms of vulnerability. According to the latest report from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nearly one in five migrants surveyed in Libya (19%) reported insufficient access to drinking water (IOM, 2023).

Effective policy actions depend on a clear understanding of these dynamics. Rather than viewing migration solely as a security issue, it is necessary to address its structural causes, among them environmental degradation and resource scarcity. Investments in water infrastructure, sustainable agriculture, and local capacity-building can help reduce migratory pressures by bolstering communities of origin's adaptability.

Building on the contexts outlined above, this paper conceives the Mattei Plan as a tool of water diplomacy, situated at the intersection of development cooperation, environmental sustainability, and the pursuit of national interests. The initiative looks at the key components of the Nexus and the human security dimensions of water access. Furthermore, its emphasis on partnering with African states to co-design interventions on the ground remarks an attempt to move beyond traditional aid models.

The Mattei Plan's ability to boost regional stability depends on several factors: above all, the inclusiveness of its governance structures, the sustainability of its financing mechanisms (through *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti*¹, *Plafond Africa*², and *Misura Africa SIMEST*³) and its ability to align with existing global architectures, such as the European Union's "Global Gateway" (in particular, the EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package) and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

Recently, the African Union published "The Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy", a functional document that guides the implementation of water supply and safe sanitation systems. It points out the need for cooperation, given that 90% of surface water across borders and 40% of Africa's population depend on shared aquifers (AMCOW, 2026).

¹ *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti S.p.A.*, known as CDP S.p.A., is an Italian public development bank. It manages the Italian Climate Fund (€3 billion), which is earmarked for investments in decarbonization and ecological transition projects under the Mattei Plan.

² Initiative promoted as part of the Mattei Plan, which allows CDP to commit up to €500 million to companies with a permanent presence on the African continent, backed by an 80% government guarantee.

³ Operational program set to launch in 2024 (with additional funding in 2025) as part of the Mattei Plan, with a budget of 200 million euros. It offers subsidized loans for productive and commercial investments, digitalization, and sustainability projects on the African continent, with a 10% grant component.

In this sense, the Plan provides a relevant case for examining how water-centered development strategies can be embedded into a broader geopolitical and security agenda, and whether such efforts can achieve durable and equitable outcomes.

4. Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative, case-study-based method to investigate the relationships between water security, socio-political stability, and development cooperation within the scope of the Mattei Plan. The qualitative approach is well-suited to capturing the complexity of interactions between environmental, socio-economic, and political variables, which cannot be adequately understood through purely quantitative means.

Nevertheless, a quantitative approach should be incorporated. As of today, it has not been made public whether any assessment tests are planned to evaluate baseline conditions, which would then allow quantification of the project's impact. It is worth noting that this type of appraisal requires additional funding to support the team responsible for collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data. Most development projects do not provide this kind of comprehensive data; instead, they typically conduct interviews that assess the state of affairs at the end of the project.

The research is structured around an analytical framework that combines the WEF Nexus, hydro-political analysis, and the human security paradigm, enabling a multi-dimensional assessment of how the water sector can contribute to stability and resilience.

Case Selection

The study focuses on three countries, namely Ghana, the Republic of Congo, and Côte d'Ivoire, selected on the basis of two criteria:

- Diversity of water-related cases, enabling comparative analysis across different environmental and governance contexts;
- Strategic importance in the West and Central African regions, particularly regarding migration trends and regional stability.

As summarized in the following table, the selected cases observe distinct dimensions of water insecurity.

Table 1. Case Studies

Country	Sectoral Focus	Key Challenge	Hydro-Diplomatic Relevance
Ghana	Environment	Pollution and resource degradation	Need for environmental governance and regulation
Republic of Congo	Urban development	Inequitable access to potable water	Urban service provision and infrastructure

Côte d'Ivoire	Agriculture	Dependence on water for value chains	Water management in agri-economic cooperation
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Limitations

The majority of the study relies on secondary data, limiting its ability to capture local-level processes in real time. As previously mentioned, there are no assessments regarding the baseline or the intended target of the planned policy actions. Since the Mattei Plan is a recent initiative, no empirical data on its long-term impact are yet available. Additionally, the comparative approach, while useful for identifying patterns, may not fully account for country-specific political and institutional complexities.

Even with these drawbacks, the research provides a valuable starting point for understanding the potential of water-centered development strategies to foster regional stability.

5. Case Studies

Ghana

In Ghana, water security is linked to agricultural productivity and economic stability, as the economy relies on agricultural exports, particularly cocoa, which depend on stable climatic and hydrological conditions (BusinessGhana, 2025). The country exported \$1.46 billion worth of cocoa beans in 2024, ranking fourth among the world's top cocoa bean exporters. Cocoa is a key source of foreign exchange earnings, accounting for 5-7% of the country's GDP. In addition, the cocoa sector is a noteworthy source of employment, providing jobs for over one million people across cultivation, processing, and distribution. The sector supports nearly 800,000 households, most of which are smallholder farmers (COCOBOD, 2023).

In 2018 the government launched the "Ghana-Ivory Coast Cocoa Initiative" to protect farmers from price drops in the international market that affect their incomes by setting a minimum price for cocoa exports. Cocoa yields are also affected by climate change and deforestation, as well as by soil degradation caused by illegal mining. These last two factors have a significant impact, reducing the amount of land available for cocoa production (Ibidem). The pollution of water bodies by illegal mining activities, known as "galamsey", has contaminated rivers such as the Pra River with toxic substances, including mercury (Wilberforce & Favour, 2024).

Environmental degradation has implications for public health, agricultural productivity, and livestock farming. Contaminated water sources reduce access to safe drinking water and compromise irrigation systems, affecting rural livelihoods and the suburban and urban areas that rely on meat, fruits, and vegetables imported from rural areas. Given that a large share of the population, over 2 billion people, depends on smallholder agriculture, these dynamics increase economic vulnerability and food insecurity (IFAD, 2021).

From a socio-political perspective, the persistence of illegal mining activities reveals governance gaps, including limited enforcement capacity and conflicting economic incentives. The resulting environmental stress acts as a destabilizing factor, exacerbating inequalities and contributing to migration pressures.

When planning measures, it is important to bear in mind that a part of the population is considered “trapped”. These are highly vulnerable individuals who may be unable to move due to insufficient financial assets, disability, social factors (e.g., gender-related issues), or a lack of social networks (Migration Data Portal, 2024). The data collected primarily concern the population that has migrated; as a result, there is little information on the population that remains behind, which is necessary for defining intervention and protection measures.

Within this context, the Mattei Plan could play a role in supporting:

- Environmental monitoring and water quality management;
- Training of local technical experts in agro-meteorology (to prevent weather hazards) and water governance (water manager);
- Sustainable agricultural practices aimed at reducing soil exploitation and degradation.

Republic of Congo

In the Republic of Congo, water insecurity is primarily associated with low access to safe drinking water, specifically in urban areas such as Brazzaville. Limited institutional capacities and a lack of investments hinder final distribution and provision. According to data collected mainly by UNICEF (2024), 68% of the population has access to safe drinking water, but there is a large urban-rural disparity (85% vs. 56%).

Urban population growth has placed increasing pressure on existing water systems, leading to disparities in access and the proliferation of informal water supply mechanisms. These conditions contribute to public health risks and exacerbate socio-economic inequalities, notably in low-income neighborhoods.

From a human security perspective, inadequate access to potable water undermines basic living conditions and adds to social tensions (UNESCO, 2024). Moreover, the lack of reliable facilities reduces the capacity of urban systems to absorb demographic pressures, including those generated by internal migration. In this case, the Mattei Plan could contribute through:

- Investments in water and distribution infrastructures;
- Capacity-building for local water management institutions;
- Implementation of digital tools to track and manage hydric resources.

Such interventions would not only improve access to essential services but also strengthen institutional coping capacity and urban stability.

Côte d’Ivoire

In Côte d'Ivoire, increasing climate variability and irregular rainfall patterns are straining agricultural systems. Smallholder farmers, who form the backbone of the sector, are particularly vulnerable due to restricted access to irrigation, financial capital, and technological support.

These vulnerabilities have broader implications for economic stability and social cohesion. Fluctuations in agricultural productivity can affect income levels, food security, and rural employment, contributing to internal displacement and migration. As part of the Mattei Plan, potential interventions include:

- Support for sustainable and climate-resilient agricultural practices;
- Development of irrigation and water control systems;
- Training programs focused on agro-meteorology and climate adaptation.

By boosting the robustness of agricultural systems, these measures could enhance long-term stability.

Italy's commitment is complemented by the financial allocations already provided for in the "Global Europe" program. It includes action plans with specific objectives for the 2021-2027 period, adopted by the European Commission in coordination with each partner. In the specific case of Côte d'Ivoire, the main priorities concern human capital development to reduce the unemployment rate; the promotion of inclusive and sustainable growth; and the strengthening of the rule of law and democratic governance to promote peace and stability. The connection to the Italian Plan is easy to see.

The Côte d'Ivoire and the European Union are interdependent in cocoa. Côte d'Ivoire is the European Union's main supplier, and the European Union is the main buyer of Ivorian cocoa (67% of Ivorian cocoa exports are destined for the EU). Cocoa production in Côte d'Ivoire continues to be plagued by three problems that negatively impact its sustainability. The first is poverty among producers, 54% of whom live below the poverty line; the second is deforestation: 80% of forest cover has been lost since 1960; and the third is the persistence of child labor, including the most severe forms of human trafficking.

All participating member states are part of Team Europe's "Cacao Durable" initiative and have set the goal of addressing all aspects of sustainable cocoa production (European Commission, 2021).

Comparative Insights

The three case studies highlight different but interconnected dimensions of water insecurity: environmental degradation (Ghana), infrastructure and access deficits (Republic of Congo), and climate vulnerability and agricultural dependence (Côte d'Ivoire). Across all cases, water insecurity emerges as a key factor influencing socio-economic conditions and, indirectly, stability and migration trends. The analysis also underscores the importance of comprehensive, context-specific measures in line with the WEF Nexus approach.

The Mattei Plan has the potential to meet these interconnected challenges. However, its effectiveness will rely on its ability to adapt to local contexts, ensure inclusive governance, and coordinate with existing international actors (CIDCI, 2024).

6. The Mattei Plan through the Nexus Lens

Recent policy developments and implementation reports confirm that water constitutes a cornerstone of the Mattei Plan. The initiative explicitly plans to develop the water sector across the African continent by intervening along the full water cycle, covering sourcing, distribution, treatment, recycling, and quality control (Sogesid, 2026). The goal has been pointed out recently during the Senate event “Water Resources in Italy and Africa” organized by Sogesid S.p.A., the state-owned environmental engineering company. Errico Stravato, the company’s CEO, stated that Sogesid promotes a holistic approach to water resource management to foster the development of efficient infrastructure. In his view, water resource management should be addressed first at the national level and then adapted to the specific contexts of Mediterranean countries.

The systemic approach reflects a shift towards integrated water governance, in which infrastructure development is combined with environmental sustainability and institutional capacity-building. Concrete initiatives illustrate the method: in the Republic of Congo, the SAEP DJOUE II project aims to implement a drinking water supply system for Brazzaville’s population. The system is designed to serve up to 1.6 million residents and ensure efficient resource management, likely through the use of solar power to help supply electricity to the facilities and reduce water waste. Similarly, in Tunisia, the TANIT water-agriculture project reflects a coordinated effort linking water stewardship with agricultural productivity and climate adaptation. It is structured around three principal areas:

- The recovery and distribution of non-conventional water. Based on recommendations from local authorities, five wastewater treatment plants (El Attar, Sfax, Sud Meliane 1 and 2) have been identified for the transfer of treated wastewater to lands managed by the “Office des Terres Domaniales”, the state agency responsible for managing public land assets;
- Revitalizing drought-affected crops through mechanization and the introduction of innovative farming techniques;
- Creating a multi-functional center to facilitate technology transfers between Italian and Tunisian agricultural supply chains (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2025).

These examples demonstrate that water is not treated as an isolated sector, but rather as a foundational component of broader development strategies, directly connected to food security, public health, and economic adaptability.

Operationalizing the WEF Nexus

The Mattei Plan’s structure reveals a concrete attempt to operationalize the WEF Nexus, moving from conceptual theory to applied policy.

Interventions such as irrigation development, land rehabilitation, and water-efficient agricultural practices directly link water management to food security and rural livelihoods. Projects

like TANIT highlight how water infrastructure can support agricultural systems while enhancing resilience to climate variability.

A valuable dimension of the Mattei Plan is the integration of digital infrastructure and technological innovation as part of the “Digital Flagship for Africa” program. It is sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation with support from the UNDP in four focus countries: Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Mozambique, and Senegal. The initiative seeks to identify solutions to strengthen public digital infrastructure, enhance connectivity in rural and remote areas, and promote training for local public administrations (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2025).

While not exclusively water-focused, initiatives such as digital platforms, satellite connectivity, and AI-based systems help improve data collection, monitoring, and the governance of water resources. Considering this vantage point, we can infer that actual water management increasingly depends on data-driven decision-making and technological capacity.

The emphasis on wastewater treatment, pollution control, and resource efficiency aligns with a circular-economy approach, which is relevant in contexts where environmental degradation, such as water contamination in Ghana, undermines both ecosystems and human security.

Through these interconnected components, the Mattei Plan embodies a Nexus-oriented model, in which water acts as an entry point for addressing broader systemic challenges.

Water Security, Stability, and Migration

A central assumption underpinning the Mattei Plan is the recognition that water is associated with stability and migration dynamics. Water deficiency and mismanagement cause economic stress, reduce agricultural productivity, and exacerbate social inequalities, driving displacement. The relationship is evident across the case studies examined:

- In Ghana, water pollution linked to extractive activities compromises livelihoods and contributes to rural economic decline;
- In the Republic of Congo, inadequate access to potable water heightens urban vulnerability and public health risks;
- In Côte d’Ivoire, climate variability affects water availability, with direct consequences for agricultural stability.

By targeting some structural vulnerabilities, the Mattei Plan adopts a preventive stance, aiming to address the underlying causes of instability rather than its symptoms. Investments in water infrastructure, agricultural resilience, and technical training are intended to enhance local adaptive capacity and reduce the socio-economic pressures that contribute to migration.

Hydro-Diplomacy

The Mattei Plan promotes a model of multi-level, multi-actor governance that involves national institutions, international organizations, private-sector actors, and local stakeholders. The method

reflects the complexity of water governance, which requires coordination across sectors and scales. The emphasis on partnership-based cooperation, often framed as an “equal partnership” with African countries, seeks to move beyond traditional aid paradigms.

From a theoretical perspective, the approach is a form of hydro-diplomacy, in which water cooperation becomes a tool for building trust, strengthening institutional capacity, and promoting regional stability.

At the same time, integrating water initiatives with broader infrastructure and digital policies suggests a hybrid model, in which development cooperation intersects with geopolitical and economic interests. For instance, the linkage between water projects and broader infrastructure corridors or digital connectivity initiatives (e.g., the Blue Raman cable system project) highlights the strategic dimension of resource governance.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the Mattei Plan can be conceptualized as an emerging model of water-centered development cooperation, characterized by a systemic view to the water cycle, a focus on sustainability, resilience, and circular economy principles, and the use of technical expertise and infrastructure development as instruments of foreign policy.

The programme embodies a broader shift in international cooperation, in line with the growing prominence of natural resources, above all water, to security and geopolitical mandates. Stability in African partner countries is tied to Mediterranean and European priorities, with regard to migration, economic cooperation, and regional security.

At the same time, its efficacy will depend on its ability to ensure inclusive and participatory governance, avoid reinforcing asymmetrical power relations, and deliver tangible and sustainable results at the local level. The Plan is therefore both an opportunity and a test case for understanding how politics can successfully mainstream water security into development policy strategies.

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