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Link: https://www.iai.it/en/events/lobito-corridor-bridge-between-diplomacy-and-development

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1. Video – **Short video for dissemination of research product, published on IAI social media channels** – 07/07/2026

   Link: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/cos%C3%A8-il-corridoio-di-lobito-e-dove-si-trova-ugcPost-7480243284443910144-bgXi/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAABGWY00BAUo8Ri80ywLsXCvYsnFafu_SvZE

No. 26|01 (January 2026)

Marianna Lunardini and Darlington Tshuma

The Lobito Corridor and Africa's Development Agenda: Synergies with the Mattei Plan and Global Gateway*

- The Lobito Corridor is a 1,300-km railway connecting the mineral-rich 'Copperbelt' of the DRC and Zambia to the Port of Lobito in Angola. The corridor represents a strategic infrastructure to secure supply chains for the global energy transition.
- The corridor is expected to revitalise local economies by supporting informal cross-border trade, which accounts for 30-40 per cent of total intra-regional trade in Southern Africa.
- For sustainability, the corridor must move past colonial-era extractive logics and adhere to high environmental and human rights standards, and support the realisation of the African Green Minerals Strategy.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Positioned as southern Africa's gateway to global trade and international markets, the Lobito Corridor spans approximately 1,300 km, extending from the Atlantic Ocean port city of Lobito in Angola through the country's central highlands to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia (see Figure 1). The corridor connects the mineral-rich regions of the DRC and Zambia's Copperbelt to the Atlantic Ocean via Angola's Lobito Port. Owing to its strategic location, the corridor is attracting significant attention from neighbouring and investor countries alike, as well as international businesses linked to the regional mining industry.

Recognising its potential to revitalise trade, regional industrialisation and regional integration, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) designated the corridor a regional priority infrastructure project in its Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan.[1] A global surge in demand for critical minerals located around the corridor, such as copper, lithium, nickel and cobalt, is fuelling interest in the project, and with it a multiplicity of actors seeking to secure fast and cheap access to critical and rare earth minerals.

* This brief was produced in the framework of the research project "Italy at the forefront of infrastructure diplomacy: the Lobito Corridor case", conducted by IAI with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo and Fondazione CSF. All opinions expressed in this document are solely and exclusively those of the author.

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1 SADC, *Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Sector Plan*, August 2012, https://www.sadc.int/node/1862.

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» The Lobito Corridor is attracting significant attention from neighbouring and investor countries alike, as well as international businesses linked to the regional mining industry

At the regional level, investments in the corridor are expected to facilitate growth of regional value-chains anchored on critical minerals, agriculture and energy resources in Angola, DRC, Zambia and neighbouring countries. Additionally, infrastructure upgrades and modernisation of the corridor are expected to significantly improve transport efficiency, reducing both the time and cost of moving goods to coastal ports.

At the local level, infrastructure development is expected to facilitate informal cross-border trade, re-establish commercial links between urban and rural areas, enhance livelihoods, create employment and improve food security for communities along the corridor. However, the implementation of this major infrastructure project also raises several concerns, most notably around financial transparency, adherence to environmental and human rights standards, and regulatory and harmonisation challenges.

Why does the Lobito Corridor matter?

Developed in 1902 as a colonial trade corridor to extract raw minerals from African hinterlands to international markets in Europe and the Americas, the Lobito Corridor today sits uneasily at the intersection of a global green transition, geopolitical contestation, poor regional infrastructure and governance deficits. Decades of civil strife in post-colonial Angola severely damaged infrastructure and slowed progress on upgrades and modernisation works on the corridor. By the time the civil war ended in 2002, only 34 km, less than 3 per cent of the rail along Angola's coast, remained functional.[2] Between 2004 and 2014, the Chinese renovated parts of the corridor with a 1.2 billion US dollar "oil-for-infrastructure" loan. Renovation plans included upgrading and redesigning the railway to accommodate up to 67 stations and trains travelling up to 90 km/hr. The goal was for the rail to be able to carry up to 20 million tonnes of cargo and four million passengers per year.[3] However, this target has not been achieved yet. In 2024, the railway line carried fewer than 200,000 tonnes of cargo with a projected capacity of 750,000 tonnes by 2027.[4]

Today, the Lobito Corridor is partially operational and is one of the five major trade, transit and development routes in southern Africa. The development of the corridor is expected to significantly improve transport efficiency, reducing both the time and cost of moving goods and freight to coastal ports. It is also expected to create economic and livelihood opportunities for communities living along the corridor through facilitating access to markets for farmers and agri-producers, artisanal and small-scale miners and informal cross-border traders. According to Angola's Census report, nearly a quarter of the country's population lives in the four provinces covered by the Lobito Corridor, making its development a major national priority.[5] At the regional level, the corridor is

2 Duarte, Ana et al., "Diversification and Development, or 'White Elephants'? Transport in Angola's Lobito Corridor", in *CMI Reports*, No. 2015/7 (April 2015), https://www.cmi.no/publications/5510.

3 Ibid.

4 Diallo, Fatoumata, "Lobito Will Be Six Times Faster than Other Corridors,' CEO Fournier Says", in *The Africa Report*, 27 August 2025, https://www.theafricareport.com/390905/lobito-will-be-six-times-faster-than-other-corridors-ceo-fournier-says.

5 Angola National Institute of Statistics (INE), *Resultados definitivos recenseamento geral da*

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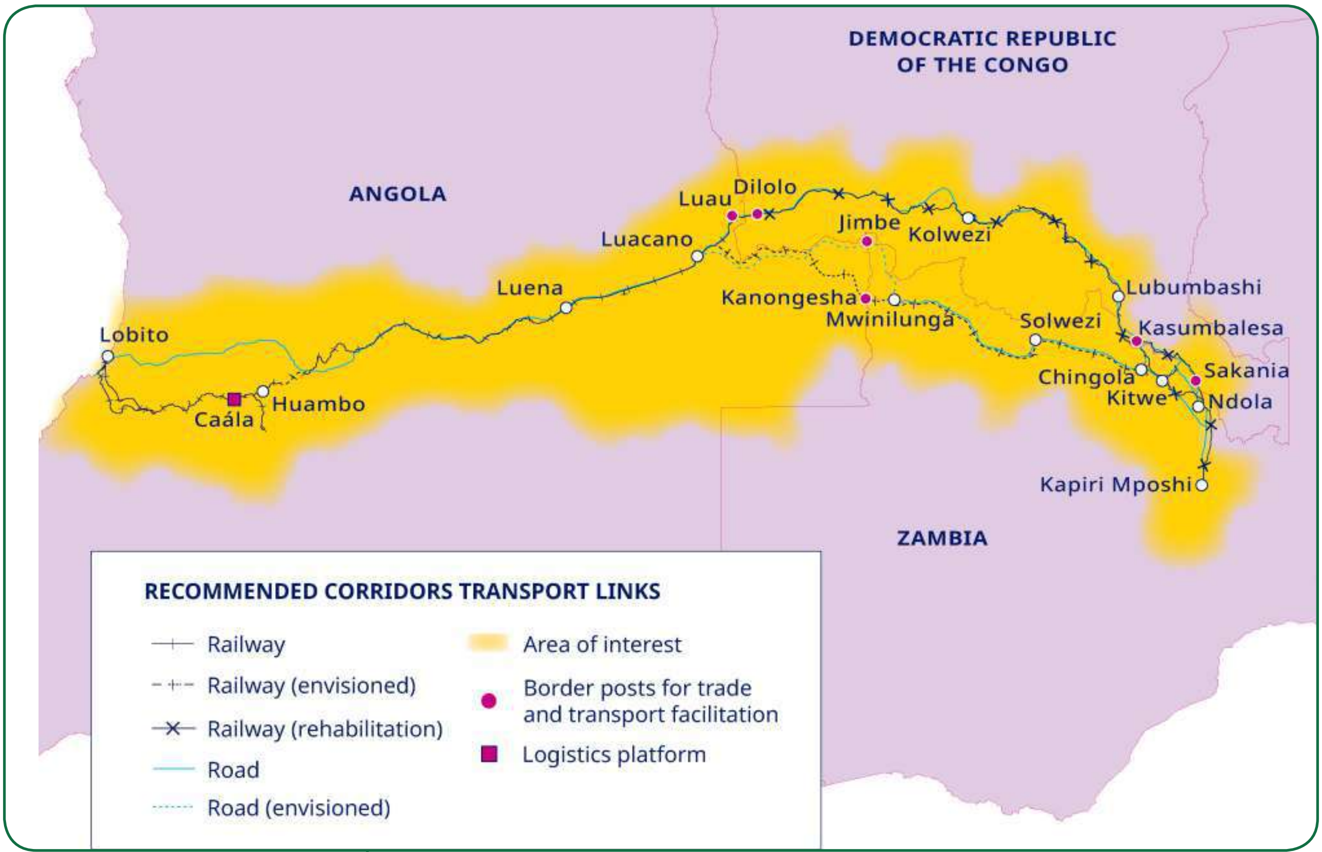

FIGURE 1 Visual map of the Lobito Corridor

Source: European Commission DG for International Partnerships website: *Lobito Corridor*, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/4522_en.

expected to enhance regional trade and integration, aligning with the African Union's vision of an integrated continent, providing a critical anchor to the roll-out of key African flagship projects like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

While the project's significance cannot be overstated, its implementation creates additional structural and policy challenges. Realisation of cross-border infrastructure projects of this magnitude and size often poses several challenges, including regulatory and policy hurdles stemming from tensions between different legal regimes and frameworks on mining and land tenure systems, compensation mechanisms and environmental protection standards.

Regional drivers and dynamics

The Lobito Corridor project unfolds in a complex geopolitical context. For instance, 2025 saw conflict escalation between the DRC and Rwanda following failed peace talks in December 2024. Recent reports from humanitarian and aid organisations show that more than 7 million people have been displaced, both internally and externally.[6] The presence of Rwanda-backed M23 rebels in the eastern parts of the country and their advance southwards have raised fears of a regional conflict with spillover effects. A fragile, Trump-backed "minerals-

população e habitação RGPH-2024, November 2025, https://www.ine.gov.ao/publicacoes/detalhes/NDc0MTE%3D.

6 OHCHR, *Democratic Republic of the Congo: National Ownership Essential to Address Internal Displacement Crisis, Says UN Expert*, 2 June 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/111750.

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❯❯ The Lobito Corridor project unfolds in a complex geopolitical context

for-peace" deal involving Kinshasa, Kigali and Washington has sought to put an end to the conflict. The widely criticised Trump peace deal was immediately followed by a US-DRC agreement to strengthen partnerships in DRC's mining sector to enhance commercialisation of critical minerals considered necessary for the US interests and its National Security Strategy.[7]

The intersection of security, geopolitical and commercial interests in the Lobito Corridor and by extension in the Great Lakes region calls for a multilayered and multifaceted strategy to manage conflicting and sometimes overlapping interests among different actors. For instance, following conflict flare-ups in the eastern DRC, in February 2025, the European Parliament called on the Commission to sanction Rwanda by freezing direct budgetary support for Rwanda and to suspend a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on critical minerals signed between the EU and Kigali.[8] Calls for suspension of EU support to Kigali followed accusations by Congolese activists of EU complicity and complacency in the conflict. The EU's position on this is further complicated by geopolitical considerations surrounding the DRC's critical minerals and its supply chains.[9] For now, the deal has been placed under review in addition to sanctions introduced against some leaders of M23 and the Rwanda Defence Force.[10]

The economic conditions in the region also demand an analysis. Angola, a leading actor in the project, faces elevated sovereign risk. This raises concern about its debt sustainability and its ability to attract additional private investment. Additionally, Angola's development model, characterised by infrastructure-for-oil loans, has been criticised as unsustainable, particularly on the back of falling oil prices, with further risks of debt default.[11] In the short-term, government efforts to diversify investors and markets have seen some success, with Angola's public debt levels showing some improvement. In neighbouring Zambia which faced a risk default in 2020, debt sustainability has improved although the country faces additional structural challenges including frequent power blackouts and high electricity tariffs as a result of low power generation and climate-induced droughts. Lusaka is focusing on diversifying its energy mix by reducing reliance on hydropower. Already, Zambia is facing elevated ecological threats and environmental damage from contamination and toxic spills from a Chinese-owned mining enterprise.[12]

7 US, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

8 European Parliament, *MEPs Want to Suspend EU-Rwanda Deal on Sustainable Value Chains for Critical Raw Materials*, 13 February 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250206IPR26752.

9 Châtelot, Christophe, "DRC Foreign Minister: 'The European Union Is Complicit in the Plundering of Our Resources and the Aggression of Rwanda'", in *Le Monde*, 29 February 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/02/29/drc-the-european-union-is-complicit-in-the-plundering-of-our-resources-and-the-aggression-of-rwanda_6570043_124.html.

10 Karkare, Poorva and Bruce Byiers, "The Lobito Corridor: Between European Geopolitics and African Agency", in *ECDPM Papers*, 16 April 2025, https://ecdpm.org/work/lobito-corridor-between-european-geopolitics-and-african-agency.

11 Yushikawa, Sumie, "China and Angola: From the Pioneering 'Angolan Model' to a 'New' Relationship", in *Analysis from the East-West Center*, Vol. 28, No. 170 (November 2024), https://www.eastwestcenter.org/node/106946.

12 Gondwe, Kennedy, "Zambia Dismisses US Health Warning after Toxic Spill in Copper Mining Area", in *BBC News*, 7 August 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2qeexv791o.

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Informal cross-border trade

Infrastructure development along the corridor will enhance the capacity of the region to bolster agricultural value chains. This will allow participating countries to access international markets, build a skills base, foster technology transfer and create employment for millions of young people. In addition to developing infrastructure and agriculture, the Lobito Corridor is also expected to facilitate informal cross-border trade. Its realisation will reshape informal economies of extraction, trade and conflict geographies. The informal sector is a critical engine driving economic resilience in the region. It currently contributes between 30-40 per cent of total intra-regional trade.[13] The Lobito Corridor will facilitate an easy flow of goods, services and people across borders, thereby strengthening intra-regional trade in southern Africa, which stood at 41.4 per cent in 2024, the highest level on the continent.[14]

›› The Lobito Corridor is expected to facilitate informal cross-border trade

While formal corridor development focuses primarily on infrastructure, logistics and trade facilitation, the informal economy remains the social and economic lifeblood of border communities. Informal cross-border trading is mainly managed by women, accounting for 60-70 per cent of it. Recognising and integrating informal cross-border trade into corridor development plans will therefore strengthen Africa's broader regional integration agenda. In fact, owing to its scale and dynamism, informal cross-border trade is driving what many describe as the real yet invisible integration of African economies, helping to advance regional connectivity and market integration in areas where formal initiatives remain slow and constrained by structural, institutional and policy barriers. Facilitating standardised regulatory environments underpinned by harmonised regional policy instruments will enable states to strike a balance between regulatory reform on one hand and their obligations to safeguard national security and combat transnational criminality on the other without undermining regional integration.

International interest in the corridor

A global decarbonisation agenda and the rapid growth of the electric vehicle (EV) industry have intensified interest in the corridor, driving a surge in investments and attracting an increasing number of actors seeking opportunities in the region. The governments of the DRC and Zambia have signed several MOUs and agreements for infrastructure development to revitalise the corridor (see Table 1).

With the support and coordination of the SADC Secretariat, the three governments involved in the development of the corridor signed the Lobito Corridor Transit Transportation Facilitation Agency Agreement in Angola in January 2023. The agreement calls for a harmonisation of the national regulations and development strategies among the three participating countries.

13 Kodero, Cliff Ubba, "Development Without Borders? Informal Cross-Border Trade in Africa", in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Political Economy*, Cham, Springer, 2020, p. 1051-1067.

14 African Export-Import Bank, *African Trade Report 2025*, Cairo, Afreximbank, 2025, p. 63, https://www.afreximbank.com/reports/african-trade-report-2025.

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Table 1 | MOUs and agreements linked to the Lobito Corridor

Parties involved	Type of agreement	Focus area	Key objectives
EU, US, DRC, Angola, Zambia, AfDB, AFC	MOU	Development of the Lobito Corridor	Joint financing, infrastructure investment, regional integration and trade facilitation
Zambia, Angola, DRC	Agreement (LCTTFA)	Trade and development	Framework for trade facilitation, customs harmonisation and corridor governance
EU, DRC	MOU	Critical minerals and value chain development	Support for mineral processing, sustainable mining practices, and local value addition
EU, Zambia	MOU	Strategic minerals and value chain development	Partnership on green transition minerals (e.g., copper, cobalt, lithium)
US, DRC, Zambia	MOU	Electric vehicle (EV) battery value chain	Strengthen regional capacity in EV battery manufacturing and supply chain resilience
DRC, Zambia	Bilateral agreement	EV battery value chain	Establish joint production and export mechanisms for battery precursors
Angola, Trafigura, Mota-Engil, Vecturis	Concession agreement	Transport and infrastructure	Management and modernisation of the Lobito Railway and associated logistics

›› Several financiers are involved in the financing of the Lobito Corridor project

Several financiers are involved in the financing of the Lobito Corridor project. For example, through the African Finance Corporation (AFC), the US allocated 1 billion US dollars to build and improve the railway of the corridor up to Zambia. The US, EU, AfDB and the AFC signed the Lobito Corridor Extension MOU to cooperate under the shared vision of the corridor, signalling growing interest by international actors to revive the corridor as a key economic artery in the region. AfDB estimates that 1.6 billion US dollars is required for the extension work and has itself committed 500,000 dollars to the project and has pledged to lead fundraising efforts to meet the investment needed.

A joint venture between Trafigura, Mota-Engil and Vecturis SA under the Lobito Atlantic Railway Company secured a 30-year concession in July 2023 to provide railway services on the condition that the company invests 450 million US dollars in Angola, and another 100 million dollars in the DRC. The company also secured a concession extendable for an additional 20-50 years on condition that the consortium builds a branch line connecting Luacano and Jimbe with a total length of 259 km, with an estimated cost of 1 billion dollars.[15]

15 Zhang, Jing and Lingfei Weng, "Financing Railway Construction to Corridor Development amid Geopolitical Rivalry: Study Two Cases in Africa", in *CSST Working Papers*, No. 12 (September 2025), p. 19, https://www.soas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/WP%20012_Financing%20Railway%20Construction%20to%20Corridor%20Development%20amid%20Geopolitical%20Rivalry_1.pdf.

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Navigating the geopolitics of the Lobito Corridor

The presence of Chinese firms and investments in the region, along with those from the EU, the US, Russia, Türkiye, India and others, is already visible, demonstrating not just the politics of minerals and mineral supply chains but also the geopolitics of infrastructure.

Africa currently needs up to 130-170 billion US dollars of investments annually to bridge its growing infrastructure gap.[16] Today, Chinese companies are involved in around 30 per cent of major infrastructure projects in Africa, both in the construction and as financiers.[17] With up to 2.6 billion US dollars required for infrastructure development in the Lobito Corridor, concerns around transparency have been raised over the financing of various aspects of the project, where most of the EU’s financing is private-sector led and implemented. China has committed 1.4 billion US dollars in refurbishing and modernising the Tanzania-Zambia railway (TAZARA) to facilitate the export of critical minerals through the Indian Ocean. While these two mega-infrastructure projects may appear to operate independently, both are critical to advancing the region and Africa’s long-term development objectives by plugging infrastructure gaps, attracting much-needed investments and unlocking economic opportunities that create jobs and improve livelihoods for ordinary people.[18]

›› The Lobito and TAZARA projects are critical to advancing the region and Africa’s long-term development objectives

The Lobito Corridor is not just a bet for international investors, it attests to a confidence in Africa’s future and will require African governments to overcome structural and policy bottlenecks, including possible tensions, such as those shown between Tanzania and Zambia in the case of the TAZARA corridor.[19] For the African continent, both the Lobito and TAZARA projects are a culmination of Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda’s vision of an integrated and prosperous continent.[20]

African development priorities, expressed through African Union frameworks, such as the African Green Minerals Strategy (AGMS) and the African Mining Vision (AMV) should guide European investments in the Lobito Corridor. Its transformative promise will only be realised if the project is designed and governed in ways that directly confront, rather than reproduce, the deep structural legacies of neo-colonialism that continue to shape the political economy of the region. In fragile contexts, large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Lobito Corridor also carry the risk that domestic budgets may be diverted towards providing security and protection for international investments, thereby undermining their intended development impact. For sustained impact, foreign and EU investments should be anchored on the development needs of local communities.

16 Cilliers, Jakkie and Blessin Chipanda, “Large Infrastructure”, in *ISS African Futures Themes*, last updated 14 January 2025, https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/11-large-infrastructure.

17 Nantulya, Paul, “China’s Critical Mineral Strategy in Africa”, in *African Center for Strategic Studies Spotlights*, 9 December 2025, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-africa-critical-minerals.

18 Kizito Sseruwagi, Nnanda, “China’s Role in the Lobito Corridor”, in *DWC Foreign Policy Analysis*, 19 October 2025, https://www.dwcug.org/?p=2400.

19 Mbikusita-Lewanika, Akashambatwa and Solange Guo Chatelard, “Railroads and Rivalries in Southern Africa”, in *The China in Africa Podcast*, 27 September 2024, https://chinaglobalsouth.com/?p=46250.

20 Devermont, Judd, “Two Railroads, One Vision”, in *CSIS Commentaries*, 10 October 2024, https://www.csis.org/node/112732.

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This requires that local and international actors involved in the project engage meaningfully with complex governance and sociopolitical realities that shape extraction and development in fragile contexts. It also demands commitment to shared good governance practices that strengthen resource-sharing partnerships and expand cross-border collaboration and coordination, enabling conditions for deeper economic and political integration to emerge. This encompasses creating a robust legal environment and strong monitoring mechanisms to ensure that investments do not cause harm or exacerbate existing tensions and grievances. More crucially, in a geopolitical context characterised by global geoeconomic and political competition, simply building infrastructure is not enough. Investments like the Lobito Corridor must be accompanied by the commitment to transform the lives of communities through supporting local industrialisation, job creation and value addition at source.

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iai briefs
No. 26|05 (February 2026)

Marianna Lunardini and Filippo Simonelli

What Role for Italy's Infrastructure Diplomacy? Lessons from the Lobito Corridor*

- The Lobito Corridor has become a strategic test case for Western infrastructure diplomacy in Africa, intersecting critical raw materials, global supply chains and the evolving balance between EU, US and Chinese engagement.
- Italy's financial commitment to the Corridor signals a shift in Rome's Africa policy, embedding the Mattei Plan within multilateral frameworks and positioning infrastructure as a lever for geopolitical credibility and economic partnership.
- The Corridor highlights both opportunities and risks for Italy's Africa strategy, testing its ability to align development goals, private-sector involvement and digital innovation amid uncertain transatlantic dynamics.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

The Lobito Corridor is an infrastructural project linking the namesake port of the Angolan coast with mineral-rich regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zambia's Copperbelt regions travelling through Angolan and DRC mainland. The project's ambition is to create a fast infrastructure to connect a westward-looking port infrastructure, such as the one in Lobito, to parts of DRC and Zambia, which are particularly rich in mineral resources and rare earths, as the importance of the latter is going to increase exponentially in the coming years.

When completed, the infrastructure should amount to 1,300 kilometres of railroad built upon pre-existing tracks of the Benguela Railway. This railway, originally built from 1902 to 1931, was already conceived as a means for exporting minerals from Zambia towards Europe and the United States. During its moments of peak efficiency, it was estimated to generate revenues of 30 million US dollars.[1] A huge part of the infrastructure was severely damaged by 27 years of conflict during the Angolan civil war that lasted from 1975 to

* This brief was produced in the framework of the research project "Italy at the forefront of infrastructure diplomacy: the Lobito Corridor case", conducted by IAI with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Fondazione CSF and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. All opinions expressed in this document are solely and exclusively those of the author.

1 UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) et al., *Potential Impact of the Lobito Corridor and Support to the Regional Transformation Agenda*, October 2024, https://hdl.handle.net/10855/50261.

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2002. By that date, it was estimated that less than 3 per cent of the Angolan part of the infrastructure was still usable, and by that time, Zambia had already found alternative means of exporting its resources through the alternate route of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), which headed eastward and was financed mostly by China, its greatest beneficiary.

The project was launched officially in 2023 with the signature of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the European Commission, the United States of America, the Governments of the Republic of Zambia, Angola, DRC, the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Africa Finance Corporation (AFC).

The Lobito project may be seen as one of the key parts of the Western attempt to respond to the challenge posed by China with its Belt and Road Initiative projects

On a broader strategic perspective, it may be seen as one of the key parts of the Western attempt to respond to the challenge posed by China with its Belt and Road Initiative projects. In this scenario, Italy is trying to carve itself a leading role: Rome's commitment to this project is quite substantial in terms of economic resources. This commitment is included in Italy's wider attempt to reshape its role and presence in Africa through the Mattei Plan, searching for space and opportunities to reframe Rome's cooperation with African partners on a so called peer-to-peer basis.[2] According to the report presented by the Italian government to parliament at the end of June 2025, Italy has committed 250 million euros in the next ten years.[3] This figure is even more significant when one considers that the total value of the project is estimated at between 1 and 2.3 billion US dollars, which greatly increases Italy's weight within it.[4] Compared to other projects in the Mattei Plan, the Lobito Corridor deserves attention for several factors. Firstly, Italy is investing in a project in which, to date, no Italian companies are involved, a substantial change from the standards adopted until now. The entity of the investment may hint that Italy is willing to insert the Mattei Plan into a broader multilateral framework.

Furthermore, the Lobito Corridor renews the partnership with the African Development Bank, the African institution most involved and with which Italy has maintained a fruitful dialogue from the outset for the success of the Plan. In addition, this investment may be seen as part of a long-term attempt to strengthen Italy's position in the West in view of the broader Sino-American confrontation on the continent.[5]

2 For a series of comprehensive assessments on the Mattei Plan, see, for an Italian perspective: Carbone, Giovanni et al., *Il Piano Mattei: rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*, Rome, Aspen Institute Italia, CeSPI, ECFR, IAI, ISPI, August 2024, https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ISPI_FPC-Piano-Mattei.pdf. For an African perspective, see: Jaldi, Abdessalam and Alessandro Cercaci, "The Mattei Plan: Recasting Cooperation through Strategy and Branding", in *PCNS Policy Briefs*, Vol. 38. No. 25 (August 2025), https://www.policycenter.ma/node/9670.

3 The commitment has been formalised as a dual investment by Italian public company Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP) and public insurer SACE. See: CDP, *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti and SACE provide EUR250 Million to Africa Finance Corporation*, 20 June 2025, https://www.cdp.it/sitointernet/page/en/cassa_depositi_e_prestiti_and_sace_provide_eur250_million_to_africa_finance_corporation?contentId=CSA51453.

4 Estimates were provided by press sources such as *Deutsche Welle*, *Bloomberg* and *Harvard Business Review*. For a comprehensive assessment, see: King, Isabelle, "Refining the Lobito Corridor: The Future of Cobalt in Sub-Saharan Africa", in *Harvard International Review*, 22 August 2024, https://hir.harvard.edu/refining-the-lobito-corridor-the-future-of-cobalt-in-sub-saharan-africa.

5 An additional reading could be to include this effort as part of the series of italian initiatives to regain American trust, which began with the non-renewal of the MOU with which Italy had joined China's Belt and Road Initiative.

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As the world accelerates a transition from fossil to clean energy, the Lobito Corridor has emerged as a strategic political and economic arena

Team Europe approach for sustainable partnerships

It is impossible to understate the importance of a project such as the Lobito corridor: as the world accelerates a transition from fossil to clean energy, the Lobito Corridor has emerged as a strategic political and economic arena. Moreover, major global actors such as the EU, the United States, China and others seek to gain leadership in critical industries, such as electric vehicles (EVs) and artificial intelligence (AI), the growth of which is closely linked to the availability of critical raw materials (CRMs). Global South countries are well-aware of the competitive dimension that CRMs have worldwide. The recent G20, led by South Africa in 2025, raised the need to ensure that countries rich in minerals will benefit from their resources.[6] The envisaged partnership should be defined by "an additive rather than an extractive relationship" as President Cyril Ramaphosa stated in Davos.[7]

The Lobito Corridor is furthermore a key project for the EU supply chain and, consequently, the Italian one. The EU and Italy are backing the project in the context of the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). A renewed interest in infrastructures is at the centre of the G7 initiative, strongly supported by the former US administration led by Joe Biden. With a focus on environmental sustainability and development, PGII fosters the mobilisation of private capital to support the realisation of high-impact infrastructure partnerships. The Lobito Corridor represents a concrete example of the joint effort, confirmed by the Trump administration in 2025. While the shift from Biden's to Trump's political agenda has, for some, reshaped US intentions towards a less-driven climate-interested approach to a more competitive environment driven by industrial security and control over critical minerals, the EU has kept its vision on supporting international partnerships for green transition.[8] Through its 2021 global strategy, the Global Gateway, the EU has engaged with African countries, such as Angola, DRC and Zambia, to support renewables and low-carbon value chains. The agenda for the Lobito Corridor is built on the premise that this vast infrastructure will serve more than just the CRM sector. In the EU vision, it aims to foster an enabling environment that stimulates local economies and supports sustainable agri-food value chains. To this end, through the Global Gateway and its Team Europe approach, the EU has declared investments for over 2 billion euros in the three African countries.[9] Agriculture, trade and logistics are the sectors where the EU is investing in partnership with Angola, DRC and Zambia (see Table 1).

6 Chime, Vivian, "South Africa's G20 Push for Local Processing of Transition Minerals Faces Barriers", in *Climate Home News*, 17 February 2025, https://www.climatechangenews.com/?p=67520.

7 World Economic Forum, *Davos 2025: Special Address by Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa*, 21 January 2025, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/davos-2025-special-address-cyril-ramaphosa-president-south-africa.

8 Vines, Alex, "Caught in the Corridor: Angola, Europe and America", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 18 December 2025, https://ecfr.eu/?p=147246.

9 European Commission DG for International Partnerships, "EU-Angola Partnership Advanced through Major Investments in the Lobito Corridor", in *Global Gateway Forum*, 9 October 2025, https://global-gateway-forum.ec.europa.eu/node/72_en.

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TABLE 1 Global Gateway projects in Angola, Zambia and DRC related to the Lobito Corridor

Source: authors' elaboration on European Commission DG for International Partnerships website: *Global Gateway Projects*, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/2623_en.

Project	Countries	Info
Connecting the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia and Angola to Global Markets through the Lobito Corridor	DRC, Zambia, Angola	Construction of the Lobito Corridor
From Transport to Trade: Lobito Corridor Catalyst	Angola	Development of the Caala Logistics Platform next to the Lobito Corridor railway, a modern hub designed to streamline the storage, handling and transportation of goods, improving efficiency for local producers and regional trade
Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) infrastructure and modernisation of agricultural vocational training in Angola	Angola	Modernisation of TVET centres: infrastructure upgrades, updated curricula, better governance, market-aligned training and a focus on gender equality
Green and Digital logistics Corridor in Angola	Angola	Construction of the corridor between the ports at Sines and Barra do Dande. It will contribute to the security of the supply chain in the agri-food sector and support a green energy and CRMs supply chain, promoting economic and social development
Kolwezi-Solwezi interconnector in Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo	Zambia, DRC	Construction of a 148 km long, high-voltage direct current 330 kilovolt transmission line to boost the stability of Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation Ltd and National Electricity Company networks, particularly in southern DRC
Strategic Partnership on Critical Raw Materials in Democratic Republic of Congo	DRC	Integration of sustainable raw materials value chains; mobilisation of funding for infrastructure; sustainable and responsible production, sourcing and valorisation of critical and strategic raw material; research and innovation; capacity building.
Critical raw materials Partnership Roadmap in Zambia	Zambia	Implementation of the strategic partnership with Zambia to promote the development of sustainable raw materials value chains.

The Corridor should be a catalyst for the economic development of the region, boosting jobs for Africans and economic opportunities. On one side, the agricultural sector, especially the more developed one in Angola, is attracting EU investments; on the other, renewables are also a joint interest. The recent

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›› The Lobito Corridor should be a catalyst for the economic development of the region, boosting jobs for Africans and economic opportunities

EU-Zambia Lobito Corridor Business Forum (12-14 November 2025) has confirmed the EU-Zambia partnership in solar power plants with additional allocation of 26.5 million US dollars to fund a 32-megawatt solar power plant in Zambia's Western Province.10

US-EU efforts are also aimed at counteracting Chinese investments in the area. The challenge is arduous. Beijing's presence is already well diffused with Chinese companies involved in around 30 per cent of the major infrastructure projects in Africa and operating in over a third of African ports, including Lobito.[11] For instance, in the Lobito port, the China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC) Construction Group and Shandong Port Group hold a 20-year concession for port operations.[12] Compared to the Lobito Corridor, China's efforts are concentrated on the revitalisation of the TAZARA railway, a strategic infrastructure project designed to secure a direct route for Congolese and Zambian copper and cobalt through the port of Dar es Salaam. While political rhetoric often frames the Lobito Corridor (West) as a direct competitive response to the TAZARA (East), the reality demands a more nuanced approach. EU partners, including Italy, must carefully assess the local context in order to counter China's dominant position in the CRM refining and EV battery sectors. While the EU advocates for a development model, more focused on socio-economic inclusiveness, competing effectively at the global level will require a structural and comprehensive strategy. Increasing the refining capacity in the EU, for instance, is one of the strategies to pursue, as the 2024 CRM Act stated.[13] Strengthening public-private partnerships is another key challenge that will test the capacities of each EU member state to mobilise domestic resources.

Testing the goals of Italy–Africa partnership: The Lobito case

Italy has a crucial role in this context. This project is the Mattei Plan's highest-priority effort based on resource allocation.[14] The decision to participate in the collaboration proves Italy's dedication to tackling Africa's infrastructure gap. It boosts Italy's participation in supply chains, in partnership with the US, a renewed commitment confirmed after the election of the new administration. Washington has pledged a loan of around 553 million US dollars, through the US International Development Finance Corporation, with a total of 4 billion to invest in projects related to agriculture, renewable energy and manufacturing.[15] Participating with such a consistent pledge to one of the cornerstones of US-Africa cooperation may have a considerable impact for both US-Italy and Africa-

10 Kunda, James, "EU Mobilizes $2.3B to Fund Works on Transport Corridor Linking Zambia, Angola, DR Congo", in *Anadolu Agency*, 12 November 2025, http://v.aa.com.tr/3742226.

11 Nantulya, Paul, "China's Critical Mineral Strategy in Africa", in *Africa Center Spotlights*, 9 December 2025, https://africacenter.org/?p=1017087.

12 Ibid.

13 Karkare, Poorva and Bruce Byiers, "The Lobito Corridor: Between European Geopolitics and African Agency", in *ECDPM Papers*, 16 April 2025, https://ecdpm.org/work/lobito-corridor-between-european-geopolitics-and-african-agency.

14 Capacci, Alessio, "A che punto è il Piano Mattei?", in *Osservatorio CPI*, 9 May 2025, https://osservatoriocpi.unicatt.it/ocpi-pubblicazioni-a-che-punto-e-il-piano-mattei.

15 Ekanem, Solomon, "Trump Renews Push for Africa's $4 Billion Regional Rail Corridor despite Rising Tariff Tensions", in *Business Insider Africa*, 7 April 2025, https://africa.businessinsider.com/fzn79dx.

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» The project is the Mattei Plan's highest-priority effort based on resource allocation

Italy partnerships, potentially positioning Rome as a strategic ally for economic partnerships. For African leaders, it confirms the Italian will to collaborate for common goals. The project is not only a priority in terms of US-EU presence in global supply chains but also for the three African countries involved. Already in 2011 the Southern African Development Community (SADC) designated the Corridor a regional priority infrastructure project.

However, the Mattei Plan remains beset by several unknowns, ranging from the limited initial public funding to the vague planning of its overall structure and the need to confirm a long-term sustainability of the Plan confined initially to a four-year framework. On one side Italy's participation is a strategic asset within the EU and in the alliances with the US and Africa; on the other side, it could represent an opening gate for different economic opportunities coming from the realisation of the Corridor. As mentioned, the Lobito Corridor project has the aim to create jobs for the young generation of Africans and boost trade among the three countries. In the vision of the partners involved, significant private investment opportunities will be unlocked from the development of the Lobito Corridor, with private engagement being key to drive diversification and economic opportunities.

Italy's private sector, the inclusion of which is a pivotal element of the Mattei Plan, could support the process. Within the Italian Plan, not only does infrastructure have a central role, but also agriculture is a fundamental pillar of the initiative. Several Italian agri-food companies are already involved in the Plan, as for instance Bonifiche Ferraresi, and have relevant expertise and know-how to share with African counterparts. In addition, the digital dimension of the Lobito Corridor should be closely examined by the Italian public-private partnerships to foster a more sustainable and inclusive development model. As proven by the AI Hub,[16] Italy is currently highly invested in Africa's digital transformation and should develop a comprehensive approach where the Lobito Corridor is aligned with its digital strategy in Africa.

To this aim, Italian authorities should work closely with the private sector in order to follow the evolution of the initiative. The partnership with Angola, DRC and Zambia should consider not only the realisation of the infrastructure but also analyse the socio-economic and environmental impact of the Corridor, highlighting risks and opportunities coming from the project. A comprehensive strategy should be fostered where the internal economic conditions, especially for Angola and Zambia, both recovering from a heavy debt burden and currently managing a delicate economic situation, should be taken into consideration by the Italian counterparts. The Mattei Plan has already shown a focus on the debt condition of African countries and the supporting countries dealing with a heavy debt burden, such as Angola, can enhance the different approach of Western partners.[17] Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has recently declared a commitment to convert 235 million euros of debt into development projects over the next ten years.[18] Synergies should be created within the

16 Endorsed by the Italy-led G7, in collaboration with UNDP, the AI Hub for Sustainable Development is a "collaborative initiative for steering private sector collective action to accelerate sustainable development in local AI ecosystems". See the official website: https://www.aihubfordevelopment.org.

17 Angola has historically been China's largest African debtor, representing 40 per cent of its total debt. See "As China Buys Less Oil, Angola Struggles to Repay Debt", in *ADF Magazine*, 3 September 2024, https://adf-magazine.com/?p=117141.

18 Ribezzo, Maria Elena, "Mattei Plan: Meloni–von der Leyen Summit Yields €1.2 Billion in

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Mattei Plan to leverage the potential benefits and maximise the effectiveness of the initiatives. Moving from declaration to concrete initiatives is vital to demonstrate a tangible commitment with African partners.

Through its collaboration with the UNDP, Italy is actively supporting Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in Africa as a core pillar of the Mattei Plan. The Lobito Corridor project could benefit significantly from the expertise and technical know-how developed through this partnership. DPIs have proven to benefit sustainable development by modernising national systems and enhancing operational efficiency in many sectors, from digital payments to personal identification. Implementing integrated digital solutions along the Corridor would foster deeper regional integration between Angola, Zambia and the DRC, harmonising regulations and platforms to ensure more transparent monitoring and control of the entire CRM supply chain. With a positive impact on transparency, implementing digital tools could diminish the risk of corruption and provide easier market access for local entrepreneurs. Italian tech companies could support the development and deployment of DPI in the region, collaborating with African countries to strengthen and integrate their national systems. More synergy between the different initiatives within the Mattei Plan is a test to show steady commitment to the collaboration with Africa, avoiding a siloed logic in the Italian strategy.

The Lobito Corridor within a weaker transatlantic bond

›› The European pathway to the Lobito Corridor remains clear

As the Lobito Corridor remains one of the central projects under the PGII initiative, it is necessary to point out the issues surrounding the relationship between Western countries that are perceivably at an all-time low now. If the transatlantic bond is to be shaken again in the next months, it is likely that wider cooperation projects may be impacted as well, and the Lobito Corridor risks suffering a similar fate. On the other hand, it remains a central infrastructure in the global competition between the United States and China; for as much as the Trump administration is disengaging from Africa, the focus on the global rivalry with Beijing remains seemingly consistent and this could provide a stronger argument for Washington to keep supporting the project. The European pathway to the Lobito Corridor, however, remains clear. First, the companies involved are European, showing that the bloc, often dismissed by its critics as lagging behind, has the will and the technological capabilities to bring ambitious projects into existence; second, it may provide a stronger basis for dialogue between European countries, European institutions and African multilateral institutions, looking for mutual benefits in a renewed framework. The key in this process is to maintain consistency over time and brace for potential changes on the other side of the Atlantic. Finally, Italy could set an example: the willingness to invest in such a project by Rome, as said before, may become the proof of the seriousness of the Italian commitment to the continent and to European cooperation with global south partners, providing an example to other countries and showing reliability to future partners.

Agreements, Unveils Strategy to Tackle Africa’s Debt”, in *EUnews*, 20 June 2025, https://www.eunews.it/en/2025/06/20/mattei-plan-meloni-von-der-leyen-summit-yields-e1-2-billion-in-agreements-unveils-strategy-to-tackle-africas-debt.

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IAI briefs
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Pietro Rinaldi and
Pier Paolo Raimondi

Minerals and the Lobito Corridor: Between Domestic Needs and the EU's Derisking Strategy*

- Minerals are essential inputs for multiple strategic sectors. Countries need to ensure and enhance their supply addressing the entire value chain, including infrastructure, such as the Lobito Corridor.
- The DRC and Zambia hold immense mineral reserves, yet foreign ownership, inequitable investment deals and the absence of local processing capacity prevent them from fully capturing the potential economic benefits.
- The EU and Italy need to broaden their engagement with the African partners along the Lobito Corridor by addressing the chronic energy challenges and ensuring local value-added development.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Critical raw materials (CRMs) have become a key battleground between great powers. Countries need these resources to reach their industrial, energy, technological and military objectives. Underpinned by these sectors' expansion, global CRMs demand is expected to rise drastically. Among such sectors, clean energy and decarbonisation efforts will be key drivers for demand growth. Clean technologies, such as solar, wind and batteries, are, indeed, much more mineral-intensive than their alternatives.[1]

However, countries and companies have increasingly focused on 'derisking' mineral supply chains, which are characterised by an extraordinarily high degree of geographical concentration along the entire value chain.[2] In these efforts, stakeholders at large need to manage geological factors combined with industrial, technological and infrastructure capabilities. Meanwhile, mineral-rich countries are considering strategies to seize geopolitical and economic benefits of this new rush while hedging between competing powers

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1 International Energy Agency (IEA), *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions*, Paris, IEA, May 2021, https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transitions.

2 Raimondi, Pier Paolo, "EU and Italian De-risking Strategies for Energy Transition: Critical Raw Materials", in *IAI Papers*, No. 25|09 (June 2025), https://www.iai.it/en/node/20282.

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›› *Cooperation among mineral-rich and importing countries is essential to ensure adequate supply and prevent price spikes and instability*

and without falling into a renewed resource curse. Against this backdrop, cooperation among mineral-rich and importing countries is essential to ensure adequate supply and prevent price spikes and instability. Such cooperation cannot be limited only to extraction, but it needs to span the entire value chain, including key infrastructure.

An illustrative example is the Lobito Corridor, which is deemed to unlock critical minerals potential located in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia and connect these countries to the international markets – especially the US and Europe – through Angola's port.[3] The European Commission and Italy are key partners in this project.[4] In supporting it, the EU and Italy need to ensure that the Lobito Corridor generates a wide range of benefits not only to the international partners and markets, but especially for the local communities by addressing chronic problems through a holistic approach.

A challenging domestic dimension

The African countries involved in the Lobito Corridor (Zambia, Angola and DRC) face severe socio-economic challenges, notably a growing and young population, widespread poverty, political and security instability, and lack of energy access. The three countries have a combined population of almost 170 million,[5] a number that was less than half just 25 years ago, and the most recent UN projections indicate that their populations will double again by 2050.[6] Economically, these countries rank among the lowest globally in terms of GDP per capita, below the Sub-Saharan African (SSA) average (1,800 dollars), with Angola being the only partial exception, and well below the global average (approximately 15,000 dollars).[7] Consequently, national governments will be called and pressured to improve economic conditions, also by converting mineral wealth into tangible economic gains for their citizens. This need is further challenged by a particularly multifaceted set of issues, including heavy debt burden, security-related issues, especially in the Eastern DRC, alongside widespread governance problems including weak state capacity to enforce laws, corruption and political instability.[8]

Furthermore, these countries face chronic energy challenges, notably a lack of energy access.[9] This issue has been a historical feature of SSA and its

3 Lunardini, Marianna and Darlington Tshuma, "The Lobito Corridor and Africa's Development Agenda: Synergies with the Mattei Plan and Global Gateway", in *IAI Briefs*, No. 26|01 (January 2026), https://www.iai.it/en/node/21440.

4 Lunardini, Marianna and Filippo Simonelli, "What Role for Italy's Infrastructure Diplomacy? Lessons from the Lobito Corridor", in *IAI Briefs*, No. 26|05 (February 2026), https://www.iai.it/en/node/21523.

5 Zambia is home to 21 million people, Angola 38 million and the DRC has 109 million.

6 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2024*, https://population.un.org/wpp.

7 Lowest globally in terms of GDP per capita: Angola, 2,700 dollars; Zambia, 1,500 dollars and the DRC, 800 dollars. See IMF DataMapper, *GDP per Capita, Current Prices: Zambia and Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2026, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/ZMB/SSA.

8 Isser, Deborah Hannah et al., "Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st Century: Four Trends and an Uncertain Outlook", in *World Bank Policy Research Working Papers*, No. 10713 (2024), https://hdl.handle.net/10986/41149.

9 Bacon, Robert W. and Masami Kojima, *Energy, Economic Growth, and Poverty Reduction. A Literature Review*, Washington, World Bank, 2016, https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/312441468197382126.

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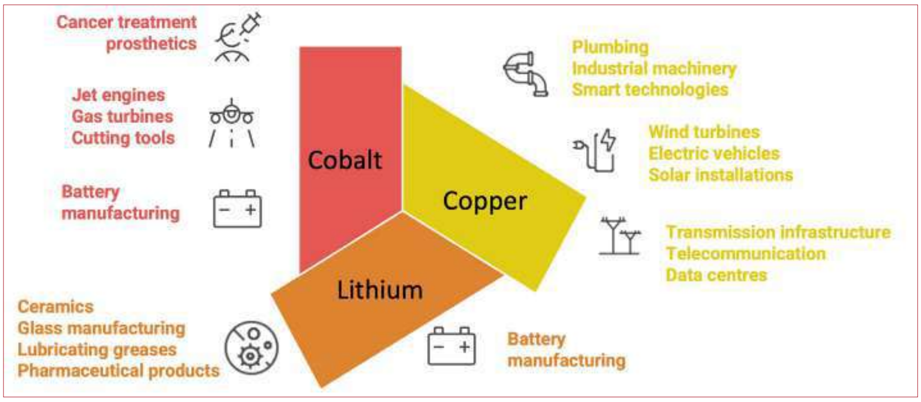
The African countries involved in the Lobito Corridor (Zambia, Angola and DRC) face chronic energy challenges

socioeconomic troubles. Despite policy commitment and international support, energy access expansion in many SSA countries has often been outpaced by the population growth rate. As of today, 585 million people in SSA are still without a reliable connection to electricity networks. At the country level, in Zambia and Angola, the share of the population with access to electricity is 51.1 per cent, while in the DRC the situation is even more serious, with only 22.1 per cent of the population having access to electricity.[10] This equates to nearly 114 million people without access in the three countries. Beyond social implications, substantial energy deficits undermine mining activities and ambitions.[11] Furthermore, even when energy access is in place, mining ambitions are hindered by the instability of the system and excessive costs. Meanwhile, despite being small energy-consuming countries, they are all experiencing the effects of climate change disproportionately, recording more intense and frequent negative weather episodes, threatening key economic activities, such as agricultural and mining, and the livelihoods of the poorest segment of the population. Such difficult conditions may pose additional challenges to mines and mineral supplies and will further stress the limited state resources dedicated to adaptation measures.[12]

Paradoxically, beneath the poverty lies an extraordinary wealth of CRMs, necessary for a global green transition that aims to mitigate those very climate impacts (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 CRMs input for key industrial and clean tech uses

Source: Authors' elaboration.



The local mining sector: Challenges and needs

The surging global demand for these technologies has driven their economic value to historic highs, potentially offering a pathway out of the region's socio-economic crisis. Indeed, Zambia and the DRC possess immense mineral reserves, mainly of cobalt, lithium and copper, although not evenly distributed. Zambia and the DRC are naturally rich in mineral resources; differently, Angola has vast reserves of oil and gas, though within the context of the Lobito

10 World Bank Data, *Access to Electricity (% of Population)*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS.

11 Johansson, Daniel, "The Energy Crisis in Zambia Is Undermining the Lobito Corridor's Potential — And DFC's Investments", in *Energy for Growth Hub Blog*, 16 April 2025, https://energyforgrowth.org/?p=7094.

12 Hill, Matthew and Taonga Mitimingi, "Key Congo Copper-Export Route Cut Off After Bridge Collapses", in *Bloomberg*, 2 March 2026, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-03-02/congo-s-main-copper-export-route-cut-off-after-bridge-collapses.

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Zambia and the DRC possess immense mineral reserves, mainly of cobalt, lithium and copper

Corridor, its role is mainly to serve as a gateway port to ship and transport resources to Western markets.

The number of resources and mining production of Zambia, and especially the DRC, is particularly staggering. Both current and future projections of copper and cobalt production showcase the importance of these countries in the global market (Table 1). By contrast, lithium is yet to be fully developed, despite large proven reserves, especially in the DRC. The DRC may become a relevant lithium producer as production from its Manono lithium deposit, estimated at over 130 million tonnes, is considered to be one of the largest in the world,[13] and is expected to begin as early as mid-2026,[14] although the project has faced several operational and governance challenges that could affect this timeline.[15]

TABLE 1 Copper and cobalt as global shares in DRC and Zambia (%)

	Reserves	Current production	Expected production by 2030
Copper			
DRC	8	12.65	16
Zambia	2	3.25	11-13*
Cobalt			
DRC	52.8	71	66
Zambia	N/A	0.1	N/A

* Note: Authors' calculation on the national strategy and market prediction provided by the IEA and by Zambia Ministry of Mines and Minerals Development, 2024.

Source: Authors' elaboration on Canada Government, African Development Bank and IEA data.

Despite its vast mineral potential and despite offering a high mineral value-to-exploration-spending, Africa continues to attract a disproportionately small share of global exploration investment, receiving just 10.4 per cent of global spending in 2024.[16] Investment flows are subject to extreme price volatility and unexpected political developments, which have repeatedly disrupted investment timelines, while the unpredictability of the policy landscape, particularly the risk of resource nationalism, further deters foreign capital. Yet the geological fundamentals of the region remain compelling enough to attract growing interest; the DRC and Zambia, for instance, lead the continent in exploration capital, suggesting some investor confidence in the viability of their deposits.[17]

Nonetheless, the question of who benefits from these investments is equally important. SSA countries often are bound to accept non-profitable or inequitable long-term deals in exchange for short-term economic relief and immediate resources. The internal pressure to spend on immediate aid and development for the local population is high, and the available capital on the market comes at very high rates for SSA countries. This situation leads to an exchange of natural resources, through concessions or long-term

13 African Development Bank, "Lithium", in *Critical Mineral Insights*, No. 4 (16 October 2025), https://www.afdb.org/en/node/87893.

14 Mishra, Shree, "Zijin Mining to Start Initial DRC Lithium Production in June", in *Mining Technology*, 12 February 2026, https://www.mining-technology.com/?p=704792.

15 European Resource Mining Community, *Manono: Nine Red Flags in the Nascent Lithium Sector in the DRC*, 8 December 2025, https://eurmc.org/?p=3056.

16 Baskaran, Gracelin, "Underexplored and Undervalued: Addressing Africa's Mineral Exploration Gap", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 9 May 2025, https://www.csis.org/node/116220.

17 DRC, *2025 Investment Climate Statements: Democratic Republic of the Congo*, September 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-investment-climate-statements/democratic-republic-of-the-congo.

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leases, for short-term financial gains or unlocking of immediate resources for development investments.

A striking example of this concern is the Sino-Congolais des Mines (Sicomines) agreement signed in 2007 between the DRC and China. Under this resource-for-infrastructure model, China committed to investing approximately 3 billion dollars in infrastructure in exchange for Chinese firms gaining mining rights to mineral deposits valued at 93 billion dollars.[18] The Sicomines agreement is emblematic of a broader trend: through a series of similar deals and direct investments, Chinese firms have come to own or hold stakes in 15 of the largest copper and cobalt mines in the DRC, operating nearly 70 per cent of its industrial cobalt mines.[19] Although not as dire, the situation in Zambia is similar. Several mines, such as the Lumwana or Kansanshi, are owned by foreign companies, in these examples, Canadians.[20] Others instead are only partially owned by overseas companies, such as the Mopani mine, where the government-backed ZCCM-IH holds some shares but not the majority.[21]

African countries endowed with vast critical mineral reserves risk becoming exporters of raw wealth rather than beneficiaries of it

Such an issue of ownership, coupled with the desire to seize economic opportunities, leads to a rising wave of resource nationalism, as governments increasingly recognise that minority stakes and royalty-based revenues leave the majority of profits in foreign hands, driving demands for greater state control over strategic mineral wealth. This dynamic of limited ownership and constrained revenues compounds a deeper structural problem. African countries endowed with vast critical mineral reserves risk becoming exporters of raw wealth rather than beneficiaries of it. To revert this trend, SSA countries need to develop regulatory, political, economic, and infrastructure capabilities to ensure operations generating added value in the country.

The mining sector is not limited to the upstream segment (i.e., extraction), it also encompasses the midstream and downstream activities, such as smelters and refineries, where raw minerals are processed. Mineral processing offers a pathway to domestic economic value addition. By processing CRMs, countries can benefit from higher export market prices, as processed materials have greater value than raw ores or concentrates. Additionally, mineral processing supports job creation, attracts downstream industries and strengthens national resilience within global supply chains.[22] Unfortunately, Zambia, and especially the DRC, deeply lack these stages of the value chains. The absence of refining plants results in the offshoring of the value-added part of the supply chain in third countries, mainly China, and leaves the African countries with a fraction of the value they could capture. Particularly telling is the situation in DRC, where, despite producing more than 70 per cent of the world's cobalt,

18 Baskaran, Gracelin, "A Window of Opportunity to Build Critical Mineral Security in Africa", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 10 October 2023, https://www.csis.org/node/107615.

19 Economist, "How America Plans to Break China's Grip on African Minerals", in *The Economist*, 28 February 2023, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/02/28/how-america-plans-to-break-chinas-grip-on-african-minerals; Khan, Zahra, "Congo's Cobalt Conundrum", in *Chemistry World*, 19 June 2025, https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/4021696.article.

20 Natural Resources Canada, *Canadian Mining Assets*, January 2026, https://natural-resources.canada.ca/minerals-mining/mining-data-statistics-analysis/minerals-mining-publications/canadian-mining-assets.

21 International Resources Holding, *IRH Completes the Official Acquisition of Mopani Copper Mines in Zambia*, 7 March 2024, https://www.irh.ae/?p=8078.

22 Pickles, Sophia, "Value Addition in the Context of Mineral Processing", in *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung E-Papers*, November 2023, https://www.boell.de/en/2023/11/15/value-addition-context-mineral-processing.

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there are merely a handful of refineries, producing only semi-refined cobalt, and even their output production is negligible on the global scale.[23]

EU mineral diplomacy

International stakeholders can support African countries and their economies in building new industries by avoiding an extractive approach

Against this backdrop, international stakeholders can support African countries and their economies in building new industries by avoiding an extractive approach. This new approach could be particularly beneficial also for the EU and its member states, including Italy, which need to carefully navigate the troubled waters of CRMs due to geopolitical competition, economic security concerns and local needs. In this effort, the EU can build on existing infrastructure projects that could have a multiplier effect on the local communities and the international community. Specifically, the European Commission, alongside Italy, Germany and France, has engaged with the Lobito Corridor through the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) launched by former US President Biden. The Corridor may help the EU in satisfying its growing demand for some of the critical minerals (Table 2). At the same time, security concerns have grown among European decision-makers given the risk of potential supply disruptions, price volatility and geopolitical risks.

TABLE 2 EU demand forecasts for selected minerals

	2020 demand (tonnes)	2030 demand forecast	2050 demand forecast
Copper	175,519	434,316 (LDS) 802,440 (HDS)	689,816 (LDS) 1,304,971 (HDS)
Cobalt	8,620	40,732 (LDS) 54,101 (HDS)	36,308 (LDS) 40,202 (HDS)
Lithium	4,891	42,313 (LDS) 58,208 (HDS)	70,563 (LDS) 101,873 (HDS)

Note: LDS = Low demand scenario; HDS = High demand scenario.

Source: Carrara, Samuel et al., *Supply Chain Analysis and Material Demand Forecast in Strategic Technologies and Sectors in the EU. A Foresight Study*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the EU, 2023, p. 10, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/386650.

To reduce these concerns, diversification is critical. Consequently, the EU has increasingly engaged with several African countries. In 2023, the Commission signed two separate MoUs with the DRC and Zambia on strategic partnerships related to CRMs.[24] While the political and economic arguments for deeper and positive EU-Africa cooperation are in place, concrete results are yet to materialise. The EU and European companies have struggled to keep pace with other players, notably the US, the Gulf and China, also due to lower acceptance of risks. Ideally, the development of the Lobito Corridor can be a building block of EU mineral diplomacy, as it could provide two benefits to improve the socio-economic situation of the African countries. Firstly, it will reduce the time of transport, hence lowering shipping costs and fast-tracking the supply chain, which can then supply higher quantities of minerals. Secondly, it can broaden

23 African Development Bank, "Cobalt", in *Critical Mineral Insights*, No. 3 (16 October 2025), https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/critical-mineral-insights-cobalt.

24 European Commission, *Global Gateway: EU Signs Strategic Partnerships on Critical Raw Materials Value Chains with DRC and Zambia and Advances Cooperation with US and Other Key Partners to Develop the 'Lobito Corridor'*, 26 October 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5303.

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»» The Lobito Corridor faces multiple challenges, as it is seen in competition with another critical infrastructure project, funded by China, TAZARA

the supply chain and bring benefits to the countries involved in the Corridor. Industries can be built all along the railway; it could create several intermediate refining steps from the raw to the final product, keeping the value-added components in the region.

However, the Corridor faces multiple challenges, as it is seen in competition with another critical infrastructure project, funded by China, TAZARA, while the US approach related to the project and to African partners is shifting as well. Therefore, it is critical for the EU, and Italy, to pursue this pathway, offering arrangements that place greater weight on economic value retention, environmental standards and engagement with local communities. To contribute to the creation of value-added industries in the African countries, the EU cannot overlook the chronic energy challenges faced by its partners. It is therefore of paramount importance that the EU's mineral diplomacy is coupled with credible and concrete energy and climate finance to foster robust and decarbonised energy systems.[25] Whether Corridor development translates into lasting domestic gains will depend largely on the governance frameworks and partnership models that shape it. This is precisely the space into which Italy and the European Union have sought to position themselves, acknowledging the multiple dimensions of a successful mineral diplomacy. Now it is high time to translate these promises and aspirations into concrete results.

25 World Bank, *Repositioning Zambia to Leverage Energy Transition Minerals for Economic Transformation. A Roadmap*, Washington, World Bank, May 2025, https://hdl.handle.net/10986/43254.

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Beyond Extraction: Aligning European and African Interests to Unlock the Full Potential of the Lobito Corridor

by **Pietro Rinaldi, Filippo Simonelli and Darlington Tshuma**

Africa's critical minerals boom presents an opportunity to strengthen its economic sovereignty. This requires leveraging Africa's minerals wealth to drive regional industrialisation, boost productivity, create quality jobs and generate domestic revenues needed to finance own development ambitions. For Europe, access to critical raw materials is a strategic necessity, underpinning the green transition and reducing dependence on single suppliers. At a time of intense geopolitical competition, the added value of Europe's proposal should be the concrete contribution to local African development, most importantly through infrastructure investment that connects markets and builds the foundations for sustainable growth. The Lobito Corridor, a critical infrastructure stretching from Angola's Atlantic coast to mineral-rich regions of the DRC and Zambia, offers an illustrative example where African and European interests align. European private capital and expertise are being deployed through industrial offtake agreements to unlock investment in energy infrastructure to power large-scale mining operations while simultaneously extending energy access to predominantly rural communities across the region.

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With the global race for critical minerals accelerating, Africa and Europe have a rare opportunity to forge a mutually beneficial partnership that aligns strategic interests with sustainable development priorities, most notably with regard to the so-called Lobito Corridor. This envisaged partnership must avoid repeating the historical mistakes of purely extractive models, prioritising sustainable development and investment in local communities instead. Drawing on their past experiences with extractive industries, African countries and their European peers can shape a development model that ensures investments in the Corridor extend far beyond the six million people who live along the area. This approach should simultaneously deliver tangible benefits for local communities, protect the environment and safeguard the interests of future generations.

The Lobito Corridor is a strategic railway project spanning approximately 1,300 km, extending from the Atlantic port city of Lobito in Angola to the borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia. The project's ambition is to create a fast and efficient transport link connecting Lobito's westward-facing

The Lobito Corridor is first and foremost a regional infrastructure priority and it is simultaneously a strategic CRM corridor

port infrastructure to the mineral-rich regions of the DRC and Zambia, which hold some of the world's largest deposits of critical raw materials (CRM). The Corridor represents a key infrastructure project under the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) of the African Union (AU). Its development and modernisation are seen as pivotal for regional and continental integration, creating jobs and driving regional industrialisation. It is important to state that the Corridor operates on two distinct, albeit reinforcing logics: it is first and foremost a regional infrastructure priority, with transformative potential for connectivity, trade and development, and it is simultaneously a strategic CRM corridor, critical to global supply chains and the energy transition.

The railway may hold enormous transformative value if it keeps its promises. Cutting the transportation time of goods from DRC and Zambia to the Angolan coast from one month to just one week has the potential to improve the environment for local businesses to thrive.[1] It can become a cradle for new industries, spanning from mining industries to clean energy to agricultural value chains, while also significantly boosting trade both within the continent and with global markets. Crucially, it opens new commercial opportunities for local small and medium-sized businesses and communities that have historically been cut off from regional and international supply chains.

Yet harnessing this potential is far from easy. The rollout faces deep financial, normative and social hurdles at the regional and country levels. It needs both political and logistical coordination, a challenge that requires aligning the interests of a multitude of actors.

Firstly, while the goals of the three African countries involved are often broadly compatible, such as increasing productivity, mobility and job creation, the specific priorities and expected returns diverge in ways that require careful analysis. Angola is primarily seeking to revitalise its trade and diversify its economy beyond oil, while the DRC and Zambia are more focused on the mining and mineral dimension of the project.

Moreover, each country aims to use the infrastructural opportunity to address other structural weaknesses: Zambia's recent power crisis has shown how quickly mining and investment plans suffer when electricity becomes unreliable; in the DRC, power shortages continue to weigh on industrial activity and on the feasibility of value addition; the longstanding overreliance on fossil fuels revenues has left Angola highly vulnerable to global commodity price fluctuations. Customs procedures, cross-border coordination and skills shortages add further costs before firms can treat local processing as a serious commercial option.

[1] European Commission DG for International Partnerships website: *Lobito Corridor*, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/node/4522_en.

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Angola is primarily seeking to revitalise its trade and diversify its economy beyond oil, while the DRC and Zambia are more focused on the mining and mineral dimension of the project

Nonetheless, all three countries share the understanding that the Corridor has the potential to enhance their citizens' well-being through regional integration. Quality job creation, which inevitably leads to improved living standards, is of primary interest to these governments, especially considering that the three Corridor countries rank among the lowest in the world across a range of socio-economic indicators, such as child mortality, access to housing and education.[2] At the same time, government budgets are severely constrained. The DRC and Zambia are classified by the World Bank as meeting the criteria for the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) category. For them, this infrastructure project could serve as a vehicle to attract new private capital for sustainable initiatives that foreign investors would otherwise be unlikely to fund. At the same time, solid and concrete policy measures should be drafted by African legislators to prevent private partners from exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and conflicts.

Second, and perhaps more complex to navigate, is the need to align Western bloc interests with African development needs. Under the recent EU Critical Raw Materials Act, supply-chain diversification is framed as a central policy objective:[3] by 2030, no more than 65 per cent of the Union's annual consumption of each strategic raw material should come from a *single* third country. The project has been largely financed by Western actors, with the EU and the United States providing the largest share of funding, over six billion dollars, and Italy emerging as a particularly committed partner, having individually pledged 250 million euros through its Mattei Plan. The project's inclusion in the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) further underscores its significance for global partners. For European players, the Corridor is primarily a supply chain de-risking strategy, one designed to reduce dependence on China for critical raw materials and secure inputs for European industry.

1. African priorities: Manufacturing, productivity and job creation

Three interconnected priority areas warrant particular attention. First, there is an urgent need for strategic investments in critical anchor sectors, including physical and soft infrastructures.[4] Investments in

[2] The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, produced by UNDP, ranks the DRC as the 13th poorest country globally, Angola as the 19th poorest and Zambia as the 23rd poorest.

[3] European Commission DG for Internal Market website: *Critical Raw Materials Act*, https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/node/2053_en.

[4] They include energy systems, road and rail networks, ports and digital connectivity and skills development programmes, regulatory reform and regional coordination

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There is an urgent need for strategic investments in critical anchor sectors, including physical and soft infrastructures

these sectors are crucial to move up the CRM value chain through local beneficiation, regional industrialisation processes and value addition, thereby driving economic productivity and large-scale job creation. For instance, in the last decade alone, the manufacturing share of African GDP has stagnated at about 11 per cent, less than half the share of peers in Asia.[5] Reversing the continent's premature deindustrialisation through deliberate industrial and economic policies aimed at expanding manufacturing capacity, enhancing productivity and strengthening regional value chains offers a chance for large-scale job creation. However, addressing the challenge of manufacturing and productivity in Africa requires addressing infrastructure gaps and policy constraints that limit manufacturing.

The scale of future demand underscores the strategic importance of this window of opportunity. By 2040, global demand for lithium is projected to increase by 4.5 times, while demand for graphite is expected to rise by 2.3 times, driven by the global decarbonisation agenda and the next wave of technological transformation.[6] Sub-Saharan Africa sits at the centre of global critical mineral production: the DRC alone accounts for over 70 per cent of global cobalt output alongside other critical minerals like manganese, lithium and nickel.[7] Yet despite holding over 30 per cent of global critical mineral reserves, African countries capture less than 1 per cent of the global value generated from clean energy technologies and component manufacturing.[8]

This imbalance highlights the need for a development model that prioritises industrial upgrading, domestic value retention and long-term structural transformation of African economies. If African countries were to gradually move up the critical minerals value chain to more complex processing steps, including smelting, processing and refining, they will be able to capture greater value from their resources and generate sufficient revenue to finance own development and create quality jobs.

The second priority concerns the provision of infrastructure and services, which must go beyond a narrow view of these projects as being designed solely for the mining sector to investing in complementary sectors and anchor industries, including agri-food

mechanisms.

[5] Newfarmer, Richard, "Africa's New Economic Transformation: More than Manufacturing", in Pierre Nguimkeu (ed.), *Foresight Africa 2026*, Brookings, 19 February 2026, p. 55-57, https://www.brookings.edu/?p=1850039.

[6] World Bank, *The Changing Wealth of Nations 2024*, 2024, https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/the-changing-wealth-of-nations.

[7] Chen, Wenjie et al., "Harnessing Sub-Saharan Africa's Critical Mineral Wealth", in *IMF Country Focus*, 29 April 2024, https://www.imf.org/en/news/articles/2024/04/29/cf-harnessing-sub-saharan-africas-critical-mineral-wealth.

[8] Everill, Bronwen, "Critical Mineral-Rich Africa Can Look after Itself", in *The World Today*, Spring 2026, https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/38159.

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Investments in the Corridor can leverage the agro-industry to absorb labour and generate quality jobs

systems, special economic zones (SEZs), urban infrastructure for cities and towns along the corridor. This has the potential to unlock job creation, expand the provision of public goods beyond mining enclaves, while contributing to long-term stability and security. For instance, investments in the Corridor can leverage the agro-industry to absorb labour and generate quality jobs. With over half of the labour force of DRC, Angola, and Zambia employed in agriculture, Africa's agri-food industry is the most scalable job-generating frontier when accompanied with the right set of policy frameworks.[9] For instance, by strengthening linkages between labour, domestic demand, finance, technology and regional markets, Africa's agri-food industry sector can generate large-scale employment while building a critical skills base. Similarly, for a continent that holds over 60 per cent of the world's uncultivated arable land, transforming agriculture into an interconnected food system industry that integrates climate adaptation and resilience, renewable energy, and nutrition holds immense socioeconomic potential.

Upgraded infrastructure along the Corridor can simultaneously address food resilience and food security issues. Almost 40 per cent of all locally produced agricultural products and commodities in African countries are lost in transportation.[10] Sustainable investment in communities therefore requires that the underlying infrastructure that supports mining and extractive industries, including ports, railroads and rural roads, are leveraged to reduce the time, cost and uncertainty in the transportation of food, especially by smallholder and medium-sized farmers. For scalable impact, these components need to be activated simultaneously rather than treated in isolation. Already, upgrades and the rehabilitation of the railway line have unlocked over six thousand jobs, with local procurement exceeding 60 per cent of the total value. An additional fifty thousand smallholder farmers are receiving training through agriculture support programmes, while digital literacy and financial inclusion initiatives are projected to reach an additional three hundred thousand residents.[11]

Similarly, supporting the development of industries in SEZs and cities along transportation and energy corridors serving the mines can leverage the underlying infrastructure and investments required for the export of mining products. For instance, Morocco's Tanger Med port has become a hub for industrial activity, supported by a

[9] World Bank Data, *Employment in Agriculture (% of total employment) (modelled ILO estimate) – Sub-Saharan Africa*, 17 January 2026, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=ZG.

[10] African Union Commission, *Post-Harvest Loss Management Strategy*, August 2018, https://au.int/en/node/34934.

[11] European Commission DG for International Partnerships website: *Lobito Corridor*, cit.

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With the right investment frameworks and industrial policies, Africa's extractive sector could increase African GDP by at least 24 billion dollars

network of business parks that now host over 1,200 companies, generate more than 110,000 jobs, and drive annual exports exceeding fifteen billion dollars. Tanger Med port's success reflects a broader ecosystem, where infrastructure investment and a business-friendly environment have been just as decisive as the port's own development.[12]

The third priority is Africa's natural wealth, which provides a significant foundation for sustained socioeconomic transformation. It is imperative that policymakers in Africa and Europe seize this opportunity to scale up productivity to generate quality employment and expand economic and social opportunities. An estimated ten to thirteen million Africans enter the labour market each year, yet collectively the continent creates less than three million jobs annually.[13] With the right investment frameworks and industrial policies, Africa's extractive sector could increase African GDP by at least 24 billion dollars, unlocking opportunities for job creation through investments in infrastructure and skills training programmes for young people.[14]

While African countries collectively hold at least 30 per cent of the world's proven CRM reserves, with renewable resources alone accounting for more than five trillion dollars, the distribution of value within global supply chains remains deeply unequal.[15] According to the International Monetary Fund, global revenues from the extraction of copper, nickel, cobalt and lithium, minerals that are abundant in the DRC and Zambia, could reach sixteen trillion dollars over the next 25 years. However, African countries are projected to capture only a fraction of this value, estimated at roughly 10 per cent, or approximately two trillion dollars.[16] This imbalance has intensified calls across the continent for stronger legislation and industrial policies requiring local beneficiation and value addition before mineral exports.

However, regional integration cannot thrive on trade and markets alone. The provision of public goods, from energy security, infrastructure, peace and security and environmental protection, are all integral to the future success of the Lobito Corridor.

[12] Eljechtimi, Ahmed, "Morocco's Tanger Med Port Expects to Exceed Nominal Container Capacity", in *Reuters*, 10 June 2024, https://www.reuters.com/business/moroccos-tanger-med-port-expects-exceed-nominal-container-capacity-2024-06-10.

[13] World Data Lab, *Africa Youth Employment Outlook 2026*, 2026, https://impact.worlddatalab.org/africa-youth-employment-outlook-report.

[14] International Energy Agency (IEA), *Stepping Up the Value Chain in Africa*, October 2025, https://www.iea.org/reports/stepping-up-the-value-chain-in-africa.

[15] IEA, *Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2025*, May 2025, https://www.iea.org/reports/global-critical-minerals-outlook-2025.

[16] Chen, Wenjie et al., "Harnessing Sub-Saharan Africa's Critical Mineral Wealth", cit.

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Europe faces the Lobito Corridor challenge from a position of industrial exposure

2. European priorities and the conditions for strategic alignment

Europe faces the Lobito Corridor challenge from a position of industrial exposure. The energy transition has heightened demand for minerals used in batteries, grids, digital technologies and advanced manufacturing; many of those supply chains remain geographically concentrated and politically exposed. The Corridor places that European concern alongside the industrial and development choices of Angola, the DRC and Zambia. The Zambian Copperbelt, the southernmost region of the country and one of the richest in the world in terms of rare earths and minerals, and surrounding areas may become important to Europe's resilience strategy, provided that cooperation does not stop at transport. Secure and efficient logistics are central in a corridor built around movement, but the longer-term value of the project will depend on processing capacity, bankable investments and local industrial participation: an infrastructure designed only for extraction would be hard for African leadership to justify to its citizens and would favour instead the repetition of the same dependence pattern. Moreover, it would also weaken the political credibility of an initiative that African partners expect to support local development and community strengthening, at a time when credibility itself has become one of the scarcest currencies in international politics.[17]

Moreover, the wider global competition for securing Africa's support remains the overarching background. China has been part of the continental industrial landscape for a long time, leaving an often-bittersweet taste that may open new opportunities for Western partners. Recent work on African debt owed to China have illustrated how Chinese lending may support infrastructure and productive capacity while also increasing exposure to debt distress where fiscal management is weak and repayment conditions narrow political room for manoeuvre.[18] Any European initiative is carried out in an environment already influenced by deep commercial networks, consolidated processing capacity and investment cycles set in motion well before the current attention to the Lobito Corridor. It also faces a broader political caution toward foreign involvement, especially where infrastructure and mineral resources appear as

[17] European Commission DG for Internal Market website: *Critical Raw Materials Act*, cit.; European Commission DG for International Partnerships website: *Lobito Corridor*, cit.; UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) et al., *Potential Impact of the Lobito Corridor and Support to the Regional Transformation Agenda*, October 2024, https://hdl.handle.net/10855/50261.

[18] Mutai, Noah Cheruiyot et al., "Examining the Sustainability of African Debt Owed to China in the Context of Debt-Trap Diplomacy", in *Scientific African*, Vol. 24 (June 2024), Article e02164, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2024.e02164.

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parts of the same strategic design. The Lobito Corridor, although seen as highly valuable in African capitals, will not resolve European (and Western) problems all at once. European involvement may be relevant and desirable if the bloc achieves an effective expansion of the range of financing, technical and regulatory options available to African partners. If national strategies of all the parties involved aim to retain more value locally and reduce dependence on a narrow set of external operators, this may turn into a further opportunity for European companies to operate in a new environment, joining investments that have originally been designed for separate initiatives. This scenario is meant to build on the EU's main strengths, including normative power, aiming at a diversification that depends on the accumulation of investment, processing capacity, standards and industrial partnerships around the Corridor and the countries involved.[19]

Finance, guarantees, and technical capacity should therefore concentrate on activities that go beyond transport and transformation only

Finance, guarantees, and technical capacity should therefore concentrate on activities that go beyond transport and transformation only. Processing, energy supply, customs coordination, skills and cross-border trade offer a broader focus, and create more opportunities for Europe as well, because they provide the conditions under which Europe's supply-chain agenda can overlap with African industrial priorities through broader projects and, most relevantly, technological transfer, which is never to be neglected when aiming to build long-term, sustainable development projects. Without that connection, the project would remain strategically visible and significant but developmentally thin, limiting the opportunities for future European involvement.[20] Italy's approach gives this discussion a concrete financial blueprint to begin with: in June 2025, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP), SACE and Africa Finance Corporation[21] signed a 250-million-euro financing agreement under the broader Mattei Plan-Global Gateway framework; CDP provides a ten-year loan, while SACE guarantees 80 per cent of the amount. The operation supports strategic infrastructure in Africa and includes the Lobito Railway Corridor among its reference projects. It also points to opportunities for Italian firms in infrastructure, transport, logistics and components for renewable power generation. The relevance of the instrument lies in the connection between public finance, risk

[19] Nantulya, Paul, "China's Critical Minerals Strategy in Africa", in *Africa Center Spotlights*, 9 December 2025, https://africacenter.org/?p=1017087.

[20] Karkare, Poorva and Bruce Byiers, "The Lobito Corridor: Between European Geopolitics and African Agency", in *ECDPM Discussion Papers*, No. 386 (April 2025), https://ecdpm.org/work/lobito-corridor-between-european-geopolitics-and-african-agency.

[21] CDP is Italy's public development bank, controlled by its Ministry of Finance; SACE is Italy's export insurance company, controlled by the Ministry of Finance as well; Africa Finance Corporation is Africa's multilateral finance institution set up by sovereign states.

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Italian participation will be judged by the projects it supports, the risks it helps absorb and the productive activities it supports along the Lobito Corridor

mitigation and African institutional finance. It gives Italy a way to act inside a European framework while keeping a national industrial profile. It can also help the Mattei Plan avoid remaining a political label. The test is practical. Italian participation will be judged by the projects it supports, the risks it helps absorb and the productive activities it supports along the Lobito Corridor. The presence of Italian companies is not enough. Their participation becomes politically stronger when it is tied to local employment, skills transfer, energy systems for productive uses and infrastructure that serves markets around the railway as well as the export route.

European instruments already point in this direction, as they tentatively move beyond rail rehabilitation. Team Europe[22] has mobilised more than two billion euros of investments across Angola, the DRC and Zambia, and the European Commission's own presentation of the Lobito Corridor puts emphasis on the link between transport and local economies, jobs, agricultural value chains, skills, water, energy and responsible CRM value chains. The important element is not the size of the figure alone, which is still not negligible at all, but the broader attempt to treat the Corridor as a development space. The Lobito Corridor is not only a chance for the development of a single project, but rather to give a credibility boost to the whole Global Gateway-Team Europe approach, which has yet to deliver most of the promises that were made in the early days of its launch in 2021.

Along the Lobito Corridor, the normative blueprint proposed by the EU will be tested much earlier than public communication usually suggests when contracts are written, guarantees negotiated, land allocated, environmental costs calculated, and communities involved – or left outside – before decisions become operative and impactful. European normative standards should be part of the deal from the start, because bankability is never just a technical question. Investors asking for lower risk are also asking for choices about who absorbs costs, how long public guarantees remain in place and how much exposure is left to communities, land users and ecosystems that often have little influence over the transaction. Better preparation and patient finance can reduce part of that burden before it is displaced elsewhere. For Europe, the financial bargain itself has to maintain the standards it promises.[23]

The Lobito Corridor, as it is today, concentrates several weaknesses that have often limited European external action: fragmented instruments, slow implementation, uneven coordination between EU and EU member-state initiatives, and a tendency to communicate

[22] Team Europe, shorter for team Europe Approach, consists of the European Commission, the member states and the European Investment Bank.

[23] European Commission DG for International Partnerships website: *Lobito Corridor*, cit.; Karkare, Poorva and Bruce Byiers, "The Lobito Corridor", cit.

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frameworks before their effects are clear. In this broader political landscape, African governments already receive multiple external offers: they have no reason to privilege European initiatives unless those initiatives are predictable, coordinated and relevant to their domestic priorities. Europe will have to prove itself: announcements must translate into active/concrete projects, while high standards must remain in the room during contracts negotiations, not only in the language of press releases and communiques. Industrial cooperation is a harder test: whether African partners gain more capacity within the value chains connected to the Lobito Corridor, or simply a faster route for raw materials to leave the region.[24]

3. Leveraging the Lobito Corridor for energy security and access

Energy access represents one area where African and European priorities genuinely converge

As observed, there are several topics where African and European priorities are not superimposable, requiring compromises across different areas, from localisation and displacement of industries to debt sharing. Energy access[25] represents one area where African and European priorities genuinely converge, and where concrete steps are already being taken. Unlike the areas of tension discussed above, both sides are already pointing in the same direction.

The electricity sector in Sub-Saharan Africa exhibits several critical structural weaknesses: frequent power outages, low electrification rates, particularly in rural areas, over-reliance on single energy sources, and underdeveloped grid infrastructure. These problems are acutely present in the three countries along the Lobito Corridor. In Zambia and Angola, only 51.1 per cent of the population has access to electricity; in the DRC, the figure falls to just 22.1 per cent.[26] This means that nearly 114 million people across the three countries lack electricity access, a challenge that sits at the top of both the AU's Agenda 2063 and the national agendas of all three countries.[27] Closing this gap requires substantial investment: in generation capacity, grid strengthening, and new connections. These are costs that local governments cannot meet alone, given their fiscal constraints and

[24] Vines, Alex, "Caught in the Corridor: Angola, Europe and America", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 18 December 2025, https://ecfr.eu/?p=147246; Ekanem, Solomon, "Trump Renews Push for Africa's $4 Billion Regional Rail Corridor despite Rising Tariff Tensions", in *Business Insider Africa*, 7 April 2025, https://africa.businessinsider.com/fzn79dx.

[25] Energy access is to be intended as both access to electricity and access to clean cooking.

[26] World Bank Data, *Access to Electricity (% of population)*, 2023, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS.

[27] African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, 2015, https://au.int/en/node/3657. The three countries have developed rural electrification roadmaps to increase the national level of electrification.

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high borrowing costs, making external investment essential.

The Lobito Corridor creates an entry point for that investment. Mining and processing operations, the primary industries developing along the corridor, require reliable, stable electricity to function. The number of mining operations in Zambia's Copperbelt region has grown in recent years, and new mines, smelters and refineries are set to follow, increasing demand on national grids.[28] This pressure is compounded by the recent adoption of policies requiring greater local processing of raw materials, keeping more of the value chain in-country, and adding a further layer of industrial electricity demand.[29] For mining companies and investors, persistent outages and grid unreliability are not only inconveniences; they bring operations to a halt at high cost. This creates a strong vested interest among private actors in financing new energy infrastructure, making the case for external investment both commercially attractive and operationally necessary.[30] At the same time, this creates a policy challenge, where weak public institutions struggle to impose conditions on powerful private operators. International partners must therefore be present and intervene with targeted support for regulatory capacity and public governance, ensuring that states retain meaningful oversight of how and where these benefits are distributed.

One of the obstacles to energy investment in Sub-Saharan Africa is the offtake problem. Building a power plant requires substantial upfront capital, the recovery of which depends on a reliable and sustained stream of demand from consumers. Households and small businesses, however, cannot provide this at the scale and consistency that investors require, making the business case for new generation capacity difficult to build.

Large-scale mines and processing facilities require constant, high-volume electricity

Mining operations change this dynamic. Large-scale mines and processing facilities require constant, high-volume electricity, and are willing to enter into long-term offtake agreements to secure it. This makes them anchor consumers that can underwrite the construction of new energy infrastructure, providing the revenue certainty that private investors need. Mining is, in this sense, already driving power investment across the continent: mining companies are increasingly committing to large-scale energy generation and securing long-term supply agreements to support transmission infrastructure.[31] As global demand for African critical minerals grows, this trend is set to

[28] Tesfaye, Meron and Daniel Johansson, "Mining Power Demand in Africa Is Rising – Firms Are Hedging While Policy Flies Blind", in *Energy for Growth Hub Blog*, 14 May 2026, https://energyforgrowth.org/?p=9588.
[29] Bekele, Liya, "Africa's New Local Content Rules Signal a Turning Point for Global Mineral Value Chains", in *Further Africa*, 18 November 2025, https://wp.me/p6zXGE-iKS.
[30] Johansson, Daniel, "The Energy Crisis in Zambia Is Undermining the Lobito Corridor's Potential – and DFC's Investments", in *Energy for Growth Hub Blog*, 16 April 2025, https://energyforgrowth.org/?p=7094.
[31] Tesfaye, Meron and Daniel Johansson, "Mining Power Demand in Africa Is Rising", cit.

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The policy challenge is to ensure that investments do not remain confined to mine sites

accelerate.[32] The policy challenge is to ensure that these investments do not remain confined to mine sites, but are structured so that their benefits extend to surrounding communities and broader grid development.

This is where the alignment of European and African interests becomes most concrete. African nations gain access to capital and technical expertise for energy infrastructure that would otherwise be fiscally out of reach. European partners, in turn, secure the reliable electricity supply that their mining and processing operations require. The result is a dual-use model: energy plants built to serve industrial demand can simultaneously expand electricity access for the wider population, an outcome that serves both commercial and development objectives, and one well-suited to the region's considerable renewable energy potential.[33]

The transformative potential of the Lobito Corridor reinforces this model in ways that go beyond the mining sector. The Corridor's transport infrastructure enables the movement of materials and equipment needed to build energy systems inland, reducing one of the key logistical barriers to deployment in remote areas. Moreover, the dual-use model is not limited to mining: the same logic can be applied to agriculture, agro-processing, and other industries developing along the corridor. Where anchor industrial demand exists, energy investment becomes viable, and from that foundation, broader electrification can follow. The Corridor thus offers not only a specific opportunity, but a replicable template for energy-led development across the region.

Several power projects have emerged from strategic collaborations between energy providers and mining companies, where often one of the two parties is European. Within this framework, the typical model involves partnering with the national utility provider, such as ZESCO in Zambia, while simultaneously securing a power purchase agreement with a mining company. The Lobito Corridor is frequently cited in these deals. One prominent example is Anzana, a Mauritius-based renewable energy developer, backed by the British investment company Gridworks, which has signed a 500 million US dollar joint venture with ZESCO to expand the national grid and connect two million Zambians along the Lobito Corridor.[34]

A second category of deals responds to the growing energy demand along the Corridor without relying on mining-backed guarantees, instead drawing on financing from European or G7 institutions. This is

[32] IEA, *Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2025*, cit.

[33] Hermann, Sebastian et al., "Estimating the Renewable Energy Potential in Africa. A GIS-based Approach", in *IRENA Working Papers*, 2014, https://www.irena.org/-/media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2014/IRENA_Africa_Resource_Potential_Aug2014.pdf.

[34] Hydropower & Dams, *New Hydro Plants Planned to Supply Zambian Mining Industry*, 28 April 2026, https://www.hydropower-dams.com/?p=54064.

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the case of MCA, a Portuguese energy developer operating in Angola, which has built the country's two largest solar plants, both located along the Lobito Corridor tracks, with support from Germany's export credit agency and reinsurance from the export agencies of Portugal and South Korea. Anchored by the Lobito Corridor framework, these plants now supply electricity to over a hundred thousand Angolans.[35] It is important to note that most new power plants are solar. Solar remains the least-costly option and offers the shortest development times, averaging between six and twelve months.[36] Increasingly, the latest projects are pairing solar generation with battery storage systems to better regulate the power injected into the grid.

Grid interconnection is emerging as a critical workstream

Ultimately, grid interconnection is emerging as a critical workstream. Large transmission capacity is essential, particularly for hydropower, where generation and consumption are often geographically distant. To address this, US developers, in partnership with the governments of Angola, the DRC and Zambia, are building a 1.2-gigawatt interconnector designed to transmit Angolan hydropower to DRC mining operations. Once complete, it will span 1,150 km, making it the longest 400 kilovolt alternating current transmission line in the world.[37]

TABLE 1 Main power projects along the Corridor

Location	Project	Provider	Capacity	State
Luau - Angola	Solar + Battery	MCA - Portugal	31.85 MW + 75.26 MWh	Operational
Cazombo - Angola	Solar + Battery	MCA - Portugal	25.40 MW +75.26 MWh	Operational
Garneton North - Zambia	Solar	Copperbelt Energy Corporation -Zambia InnoVent - France	20 MW	Under construction
Itimpi Solar II - Zambia	Solar	Copperbelt Energy Corporation - Zambia	136 MW	Operational
Kansanshi/ Sentinel - Zambia	Solar + Wind	Total Eren - France Chariot Energy - US	230 MW + 200 MW	Under construction
North-West Zambia Region	Hydropower	Anzana - Mauritius (backed UK)	50 MW	Under construction

[35] Power Gen Advancement, *MCA Starts Up Africa's Largest Off-Grid Solar Park in Angola*, 8 May 2026, https://www.powergenadvancement.com/?p=19360.
[36] African Union Development Agency (NEPAD), *The African Continental Power Systems Masterplan. Support Studies – Solar Power*, June 2023, https://africa-eu-energy-partnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Solar-SSS-Summary-UPDATED-CLEAN-1.pdf.
[37] See Hydro-Link website: https://www.hydro-link.us.

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The energy sector offers a rare solution where commercial logic and development objectives genuinely reinforce one another

A table visualising several of the projects that are developing along the Corridor (table 1) makes it possible to understand that the energy sector offers a rare solution where commercial logic and development objectives genuinely reinforce one another. If that model can be replicated, along other corridors, in other sectors, with the same discipline around dual-use infrastructure, it may prove to be one of the most consequential lessons the Lobito Corridor has to offer.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations is addressed to European and African policymakers, local investors and international financiers. Effective implementation requires all three stakeholders to act in tandem and coordinate across all of them.

- *Link European support to local industrial capacity*: EU and member-state financing for the Lobito Corridor should not focus only on transport efficiency and access to CRM. Guarantees, technical assistance and project preparation should prioritise processing capacity, energy supply, skills development, customs coordination and cross-border trade. The attention to these areas is essential if the Corridor is to strengthen productive activity and regional integration between Angola, the DRC and Zambia, rather than simply accelerate the export of raw materials.
- *Provide strategic alternatives through instruments, not geopolitical branding*: Europe should treat the Lobito Corridor as a way to broaden the range of financing, regulatory and technological options available to African partners. This would allow the EU and its member states to support diversification without presenting the project mainly as a counterweight to China. The European offer will be more credible if it produces industrial partnerships, local value creation, and predictable normative standards around the Corridor. In terms of CRM developments, a *European Technical Assistance Hub* can be created to export the know-how and strengthen the technical expertise of African partners and provide an additional advantage to the European proposal compared to other international offers.
- *Make bankability compatible with safeguards*: Global Gateway, the Mattei Plan and related financial instruments should reduce investment risk without transferring costs onto public budgets, local communities, land users, or fragile ecosystems. Procurement transparency, debt sustainability, environmental assessment, and community involvement should be integrated into project design and financing from the start. High standards should become part of the European competitive offer, not a separate layer added after investment decisions are made. The Corridor runs along protected forests and biodiversity; the EU, in partnership with the African

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counterparts, could develop a timely monitoring system on the sustainability of mining practices and biodiversity protection.

- *Strengthen the governance of the African Sovereign Wealth Fund through European support*: The economic windfall from Africa's critical minerals resource boom is an opportunity to assert 'resource sovereignty'. With technical assistance from international development finance institutions, such as CDP, and strategic investment funds, such as the Fondo Strategico Nazionale del Made in Italy, Italy could support African countries in strengthening governance of Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) as instruments for long-term economic resilience and structural transformation. Well-designed and governed SWFs can help stabilise public revenues, mitigate the effects of external shocks, and reduce vulnerability to commodity price volatility. They can also play an important role in managing exchange-rate pressures associated with resource booms, thereby preserving the competitiveness of non-resource sectors and supporting broader economic diversification and industrial development.
- *Improve coordination of the actors involved through a one-stop interface*: One of the most pressing issues is to coordinate between the several international frameworks that are involved in the coordination of the Corridor (Global Gateway, PGII, Mattei Plan). There is therefore the need to create a clear system of coordination to understand each partner work, and to avoid gaps and duplications. The World Bank, in partnership with the AU, could be the voice behind this coordination effort, creating a more comprehensive design of global governance. At the same time, the Lobito Corridor Transit Transport Facilitation Agency, an intergovernmental institution established by Angola, the DRC and Zambia to streamline cross-border trade and infrastructure development along the Lobito Corridor, has to become the point of reference for foreign investors.
- *Scale up the dual-use energy model as a replicable template*: The energy projects developing along the Lobito corridor reinforce that commercial and development objectives can reinforce one another. EU and member-state instruments should formalise this dual-use model as a financing template replicable across the Corridor and beyond. Concretely, Global Gateway and the Mattei Plan should prioritise technical support for long-term offtake agreements between mining companies and national utilities, extending grid access to surrounding communities beyond mine sites. Additionally, project preparation facilities should be strengthened to reduce the time for developing solar and battery storage projects, which currently offer the shortest development cycles. At the same time, African governments should provide coherent and strong legislation to ensure that private companies are held accountable and that progress in energy access is tangible.

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Istituto Affari Internazionali

Closed-Door Workshop

ALIGNING INTERESTS ALONG THE LOBITO CORRIDOR: DIPLOMACY, DEVELOPMENT, AND CRITICAL MINERALS

Monday, 27 April 2026

15:00 – 18:30 CEST

Istituto Affari Internazionali-IAI
Rome - Italy

Working language: English
The event will be held under the Chatham House Rule.

In partnership with

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Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale

Programme

15:00 – 15:15

Opening Remarks

ETTORE GRECO
Executive Vice President, Istituto Affari Internazionali-IAI

LORENZO ORTONA
Deputy National Coordinator of the Task Force for the implementation of the Mattei Plan for Africa, Prime Minister's Office of Italy

15:15 – 16:45

Session I: The Cooperation/Coherence Framework

"SYNCHRONIZING INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS IN THE LOBITO CORRIDOR"

With a growing collection of international frameworks converging on the Lobito Corridor, this session asks how their efforts can be coordinated to deliver real impact on the ground. Central to this discussion is ensuring the development priorities of Angola, the DRC, and Zambia.
The session will explore:

- *Capture insights from local regional stakeholders on how international synergies can best support local economic priorities.*
- *Develop a "tandem" approach for utilizing financial and diplomatic tools, ensuring that European and Italian investments translate into tangible regional development.*
- *Analyze the integration of the Mattei Plan alongside the Global Gateway (EU) and the PGII (G7) to ensure Italian initiatives complement global frameworks.*

Framing the session

MARIANNA LUNARDINI and DARLINGTON TSHUMA
Researchers, IAI

Kick-Off Remarks from Embassies

JOSEFA LEONEL CORREIA SACKO, Ambassador of Angola to Italy
PAUL EMILE TSHINGA AHUKA, Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Italy
NCHIMUNYA CHISUTA, Economic Counsellor, Embassy of Zambia to Italy

Moderator:
FILIPPO SIMONELLI
Researcher, IAI

16:45 – 17:00

Break

17:00 – 18:30

Session II: The Energy Dimension

"UNDERSTANDING THE ENERGY IMPLICATIONS OF THE LOBITO CORRIDOR"

Critical raw materials have moved to the top of the global agenda, driven by the energy transition and the industrial dependencies it has exposed. Countries are rapidly learning that extraction alone is not enough.

The session will explore:

- *The resources of the area of interest in the Lobito Corridor railway, and their key industrial applications (Cobalt/Lithium/Copper)*
- *The potential of a new Green Supply Chain running from Southern Africa to Europe, and what it would take to make it viable*
- *The broader synergies with the Global Gateway and Mattei Plan in terms of energy security and decarbonisation.*

Framing the Session

PIETRO RINALDI
Researcher, IAI

Kick-Off Remarks

ALBERTO CASTRONOVO
Special Envoy for Critical Raw Materials (CRM), Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy

TAE-YOON KIM
Head of Critical Minerals Division, International Energy Agency (IEA)

Moderator:
MARGHERITA BIANCHI
Head of the Programme "Energy, climate and resources", IAI

18:30

End of the Workshop

Guiding Questions

Session 1

- The Lobito Corridor sits at the intersection of multiple international frameworks, as the Global Gateway, the Mattei Plan, the PGII, each with its own logic. Are these frameworks converging around a shared vision, or are we witnessing parallel initiatives?

- The Corridor accrues many interests, from very different stakeholders. Whether it be a Zambian miner, a European investor, an Italian policymaker, or a Congolese farmer, there are different expectations. How can the project then be evaluated, and how can these complex and very different perspectives be considered in the broader governance of the project?

- The infrastructure of this scale requires financing that corridor countries will ultimately be accountable for. What safeguards exist to ensure that the financial architecture of the Corridor does not reproduce the debt dependency dynamics that have historically accompanied large external infrastructure investments in Africa?

- Beyond financing, what models of public-private partnership can ensure that European companies act as enablers of African enterprise growth along the corridor, and what incentive structures are needed to make this commercially viable for both sides?

Session 2

- How should the balance between European sustainable supply chain security and African industrial development ambitions be guaranteed, and what mechanisms can ensure that local added value is produced?

- The mining industry is deeply power-intensive. Yet in Sub-Saharan Africa, electricity infrastructure remains partially underdeveloped. The additional electricity needed for the mining industry might create tension with the needs of the local population, which still has limited access to electricity. How should that trade-off be managed, and what role should renewables play in resolving it rather than deepening it?

- How to guarantee shared transparent and sustainable, environmental and social standards along the critical mineral supply chain?

- Capacity building is key to develop a local green industrialisation. How can the various actors involved in the Lobito Corridor coordinate their efforts to create the adequate ecosystem (e.g., technological, financial, regulatory etc) to fully unlock the potential of the project?