

The External Dimension of Italian Migration Policy (DEPMI): a mapping of the tools to manage migratory flows with countries of origin and transit

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Abstract

Recent shifts in migration governance – especially the externalization of border control and the strategic use of migration cooperation – demand systematic analyses of how states manage migration beyond their borders. Italy has emerged as a key actor in this domain, yet its external migration policies remain understudied. The DEPMI project addresses this gap by mapping and analysing Italy's bilateral migration engagement with 28 countries across North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia between 2000 and 2024. It sheds light on the objectives, tools, and evolution of Italy's external migration governance through two original datasets of over 140 bilateral instruments and 1,800 migration-related development cooperation projects. Complemented by 28 country profiles and an interactive map, DEPMI provides a robust framework for comparative analysis and policy reflection. This article outlines the project's aims and methodology, while presenting key research findings from the Sub-Saharan African context. It shows how the region, once peripheral, has become central to Italy's migration diplomacy, with a strong emphasis on containment, returns, and the strategic use of legal migration as diplomatic leverage.

1. Introduction

No longer confined to the realm of domestic affairs, migration policy has become a strategic field of action, shaping countries' foreign policy and international relations (Abbondanza 2023; Rosina 2023). Both the European Union (EU) and its Member States (MS) have increasingly turned outward, relying on partnerships with countries of origin and transit through an expanding array of policy tools, including bilateral agreements, development aid, mobility schemes, and diplomatic frameworks, to manage migration beyond their borders (Zardo 2025; Samuk et al. 2024; Cardwell and Dickson 2023; Longo and Fontana 2022; Rosina 2022).

This trend is particularly evident in Italy, a crucial gateway along major Mediterranean migratory routes. Over the past two decades, Italy has expanded and diversified its engagement with third countries. The Readmission Agreements with Egypt and Tunisia



(2007 and 2011), the Memorandum of Understanding with Libya (2017), the MISIN military mission in Niger (2018), the humanitarian corridors with Lebanon (2016), Ethiopia (2017), and Pakistan (2021), the unveiling of the Mattei Plan in Ethiopia (2023), accompanied by a €2.2 billion investment package and high-level dialogue with sub-Saharan African leaders, the brokering of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum (July 2023), and the recent agreement with Albania (2024), are all notable examples of Italy's proactive externalization strategy.

While these efforts underscore the strategic importance of international cooperation as a cornerstone of contemporary migration governance, they also raise empirical challenges. What instruments define Italy's external migration strategy, and how can they be systematically classified? What types of agreements are forged with countries of origin and transit? How have they evolved over time and space? To what extent do they align with, or diverge from, EU-level initiatives? And what role do development cooperation projects play in Italy's external migration governance framework?

These questions matter for two reasons. First, despite the rising importance of external migration policy, the Italian case remains underexplored. Existing studies have examined the interplay between immigration policy and foreign policy, particularly the role of Interior Ministers in bridging the domestic-international nexus (Zotti and Fassi 2020), the impact of government change on migration-related foreign policy instruments (Abbondanza 2023), or military engagement abroad related to irregular migration (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020). However, no study has systematically identified, classified, and compared, both temporally and geographically, the full range of instruments and agreements employed by Italy in its cooperation with countries of origin and transit.

Second, the literature on external migration governance still focuses mainly on the EU (e.g. Niemann and Zaun 2023; Reslow 2017, 2019; Geddes et al. 2020), often overlooking the variety of instruments employed by individual MS in their bilateral relations. This gap is particularly striking given that MS, including Italy, have developed autonomous external migration strategies that operate beyond, alongside, or even in tension with EU initiatives (Fontana and Rosina 2024).

These questions led to a dedicated research project. In May 2021, a proposal was submitted on behalf of the Siracusa International Institute for Criminal Justice and Human Rights (SII) in response to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' competitive call for 'Study, Research & Analysis in the Field of Foreign Policy & the Promotion and Development of International Relations'. The proposal, titled *External Dimension of Italian Migration Policy* (Dimensione Esterna Politica di Migrazione Italiana - DEPMI), was positively evaluated. As a result, the project was officially launched in September 2021, focusing on Italy's migration cooperation with 14 countries in the broader Mediterranean region. The SII acted as the grantee institution, with Matilde Rosina (Brunel University London & London School of Economics and Political Science) and Sahizer Samuk (BI Norwegian Business School) as core members of the research team, and Iole Fontana (University of Catania) as Principal Investigator. In May 2023, a follow-up proposal was submitted under the same funding scheme, aiming to expand the analysis to 14 additional countries. Following a second successful evaluation, DEPMI II was approved for an additional year of funding and launched in early 2024.

At its core, DEPMI sought to address a critical gap in the literature by conducting a systematic analysis of Italy's external migration policy. Specifically, the project undertook a comprehensive mapping, identification, and classification of bilateral agreements and development cooperation initiatives adopted between Italy and countries of origin and transit. Concretely, it pursued two main objectives:

1. To build a structured dataset encompassing all agreements concluded between Italy and 28 countries of origin and transit in the broader Mediterranean region between 2000 and 2024, including associated development cooperation programmes;
2. To develop an interactive visual map of Italy's external migration policy, offering clear and accessible information on *what* Italy does and *where*, in terms of cooperation with third countries on migration.

This article provides an overview of DEPMI, outlining its theoretical framework, data collection, and methodology. As the project has now reached completion, it also presents key empirical findings from the project's most recent phase, which focused on Italy's external migration cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa, an area that remains relatively underexplored in academic literature despite its growing strategic importance. This article first introduces the theoretical framework, the project's main outputs, methodology, and relevance. The second part illustrates empirical findings referring to the area of Sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

The external dimension of migration policies takes shape when areas historically rooted in domestic affairs, such as immigration, gain foreign policy relevance, occupying a hybrid space at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy agendas (Carrera *et al.* 2015; Geddes 2009). Originally developed in EU studies, the concept captures the growing role of third countries in managing irregular flows, legal pathways and root causes (Samuk *et al.* 2024; Chou 2009; Boswell 2003). Recent literature has explored how EU externalization is operationalized through a wide range of instruments, such as return agreements, mobility partnerships, memoranda, migration clauses etc., used to engage countries of origin and transit in the pursuit of migration policy goals (Carrera, 2019; Czaika *et al.*, 2023; Longo and Fontana, 2022; Reslow, 2017, 2019; Trauner and Wolff, 2014; Zardo, 2022).

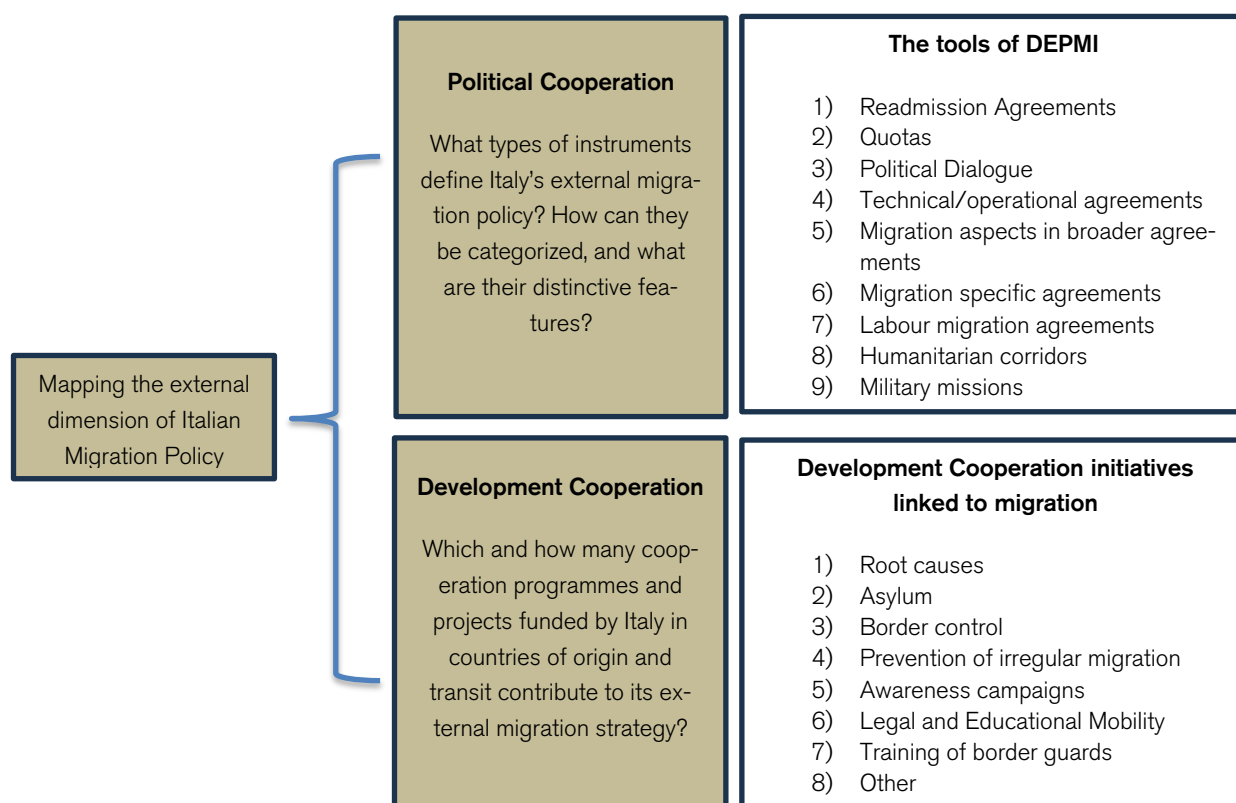
Building on this literature, the DEPMI project investigates the external dimension of migration policy at national level, using Italy as a case study.¹ Adopting a policy instrument perspective (Capano and Howlett 2020), it identifies and analyses the tools, such as agreements, partnerships and cooperation programmes, that Italy has deployed in cooperation with countries of origin and transit. These instruments are treated as key indicators of how external migration governance has evolved over time and space,

¹ In this respect, DEPMI draws on insights from previous research conducted within the Horizon 2020 project PROTECT: The Right to International Protection, which advanced understanding of the EU's external migration policies by mapping the instruments used to engage third countries. For further detail, see Longo and Fontana (2022).

offering insights into how externalization is operationalized and how political intentions are translated into concrete strategies.

To this end, the project maps Italy’s external policy across two interrelated domains: political cooperation and development cooperation (Fig.1).

Figure 1. DEPMI Approach and Coding Scheme



Source: own elaboration.

2.1. Political Cooperation

The first domain, political cooperation, encompasses the diplomatic initiatives, bilateral agreements, and operational tools through which Italy advances its migration priorities and engages with partner countries. The analysis asked: What types of instruments define Italy’s external migration policy? How can they be categorized, and what are their features?

To answer these questions, the project develops a typology of policy instruments, a ‘DEPMI toolbox’ composed of nine² distinct elements making up Italy’s external migration policy, as illustrated in Figure 1 and listed here below.

- Readmission agreements (1) are tools to facilitate the identification and return of irregular migrants (Cassarino 2010). Envisaged in the *Testo Unico*

² The original framework comprised nine elements; a tenth, 'extra-territorialization of asylum', was later added to capture emerging developments, such as the Italy-Albania Agreement. See Rosina and Fontana (2024).

sull'Immigrazione amended by the Bossi-Fini Law (189/2002), both the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of the Interior may promote initiatives, in cooperation with partner countries, to expedite return to countries of origin.

- Quotas (2), implemented through the so-called *Decreti Flussi*, offer preferential entry channels for labour migration, often conditionally tied to return cooperation, with priority given to countries that collaborate on readmission (Rosina and Fontana 2024).
- Political dialogue (3) integrates migration into bilateral agendas, through diplomatic exchanges and high-level meetings.
- Technical-operational agreements (4) include memoranda, protocols or letters of intent regulating technical aspects of cooperation, such as police cooperation, training or logistics related to migration management.
- Migration provisions in broader agreements (5) refer to the inclusion of migration-related goals in comprehensive frameworks, e.g. partnership and cooperation agreements, that encompass a wide range of issues.
- Migration-specific agreements (6) target multiple aspects of migration governance, within a single comprehensive framework, extending beyond the scope of readmission, labour and technical agreements.
- Labour/circular mobility agreements (7) establish cooperation on foreign workers' admission to the Italian labour market. They aim to match labour supply and demand, promote skills transfer, and encourage circular migration. They may also include visa facilitation schemes.
- Humanitarian corridors (8), launched through protocols involving the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, and NGOs (e.g. Sant'Egidio), provide safe and legal transfers of individuals in need of international protection from first countries of asylum to Italy. Though these corridors are not traditional bilateral tools, they are a key element of Italy's migration cooperation, particularly with countries hosting vulnerable populations.
- Military missions (9) refer to operations that incorporate migration and border control into their mandate

This typology was developed through a hybrid approach combining theoretical adaptation and empirical observation. Deductively, we drew on previous scholarly efforts to map and categorize research on EU externalization tools (Czaika et al., 2023; Trauner and Wolff, 2014;), and more specifically on Longo and Fontana (2022), who identified thirteen key EU-level instruments based on secondary literature and policy documents. We readapted this framework to the national level by selecting categories with clear counterparts or comparable instruments at Member State level (e.g., EU readmission agreements → MS readmission agreements; EU-third country political dialogue → MS-third country political dialogue; EU visa facilitation agreements and mobility partnerships → national quotas and labour migration agreements; EU protection programmes → humanitarian corridors; Migration clauses in EU bilateral agreements → Migration provisions in MS bilateral agreements), while excluding EU-specific tools with no

equivalent in Member State practice (e.g., Frontex working arrangements). However, the typology was also refined inductively during the empirical mapping of Italy's bilateral cooperation. This led us to introduce two additional categories – Technical-Operational Agreements and Migration-Specific Agreements – to capture forms of cooperation not previously identified in EU-level frameworks.

By doing so, the DEPMI project directly engages with and extends the literature on categorization and diversification in external migration policy. While earlier studies have focused primarily on EU instruments, our contribution lies in re-adapting these categories at the national level of the MS, demonstrating that the external dimension of migration policy is not exclusive to the EU (Fontana and Rosina 2024; Rosina and Fontana 2024).

This exercise is not merely taxonomic: it provides analytical insight into how and why certain instruments are chosen over others and how countries' externalization policies are operationalized in practice. The typology is not intended as a purely technical exercise. It also helps illuminate why certain forms of migration cooperation are chosen over others. For example, the decision to conclude a readmission agreement rather than a broader migration partnership may signal a preference for control over mobility (Cassarino 2007) or reflect asymmetric bargaining dynamics (Cassarino 2010), particularly when partner countries are dependent on aid, trade or work access, factors that limit their negotiating leverage and ability to pursue more balanced and comprehensive frameworks (Cassarino 2014, Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, Lavenex and Lutz 2024). Similarly, the emergence of hybrid or 'migration-specific' agreements points to efforts to bundle objectives, such as return, mobility, and capacity-building, into more politically acceptable or flexible formats, particularly where cooperation may be contentious (Adam et al. 2020; Tittel-Moser 2018). By highlighting the specific tools employed and tracing the link between instrument choice and broader political dynamics, the typology offers empirical grounding for the analysis of states' externalization practices. It also provides valuable insights into broader patterns of migration diplomacy (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019), including how states seek to reassert control and sovereignty through visible policy tools (Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022), and into the ways in which migration governance has become embedded within wider frameworks of foreign policy and international cooperation.

2.2. Development Cooperation

The project also examined a second domain of Italy's external migration policy, i.e. development cooperation, with particular attention to the funding of programmes and projects related to migration governance. The inclusion of this dimension is grounded in the body of literature that underscores the increasing relevance of development cooperation and the so-called 'root causes approach' within the externalization framework, signalling a shift from a peripheral concern to a central policy tool (Tsourdi and Zardo 2025; Lavenex and Kunz 2008; Castillejo 2016; Panizzon and van Riemsdijk 2019). As migration governance becomes increasingly intertwined with foreign aid (Zardo 2025), this aspect remains underexplored in existing analyses. In response, DEPMI treats development cooperation as an integral component of Italy's external migration toolbox, asking: Which and how many cooperation projects funded by Italy in

countries of origin and transit contribute to its external migration strategy? Which ‘migration dimension’ do they address? To this end, the analysis classifies funds, number and types of initiatives, as well as the specific migration-related dimensions they target.

3. Project’s outputs

The DEPMI project generated a range of outputs aimed at providing both analytical depth and practical utility for different stakeholders including scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. These include:

- DEPMI Toolbox Dataset: containing 140 agreements and instruments adopted by Italy with 28 countries in the broader Mediterranean region between 2000 and 2024.³ An initial dataset of 85 observations was developed under DEPMI I and later expanded with 54 additional instruments under DEPMI II.
- Interactive [online map](#): built from the dataset, this open-source tool enables users to literally ‘navigate’ Italy’s external migration policy, providing a comprehensive and immediate visual overview of instruments and countries involved.
- Development Cooperation Dataset: over 1,800 entries on Italy’s funded programmes and projects – both migration-related and not – across the same 28 countries, between 2000 and 2024.
- 28 DEPMI Country Profiles: concise and informative documents in English detailing Italy’s migration cooperation with each partner country, and covering political, diplomatic, and development cooperation dynamics.
- Three peer-reviewed academic articles, inspired by the project’s findings:

Rosina, M., & Fontana, I. (2024), ‘The external dimension of Italian migration policy in the wider Mediterranean’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 1–32, which explores the evolution of Italy’s external migration tools across time and space, as well as the drivers that have shaped their use.

Fontana, I., & Rosina, M. (2024), ‘The Tools of External Migration Policy in the EU Member States: The Case of Italy’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, which, through the case of Italy, investigates how member states’ external actions interact with EU migration governance, identifying patterns of competition, convergence, and complementarity.

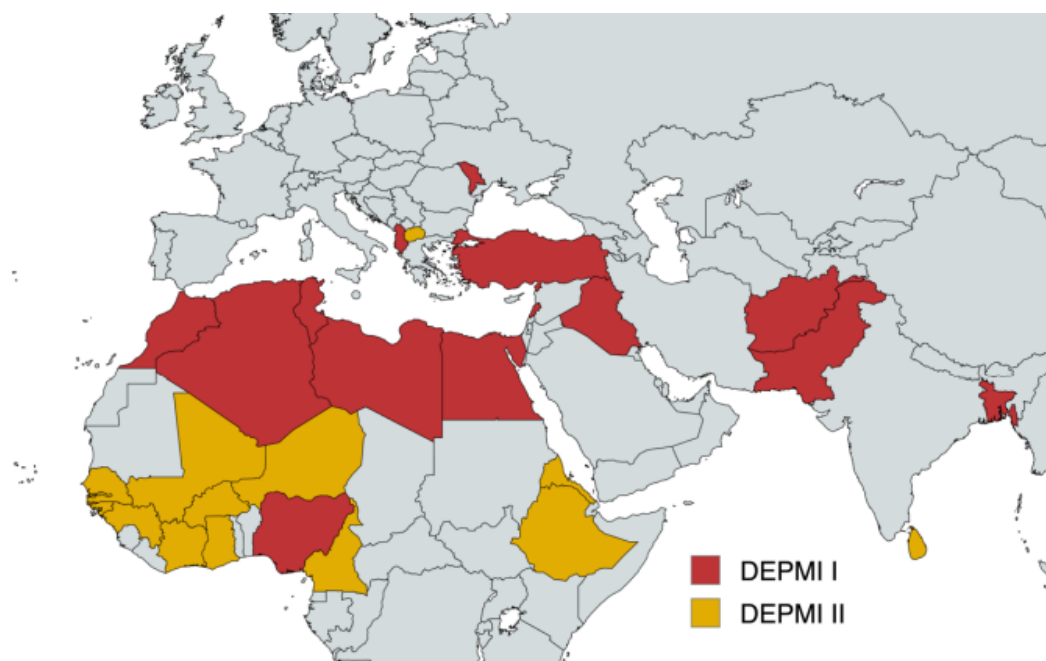
Samuk, S., Rosina, M., & Ince-Beqo, G. (2023), ‘Like “falling leaves”: The migration of the highly-skilled from Turkey to Italy’, *La Cittadinanza Europea Online*, 1–2023, which sheds light on the underexplored phenomenon of highly skilled migration to Italy, using Turkey as a case study.

³ For some countries, the dataset also includes agreements dating back to the late 1990s.

4. Methodology

The research analyses the political, diplomatic, and development cooperation instruments and agreements concluded between Italy and countries in the greater Mediterranean region. The term ‘greater Mediterranean’ refers to an area anchored in the physical Mediterranean basin, yet extending beyond its traditional natural boundaries, stretching southward into the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, and north-eastward towards Asia, and encompassing regions that constitute its politically and economically turbulent periphery (Campelli and Gomel 2022; Di Cecco 2002). This region was selected for two main reasons. Not only does the broader Mediterranean function as a microcosm of global political dynamics (Panebianco 2022), making it a strategically significant theatre for Italy’s foreign policy engagement, but it has also emerged as a critical hub for migratory movements and recurrent migration ‘crises’ within the European context, particularly along the Central Mediterranean route. The 2011 Arab uprisings, protracted conflicts in Libya and Syria, the Taliban’s return and ensuing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (2021), Tunisia’s recent authoritarian turn (2023–2024), the heightened climate vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa (Fontana 2024), combined with persistent structural economic and political instability across the region, have all contributed to the proliferation of new migration routes and departure hubs, reinforcing the urgency of sustained, multidimensional cooperation with countries of origin and transit.

Across its two phases, DEPMI explored 28 countries, selected to cover diverse sub-regions within the broader Mediterranean area, to enable cross-country comparisons of evolving cooperation patterns (Fig.2). These include: five North African countries (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt), three countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans (Albania, Moldova, and North Macedonia), four countries in Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), three Middle Eastern countries (Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey), and thirteen Sub-Saharan African countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal). This latter group was primarily included as part of DEPMI II, which was specifically designed to expand the sample of analysed countries with a deeper focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, given their growing strategic relevance as both regions of origin and transit in the context of Italy’s external migration policy.

Figure 2. DEMPI Geographical Coverage

Source: own elaboration.

The analysis covered the period 2000–2024 to enable a longitudinal assessment of Italy’s external migration policy and its evolving instruments.

The project adopts a qualitative comparative methodology, combining in-depth case studies with cross-country analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and divergences in Italy’s migration cooperation with third countries. Data collection relied on triangulating primary and secondary sources.

The first step of the research involved reconstructing the trajectory of Italy’s migration cooperation with each of the 28 partner countries, through a comprehensive review of relevant legal texts and secondary sources. These included immigration legislation, official policy documents, grey literature, and academic studies, which enabled the identification of key actors, bilateral agreements and diplomatic and political relations. Building on this, DEMPI Country Profiles were developed. Each profile is structured in two sections: the country’s migration relevance for Italy, in terms of regular and irregular migration flows and asylum applications, and the bilateral cooperation frameworks between Italy and the specific country, outlining the policy instruments used, key features, and their evolution.

The second step entailed the systematic mapping and classification of the instruments themselves. The research team identified and catalogued all the agreements, memoranda, protocols and related documents adopted by Italy with the 28 countries, according to the typology identified in the theoretical framework, whereby each instrument was assigned to the category that best reflected its main purpose – i.e., the

dominant policy goal as determined by stated aims in official documentation.⁴ Primary sources, namely the full texts of the agreements retrieved from the public repository of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were examined to assess objectives, structure, and operational logic. When unavailable, the content was reconstructed using secondary sources. On this basis, the DEPMI toolbox dataset was compiled. Each entry was classified by:

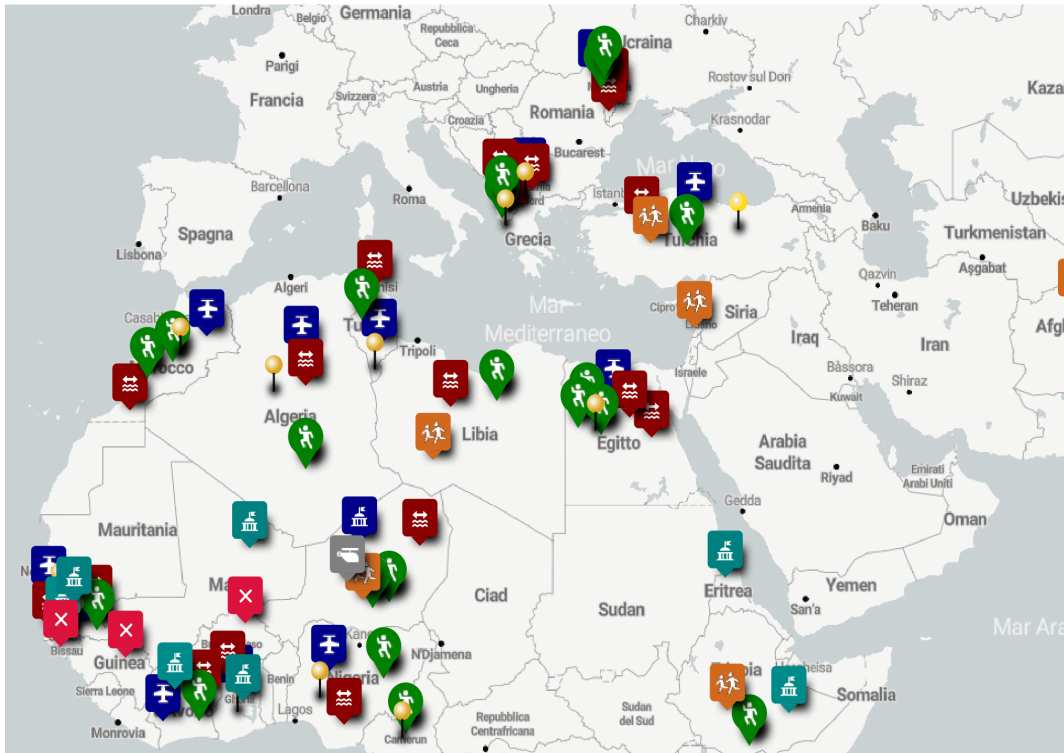
- instrument type (based on the DEPMI typology),
- country,
- year of adoption,
- main goal,
- and other covered thematic areas – return and readmission, border control, asylum, legal mobility, visa facilitation, labour migration, education, and anti-smuggling cooperation.

This classification enabled both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the content, patterns, and evolution of Italy's external migration engagement over time.

Moreover, as mapping facilitates also the intuitive and immediate presentation of research findings through spatial and visual representations (Conceição et al. 2017), we transformed the dataset into an interactive [visual map](#). Users can filter by instrument type or country using unique icons, and access detailed information on the date, content and, where available, the source or full text of each instrument (Figures 3 and 4).

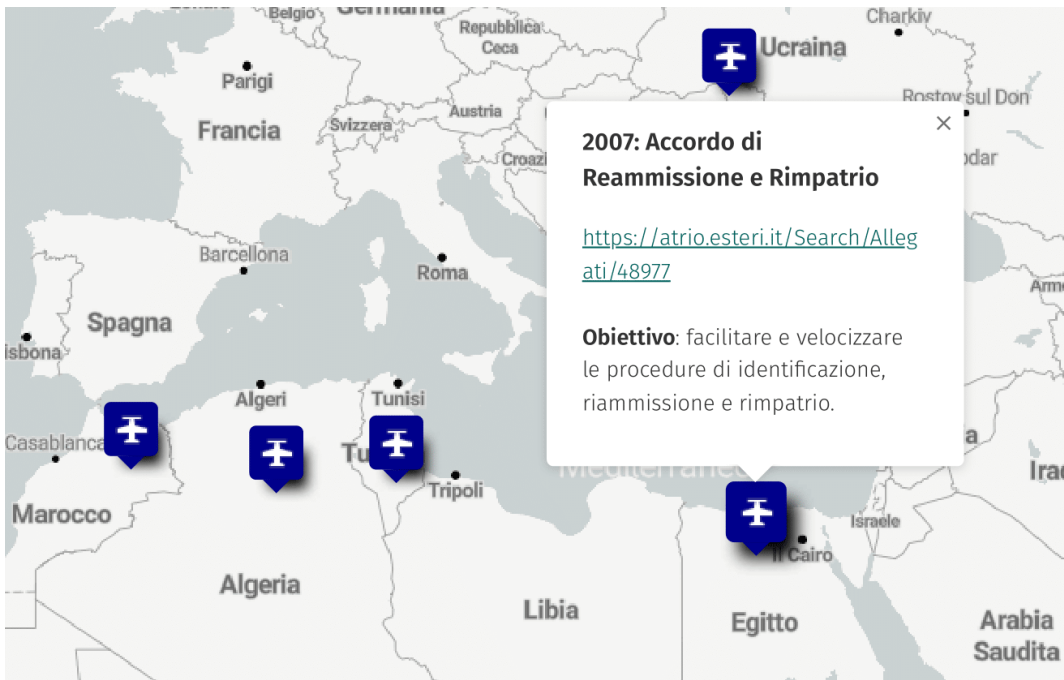
⁴ Agreements dealing exclusively with returns were coded as Readmission Agreements (e.g. the Italy–Nigeria Readmission Agreement), while those addressing labour mobility and employment cooperation were classified as Labour Agreements. Instruments regulating technical or operational aspects, such as police training or equipment provision, were categorized as Technical-Operational Agreements (e.g. the Italy–Ivory Coast Police Cooperation Agreement). Broader cooperation frameworks that included migration among several thematic areas were coded as Migration Provisions in Broader Agreements (e.g. the Italy–Cameroon Agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation). Finally, to account for more complex and multidimensional instruments that did not fit neatly into the above categories, we introduced a dedicated category of Migration-Specific Agreements that combine multiple migration-related objectives – such as return, mobility, and capacity building – without a single dominant focus, and extend beyond the scope of purely technical, labour or readmission agreements (e.g. the Italy–Senegal Partnership).

Figure 3. The DEPMI Interactive Map



Source: own elaboration.

Figure 4. Details of instruments adopted as shown on map



Source: own elaboration.

Finally, for the dataset on development cooperation, data was collected from the *Reports on the Implementation of Development Cooperation*,⁵ published annually by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS)⁶ between 2000 and 2023. For each of the 28 countries, annual allocations and associated development programmes were recorded. All entries were classified by:

- Country
- Project
- Financial Allocation (amount)
- General goal (e.g. education, health, food safety, agriculture etc.)
- Migration relevance (yes/no)
- If the project was migration related, all covered thematic areas were also recorded (tackling root causes; preventing irregular migration; border control; training of border guards; asylum and international protection; legal and educational mobility; awareness campaigns; other).⁷

Due to gaps in AICS reporting,⁸ the dataset does not claim to be exhaustive. Nonetheless, it offers a unique and rich source of data, representing one of the first systematic efforts to document Italy's development cooperation initiatives targeting various dimensions of migration governance. It supports both thematic and cross-country comparisons, positioning development aid as an integral component of Italy's external migration strategy.

5. Relevance and innovative contribution of the Project

Mapping Italy's external migration policies in the broader Mediterranean offers a timely and original contribution to both policy and academic debates. First, migration partnerships are no longer an exceptional or *ad hoc* response. They have become a *new normal* in the EU and MS migration governance strategies and were identified as key tools by the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2020) and the UN Global Compact on Refugees (2018). Second, migratory flows remain a persistent and dynamic

⁵ *Rapporti sull'implementazione della Cooperazione allo Sviluppo*.

⁶ Formerly Directorate General for Development Cooperation (DGCS).

⁷ To identify migration-related projects, we conducted a qualitative screening of project titles and descriptions. Projects were classified as migration-related if their objectives explicitly referenced migration as a primary or significant component, such as addressing irregular migration, facilitating return and reintegration, improving border management, or promoting legal mobility. For instance, a project like 'Richesse ivoirienne: Socio-economic development and job opportunities in Ivory Coast to stop irregular migration' is officially listed under the 'education' sector, but was included in our migration-related sub-set because it clearly aims to address irregular migration.

Once this sub-set was established, we further coded each project based on the specific migration-related dimensions it covered (e.g., tackling root causes, border control, return and reintegration, asylum, awareness campaigns, etc.). The aim was not to assign each project to a single sub-category, but to identify the range of migration themes addressed by a given initiative, and to assess their frequency and distribution across countries.

⁸ AICS reports do not always provide systematic year-by-year coverage of all implemented programmes and projects.

phenomenon, with movements consistently reaching Italy's⁹ - and more broadly, the EU's - southern frontier. Understanding how Italy engages externally to manage these flows is not only timely, but also essential in exploring patterns of international cooperation and migration diplomacy.

DEPMI represents an innovative effort to systematize and map Italy's external migration policy across a wide geographic area and a high number of partner countries. The project brings both conceptual and empirical innovation. By bridging the political-diplomatic sphere with the often-overlooked area of development cooperation, it integrates two generally disconnected dimensions, thus enabling a more holistic understanding of Italy's external migration governance. Its outputs offer detailed, structured and accessible information as a valuable resource for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike, providing a solid empirical basis for both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The two datasets represent a rare comprehensive stock-taking effort, filling a significant empirical gap and opening new avenues for enquiry into the priorities and tools Italy has used over time. The interactive map provides an innovative and enduring visual interface to explore the geographic and thematic spread of these instruments, while the 28 Country Profiles deliver compact and informative snapshots of bilateral dynamics.

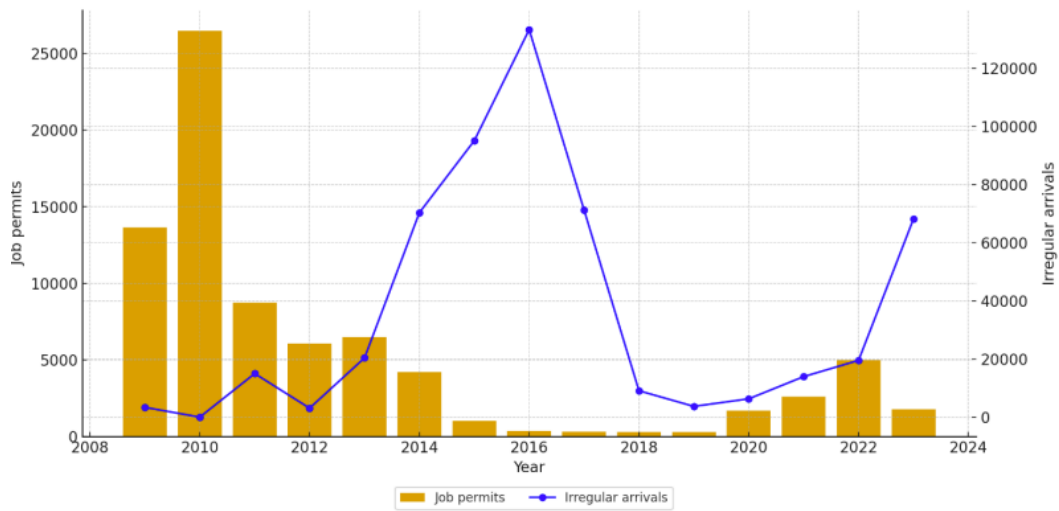
6. Some research findings: Italy' external migration policy in Sub-Saharan Africa

6.1. A comparative qualitative analysis through the DEPMI migration profiles

Drawing on the DEPMI Country Profiles, which reconstruct the migration relevance and cooperation trajectories of each country, several recurring dynamics emerge. While the 13 Sub-Saharan African countries included in the analysis differ considerably in terms of their political and economic contexts, all gained prominence during the so-called 'migration crisis', with significant spikes in irregular arrivals in Italy between 2014 and 2018, particularly from Eritrea and Nigeria. Asylum applications from Sub-Saharan nationals also peaked during this period: between 2016 and 2017, they represented approximately 64% of Italy's total, with Nigeria and The Gambia leading. Although arrivals briefly declined after 2018, irregular movements from Sub-Saharan Africa did not cease; nor were they significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, flows increased after 2020, indicating that the structural drivers of mobility remained unchanged by the health emergency and its inherent restrictions. At the same time, our mapping highlights a sharp reduction in the availability of legal entry channels for nationals of these countries. Since the early 2010s, the number of work permits issued by Italy under the *Decreti Flussi* for regular and seasonal work has declined significantly, (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2012; Fig. 5).

⁹ The data observed in the first months of 2025 confirm this upward trend, with migratory flows remaining consistently high both along traditional routes and through new pathways. See UNHCR Mediterranean situation.

Figure 5. Arrivals from, and Work Permits for, Sub-Saharan Countries to Italy (2009-2023)



Source: Authors' elaboration from ISTAT and FRONTEX data

Moreover, although Sub-Saharan nationals filed most asylum applications during the peak years of the migration crisis, recognition rates remained low, with over 85% of claims from the 13 countries rejected in 2019 alone. Among these, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, and Senegal are considered 'safe countries' by the Italian government,¹⁰ while Cameroon,¹¹ Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger and Nigeria are not (Table 1). Labelling countries as 'safe' has significant implications. Beyond its procedural use, the list has become a strategic tool of unilateral migration governance. While common across Europe and beyond, this approach has faced criticism for its lack of objectivity and overly pragmatic logic (Costello 2016; Ambrosini 2025).

¹⁰ Decree n.249, 24.10.2024.

¹¹ Cameroon and Nigeria were briefly listed as safe countries under Decree No. 105 of 7 May 2024, but were subsequently removed.

Table 1. Sub-Saharan Africa: list of safe country of origin

	Decree 72 – 03/2023	Decree 105 – 05/2024	Decree 249 – 10/2024
Burkina Faso			
Cameroon		X	
Cote d'Ivoire	X	X	X
Eritrea			
Ethiopia			
Gambia (the)	X	X	X
Ghana	X	X	X
Guinea			
Guinea-Bissau			
Mali			
Niger			
Nigeria	X	X	
Senegal	X	X	X

Source: own elaboration.

Looking at Italy's external dimension of migration policy in the region, our findings reveal that migration becomes a more viable and strategic area of bilateral cooperation when built on pre-existing diplomatic and economic relations. Except for Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, which have no long-standing ties to Italy, all the other countries show prior cooperation that facilitated the development of DEPMI-related instruments.

Here, entry quotas for seasonal or non-seasonal employment under the *Decreto Flussi* were strategically used as positive conditionality, functioning as diplomatic leverage and tangible benefits for countries engaging in migration cooperation (Table 2). In many cases, quotas were allocated after the conclusion of migration-related agreements, serving as a *reward*. For example, The Gambia and Ivory Coast received quotas the same year they signed technical cooperation agreements with Italy focused on policing, migrant smuggling, and identification procedures. Niger followed suit, receiving quotas in 2010 after the conclusion of a security agreement. In other instances, Italy used quotas as an *incentive* to encourage cooperation. Ghana was included in the quota system in 2007, three years before a technical agreement was signed in 2010, suggesting that legal entry opportunities were offered to initiate diplomatic dialogue. Similarly, Mali was added in 2017, when political dialogue began, and eventually formalized a bilateral agreement in 2021. Nigeria illustrates a hybrid case: a readmission agreement was signed in 2001, followed by an initial allocation of 500 work permits in the 2002 *Decreto Flussi*.

Notably, the number rose to 1,500 in 2010, just before the agreement officially entered into force, reflecting a mix of incentive and reward logics.

Table 2. Sub-Saharan Africa: list of safe country of origin

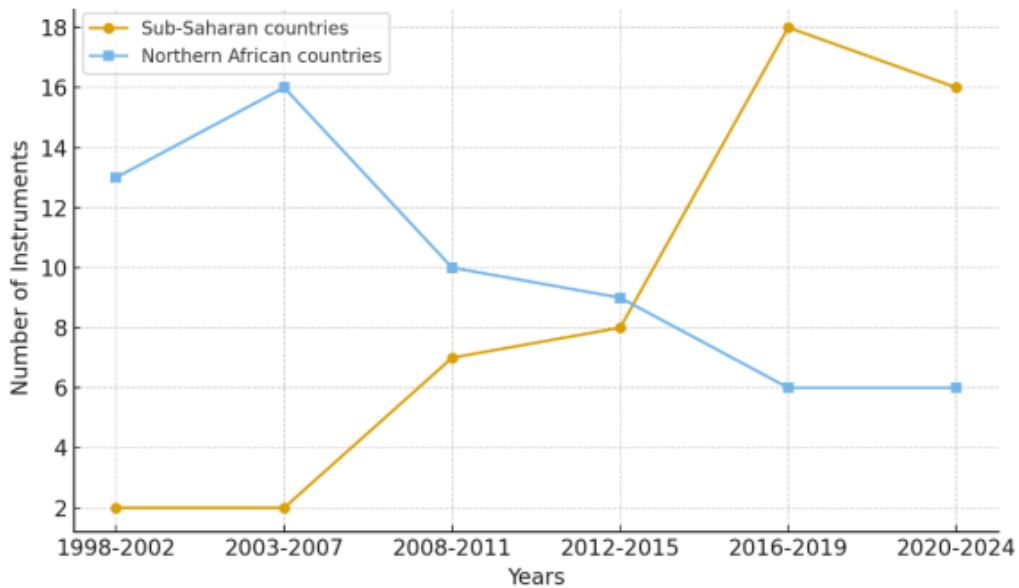
	Quotas (Year)	Agreements potentially linked to Quotas as incentives or rewards
Gambia (The)	2010	Strengthening Police Cooperation in the fight against Migrant Trafficking and Irregular Migration (2010)
Ghana	2007	Technical agreement to enhance police cooperation in the fight against migration, trafficking and terrorism (2010)
Ivory Coast	2015	Technical Agreement of technical assistance and swift identification mechanisms of migrants in the context of return procedures (2015)
Mali	2017	Joint Declaration on migration and Security (2021)
Niger	2010	Cooperation Agreement on Security Matters (2010)

Source: own elaboration.

6.2. A comparative quantitative analysis through the datasets: DEPMI tools

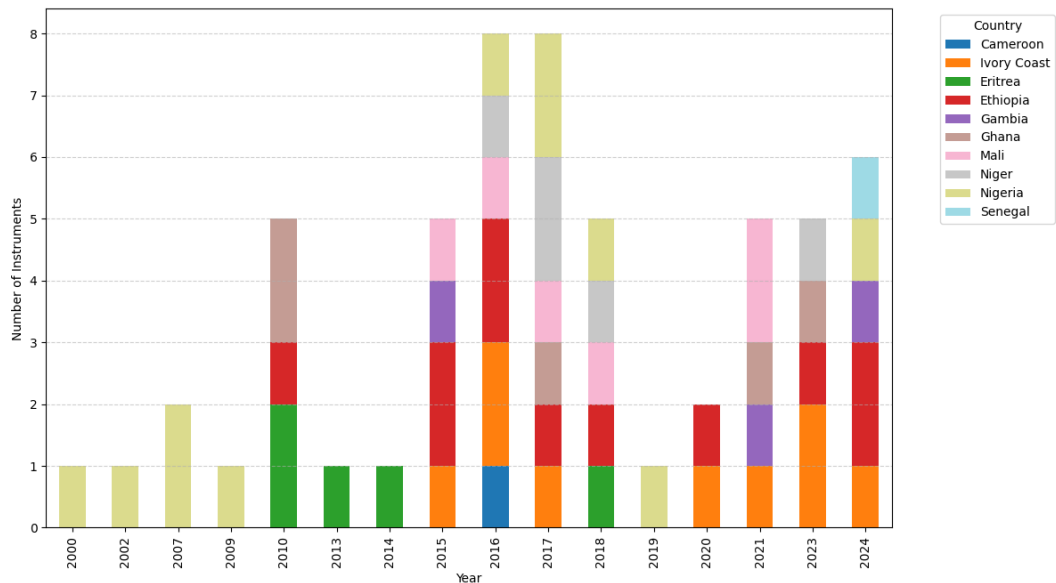
Although Italy’s external migration policy began to take shape in the early 2000s, a comparative analysis of the DEPMI toolbox shows that migration cooperation with Sub-Saharan African countries started to expand more substantially only from the mid-2010s (see Figures 6 and 7 below). During the initial phase of Italy’s externalization strategy, policy tools and agreements were primarily concentrated in geographically proximate regions such as the Western Balkans and North Africa (Rosina and Fontana 2024), as traditional ‘buffer zones’ where multiple new instruments, including readmission agreements, political dialogues, and migration quotas, had already been introduced by the mid-2000s. In contrast, cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa remained marginal throughout the 2000s and only gained traction after 2015, in response to the escalation of irregular migration flows from the region. From 2016 onward, the number of tools deployed in Sub-Saharan Africa increased sharply (Fig. 6), reflecting a clear reorientation of Italy’s external action towards the region. While Nigeria was the first country to engage with Italy, already in the early 2000s, by 2010 cooperation had expanded to include Senegal, Ghana, Niger, and the Gambia. Geographical engagement was further diversified in 2015-17, with the inclusion of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Mali.

Figure 6. Instruments adopted by Italy with Sub-Saharan African countries: evolution over time.



Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

Figure 7. Instruments adopted by Italy with Sub-Saharan African countries: countries involved.



Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

At first glance, the decline in instruments involving North African countries may seem counterintuitive, given the heightened focus on migration during the so-called ‘migration crisis’. This trend, however, reflects both the absence of stable counterparts – such as post-2011 Libya and politically unsettled Tunisia after Ben Ali’s fall, which led Italy to favour more informal instruments (Rosina and Fontana 2024) – and the fact that the figures capture only newly introduced instruments, while many existing ones remain in

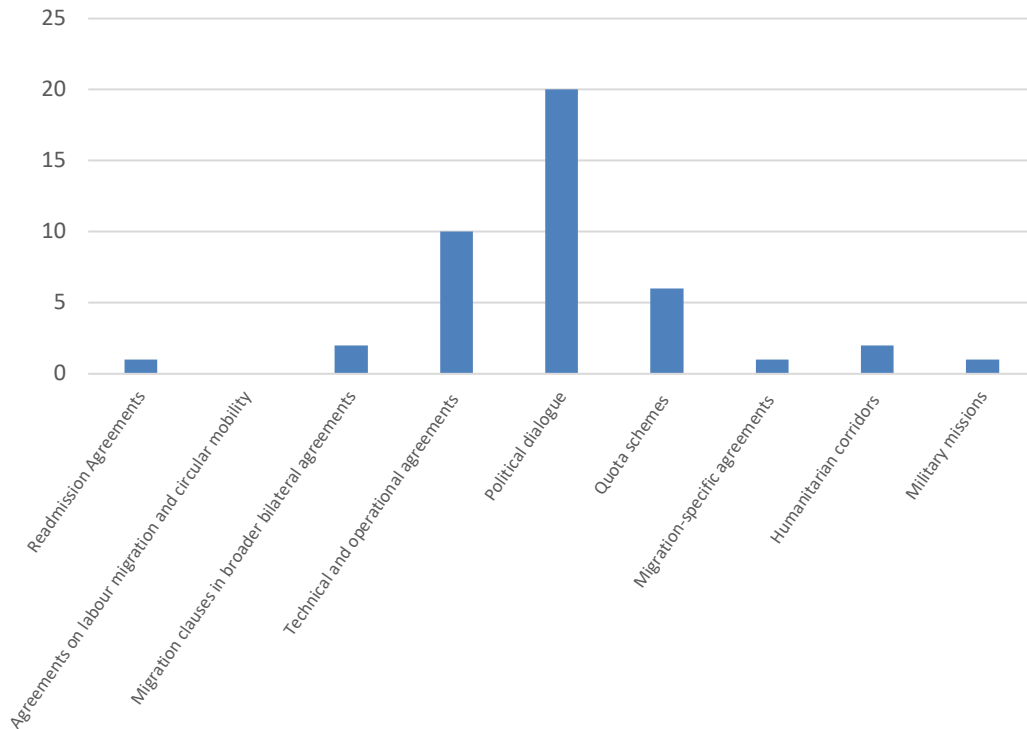
place. Simultaneously, the rising prominence of Sub-Saharan countries signals a broader policy shift toward the origins of migratory flows, showing (a) that Italy's DEPMI is highly responsive to the nature and source of migration and (b) that its externalization strategy is expanding geographically, changing spatial logics of migration containment and enlisting more countries to push Europe's borders farther away.

From a typological perspective, the data indicate a predominance of political dialogue and technical-operational agreements (see Figure 8 below), which together represent the core of Italy's migration cooperation strategy in the region. The high frequency of these two tools highlights a flexible and informal approach, aimed at strengthening partnerships without relying on more rigid or binding legal frameworks. This aligns with Italy's broader preference, since the mid-2010s, for informal tools, leveraged to respond quickly to shifting migratory routes, engage with countries lacking stable governments, and avoid judicial and parliamentary scrutiny (Rosina and Fontana 2024).

Interestingly, no bilateral labour migration agreements were identified with Sub-Saharan African countries, suggesting that legal mobility remains marginal in Italy's cooperation with the region. Instead, references to mobility are mostly limited to the inclusion of Sub-Saharan countries in the annual *Decreti Flussi* or addressed at a discursive level through political dialogue.

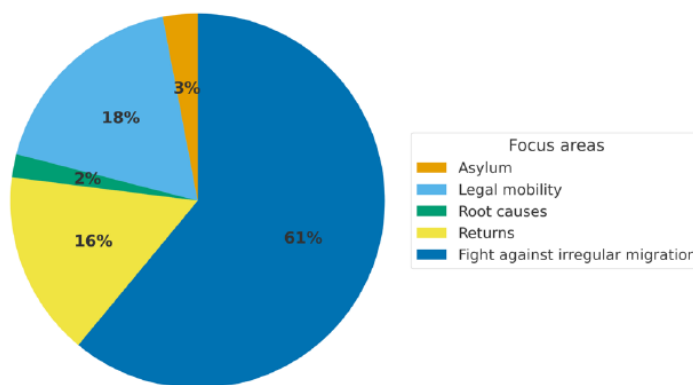
Similarly, readmission agreements are rare, with Nigeria being the only country in the region with a formal agreement in place (2000). However, return is often addressed indirectly through broader technical cooperation protocols, such as those concerning police collaboration, border management, and training. Indeed, a breakdown of thematic areas illustrates that combating irregular migration and enabling returns remain a strategic focus (see Figure 9 below). Not only do 16% of instruments address returns, but nearly two-thirds (61%) focus on preventing irregular departures. By contrast, only 18% refer to legal mobility, and even then, the absence of formal labour migration agreements casts doubts about their practical significance. Just 2% and 3% of tools address asylum and the root causes of migration, respectively (Figure 9). Overall, these figures confirm the centrality of containment strategies in Italy's external migration policy.

Figure 8. Type of instruments adopted in Sub-Saharan Africa.



Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

Figure 9. Instruments adopted in Sub-Saharan Africa: main focus areas.



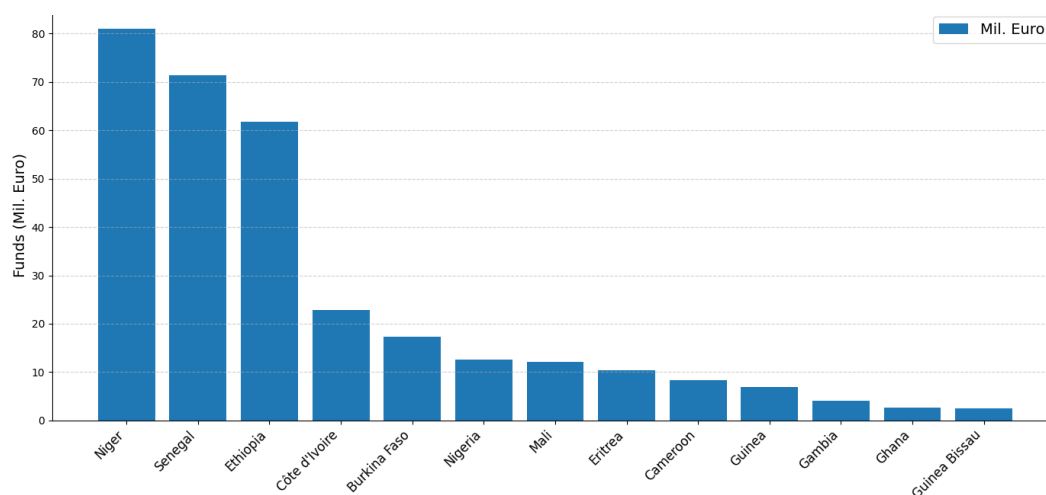
Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

6.3. A comparative quantitative analysis through the datasets: DEPMI development cooperation

This section draws on a subset of the DEPMI development cooperation dataset, specifically focusing on migration-related projects funded by Italy in the 13 Sub-Saharan African countries examined. Overall, between 2001 and 2023, Italy invested over €259

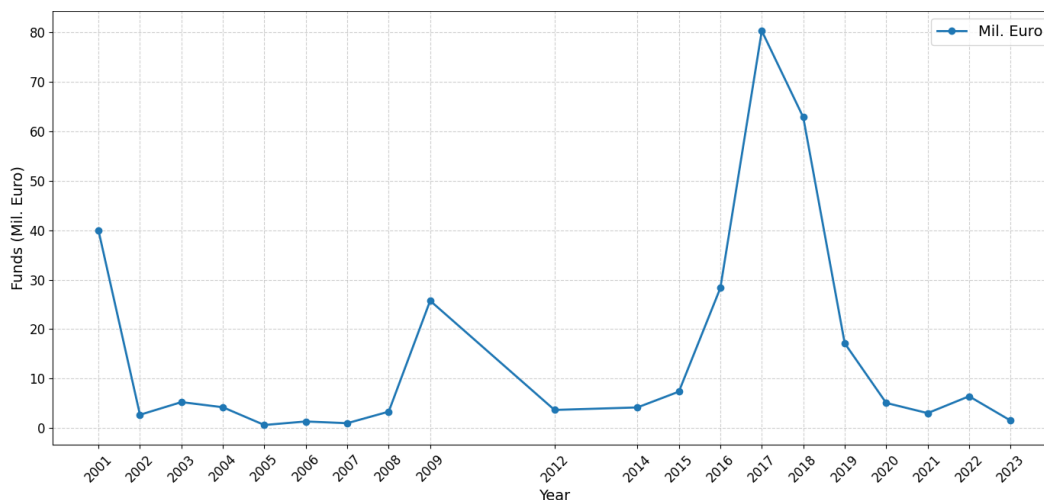
million in migration-related development projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of this funding was delivered during the years of the migration crisis, particularly between 2016 and 2017 (Figure 11). The two largest recipients in this regard were Niger and Senegal (Figure 10), which alone accounted for more than half of the total funding allocated in the region. Interestingly, while we initially expected development cooperation on migration to align closely with formal frameworks of political and diplomatic cooperation, such as bilateral agreements or structured dialogues, based on the assumption that migration tools are typically embedded within broader cooperative frameworks (Cassarino 2010), the data suggest this correlation is not always consistent. In several cases where bilateral political engagement was limited or absent, development cooperation emerged as an alternative pragmatic entry point for advancing collaboration on migration governance. Burkina Faso is emblematic in this regard. Despite the lack of formal migration agreements or structured dialogue with Italy, it received substantial migration-related development assistance and ranked fifth among Sub-Saharan countries in terms of allocated funds. Over 65% of this assistance targeted the root causes of migration. Moreover, in 2022, in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs funded a new regional programme to combat transnational organized crime, aiming to improve border management and strengthen community resilience.¹² This suggests that development cooperation can function as an alternative channel for migration governance, especially where political agreements are limited or unfeasible.

Figure 10. Italy's migration-related funds (Mil. €) in Sub-Saharan Africa (2001-2023): Country distribution.



Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

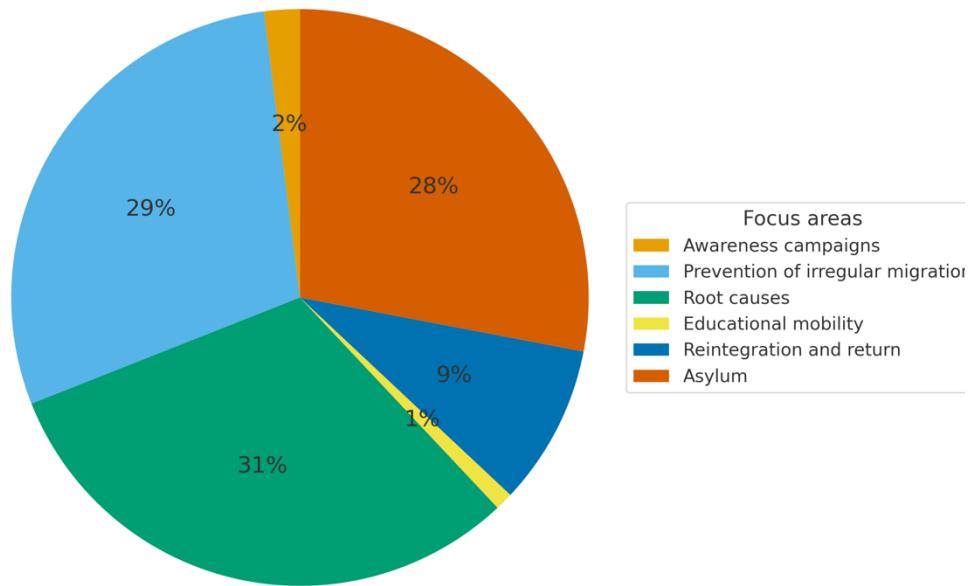
¹² <https://niger.iom.int/news/iom-launches-new-italian-funded-project-combat-transnational-crime-burkina-faso-mali-and-niger>

Figure 11. Evolution of Italy's migration-related funds (Mil. €) in Sub-Saharan Africa (2001-2023).

Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

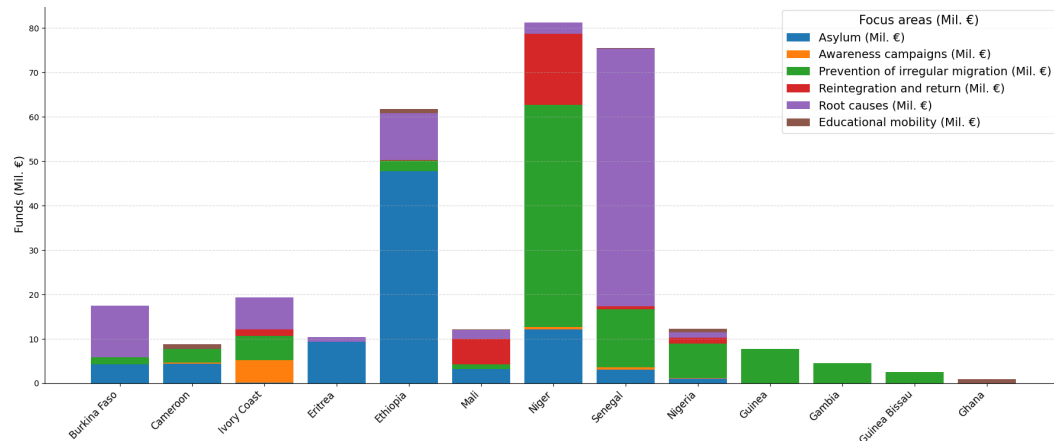
Looking at the thematic distribution of funds, the prevention of irregular migration (including border control and training of border personnel in third countries) and addressing the root causes of migration, represent the two most prominent focus areas, accounting for 29% and 31%, respectively, of the projects in the DEPMI development dataset (Figure 12). In Niger, most projects fall under the 'prevention of irregular migration' category, consistent with the country's strategic role as a transit hub for the Central Mediterranean route. Senegal is instead the country with a majority of projects aimed at addressing the root causes of migration, in line with its growing role as a country of origin for migrants arriving in Italy. Finally, 28% of migration-related development cooperation focused on international protection, mainly in the form of support to refugees and displaced populations in countries of first reception. These projects are mostly concentrated in Eritrea and Ethiopia, which continue to face large-scale displacement and humanitarian challenges (Figure 13).

Figure 12. Thematic focus areas, of Italy's migration-related development cooperation (2001-2023).



Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

Figure 13. Thematic focus per country of Italy's migration-related development cooperation (2001-2023).



Source: Authors' elaboration from DEPMI Dataset.

7. Conclusions

The DEPMI project provides a comprehensive and unprecedented overview of Italy's external migration policy, shedding light on the wide array of instruments and strategies deployed beyond the EU framework. By systematically mapping and classifying Italy's cooperation instruments with 28 countries spanning North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia between 2000 and 2024, it serves as a critical resource for understanding the trajectory of Italy's external migration governance. It reveals the geographic breadth, evolving priorities, and operational complexity of Italy's engagement on migration. It also illustrates how Italy has progressively institutionalized

and expanded its externalization strategy, through a structured and diversified set of tools.

One of DEPMI's key contributions is the creation of two original datasets: the DEPMI toolbox dataset, comprising over 140 bilateral agreements and migration-related instruments, and the development cooperation dataset, cataloguing more than 1,800 projects that explore development as an alternative or complementary strategy of migration governance. Together, these datasets provide an innovative empirical foundation for research and policymaking, supporting both longitudinal and cross-country comparative analyses. They also offer a replicable methodology for investigating other national contexts, yielding valuable insights into migration diplomacy and its underlying instruments.

The case of Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly illustrative. Findings show that Italy's engagement with the region has become increasingly central within the DEPMI framework. Once peripheral, Sub-Saharan countries have gradually moved to the forefront of Italy's external action, emerging as key partners in managing migration flows originating from the region. Nearly two-thirds of DEPMI tools targeted irregular migration, while returns also emerged as a significant focus of Italy's negotiations, though only one formal return agreement was ultimately concluded. More broadly, Italy's DEPMI engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa has relied heavily on informal and flexible instruments, such as political dialogue and technical or operational agreements, allowing for rapid responses to evolving migration routes and regional instability. This has contributed to the growing informalization of Italy's external migration governance in the region (and beyond). At the same time, development cooperation has complemented political tools, with most funds targeting the fight against irregular migration and its root causes.

Alongside the datasets, the 28 DEPMI Country Profiles offer concise and systematic overviews of Italy's bilateral cooperation with each partner country, integrating insights on migration trends and each country's 'migratory relevance' to Italy. In so doing, they highlight a recurring pattern: when legal migration channels are restricted or closed, irregular arrivals tend to increase, underscoring not only the interconnectedness of regular and irregular mobility, but also the functional link between the tools designed to manage them. Indeed, legal mobility, far from being detached from control objectives, has been strategically employed as diplomatic leverage to foster cooperation and incentivize bilateral engagement on return and enforcement measures. The DEPMI profiles support both academic enquiry and policy reflection by revealing the complex interplay of migration drivers and of the different strands of migration governance.

Finally, the interactive map provides a new visual tool that complements the datasets and country profiles in a highly intuitive format.

Looking ahead, DEPMI also opens avenues for further research, including investigating how Italy's domestic labour needs interact with its external migration policy, and to what extent legal entry channels align (or not) with broader foreign policy goals.

Overall, despite the predominant focus of the literature on the externalization of migration at the EU level (Niemann and Zaun 2023; Reslow 2017, 2019; Geddes *et al.* 2020), the project's findings through the case of Italy confirm that MS' external migration governance is not marginal or dependent on the EU, but a strategic, autonomous

pillar of their own foreign policy. The project's outputs fill a critical empirical gap and offer valuable theoretical and empirical resources for research on migration diplomacy. By systematically mapping Italy's instruments, partners and thematic focus, the project demonstrates how migration has become a central tool in shaping its international relations. DEPMI's outputs provide robust data that enable both comparative analyses and nuanced case studies. They also offer valuable theoretical and empirical resources to advance research on externalization and migration diplomacy, informing debates on external migration policy, the politics of partnerships with countries of origin and transit, and the interplay between domestic priorities and international engagement.

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