BANCA D'ITALIA
EUROSISTEMA

Africa Growth and Opportunity: Research in Action Conference

Building Skills for Africa's Home-Grown Development

Introductory remarks by Paolo Angelini
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Palermo, Palazzo dei Normanni, October 26-27, 2026

1. Introduction[1]

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to open the second Agorà Conference. This meeting reflects the ongoing partnership between the Bank of Italy, the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Italian Hub of the World Bank Group, whose aim is to promote policy-oriented research cooperation between Italy and Africa.

Our last conference focused on physical infrastructure for energy, a necessary component to put Africa on a sustainable growth path, and on the catalytic role which international cooperation initiatives, such as Mission 300[2] and Italy's Mattei Plan, can play in this field.

This year our main focus is on another necessary component, skills for workers. Africa's labour force reached 600 million in 2025 and continues to expand rapidly; it is estimated to more than double by 2050.[3] Creating employment opportunities for these people represents a huge challenge, but also – in an era of ageing and declining populations worldwide – a great opportunity to turn the Continent into a global economic engine. To reap this demographic dividend, it is essential to provide young Africans with the know-how required to make the most of today's production technologies. Infrastructure and technology can create opportunities, but it is human capital that determines whether those opportunities translate into lasting productivity gains, quality jobs and economic growth.

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1 I wish to thank Matteo Bugamelli, Angelo Cicogna, Riccardo Cristadoro, Angelica Pizzini and Riccardo Settimo for their comments and contributions.

2 Through Mission 300, the World Bank Group and the African Development Bank Group aim to bring electricity to 300 million Africans by 2030. The initiative translates financial and reform commitments into implementation through national energy compacts, economy-wide reforms, investment programs, technical assistance, and private sector mobilization.

3 World Bank, Making Industrial Policy Work in Africa. Africa Economic Update, April 2026. World Bank, Washington DC.

In my brief remarks I shall argue that energy, AI and labour skills are all parts of a broad canvas that need to come together if we are to make progress.

2. Energy and AI: access, investment and skills

In 2024, nearly 600 million people in Africa lacked access to electricity. Since then, initiatives under the aegis of Mission 300 have already brought electricity to around 60 million people across 40 countries.[4] Projects so far co-financed through Italy's Mattei Plan are expected to provide access to nearly 9 million Africans by 2030.

The pace of progress is encouraging, but much remains to be done before reliable and affordable power is brought to all Africans.

Financing remains a major obstacle. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), financing costs for clean energy projects in Africa are two to three times higher than in advanced economies and China. This differential largely reflects economy-wide risks like macroeconomic and political fragilities, as well as weaknesses in regulatory and institutional frameworks, rather than factors specific to the energy sector.[5]

There is no easy solution to this problem. Development banks can help reduce financing costs and mobilise private investment, but much is in the hands of African governments, who are responsible for adopting the policies and structural reforms capable of reducing the risk premium.

Scarcity of qualified labour is another obstacle. Adequate technical skills are needed for firms in the energy field, as well as for government agencies and intermediaries to assess projects. Without a well-trained workforce finance is harder and more costly to obtain, and viable projects may never reach the implementation stage. Skills development is both a consequence of investment and a condition for attracting it.

Training institutions should therefore work closely with firms to identify and respond to demand for skills emerging across the entire life cycle of energy infrastructure investment projects.[6] Success should be measured not only by how many people are trained, but also by whether they find productive employment.

Here too, Mission 300 and the Mattei Plan play a role. The Mission 300 Fellowship, for example, began deploying African energy professionals to government ministries and agencies in October 2025.[7] One of the six pillars of the Mattei Plan is devoted to education and training. Last June, the Plan's Task Force and Enel Foundation agreed

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4 A. Banga, Remarks by World Bank Group President at the 2026 Annual Meetings Plenary, 16 October 2026, Bangkok.

5 IEA and African Development Bank (2023), Financing Clean Energy in Africa, p. 28. The cost-of-capital comparison draws on survey evidence and stakeholder interviews; conditions differ across countries and projects.

6 IEA, Africa Energy Outlook 2022, pp. 196-198.

7 World Bank Group, Powering the Future: How African Energy Fellows Are Accelerating Mission 300 – CoAction Global and a New Model of Impact, Feature, 9 April 2026.

on a MoU to provide energy training in Africa, building on several initiatives already undertaken in this field.[8] For instance, the Terna Innovation Zone in Tunisia combines specialist training, technology transfer and support for innovation in the energy sector.[9]

The same link between infrastructure and the skills needed to use it apply to artificial intelligence. For a data centre, access to reliable electricity is a precondition, but realizing its full benefits also requires that workers in firms and government agencies are able to use its applications.

AI is poised to automate some tasks currently performed by workers as well as to create new ones that complement workers' capabilities. The balance between these two effects will determine the impact of AI adoption on labour demand and on the sectoral distribution of productivity gains. Higher productivity does not automatically translate into more or better jobs. Differences in countries' capacity to adopt and adapt to AI may therefore close or widen existing economic gaps.[10]

There is still wide uncertainty about these effects. What is certain is that powerful economic forces are propelling this technology, and will promote adoption wherever it promises to deliver cost-effective benefits for users. Therefore, there seems to be no alternative to developing a strategy to make the most of AI.

For Africa, and probably for Europe as well, the immediate priority is not to compete in developing frontier models, or to reproduce every layer of the AI technology stack, but rather to adopt existing technologies effectively and at an appropriate pace.

In Africa, AI tools need to be adapted to local languages, institutions and business practices, and to environments where electricity, connectivity and computing capacity may remain uneven for some time. Indeed, not every useful application needs large data centres or continuous high-speed connections.[11] Across Africa, we already see considerable ingenuity in adapting to local constraints. For example, in East Africa an offline smartphone tool has been used to help diagnose crop diseases.[12] In Ghana, a mathematics tutor has been shown to deliver learning gains equivalent to an additional year of schooling through simple text exchanges on basic mobile

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8 See Piano Mattei per l'Africa – Terza Relazione Annuale al Parlamento, July 2026.

9 Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Piano Mattei per l'Africa, project sheet: "Terna Innovation Zone".

10 F. Panetta, The challenge of innovation, Kyiv, 21 September 2026, pp. 5-6. See also World Bank, World Development Report 2026: The Promise of Artificial Intelligence, Overview and Chapter 1.

11 World Bank, World Development Report 2026: The Promise of Artificial Intelligence, Chapter 3, pp. 83-99, and Spotlight 1, pp. 101-103; African Union Commission, Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024, pp. 3-4, 27-28 and 44-47. These sources link local data and technical capacity with energy, connectivity, skills and institutions.

12 L.M. Mrisho et al., Accuracy of a Smartphone-Based Object Detection Model, PlantVillage Nuru, in Identifying the Foliar Symptoms of the Viral Diseases of Cassava-CMD and CBSD, Frontiers in Plant Science, vol. 11, 2020. The application operates offline. On technological self-sufficiency and dependency risks, see World Bank, World Development Report 2026, Chapters 2 and 6.

devices.[13] These instances show that technology can bring useful outcomes even within the limits of currently available infrastructure, and can help overcome some of these constraints.

AI can also strengthen education and training systems themselves, for example by supporting teachers and expanding access to knowledge. Yet, digital skills alone are not enough: literacy, numeracy and problem-solving remain essential for adapting to technological change.

Returning to the energy sector, AI can also help manage the energy systems on which it depends, by improving forecasts of renewable generation, fault detection and grid expansion planning. The results from the IEA 2025 survey of energy companies emphasize once more the importance of training: insufficient internal digital skills were the leading barrier to the adoption of AI in the sector.[14]

Beyond these initial applications, effective AI adoption also requires attention to the quality and availability of data. As data are the fuel of AI, the challenge is to collect more data – by digitizing existing paper documents and acquiring new sources – and to ensure that they are relevant, reliable, up to date and secure.

3. Conclusion

Infrastructure – for energy and for AI – and labour skills must grow together to sustain economic development in Africa, which has to be home-grown, as the title of our Conference underlines, but can benefit from well-targeted cooperation initiatives, such as the ones discussed at Agorà.

Going forward, I believe that we should strive to exploit this Conference's potential as a catalyst for cooperation initiatives that support development. As the Italian Hub of the World Bank expands beyond research, Agorà could evolve into a regular forum where the World Bank, the Bank of Italy, the Ministry of Economy and Finance, and our African friends jointly take stock of progress made and discuss future directions.

We could organize the next meetings around two simple sets of questions. Looking backward, what has been achieved since the previous Conference? Which projects have advanced, which have stalled, and what have we learned from these experiences? Have investments translated into job-relevant skills, higher productivity and better jobs? Looking forward: what new ideas and programmes should be developed over the following year or two? What research projects could be most useful in supporting these efforts?

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13 O. Henkel, H. Horne-Robinson, N. Kozhakhmetova and A. Lee, Effective and Scalable Math Support: Experimental Evidence on the Impact of an AI-Math Tutor in Ghana, AIED, 2024; World Bank, World Development Report 2026: The Promise of Artificial Intelligence, Spotlight 1, p. 103.

14 IEA (2025), Energy and AI, pp. 235-236; IEA (2026), Key Questions on Energy and AI, pp. 10, 78-79 and 82-85. The digital-skills finding concerns energy companies in the IEA Industry Employment Survey 2025. The report projects global data-centre electricity use at about 950 TWh in 2030, up from 485 TWh in 2025; these figures cover all data centres, not AI alone.

This would boost Agorà's potential as a policy-relevant research venue and a platform to review project implementation, identify bottlenecks and define priorities for the next phase.

Let's keep working together, so that when we meet again we can review a list of achievements and discuss new ideas to forge ahead.

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