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**Education, Equity and Growth.**

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The issues we are debating about today are at the heart of the Italian Government programme, since its coming to power one year ago, in order to match the European development strategy – the so called Lisbon Strategy – with the role of the State, the welfare policies and the universal citizenship rights.

The key issue is how to implement the ethical and political principle whereby all Human Beings have equal social dignity and equal rights, without discriminations related to race, religion, gender, social status or sexual orientation. This is a principle we have inherited from the illuminist culture, which the industrial society has translated into a development concept which should warrant prosperity for all.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the concept of “equal rights for all” - not quite as a kind concession of the governments but as a necessary precondition to progress - was solemnly integrated by the States in their national Constitutions and in their international engagements, at a formal level. However, at the factual level, the concept of “substantial equality of all” is always challenged by the dynamics of the economic development.

This calls for a fundamental change of the socio-economic paradigm, this calls for a new policy which can tie together a new economy, a new society and a new environmental quality.

Thus, we need a new development model, which includes policies for full and quality employment, for redistribution of incomes and revenues for social quality. We need a new development model which must be guided by the principles of laicism and universalism - distinctive cultural traits of the European culture – and which must honor the arduous achievements of equality and solidarity in the living and working environments.

As a matter of fact we strongly believe that employment, human rights and development are intertwined and in order to give substance to this belief we need to reinvent the concept of development and the concept of equality.

The concept of equality demands a profound connection with the concept of liberty, which should be interpreted as freedom of choice between a number of possible life options. “Equality cannot and should not be related uniquely to individual income levels or to national gross products” (quote from Amartya Sen).

The quality of the new economy is based upon knowledge and innovation. Our objective is to reinstate knowledge and wisdom at the heart of policy making, at the heart of economy and society; our objective is to leverage development through interaction and dialogue between different cultures.

The challenge of development requires that we invest more, not just in scientific research but also that we promote the diffusion of education among the citizens.

We must aim at a school-concept which is a natural place for integration, where diversity is a value and where discrimination and prejudice are banned; a quality-school which must be public, and inclusive, a school which is a guarantee of democracy and does not leave anyone behind.

Our society is a society of information and of cultural pluralism and the school must be the pillar of the citizen's education system, giving room to different learning patterns, granting opportunities to everyone's talents. Lifelong learning and education are necessary conditions to achieve equity, social inclusion, and a better quality of living for men and women.

We are sure that a crucial step of modern society is the rights and dignity of women and children as a precondition for dignity and well-being for all mankind. Substantive equal rights for men and women are an essential condition for a development path which takes into consideration the aspirations of all persons rather than a subset of privileged ones.

After the Peking Conference, which has qualified women's rights as human rights, we have acquired ever stronger evidence that including gender difference in Government does not mean only adding a new partner around the decisions' table, but it means rewriting the rules of policy making and set up new patterns of social behavior.

Economic precariousness as much as intolerance and repression, underdevelopment as much as despotism in old and new fashions are still around us; that's why all policies which combat racism, homophobic and gender discriminations must be considered as components of the policy for development. This also applies to the laws protecting women against violence and policies which grant social status to the informal unions, including those between homosexuals.

2005 is the year which marked the beginning of the Education Decade for a sustainable development, a crucial opportunity for further advancement towards a sustainable World. Sustainable development was defined as a development kind which meets the present needs without compromising the rights of the future generations to satisfy theirs. It touches such diverse aspects as peace, environmental integrity and human rights and it requires from all of us responsible for policy making to reinvent the concept of "progress".