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# NARRATIVES OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

*Principles and recommendations aimed at strengthening the legitimacy, public understanding, and advocacy capacity of international cooperation in Spain.*

March, 2026

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Spanish Network for Sustainable Development (REDS-SDSN Spain)

[www.reds-sdsn.es](http://www.reds-sdsn.es)

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## About REDS-SDSN Spain

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) is a global initiative launched to mobilise the expertise and resources of academia, civil society, and the private sector to provide solutions for sustainable development at the local, national, and global levels.

The Spanish Network for Sustainable Development (REDS-SDSN Spain) is the national chapter of SDSN in Spain. This association drives partnerships and public policy actions to advance the Sustainable Development Goals in urban and rural settings.

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## PROLOGUE

The reflection and dialogue process on cooperation narratives undertaken by the Spanish Network for Sustainable Development (REDS-SDSN Spain), with the support of the State Secretariat for International Cooperation, provides valuable guidance on possible pathways to continue explaining Spanish Cooperation's actions more and better.

This report invites us to explain better how international cooperation, in addition to channelling the solidarity of Spanish citizens, is a key tool for pursuing shared benefits in an interdependent world facing inevitable transnational threats and challenges. It urges us to better combine the technical rigour with which we implement sustainable development cooperation policy with the sharing of real human stories behind our actions, as an irreplaceable means of better demonstrating the impact of what we do in a way more capable of generating closeness and a sense of social utility, even among those least familiar with the work of Spanish cooperation. It also proposes exploring new cultural formats and narrative innovation as strategic tools, fully incorporating young people as active agents in building new narratives, enabling new spaces for listening and dialogue, and developing proactive strategies against disinformation grounded in transparency and informational clarity.

The double crisis we currently face — of multilateralism and international law on the one hand, and of international cooperation on the other — reveals in a particularly stark way a deeper reality that it is imperative to address: we have taken for granted a series of basic consensuses, believing them to be already consolidated, immovable agreements, and we have underestimated the expansive force of certain actors' attempts to erode the foundations of democracy, equality and human rights. Today it is urgent to recall that social achievements are not immovable, and that it is necessary to keep advancing and protecting them always to preserve and renew the basic social contracts that guarantee social cohesion and justice, equity and respect for diversity, and, ultimately, policies aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for a dignified life for all people, here and in every corner of the planet.

And it is urgent to do so from a place of continuous improvement and renewed commitment.

Continuous improvement because, beyond the organised interests seeking to impose the law of the strongest upon the rights of the most vulnerable, it is essential to move forward together with citizens' full conviction about the purpose and objectives, the effectiveness and impact of certain public policies which it is our obligation to address, from maximum transparency and democratic commitment to accountability. Also, from the understanding that the ways of sharing, communicating, and explaining must be updated, in substance and form, to continue connecting effectively and intergenerationally with the diversity of a plural

society like Spain's. But also from commitment: a clear commitment to values — empathy, respect, dialogue, peace, solidarity, sustainability — more relevant than ever, and to principles and frameworks of action — equality, human rights, international cooperation — firmly anchored in our constitutional order and which, despite the noise of a strident minority, have been and continue to be those of the vast majority of Spanish society.

I therefore wish to thank REDS-SDSN Spain for their collaboration in feeding, enriching and disseminating the generation of new narratives. Reiterating the firm commitment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation to the ongoing strengthening and improvement of all channels of information, dialogue and communication with citizens, from a vocation of public service and the conviction that cooperation for sustainable development contributes undeniably to the improvement of living conditions in the countries with which we work, but also for all Spanish people.



**Eva Granados Galiano**

State Secretary for International Cooperation  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Towards a new narrative of Spanish cooperation for sustainable development

This report presents a strategic framework for renewing the international cooperation narrative in Spain through communication grounded in global justice and interdependence. In the context of multidimensional crises, the document establishes that narrative is not an accessory element but a fundamental political tool for ensuring democratic support for sustainable development cooperation within the framework of Spain's external action.

The core proposals are organised around a ten-point set of practical solutions designed to transform public perception:



I. *Build a narrative of international cooperation based on interdependence and shared benefits.*



II. *Prioritise concrete, tangible, and understandable messages, combining technical rigour with human stories that generate closeness and a sense of social utility.*



III. *Position education for sustainable development and global citizenship as a strategic space for working in a sustainable way on these new narratives.*



IV. *Strengthen the role of local governments and regional cooperation agencies as key actors for translating global accounts into citizens' everyday context.*



V. *Deliberately diversify the spokespeople for international cooperation.*



VI. *Explore new cultural and narrative formats as strategic, not accessory, tools.*



VII. *Position young people as active agents in constructing new narratives, displacing the more common view that frames them as a target audience.*



VIII. *Enable spaces for listening and dialogue with unconvinced citizens.*



IX. *Communicate cooperation through a holistic, coherent vision, avoiding fragmented narratives focused on isolated projects.*



X. *Develop proactive strategies against disinformation based on transparency, clarity, and the anticipation of critical discourse.*

It is proposed to replace the concept of 'aid' with that of interdependence, building a narrative based on shared benefits amid global challenges, in line with the already established conceptual frameworks of Spain's public policy on international cooperation for sustainable development. To make this idea concrete, the emphasis is on tangible, understandable messages that combine technical rigour with human stories that foster closeness without falling into victimhood, restoring agency to the protagonists in the partner countries of Spanish Cooperation.

In a complementary way, the document advocates diversifying spokespeople, prioritising the voices of local leaders and partner organisations to ensure a horizontal and authentic narrative. This shift in approach is supported by the role of local governments and young people as active agents, capable of translating major international challenges into the everyday context of citizens. To broaden its reach, the report urges exploring innovative formats in culture and digital communication to facilitate dialogue with unconvinced citizens and neutralise hate speech and disinformation through transparency and anticipation.

The report concludes that improving the effectiveness of cooperation is inseparable from an education for sustainable development that fosters co-responsibility. By promoting a holistic and coherent vision of public policies, Spanish cooperation is presented not as a response to isolated emergencies, but as a stable investment in the architecture of global peace and justice.

The implementation of these narrative solutions will thus enable the consolidation of a renewed social contract between institutions and a critical citizenry committed to the challenges of the 21st century.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Why talk today about the narratives of international cooperation for sustainable development

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Over the past decade, Spanish society has faced a series of crises, from the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic and social consequences to the escalation and intensification of international conflicts. This chain of crises has generated a sense of permanent instability that, in itself, acts as a factor of democratic fatigue. When the context is perceived as chaotic and responses as insufficient, the idea takes hold that 'something is not working', even if it is not always clear where ultimate responsibility lies.

In this scenario, public institutions tend to become the main object of questioning, with this distrust extending to the public policies they promote. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that a section of the public perceives that institutions are not adequately responding to their needs and, on the other, to a widespread lack of knowledge about the real scope of their competencies and limitations. This combination of frustration and disinformation weakens the bond between citizens and public action.

This perceived distance from institutions can translate into an increasingly critical view of public spending and its impact on individual well-being. A growing section of the public perceives the effects of public policies from an immediate and utilitarian perspective, formulated in terms of direct benefit: 'how does this affect me, here and now?'. Under this lens, policies with indirect, medium, or long-term impacts, or whose scope extends beyond national borders — such as international cooperation and sustainable development policies — tend to be perceived as secondary or dispensable, even when they are still valued positively in ethical and moral terms. As a consequence, fertile ground is created for polarisation and the diffusion of simplified or openly disinforming accounts. When people do not understand how public policies work, who makes decisions, what results they generate or why they are relevant to the daily lives of Spanish citizens, these policies risk becoming easy targets for discourses that present them as ideological luxuries, impositions or initiatives disconnected from social reality.

This perception is reinforced by political and media discourse that reduces the notion of efficiency to a strictly economic reading, in which public spending is conceived as a cost rather than a collective investment. From this logic, international cooperation is questioned less for its objectives than for its supposed inefficiency, complexity or distance from citizens' so-called 'real priorities'. It is not so much a question of abandoning values such as solidarity or global justice, but of a

growing competition between these values and narrative frameworks centred on austerity, competition and the prioritisation of the national.

In parallel with these discourses, accounts that directly and explicitly question sustainable development and cooperation policies have gained ground and are being progressively adopted by a section of the public. In this context, much of the challenge facing international cooperation is not only one of political opposition or budgetary scarcity, but also of narrative. The difficulty lies not only in which policies are pursued, but also in how they are explained, from which frameworks they draw on, and how well they connect with citizens' real concerns.

Addressing today the review and specialisation of international cooperation narratives is not an accessory exercise, but a **necessary condition for its present and future legitimacy and sustainability.**

## 1.2. REDS-SDSN Spain and the narratives for sustainable development

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Beyond the field of cooperation, the rise of denialist and disinformation discourses has become a direct threat to sustainable development policies aimed at social well-being and environmental protection. Attacks on the 2030 Agenda, amplified on social networks, in certain political discourses or even in social mobilisations, reveal the fragility of a framework that, despite its ambition, is not being understood or integrated by broad sectors of the public.

Starting from this situation, in 2024, thanks to the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, REDS-SDSN Spain began to address, in a systematic way, the area of new narratives to identify alternative ways of telling the story of the 2030 Agenda in a clearer, closer and more innovative way. It is necessary to explain its meaning and utility in a way different from how it has been done since 2015: reducing the weight of technical language and focusing on its impact on people's daily lives, with special attention to personal testimonies and the narrative's emotional elements. It is not just about defending the 2030 Agenda, but about making it understandable and relevant.

To materialise this idea, a structured dialogue process was launched in three sessions, bringing together more than 60 representatives of public administrations at different levels, the private sector, civil society, and academia. Throughout this journey, a critical analysis was conducted of how the 2030 Agenda had been communicated since its adoption in 2015, how its public perception had evolved in Spain, and which narrative challenges needed to be addressed to reinforce its legitimacy.

The result was a report with nine concrete proposals to improve the way in which the 2030 Agenda is explained, in the final period before its deadline. These proposals advocate, in essence, for broadening the voices present in the public conversation, incorporating culture and humour as vehicles for conveying messages, and building accounts with greater capacity to generate emotional connection.



In the image, a new narrative about the 2030 Agenda. Source: Author's own work

Two key learnings emerged from this process:

- First, the **disconnection of a significant section of young people from sustainable development**. In response, REDS-SDSN Spain promoted the launch of the Jóvenes 2030: Creando el Futuro initiative, aimed at positioning young people across the country as protagonists and ambassadors of new narratives.
- Second, the **need to translate the process's conclusions and proposals into other areas of sustainable development, especially those most exposed to public contestation**. International cooperation, increasingly questioned and simplified in public debate, was identified as one of the main spaces where this work was most urgent.

From this trajectory and accumulated learning, the present report emerges, which analyses and reflects on the narratives of international cooperation in Spain at a critical moment for its social legitimacy.

## 1.3. Objectives and methodology

This publication aims to formulate concrete proposals for **building a narrative on international cooperation that better connects with Spanish citizens**, through messages and formats that are clearer, easier to understand, and more capable of generating greater social engagement. It analyses the predominant accounts around international cooperation, the main communicative challenges it faces and the current context of cooperation at national and international level, with special attention to the recent Law on Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity and the Spanish Cooperation Director's Plan.

The essence of this document lies in the participatory process activated by REDS-SDSN Spain with the Spanish cooperation ecosystem. In the first instance, an open in-person session was held that combined the presentation of key evidence on the state of international cooperation with a multi-actor dialogue aimed at identifying the main current narrative challenges. This session allowed the debate to be contextualised, diagnoses to be shared, and both consensus and dissent among actors with diverse responsibilities, approaches and experiences to be made visible.

*From the contributions and ideas gathered during the first session, the following consensus areas have been identified regarding what a new narrative for international cooperation should look like*



*In the image above, the main consensus points from the first session of the itinerary on what a new narrative for international cooperation should look like. Source: author's own elaboration.*

Subsequently, a second session was held with a more operational approach oriented towards collective work. This space deepened the ideas that emerged in

the previous session, moving towards the co-creation of narrative hypotheses, messages and communicative principles that would allow international cooperation to be explained in a closer, more relevant and more aligned way with citizens' everyday concerns. These encounters also served as a reflection on the role of education for development and the differential value of decentralised cooperation in building solidarity ties from the local sphere.



*In the image, the ten main ideas from the second session of the itinerary. Source: author's own elaboration.*

Finally, and in a complementary way, the process was enriched with bilateral meetings in a reduced format with profiles less commonly present in this type of process. These conversations involved experts in the field of international cooperation, critical voices from approaches centred on the efficiency of the use of public resources, and researchers with decolonial perspectives who question the paternalistic narratives and power asymmetries still present in international cooperation. Rather than seeking an artificial synthesis, these interviews aimed to understand existing tensions, incorporate divergent views and use them as input for building more robust, honest and credible accounts.

In order to increase the cross-cutting vision and the involvement of young people, REDS-SDSN Spain integrated the youth community it coordinates, where it has been possible to deepen and contrast the ideas that were emerging throughout this entire process. The integration of perspectives from all sectors involved in Spanish Cooperation is the added value of this publication, as the proposals reflected hereafter are the result of agreements and disagreements among a broad number of actors.

In summary, the proposals and recommendations gathered in this document are **designed to guide the action of the main actors of Spanish Cooperation**, with special attention to state public administrations, cooperation agencies, local governments and third sector organisations. It provides strategic criteria to facilitate the construction of more solid, coherent and understandable accounts on international cooperation, as well as the design of communication and dissemination actions capable of reinforcing citizens' commitment and the social legitimacy of this public policy.

## 2. The current context: international cooperation in the world under tension

### 2.1. Disinformation, polarisation and democratic fatigue

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We speak of disinformation when referring to the generation of erroneous news, while the term fake news refers to those that are intentionally deceptive and demonstrably false (Au et al., 2022). Both concepts are key elements in explaining the weakening of and lack of trust in institutions. The World Economic Forum announced in 2024 that disinformation is one of the main destabilising elements facing governments worldwide in the short term (Serrano, 2024), ranking it even above climate issues or armed conflicts.

The concept of 'democratic fatigue', coined by David Van Reybrouck (2017), refers to the lack of legitimacy, discontent and, consequently, social disaffection towards the democratic institutional system. It encompasses a feeling of social frustration with a system that is considered not to satisfy basic needs, not to solve the problems that citizens consider important, not to generate opportunities to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the population, or in which citizens do not feel they have spaces for participation and to be heard. Under this concept, several interrelated factors already described converge: exposure to fake news, the capacity — or incapacity — to identify them as false news, high levels of political and social polarisation, and the perception of not having basic needs met (such as a quality educational and healthcare system, decent working conditions or access to housing). It has been documented that, in rural areas, these issues are more intense, increasing discontent and disaffection with the system (Van Reybrouck, 2017).

Information flows have the capacity to influence and determine social, economic and political processes, as they define and guide discourse and ultimately generate public opinion. Consequently, they exert a direct impact on citizens' opinions and perceptions of the democratic system. In this context, digitalisation opens a new space that allows for the rapid and mass proliferation of information, increasing the reach and effectiveness of intentional disinformation campaigns. In this virtual space, the deliberate use of fake news becomes a political tool that favours social polarisation and, consequently, the weakening of institutions and the democratic system itself.

These elements lead to a social polarisation that impedes open and respectful dialogue, discussion in proactive and constructive terms and critical thinking. Embracing these precepts turns those people or agents with different or

antagonistic opinions into enemies to be combated, hindering cooperation between actors with different interests and visions.

## 2.2. International landscape of development cooperation

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Development cooperation has evolved notably in recent decades, both in its actors and in its approaches, instruments and priorities, currently showing a greater orientation towards the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (OECD & UNDP, 2020). These goals have allowed a shift away from a traditionally welfare-based approach, towards a comprehensive, universal and multidimensional vision of development that combines the economic, social, environmental and institutional. Alongside the progress of the 2030 Agenda, there has been an evolution from an approach centred on financial aid towards models based on strategic partnerships, co-responsibility and policy coherence (United Nations, 2015). This change has been accompanied by a greater emphasis on measuring results and impacts, as well as on the integration of cross-cutting approaches such as gender equality, human rights and environmental sustainability (OECD, 2020). Similarly, mixed (public-private) financing has gained prominence, alongside innovation, digitalisation and measurement as key tools to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs (OECD & UNDP, 2020).

Despite these advances, sustainable development cooperation faces significant structural challenges, among which stand out the insufficiency of financing and the generalised delay in achieving the SDGs, aggravated by simultaneous global crises (United Nations, 2023). Issues such as extreme poverty and inequalities persist, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where the effectiveness of cooperation may be more limited (OECD, 2020). Added to this is the fragmentation of the cooperation system, with multiple actors and poorly coordinated agendas that reduce the real impact of interventions (UNCTAD, 2022; OECD, 2018).

Faced with this reality, phenomena previously described, such as disinformation, polarisation and democratic fatigue, find space to negatively impact the perception and consequent social support for the Spanish development cooperation system. The advance of digitalisation and new technological developments, such as artificial intelligence, contribute to information — both true and false — having greater reach, surpassing national borders, which were habitual for traditional media. What was experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the global reach of disinformation campaigns, affecting decisions in the internal and foreign policy spheres of countries, with direct consequences on people's health. We also see it in situations of external interference in electoral processes,

reinforcing social distrust in institutions, or in the increase of national security as the main concern of citizens.



***“Coordination between the European response and state-level initiatives is the only viable strategy, because, however much the challenge affects digital sovereignty, it far exceeds the capacities of individual states.”***

*(Badillo, 2019)*

The World Economic Forum's Global Cooperation Barometer (2025) reveals that global cooperation is at a defining moment. **After ten years of sustained growth, the positive trend has come to a halt.** The crisis of multilateralism and the drastic reduction of funds allocated to the international cooperation system, against a backdrop of growing international polarisation, disaffection and distrust in institutions, makes it necessary to rethink the system.



***“We have to make the vital attractive. One of the main challenges we face is convincing citizens that what happens in other places also affects us”***

*(Lecumberri, 2025)*

At the European level, Spain's integration in 1986 into what was then called the European Economic Community represented a turning point in terms of cooperation, by aligning national policy in this area with Community frameworks, which reinforced its international projection. From then until today, the EU has advanced in building a common social and cooperation policy, aimed at social cohesion, the reduction of inequalities and the fight against poverty, both internal and external. However, financing challenges persist, as the target of 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) allocated to ODA has not been systematically achieved, despite repeated commitments and efforts made. At the same time, the Union has demonstrated a capacity for solidarity in response to crises through instruments such as the Solidarity Fund, reinforcing internal cooperation between member states. The Eurobarometer (2022) reveals the trust of the majority of Spanish citizens in the EU on key issues such as poverty reduction, inequality reduction, and matters of peace, security and migration.



***“Faced with the two great challenges we face today, the invasion of Ukraine and the post-pandemic economic recovery, European citizens in general and Spanish citizens in particular are opting for joint solutions at the EU***

***level. In the face of major challenges, European unity is the way forward"***  
(Lledó, 2022)

More recently, a More in Common survey reveals that while Spain and Denmark see international cooperation as a driver of influence, France and Germany are more sceptical (More in Common, 2025). The majority of respondents agree that EU funds should prioritise security in the face of global cuts that the OECD estimates at up to 17% for 2025. Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy are among the countries that, in terms of GDP or absolute terms, have reduced their commitments. Spain, for its part, is resisting the trend, although its contribution (0.25% of its gross national income) remains far from the 0.7% target set by the UN. Nevertheless, taken together, both Spain and the EU have consolidated an approach based on multilateralism and the SDGs, moving towards a more cross-cutting and participatory model of cooperation, albeit with persistent challenges in effective implementation and the fulfilment of financial commitments.

## 2.3. Spanish cooperation today and public perception

In recent years, Spain's Official Development Assistance (ODA) has shown a positive evolution in general terms, reaching in 2022 a peak close to 0.30% of Gross National Income (GNI). This effort reflects the State's commitment to international cooperation in a particularly complex global context, conditioned by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and by new international crises that have highlighted global interdependence. In 2023, the percentage of ODA relative to GNI stood at around 0.24%, showing a moderation of relative effort, while in 2024 preliminary data pointed to a slight recovery to approximately 0.25% (OECD, 2024). Although the percentage of ODA relative to GNI showed fluctuations during the period analysed, the total volume of resources allocated to cooperation remained at high levels, exceeding 4 billion euros in 2024. This evolution reflects the willingness to maintain the commitment to cooperation, while evidencing the need to continue advancing towards a path of progressive and sustained growth.

The approval of **Law 1/2023 on Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity** is a fundamental milestone that supports the latest major reform of Spanish Cooperation. The law consolidates cooperation as a strategic public policy, aligned with the 2030 Agenda, and reaffirms Spain's commitment to progressively advance towards

Spain commits to allocating **0.7% of its GNI** to ODA by 2030 under the Law on Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity.

the international target of allocating **0.7%** of GNI to ODA by 2030 (Law 1/2023). It also reinforces key principles such as policy coherence, the human rights approach, gender equality and sustainability. Furthermore, the new regulatory framework **recognises the significant role of decentralised cooperation**, developed by autonomous communities and local entities, which in 2024 contributed approximately 10% of total Spanish ODA, making a significant contribution to strengthening the Spanish cooperation system and the diversity of approaches and actors that make it up (Law 1/2023).

This law explicitly promotes an alliance approach, fostering collaboration with partner countries, multilateral organisations, civil society, the private sector and academia as a means of improving the impact and coherence of development policies. Additionally, the law incorporates cross-cutting strategic frameworks, such as the Feminist Cooperation Strategy, which has as its main objective to promote gender equality, strengthen the rights of women, adolescents and girls, and contribute to sustainable and inclusive development for more just and democratic societies. A framework based on four pillars — rights, representation, resources and alliances — that integrates a gender perspective into all system actions. For the first time, the added value of decentralised cooperation is explicitly recognised, highlighting its social legitimacy, territorial grounding and capacity to complement the State's external action.

Despite the progress represented by the Law, significant challenges persist in implementing the reform. Recent milestones, such as the holding in Seville of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the adoption of the Seville Commitment (UN General Assembly, 2025) reinforce the political framework of Spanish cooperation but do not substitute the need for sustained progress in coherence and implementation capacity. Translating the new regulatory framework into tangible, stable and understandable results for citizens, avoiding limiting the reform to the institutional or declaratory level, remains one of the great challenges.

Cooperation financing is one of the most persistent structural challenges of the system. Although Law 1/2023 reaffirms the commitment to the 0.7% of GDP target, its achievement continues to depend on a sustained expansion of available resources and the activation of complementary financing mechanisms. The international context itself reinforces this difficulty: according to the OECD (2025), the cuts announced by major donor countries in 2025 will deepen a regressive trend that began the previous year, to which are added recent decisions such as the United States' withdrawal from key organisations of the multilateral system. The challenge lies in guaranteeing financing that is sufficient, predictable and coherent with the ambition of the cooperation policy, capable of responding to global challenges without being subordinated to short-term political or budgetary circumstances.

Even so, social support for international cooperation in Spain remains strong: 58% of citizens consider that resources allocated to cooperation are a good use of the European Union's budget (More in Common, 2025). When asked what option regarding the role of the State in international aid and cooperation they considered most appropriate, only one in four (25%) opted for the proposition that 'the State should help less developed countries through cooperation and development aid projects', while for seven in ten (71%), 'the State should first guarantee the well-being of Spanish people and then that of other countries'.

Figure 16: Opinions on the priority of the State (international cooperation or the welfare of Spaniards), Spain, 2015

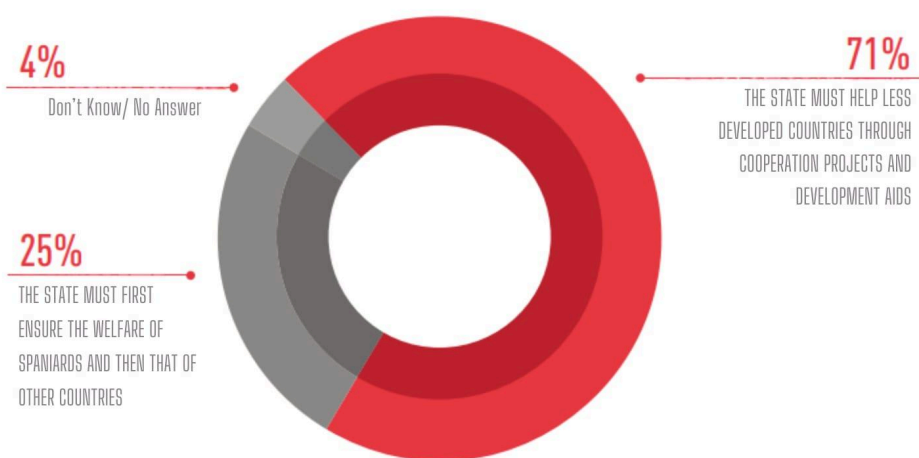


Figure 1: Opinions on the priority of the State (international cooperation or the welfare of Spaniards), Spain, 2015. Centre for Sociological Research. Source: Valiente, Celia, 2015, "Spanish Public Opinion on International Development Cooperation. CIS Studies 2005–2015." Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation and the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS).

However, the perceived distance of the impact of cooperation activities, combined with the growing process of social polarisation and 'democratic fatigue', makes Spanish cooperation one of the targets of disinformation and fake news, deepening feelings of distrust and discredit of the system. The bulk of the criticism centres on the perception of Spanish cooperation as an inefficient and outdated system, as well as on the lack of transparency and accountability, which makes it difficult to understand the relationship between spending and the results/impacts obtained (Alonso, 2024).

# 3. Narrative frameworks of Spanish Cooperation

To begin analysing the narrative of Spanish Cooperation, it is important to ask how it is narrated by official bodies. One of the key tools for communication and dissemination is the web portal that centralises all information on this area of work of the Spanish Government. This portal, as of January 2026, offers two approaches that are illustrative of its presentation.

The first description of how Spanish cooperation is understood includes 'the sum of all those people, institutions, resources and capacities that Spain makes available to developing countries to contribute to human development, the eradication of poverty and the full exercise of rights' (cooperacionespanola.es, n.d.). This highlights a model of cooperation composed of multiple actors: the General State Administration, decentralised cooperation (autonomous communities and local entities), NGOs, the private sector, trade unions, universities, companies and other civil society actors. This diversity has been a distinctive element of Spanish cooperation policy since its beginnings, providing added value and requiring high needs for coordination and coherence between the different levels and actors.

The second description defines cooperation as 'an essential public policy and a reflection of Spain's commitment to a sustainable, equitable and peaceful global development' (cooperacionespanola.es, n.d.). This more operational vision guides its action efforts in the **Spanish Cooperation Director's Plan 2024-2027**, which is based on different guiding principles:

- Human rights-based approach, democracy and gender equality, integrating a feminist perspective and the fight against structural inequalities.
- Contribution to the 2030 Agenda, aligning cooperation with the Sustainable Development Goals, driving a triple social, ecological and economic transition.
- Reinforcement of multilateralism, through strategic alliances with international organisations and regional actors.
- Geographic prioritisation, with special attention to regions and countries with higher levels of vulnerability, conflict or inequality and those with greater experience and knowledge.
- Promotion of financial cooperation for sustainable development, aimed at mobilising resources and investments with long-term impact.
- Principled, coordinated and adequately resourced humanitarian action, including emergency response and disaster risk reduction, fostering the development-humanitarian nexus.

- Education for sustainable development and global citizenship, as a tool to foster awareness, participation and social co-responsibility.
- Improving the effectiveness and coherence of policies, promoting more coordinated, transparent and results-oriented management.
- Commitment to ODA, including the target of 0.7% of GNI by 2030 and the strengthening of humanitarian action.

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in 2015, Spanish Cooperation has developed a series of action strategies accompanied by a change in narratives, both from the public institutions of the Cooperation and from the NGDO sector. In the last five years, these narratives have faced a whole series of messages and actions seeking to delegitimise them, questioning the political neutrality that cooperation previously enjoyed or the consensus generated by the 2030 Agenda, and thus deepening the political and social polarisation that already affects most public policies.

### Narrative axes of the questioning of Spanish Cooperation

- Efficiency:** highlights the need to **ensure that cooperation resources are used optimally**, with programmes oriented towards measurable and sustainable results, avoiding duplication and improving coordination among bilateral, multilateral and third-sector actors. The critique points to strengthening strategic planning, monitoring and impact evaluation, as well as maximising the transformative effect of interventions.
- Legitimacy:** the degree of **participation and representation** of the different actors in the definition of cooperation policies is questioned, including civil society, local communities and partner countries.
- Sovereignty:** how Spanish Cooperation can balance external influence while **respecting the autonomy** of partner countries is analysed. The criticism raises the need to avoid paternalistic or interventionist approaches and to foster cooperation relationships based on dialogue, co-responsibility and shared decision-making, respecting local priorities and the development frameworks of each country.

**Table 1:** Summary of main thematic axes addressed by narratives opposed to the action of Spanish Cooperation. Source: own elaboration.

The tools and actions that materialise the concepts of disinformation and polarisation arise at a moment of transformation of a global geopolitical system that, if it continues to advance, could compromise the democratic structures consolidated up to now. For this fundamental reason, narratives linked to Spanish cooperation, as with those on climate change or inequality, are being and will be increasingly questioned. It is important to be aware of this context in order to anticipate attacks, weakenings and forms of delegitimation of a policy — Spanish Cooperation — that has traditionally had and, to some extent, still has, high social support and political consensus.

**Which accounts dominate public discourse?** In general, moments of transition towards a sociopolitical and economic system that has yet to be fully

defined or reached consensus tend to be marked by the coexistence of accounts: traditional accounts, new visions and strategic accounts based on profound transformation, alongside accounts that react negatively to the crisis of change and that are based on a mental framework of confrontation.

In the case of cooperation, certain accounts based on traditional aid inherited from the model begun at the start of the 20th century still persist, before leaving behind the North-South welfare model approach. In the present century, the model is oriented towards a global cooperation based on a model of co-responsibility and horizontal alliances between diverse actors. The account accompanying this new framework moves away from projecting cooperation as 'donor and recipient' and focuses on the search for partners in an interdependent world facing transnational challenges such as the climate crisis, pandemics and food security.

In this context, cooperation with a rights and gender approach also emerges, which seeks to place the empowerment of women and the protection of groups in vulnerable situations as the central axis of international action. This new approach proposes structuring international cooperation policies for sustainable development to respond to global crises in a just and inclusive way, integrating the fight against climate change, the reduction of inequalities and sustainable economic growth.

In the last year, Spanish Cooperation has been facing a scenario at a global level that conceives of external aid less as development cooperation and more as a geopolitical negotiation instrument, as a consequence mainly of the change of government in the United States, but also of the guidelines promoted by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) of the European Commission and the cuts made by other relevant actors. This situation provokes new disputes between those who justify cooperation in a context of protecting human rights and multi-actor alliances, versus those who try to convince citizens based exclusively on the donor country's own benefit. The priority that a large part of Western countries are giving to military spending can also be inscribed in this dispute.

Furthermore, in the current context, these criticisms do not occur in isolation, but are inscribed in a broader framework of contestation of certain public policies identified as 'progressive', including the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. A review of critical literature and public discourse shows that many of the arguments used to question development cooperation reproduce, almost literally, the same frameworks used to discredit the Sustainable Development Goals.

These arguments share a common logic: they doubt the real effectiveness of policies, question their democratic legitimacy, point to alleged ideological biases and warn of risks of loss of sovereignty or mismanagement of public resources. Beyond the partial or total validity of some of these perceptions, their repetition reveals the existence of simple, easily understandable and highly effective narrative

frameworks from a communicative standpoint, which directly influence public perception of international cooperation.

## Recurring narrative arguments

### 1. Questioning of effectiveness

- It is argued that both the 2030 Agenda and international cooperation are excessively general, aspirational and not very effective, with difficulties translating into concrete and sustainable impacts.
- The lack of tangible results relative to the magnitude of resources invested is criticised

### 2. Distrust over financing and government

- The sufficiency and use of financial resources is questioned, pointing to risks of bureaucratisation, inefficiency or misappropriation of funds.
- An administrative overload is perceived that prioritises reports and procedures over real action.

### 3. Sovereignty and autonomy

- It is argued that these agendas may condition economic, social or migration policies, limiting the capacity of states or communities to define their own priorities.
- In the case of cooperation, the risk of generating dependency in partner countries is added

### 4. Ideological bias

- Both are accused of promoting specific ideological values, especially regarding gender, the environment or rights, perceived by some sectors as alien or imposed.
- These frameworks tend to be linked to discourses on family, education or cultural identity.

### 5. Complexity and fragmentation

- The multiplicity of actors, objectives and instruments is criticised, which would make coordination difficult and reduce overall efficiency.
- A lack of sufficient adaptation to territorial and local contexts is noted.

### 6. Transparency and accountability deficits

- The clarity of available information and citizens' capacity to understand how decisions are made and what results are obtained is questioned.

**Table 2:** Summary of common points identified in critical arguments against the 2030 Agenda and international cooperation. Source: own elaboration.

These arguments do not necessarily deny the importance of sustainable development or international cooperation, especially in its humanitarian dimension.

However, they do question its viability, effectiveness and legitimacy as currently presented in the public space. The strength of these frameworks lies in their simplicity and in their capacity to connect with citizens' everyday concerns, which reinforces their impact on public opinion.

Understanding this convergence of critical accounts is key to designing new international cooperation narratives that not only inform but respond in a credible way to existing doubts, avoiding both the defensive discourse and the denial of the system's real problems.

### 3.1. Key narrative challenges

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This convergence between a highly unstable international geopolitical situation and a transition in the narrative frameworks of cooperation requires the consolidation of consensual accounts across most of the Spanish Cooperation sector. However, to advance towards a consensus, it is essential to detail some additional narrative challenges beyond the general ones of cooperation that have already been mentioned:

- *Citizens' perception of disconnection between international cooperation and local problems and challenges.* Tom Crompton (2010), a member of the WWF UK management team, published the Common Cause report in which he noted that 'there is a set of common values that can induce people to address a range of problems 'bigger than oneself', such as the environment and global poverty'. That set of values is often confronted with the fact that cooperation programmes are developed at a considerable distance from donor countries and their people. In our country, the fight against climate change or poverty, hunger and inequalities in other countries, although they are issues that concern society, do not tend to figure among the three main priorities, being surpassed by issues such as inflation, access to housing and unemployment. Hence, the need to connect and give a global dimension to these issues when talking about international cooperation.
- *Different stances and perspectives.* Although broadly speaking, there is widespread support for international cooperation and the values on which it is based, there are also disagreements around its role and implementation. The current polarisation scenario is also an important barrier, as it makes it difficult to generate consensus on a large number of issues related to public policies.

In 2018, the Pew Research study on political polarisation in the United States showed that more than 80% of respondents rarely or never change their stance after debating with someone who does not share their views (Pew Research Center,

2018). However, as writer Rebecca Solnit reminds us, 'to build a movement it is necessary to go beyond the people who agree with us' (Rebecca Solnit, 2024). In development communication, that 'going beyond' has always been a challenge. For years, in fact, the practice focused more on convincing the already convinced than on engaging with those who thought differently.

- *From 'every man for himself' to the common good.* Psychologist and writer Tim Kasser warns that any model for citizen engagement that appeals to people's sense of self-interest will diminish their sense of the common good (Tim Kasser, 2020). His reflection points to a frequent risk: when we reduce mobilisation to individual motivations, we weaken our capacity to think and act collectively. A growing tension thus emerges between the collective and the individual: the common goods versus 'do it yourself', community solutions versus self-protective isolation. Ultimately, fear is the greatest tool of demobilisation, while the best defence arises from community: from the people around us, who understand the value of caring for each other and sustaining the public as that which guarantees our shared well-being.

Cooperation continues to be seen predominantly as a state responsibility. Therefore, when narratives attack the legitimacy of the public, international cooperation, as an essentially public policy, is also damaged, albeit indirectly. If one adds the perspective of a political system that tends towards short-termism (and that legitimises the revision or dismantling every four years of policies designed for several decades), one obtains a sum of arguments that favour the erosion of the achievements consolidated over decades. The capitalist economic system, for its part, is so liquid and adaptable that it continuously protects itself against any attempt at profound transformation of its paradigms.

Nor can a fundamental aspect be overlooked: the advance of cooperation models that do not require democratic standards or human rights, such as that promoted by China, weakens the traditional narrative of NGOs as indispensable actors. If other models promise rapid investments without conditionalities, the differential value of rights-based cooperation becomes less evident to part of the public. All these elements make the sustained construction of solid public policies, as development cooperation policies should be, more difficult.

- *Polarisation strategies based on hoaxes and disinformation.* Post-truth is not simply lying: it is a sophisticated technique of constructing accounts based on distorted or outright false facts, designed to activate fears and anxieties previously installed in society. It works by feeding confrontational identities (the good and the bad, ours and theirs, those from here and those from outside) that simplify reality and reinforce polarisation. To this is added the multiplier effect of fake news mentioned in the previous chapter: disinformation spreads easily, profoundly affecting public perception even when the data are misleading or inaccurate. The impacts of this type of information are increasingly visible: in France, up to 65% of the population

believes that aid is wasted due to corruption (University College London et al., 2018).

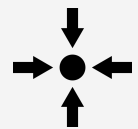
- *Generating understandable accounts of complexity.* One of the greatest challenges in communication is the complexity of global challenges, whether social, economic or environmental. These issues contain objectives that seem contradictory, such as reducing energy poverty while also reducing carbon emissions, and this makes it difficult to simplify messages without sacrificing nuance. In these accounts, it is necessary to acknowledge the general perception in the face of technical language: concepts such as decarbonisation, mitigation, or SDG metrics distance the conversation from the public, who feel more addressed by everyday terms such as well-paid jobs, warmer homes or accessible transport. On the other hand, the complexity of the current world has generated a crisis of realistic imagination: we struggle to visualise possible alternatives because we believe that current norms are immovable limits. **That is why it is so important to feel that we can change the norm, so that we can imagine different futures.**

# 4. How can we better communicate international cooperation in Spain?

## 4.1 Principles for new cooperation narratives

At the outset, both the analysis of the working sessions and the review of specialised literature show that the debate on new narratives for international cooperation does not focus so much on the need to generate a completely new narrative, already widely shared, but rather on redefining its orientation, its approach and its staging. There is broad agreement that the traditional model of 'aid', based primarily on charity, has lost explanatory capacity and social legitimacy, but relevant disagreements persist about the values, interests and strategic frameworks that should underpin the new narratives.

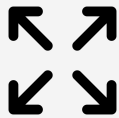
**Overcoming the logic of 'aid', one of the main consensuses.** There is broad agreement that the language, contexts and images associated with international cooperation must evolve to remain relevant and understandable to Spanish citizens.



- In the first place, there is shared agreement on the need to move from a narrative based on one-way aid towards a **narrative of interdependence, alliances and shared interest**. Cooperation is increasingly understood as a collective response to common global challenges, such as health, climate change or humanitarian crises. The evidence and recent events, both climatological and sanitary, mean that the global-scale challenges approach is increasingly consensual, even among those who might be considered 'unconvinced'. Communication must therefore find an honest middle ground: showing how cooperation generates shared benefits, local and global, without reducing it to a mere instrument of national advantage.
- In the second place, there is agreement that **excessively technical or institutional narratives do not generate social engagement**. Data and evidence are necessary, but insufficient on their own. It is important to complement accounts with visible impacts and concrete changes, capable of generating hope, a sense of belonging and collective pride. The use of excessively idealistic goals can inspire enthusiasm at first, but also generates expectations that are often impossible to fulfil. When results do not arrive in the expected timeframe, frustration arises, and this erodes the legitimacy of organisations working in cooperation. In this way, it will be possible to maintain it as a relevant, credible public policy aligned with the needs of a world in transformation.

- Likewise, there is a growing consensus around the need to move towards **more horizontal narratives coherent with decolonial approaches**. This implies abandoning paternalistic representations, the figure of the 'saviour' and the instrumental use of poverty, to **make visible the leadership, knowledge and capacities of the partner countries and communities in development processes**. To make this possible, it is necessary to better highlight the role of the various actors involved in international cooperation projects for sustainable development, giving greater prominence to local partners. Abandoning paternalistic representations also implies reviewing the usual language used in cooperation, trying to set aside concepts that categorise countries and communities solely as recipients or lacking knowledge.
- Moments of crisis, moreover, highlight something fundamental: **the strength of social cohesion**. This idea should occupy a central place in the accounts of international cooperation: it is not just about transferring resources, but about strengthening communities capable of caring for each other collectively.
- Finally, transparency appears as a shared and strategic principle, even for those with very different approaches. Not only as an ethical obligation, but as a **key tool for strengthening cooperation's credibility** in the face of disinformation and discourses that present it as ineffective or as an unjustified use of public resources.

In this area, in recent years, significant advances have been made in international cooperation, broadening the available information on financing and project scope. These efforts constitute a solid basis for reinforcing credibility and public trust. However, to consolidate these advances, it is key to continue working on the accessibility and usability of information, facilitating navigation through large volumes of data and reinforcing the communication and training actions that allow different publics to understand and effectively use the existing platforms.

**Values, interests and political orientation are the main points of dissent.** Despite agreements around the form and tone of new narratives, deep disagreements persist in relation to their basis and strategic orientation. 

- One of the main friction points is between those who defend a **narrative centred on national interest and those who opt for a narrative based on global justice and solidarity**. From the first approach, it is argued that emphasising the strategic benefits for the donor country, such as stability, security or economic interests, is key to gaining political and social support. From the second, it is warned that an excessively transactional approach can

empty cooperation of its transformative content and alienate a section of the social base that supports it for ethical and equity reasons.

- There also emerges a dissent between **visions centred on economic efficiency and approaches oriented towards social transformation**. While some perspectives prioritise the allocation of resources based on cost-benefit criteria and quantifiable results, others question this logic as insufficient to address the structural inequalities and power relations underlying development problems.
- The **financing of cooperation** constitutes another area of debate. Against the idea of cooperation as a public policy financed by the state or autonomous communities, voices emerge that raise the need to explore mechanisms of voluntariness or tax incentives as a way of reinforcing social legitimacy and a sense of citizen co-responsibility.
- Finally, a dissent is identified around the **use of certain terms** that generate immediate rejection in part of the public, which forces reflection on how far to adapt language without emptying the content. While some actors consider that these terms make communication with broader audiences difficult, others defend them as central and non-negotiable elements of a cooperation coherent with human rights and social transformation.

These consensuses and dissents should not be understood as obstacles, but as a starting point for building stronger, more honest narratives capable of dialoguing with a diverse citizenry. Recognising these tensions is key to formulating proposals that do not seek to simplify the debate, but to make it more comprehensible, credible and socially relevant.

## 4.2 Ten-point proposal framework for building new narratives of international cooperation

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Starting from the consensuses and dissents identified throughout the process, as well as from the previous proposals formulated within the framework of Narratives for the 2030 Agenda and the bibliographic references analysis presented earlier in this document, this report puts forward a set of recommendations aimed at improving the way international cooperation is communicated in Spain. The objective is not only to make it more comprehensible, but also to reinforce its social legitimacy and its capacity to generate citizen commitment in a context marked by polarisation, disinformation and growing demands for accountability.

**The proposals shown below aim at the construction of a narrative of international cooperation that is capable of integrating values and pragmatism, global justice and tangible impact, without renouncing any of these elements.**

It is about explaining cooperation better, from honesty, coherence and social utility. Because the main challenge is no longer just to do cooperation, but to make citizens understand why it matters.

### ***1. Build a narrative of international cooperation based on interdependence and shared benefits***



*Definitely, overcoming the 'aid' framework implies explaining cooperation as a public policy that responds to global risks and challenges that directly affect the well-being of Spanish citizens. This approach allows the welfare narrative to be displaced without reducing cooperation to a merely instrumental or transactional discourse.*

## PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

### **Name**

Public Talent for the World

### **ORGANIZATION**

Foundation for the Internationalisation of Public Administrations (FIAP)

### **DESCRIPTION**

«Public Talent for the World» is the strategic narrative that FIAP has been promoting since 2021 to highlight the role of the human capital of public administrations in international cooperation. The initiative showcases the commitment and professionalism of public servants who participate in international projects, showing the human face of institutions and dismantling stereotypes associated with civil service immobility.

The narrative highlights shared values such as public service, multilateralism and the defence of the rule of law, positioning cooperation as a coherent expression of the public service vocation and not as a peripheral policy or one alien to Spanish institutional reality.

### **ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE**

«Public Talent for the World» exemplifies an approach to cooperation based on real interdependence and shared benefits. By demonstrating that international cooperation strengthens both the partner countries and the Spanish administrations themselves, the narrative contributes to dismantling the idea that it is a one-way policy disconnected from the national public interest.

In a context of growing institutional disaffection, explaining that cooperation improves our own public policies is a structural argument for reinforcing its social legitimacy.

**Table 3:** Practical case relating to the narrative of interdependence and shared benefits.

## II. Prioritise concrete, tangible and understandable accounts, combining technical rigour with human stories capable of generating closeness and a sense of social utility



*Communicating the impact of cooperation requires translating results into recognisable examples, avoiding the excess of technicisms and narratives based on victimisation or drama, and promoting the translation of data into tangible results associated with people's daily lives.*

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

The Experience Lab

#### ORGANIZATION

Charity: Water

#### DESCRIPTION

The Experience Lab is an immersive exhibition designed to bring the public closer to the reality of access to safe drinking water from a sensory and emotional perspective, without renouncing the rigour of the problem. Far from limiting itself to figures on millions of people without access to safe water, the initiative translates the challenge into physical and comprehensible experiences.

One of its most impactful spaces shows close to two hundred glasses of water in different shades — browns, greens, murky — that represent real sources of consumption in different places in the world, accompanied by a simple and powerful message: 'Drinking water shouldn't have color'. In another room, visitors walk with water containers in a 4D room that simulates the climatic and environmental conditions of a rural African community, reducing the distance between understanding the problem and feeling it first-hand.

The experience is completed with individual first-person accounts through virtual reality, such as that of Grace, a Ugandan girl whose life changed when her community gained access to clean water. The visitor does not just hear the story: they live it.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

The Experience Lab demonstrates that communicating cooperation and development does not imply simplifying the content, but making it experiential and meaningful. By connecting statistics with concrete human experiences, the initiative transforms an abstract global problem into a comprehensible and actionable reality.

**Table 4:** Practical case relating to generating concrete, comprehensible and tangible accounts.

### III. Position education for sustainable development and global citizenship as a strategic space for working sustainably on these new narratives



*This approach allows the generation of a deeper and more critical understanding of the challenges, reinforcing values such as interdependence, co-responsibility and the common good. It is therefore a priority to strengthen education for development as a key tool for structurally working on new narratives of international cooperation in Spanish society. It can also be of great utility for explaining the importance of international cooperation in addressing many of the challenges that people face in their daily lives.*

#### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

##### NAME

Movement 4.7

##### ORGANIZATION

Various organisations and individuals in Spain

##### DESCRIPTION

Movement 4.7 is a space for encounter and collective construction made up of 41 civil society organisations and 44 professionals from the educational sector, as well as individuals involved in their own capacity. Its purpose is to drive the fulfilment of SDG Target 4.7 in the Spanish educational system.

The Movement works both in the political and educational spheres, promoting the effective incorporation and adequate financing of Education for Development and Global Citizenship in regional, national and international educational systems.

##### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

Movement 4.7 exemplifies how education can become a strategic space for consolidating narratives of interdependence, co-responsibility and global justice in a structural and lasting way.

Integrating global citizenship into the curriculum implies working on values, critical thinking and an understanding of complexity, creating conditions for new generations to understand international cooperation not as an external gesture, but as part of a shared responsibility.

Furthermore, by combining institutional advocacy and action in classrooms, the Movement addresses both the normative and practical level, reinforcing the sustainability of the new narratives beyond the political or media cycle.

**Table 5:** Practical case relating to education for sustainable development.

#### IV. Strengthen the role of local governments and regional cooperation agencies as key actors for translating global accounts into citizens' everyday context



*Their territorial proximity makes them fundamental allies for showing how international cooperation connects with local realities and with people's concrete concerns, helping to dismantle the discourse of 'our own people first'. Additionally, they have a great opportunity to foster social co-responsibility through the generation of accounts from people connected to the municipality or province.*

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

European Days of Local Solidarity (EDLS)

#### ORGANIZATION

Platforma

#### DESCRIPTION

The EDLS, launched in 2016, are an annual campaign promoted by cities, regions and associations of European local governments to make visible their commitment to global solidarity and sustainable development.

For two weeks each year, participating entities organise activities open to citizens to show how their international action — especially through decentralised cooperation — contributes both to global development and to local strengthening.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

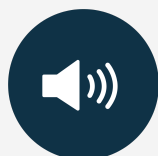
The EDLS exemplify how local governments can act as narrative translators between the global and the everyday. By placing international cooperation within the framework of municipal or regional action, the perception of distance is reduced and the understanding of its impact is facilitated.

This approach dismantles the 'our own people first' mantra by demonstrating that decentralised cooperation strengthens the economic, social and cultural fabric of the territory; that international alliances drive institutional learning and better public policies; and that global solidarity does not compete with the local, but broadens and projects its values and priorities.

Furthermore, the local scale allows the generation of closer and more recognisable accounts, incorporating testimonies from people linked to the municipality or region who participate in international projects.

**Table 6:** Practical case relating to strengthening the role of local governments and regional cooperation agencies.

## V. Deliberately diversify the spokespeople for international cooperation



*Broadening the voices that explain and defend this policy, incorporating non-traditional profiles, local, cultural or youth-related references, contributes to breaking the perception that cooperation is a homogeneous discourse alien to broad sectors of society. This plurality reinforces the credibility of the message and facilitates connection with audiences that are today more distant or sceptical.*

*This recommendation can be manifested through collaboration with cultural figures, local arts, sports clubs or local content creators that generate a sense of belonging and pride, helping cooperation values to be perceived as one's own.*

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

[Dialogue Series #WomenAndScientificDiplomacy](#)

#### ORGANIZATION

AECID and the Network of Associations of Spanish Researchers and Scientists Abroad

#### DESCRIPTION

#WomenAndScientificDiplomacy was a digital campaign developed in 2023. Through a series of short videos disseminated on social networks and digital channels, scientists and professionals linked to Spanish Cooperation projects shared their experiences, challenges and contributions in the field of scientific diplomacy.

The initiative aimed to make visible the gender gap in research and innovation, inspire scientific vocations in girls and young people, and reinforce Spanish Cooperation's commitment to equality and inclusion in STEM, in line with the SDGs.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

This initiative exemplifies how diversifying spokespeople strengthens credibility and broadens the social reach of international cooperation. By incorporating scientific profiles and female references, cooperation ceases to be perceived as a homogeneous or exclusively political discourse and is presented as a professional, technical space committed to excellence and equality.

Furthermore, by connecting cooperation with scientific diplomacy and Spanish talent abroad, it contributes to breaking the sector bubble and positioning this public policy in broader conversations about innovation, competitiveness and the future.

**Table 7:** Practical case relating to diversifying the spokespeople of international cooperation.

## VI. Explore new formats in culture and narrative innovation as strategic, not accessory, tools



The use of creative, audiovisual and transmedia formats allows the broadening of audiences, especially among younger publics, competing in a saturated information ecosystem where attention is a scarce resource. In this sense, culture can function as the necessary vehicle for endowing cooperation with vital and political meaning, integrating it into people's daily lives.

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

Bilbao [International Invisible Cinema Festival 'Film Sozialak'](#)

#### ORGANIZATION

Kultura Communication Development KCD-NGDO

#### DESCRIPTION

The International Invisible Cinema Festival 'Film Sozialak', held in Bilbao since 2009, uses social cinema as a tool to promote critical and committed citizenship. Through fiction, documentary and animation, the festival addresses themes linked to sustainable development, human rights, gender equity, migration and diversity, among others.

More than a film event, the festival functions as a cultural space for collective reflection, where the audiovisual narrative becomes a vehicle for debating major global challenges from perspectives that are accessible and emotionally connected to the audience.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

The 'Film Sozialak' Festival demonstrates that cultural formats are not just complements in the communication of cooperation and sustainable development, but strategic tools for connecting with diverse audiences in non-institutional spaces.

By shifting the debate towards the cultural sphere, the initiative reduces the ideological barrier, generates emotional identification and facilitates a more complex and human approach to global challenges.

**Table 8:** Practical case relating to exploring new formats for telling the story of cooperation.

## VII. Position young people as active agents in the construction of new narratives, displacing the more common vision that conceives of them as a target audience.



*Integrating young people into processes of creation, dissemination and appropriation of messages about international cooperation is key to ensuring that it is perceived as a space of co-responsibility and shared future. This change in participation allows the reduction of the youthful perception of distance they may have from institutions and NGOs.*

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

Campaign: «It's not magic, it's collective action»

#### ORGANIZATION

Coordinadora Valenciana de ONGD

#### DESCRIPTION

«It's not magic, it's collective action» is a campaign aimed at young people between 16 and 25 years old that addresses different sustainable development challenges — climate crisis, food sovereignty, arms trade, racism, right to housing, dignified mobility and gender justice — through a creative, close and non-moralising approach. The campaign uses tarot symbolism as a narrative resource to connect with cultural codes recognisable by young people, conveying complex messages in an accessible and hopeful way.

The campaign is part of a participatory process with young people from different parts of the Valencian Community, who actively participated in the co-design of the messages, tone and formats. Young people are not treated as a recipient audience, but as creative agents with the capacity to define which topics to address, how to tell them and from which languages to do so.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

This initiative exemplifies how to place young people at the centre of the construction of narratives on sustainable development and international cooperation, recognising their capacity for analysis, creativity and leadership.

Its combination of real participation, narrative innovation and connection with everyday concerns makes it a replicable reference for other actions aimed at renewing cooperation accounts from a generational and culturally situated logic.

**Table 9:** Practical case relating to involving young people in the process of defining messages.

## VIII. Enable spaces for listening and dialogue with unconvinced citizens



The current polarisation demands moving from one-way communication strategies to processes that acknowledge the real concerns of the population, without validating disinformation, but also without ignoring it. In communication, the aim is for all people to be able to recognise and build a common objective arising from a combination of conversations and experiences. When that common objective is built through conversations from difference, a particular kind of trust emerges: one that is strengthened by small shared successes.

Listening, contextualising and responding with clear arguments and close examples allows the reduction of the distance between public policies and citizens' perceptions, making people feel more involved in policy, identifying their concerns and which terms generate more rejection.

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

Climate Narratives Observatory

#### ORGANIZATION

BlablaLab

#### DESCRIPTION

The Climate Narratives Observatory is a space for citizen science and participation aimed at listening to, mapping and making visible how the population talks, feels and thinks about climate change in Spain. Although it is not focused on international cooperation, its methodology is particularly relevant for addressing contexts of polarisation and distrust.

Through citizen science tools, the Observatory identifies narrative frameworks present in the territory, analyses emotions associated with the eco-social transition and makes those narratives visible to political decision-makers and public actors. The results are synthesised in periodic reports and represented on an interactive map accessible on their web portal.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

Although centred on the climate sphere, this practice offers a replicable model for international cooperation, as it allows the identification of which terms generate rejection or distance and makes visible latent concerns without validating disinformation.

Adapted to the cooperation sphere, a similar model could map perceptions about development aid, multilateralism or external public spending, generating continuous narrative intelligence rather than reactive responses

**Table 10:** Practical case relating to generating spaces for dialogue with unconventional participants in the conversation.

## IX. Communicate cooperation from a holistic and coherent vision, avoiding fragmented narratives focused on isolated projects



*Narratives centred on one-off projects tend to be seen as something distant or tangential to national reality, which weakens social support and the legitimacy of the system. A coherent narrative allows cooperation to be positioned as a strategic investment that generates international stability and prevents greater crises.*

*The aim is to offer narratives that make comprehensible the links between cooperation, climate, equality, gender, education, energy and economy. Accounts that allow people to see the full picture and understand that complexity requires comprehensive solutions.*

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

Sweden's Strategy for International Civil Crisis Management and the Promotion of Peace 2024-2028

#### ORGANIZATION

Swedish Government

#### DESCRIPTION

Sweden's Strategy for Civil Crisis Management and the Promotion of Peace 2024-2028 forms an integral part of the country's foreign, security and development policy. It is not presented as an isolated cooperation instrument, but as a structural component of Swedish international action.

The document articulates the Swedish contribution to strengthening the capacities of multilateral organisations to prevent, anticipate, manage and resolve crises and conflicts, promoting sustainable peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

Although it is not a communication initiative in the strict sense, this strategy exemplifies how a coherent political vision facilitates an equally coherent narrative. By placing cooperation within an integrated framework of security, development and foreign policy, Sweden avoids discursive fragmentation based on isolated projects.

This approach allows cooperation to be explained as an investment in international stability, a contribution to the rules-based international order, a preventive tool against greater crises and a policy aligned with legitimate national interests and democratic values.

**Table 11:** Practical case relating to communicating from a holistic and coherent vision.

## **X. Develop proactive strategies against disinformation, based on transparency, clarity and the anticipation of critical discourses**

Countering accounts that present cooperation as a waste or an ideological luxury requires accessible data, credible spokespeople and spaces for continued public explanation. Honest communication must include not only the successes, but also what was not achieved, transforming failures into lessons learned to improve efficiency.



In response to this, formulas emerge for anticipating or preparing for possible disinformation tactics, which in English is called *prebunking*. Unlike *debunking*, which is limited to refuting falsehoods already disseminated, *prebunking* consists of anticipating disinformation before it circulates. It works like an 'informational vaccine': it exposes people to weakened versions of possible deceptions, explaining why they are manipulative, to strengthen their capacity to resist them when they encounter them in the future.

### PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

#### NAME

Practical guide to combating disinformation through preventive disclosure

#### ORGANIZATION

University of Cambridge, Jigsaw (Google) and BBC Media Action

#### DESCRIPTION

This publication is a practical guide aimed at strengthening social resilience against disinformation through the prebunking technique.

The document translates academic evidence into accessible tools for public officials, communicators and organisations wishing to design preventive interventions, even without prior knowledge in behavioural psychology.

#### ADDED VALUE AS A PRACTICAL CASE

Although the guide is not specifically focused on international cooperation, its approach is fully transferable to this sphere, where narratives proliferate that present aid as waste, ideological privilege or a threat to the national interest.

Applied to cooperation, prebunking would allow the anticipation of recurring arguments ('our own people first', 'it's useless', 'everything is lost to corruption'), explaining in advance the manipulation techniques that tend to accompany them, preparing spokespeople and clear materials before the controversy escalates, and incorporating transparency about limitations and failures, reducing vulnerability to attacks.

**Table 12:** Practical case relating to developing proactive strategies against disinformation.

## 5. Conclusions

Following the analysis developed through the cooperation narratives process, it emerges that we are facing a paradigm shift that transcends the communication of cooperation to place itself at a level closer to a first-order political and social tool. In a context defined by the succession of global crises and the intensification of international conflicts, it is essential to move from welfare-oriented models towards rights-based, collaborative and complex co-responsibility approaches, an evolution that is becoming increasingly visible in Spanish Cooperation.

For Spanish society to perceive cooperation as an essential public policy, the narrative must be built from interdependence and global justice, underlining that the challenges we face — climatic, sanitary, economic or geopolitical — know no borders and require shared solutions. Narrating cooperation from this framework not only reinforces its institutional legitimacy, but also strengthens values deeply rooted in our democratic tradition: international solidarity, the defence of human rights and the fight against poverty and inequalities as ethical and political commitments that transcend circumstances.

Making this vision concrete requires that new accounts move from the abstract to the human, prioritising narratives that place people's dignity and the transformative capacity of communities at the centre. This necessarily implies diversifying spokespeople: it is no longer about speaking about others, but about facilitating communities in the Global South and feminist leaders to occupy the centre of the discourse, contributing their knowledge, experience and solutions. Only from this transversality will it be possible to effectively combat disinformation and hate speech, articulating a solid narrative that explains cooperation as an investment in human rights, gender equality and democratic strengthening.

This narrative transformation will be as effective as its alignment with the global structural frameworks of sustainable development, especially with the 2030 Agenda. The commitment to 0.7% of GNI by 2030 should not be presented as an isolated technical figure, but as an ethical and financial pact that reinforces multilateralism, international stability and peace. Cooperation and principled humanitarian action must be communicated as pillars of a human security architecture that protects life, prevents crises and reduces risks in the short, medium and long term.

Because cooperation is not only an expression of solidarity, it is also a strategic tool against global threats that have direct consequences on our lives. Pandemics, climate change, food insecurity, energy crises or economic instability demonstrate that investment in sustainable development and institutional strengthening in other contexts has repercussions on our own health, prosperity and stability. Strengthening capacities in partner countries, supporting healthcare systems, driving just energy transitions or consolidating democratic institutions

contribute to reducing vulnerabilities that would otherwise end up affecting our societies too.

Narrating cooperation from this perspective allows us to understand that it is not an ideological luxury or an isolated altruistic gesture, but a public policy that contributes to guaranteeing peace, democracy and respect for fundamental rights, both outside and within our borders. Where legitimate institutions are strengthened, conflicts are reduced; where rights are broadened, opportunities are generated; where crises are prevented, much greater human and economic costs are avoided.

The success of this narrative transformation will also depend on the capacity to connect with unconvinced citizens. In 2026, it is no longer sufficient to inform: it is necessary to actively involve young people, local governments and territorial actors as translators of global challenges into the everyday language of neighbourhoods and municipalities. Spaces for education for sustainable development, active listening and citizen dialogue not only reinforce the transparency of Spanish cooperation but build a sense of belonging to an interconnected community of which all people are part.

In short, narrating international cooperation better means demonstrating that a more just world is not only a moral aspiration, but the necessary condition for securing collective well-being in the 21st century. A well-being that is not limited to the present, but protects future generations, consolidating more resilient societies, more inclusive economies and stronger democracies at local and global levels. In an interdependent world, well-being is shared, or it is not sustainable.

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