

# STRATEGIC NARRATIVE RESPONSE MANUAL

*A practical guide to countering disinformation on international cooperation, climate action and global health*

**Based on the results of the Narrative Resilience Lab**

*New Progressive Narratives for International Cooperation: A European Perspective*

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## 1. About this manual

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2025 marked a historic turning point for international cooperation. Official Development Assistance fell by 23.1% from the previous year, the largest annual contraction on record (OECD, 2026). The political consequences are not abstract; modelling suggests that this erosion of global solidarity could result in an additional 22 million deaths by 2030 (Ferreira et al., 2025).

While specific countries have driven the most dramatic cuts, a broader trend is reshaping the political landscape across donor nations. Growing pressure to prioritise policies with tangible, immediate impact on domestic constituencies has created fertile ground for negative narratives about international cooperation that, when left unchallenged, can become disinformation that shifts public opinion and, ultimately, political will.

The challenge is not simply one of messaging. Citizens in major donor countries face genuine economic insecurity, and their question about what international cooperation actually does for them is entirely legitimate. International cooperation will not recover its public legitimacy by improving how it talks about itself. It needs to connect to a broader story about shared security, interdependence and the real costs of a world without it. Moral arguments alone are no longer sufficient.

In this context, a growing volume of disinformation about international cooperation circulates across both digital and traditional media, exaggerating failures, exploiting legitimate concerns and making it harder for citizens and decision-makers to engage with the issue in good faith. Learning to identify and respond to these messages is a political necessity nowadays.

This manual is built around prebunking, one of the most effective approaches available to respond to this challenge. Unlike debunking, which corrects false claims after they have already spread, prebunking works by building resilience before disinformation arrives. It teaches people to recognise the manipulation techniques commonly used in these narratives and identifies the communication mistakes that make responses counterproductive. Research consistently shows that when people understand how a message manipulates, they are significantly less susceptible to it, even when they encounter it later in a different form (Harjani et al., 2022).

### How this manual was built

This guide was developed following the workshop *New Progressive Narratives for International Cooperation: A European Perspective*, held at the European Parliament in Brussels on 7 May 2025 (REDS-SDSN Spain, 2026). Nearly 35 representatives from European institutions and civil society worked in groups on three real disinformation cases, identifying manipulation techniques, surfacing legitimate concerns and mapping communication mistakes to avoid. The frameworks, alternative narratives and principles in this manual are grounded in that collective work.

## 2. Three documented cases

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The three cases below are real disinformation narratives with verified circulation in the European information space. They serve throughout this manual as reference points for applying the analytical framework. Each combines a manipulative technique with a legitimate citizen concern, which is precisely what makes them effective and difficult to counter.

	Disinformation narrative	Manipulation techniques	Legitimate concern exploited
<b>Development cooperation</b>	"The money from development aid ends up being corrupted in recipient countries and doesn't reach those who need it. It's better to spend that money on our own citizens."	<p><b>False dichotomy:</b> forces a choice between helping people abroad and helping at home.</p> <p><b>False generalisation:</b> treats corruption in some contexts as a universal feature.</p> <p><b>Oversimplification:</b> proposes elimination where improvement would be the logical response.</p>	Anxiety about the ineffective use of public funds and lack of visible accountability.
<b>Global health</b>	"International health organizations responded poorly to the pandemic and now want more power over national decisions. The WHO represents private interests, not citizens."	<p><b>Elite conspiracy:</b> suggests a hidden agenda driven by private actors.</p> <p><b>Fear appeal:</b> activates anxieties from the pandemic experience.</p> <p><b>Sovereignty threat:</b> frames multilateral health governance as a mechanism of control.</p>	Post-COVID distrust of institutions and frustration over unequal vaccine access.
<b>Climate action</b>	"European climate policies destroy jobs and harm working families while other countries pollute without restrictions. Climate policies are a new form of control that attacks citizens' freedoms."	<p><b>Scapegoating:</b> uses other countries' behaviour as justification for inaction.</p> <p><b>False dichotomy:</b> presents job losses and green policy as an inevitable pairing.</p> <p><b>Exaggeration:</b> claims policies destroy jobs and threaten freedoms without evidence.</p>	Insecurity about employment, class inequality and fear of restrictions on personal freedoms.

### 3. The dos and don'ts

Responding to disinformation is rarely straightforward. The instinct to react quickly, to correct the record or to defend what we know to be true can lead us into traps that end up amplifying the very messages we are trying to counter. In high-pressure situations, taking time to think about how to respond is what makes the difference between an effective reply and one that makes things worse.

#### What NOT to do

**Avoid being condescending or patronising.** When a response signals moral superiority or fails to take the original argument seriously, audiences may sympathise with the person being dismissed. People can tell when they are not being respected.

*Example: Responding to the aid efficiency critique with 'the evidence is clear, people just don't understand it' closes the conversation before it starts.*

**Do not let emotions drive the response.** Disinformation is designed to provoke an emotional reaction. A reply drafted in frustration will rarely be the most effective one and can escalate rather than defuse.

*Example: Reacting immediately to a climate jobs claim on social media without framing the response carefully risks amplifying the original message.*

**Do not repeat the opponent's frame.** When a response focuses on negating the disinformation, it risks reinforcing the same frame. Saying 'cooperation is not wasteful' keeps 'wasteful' at the centre of the conversation.

*Example: Starting a reply with 'The WHO is not controlled by private interests' repeats the conspiracy frame instead of replacing it.*

**Avoid being overly technocratic.** Responding with data and facts alone ignores one of the key reasons disinformation works: it speaks to emotions. A purely technical reply may be accurate without being persuasive.

*Example: Citing ODA statistics in response to 'spend the money here first' addresses the head but not the heart of the concern.*

## What TO do

**Acknowledge the legitimate concern.** Disinformation almost always exploits a real citizen's fear. Identifying that concern and naming it openly signals that you have listened, and makes it much harder for the disinformation to maintain its emotional hold.

*Example: Opening with 'Accountability in development spending is a legitimate demand, and here is how it works in practice' validates before reframing.*

**Connect the message to people's everyday lives.** Abstract arguments about global policy rarely move unconvinced audiences. A direct and concrete connection to daily life makes the message significantly more relatable.

*Example: Showing how global health systems protect against the next pandemic reaching your family is more persuasive than defending the WHO in abstract.*

**Use successful examples.** Concrete examples of what works are more powerful than general claims. They make the argument visible and shift the conversation from theoretical debate to demonstrated reality.

*Example: A specific case of a cooperation project that reduced migration pressure or improved regional stability is worth more than ten statistical averages.*

**Build holistic narratives.** Narratives centred on isolated projects tend to feel distant. Connect cooperation to the broader picture of shared security, climate, health and economic well-being.

*Example: Framing development cooperation as part of the same response to instability that protects European citizens at home is more compelling than project-by-project reporting.*

**Balance evidence with a personal approach.** Use data when you have it, but pair it with a tone that speaks to the emotional reality of the concern.

*Example: In the climate case, cite job creation numbers from clean energy transitions, then tell the story of a community that went through it.*

## 4. Alternative narratives

The following messages were developed by the REDS–SDSN Spain team building on the diagnostic work produced by workshop groups. They are not verbatim outputs of the session, but are grounded in the manipulation techniques, legitimate concerns and communication mistakes that each group identified. They are offered here as testable starting points, not finished scripts.

Each message follows the same logic: it starts from the legitimate concern the disinformation exploits, refuses to repeat the opponent's frame, and proposes something that can be said out loud, without jargon, by a public official, civil society representative or researcher.

<p><b>Case 1</b> <b>Development cooperation</b></p>	<p><i>The narrative exploits real anxiety about the inefficient use of public funds. The legitimate question is not 'why should we help others?' but 'how do we know this actually works?'</i></p>
<p><b>Alternative narrative</b></p>	<p><b><i>"Corruption is a real problem in every sector, including development. The answer is stronger oversight and more accountability, not abandoning the policies that prevent crises from reaching our borders. Every euro spent on stability abroad is cheaper than managing a crisis at home."</i></b></p>
<p><b>What makes it work</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Validates the concern rather than dismissing it.</li> <li>– Reframes accountability as an argument for cooperation rather than against it.</li> <li>– Connects abstract global stability to something concrete and local.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Case 2</b> <b>Global health</b></p>	<p><i>The narrative exploits post-COVID distrust of institutions. The legitimate question is not whether multilateral health cooperation is necessary, but whether it is trustworthy and who it serves.</i></p>
<p><b>Alternative narrative</b></p>	<p><b><i>"The pandemic exposed real failures in speed, equity and transparency. The answer to those failures is better-resourced, more accountable global health systems, not weaker ones. The next outbreak won't wait for us to rebuild from scratch."</i></b></p>
<p><b>What makes it work</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Acknowledges the failure rather than defending the institution, which disarms the conspiracy frame.</li> <li>– Pivots to the practical consequence of the alternative: no global health cooperation.</li> <li>– Makes a practical, not moral, case for multilateralism.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Case 3</b> <b>Climate action</b></p>	<p><i>The narrative exploits real economic insecurity. The legitimate question is not whether climate change is real, but who pays the cost of the transition and whether working people are protected.</i></p>
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**Alternative narrative**

***"Climate policies that ignore workers aren't just unfair, they are not complete. The transitions that have succeeded are the ones that created jobs, reduced energy costs for households, and brought communities along. We should be demanding fairer climate action, not less climate action."***

**What makes it work**

- Separates the legitimate concern (economic justice) from the manipulative conclusion (abandon climate policy).
- Reframes the debate around the quality of the transition rather than its existence.
- Speaks to concrete outcomes rather than defending climate policy as an abstract good.

## 5. Three principles for any context

These three principles emerge from the alternative narratives above. They apply regardless of the specific topic, channel, or audience, and can serve as a checklist before drafting any response to disinformation.

**1**

### **Validate before you reframe**

Each message acknowledges that the concern behind the disinformation is real. Skipping this step and going straight to the counter-argument signals that you haven't listened, and closes the conversation before it starts.

**2**

### **Replace the conclusion, not the premise**

The most effective responses accept the premise and propose a different conclusion. If corruption exists, the answer is stronger oversight, not abandoning cooperation. If institutions failed, fix them, not dissolve them. If transitions are costly, make them fairer, not smaller.

**3**

### **Make the cost of the alternative visible**

Abstract arguments for cooperation rarely move unconvinced audiences. What moves people is understanding what the world looks like without these policies and making that concrete, proximate and credible.

## 6. How to use this manual

This manual draws on the collective work of nearly 30 representatives from European institutions and civil society who participated in the workshop held at the European Parliament in Brussels on 7 May 2025. It is intended as a practical reference, designed to be useful from the moment you pick it up.

It speaks to two different needs. The first is building individual and organisational resilience: developing the capacity to recognise manipulation techniques when you encounter them, whether in a news article, a political speech, a social media thread or a conversation with a sceptical colleague or constituent. The second is knowing how to act when you need to respond, whether you are preparing a public intervention, drafting a speech, replying on social media, designing a campaign or writing an opinion piece. The principles in this manual apply across all of these contexts.

For those working within or leading a communications team, we recommend using this manual as a starting point for a more detailed internal protocol on how your organisation responds to disinformation. What that protocol looks like will depend on your institutional context, your audience and the channels you work with, but the analytical framework here can serve as its foundation.

There is also an outward-facing dimension worth considering. Creating accessible content that helps your own audiences understand how disinformation works is one of the most effective contributions any organisation can make. Prebunking requires clarity, consistency and the willingness to name manipulation when you see it.

This manual is designed to be consulted, not read once and filed. The framework it offers applies across different professional contexts and communication formats. Below are three practical protocols for the most common situations in which you are likely to need them.

### A Preparing a public intervention, speech or briefing

1. Identify which of the three documented narratives is likely to come up, or which manipulation technique the expected criticism will use.
2. Check section 2 to confirm the legitimate concern behind it.
3. Review the relevant alternative narrative in section 4 as a starting point.
4. Apply the three principles in section 5 to test your draft: Does it validate first? Does it replace the conclusion? Does it make the cost of the alternative visible?
5. Cross-check against the 'what not to do' list in section 3 before finalising.

### B Responding on social media or in a public debate

1. Pause before reacting. Identify the manipulation technique being used (section 2).
2. Do not repeat the opponent's frame. Do not start with a negation.
3. Name the legitimate concern the message is exploiting, then reframe.
4. Keep the response concrete: one example, one consequence, one alternative.
5. If time is short, lead with principle 3: make the cost of the alternative visible.

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**Working with your team or training others**

- 1.** Use the three cases in section 2 as working material for a group exercise. Ask participants to identify the manipulation technique and the legitimate concern before seeing the answers.
- 2.** Run the alternative narrative drafting exercise from section 4 with your own cases.
- 3.** Use the dos and don'ts in section 3 as a checklist for reviewing existing communications materials.
- 4.** Consider creating your own institution-specific protocol based on this framework, adapted to your audience, channels and the disinformation narratives most relevant to your context.
- 5.** Producing accessible content that helps your own audiences recognise manipulation techniques is one of the highest-value uses of this framework. Prebunking does not require institutional authority. It requires clarity, consistency and the willingness to name manipulation when you see it.

## Credits

This manual was produced by REDS–SDSN Spain following the workshop New Progressive Narratives for International Cooperation: A European Perspective, held at the European Parliament in Brussels on 7 May 2025.

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## About REDS-SDSN Spain

*The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) is a United Nations 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 sustainable development challenges in urban and rural settings.*

*REDS-SDSN Spain has been working since 2024 to promote social and political commitment to sustainable development through a renewed communication approach. Since then, it has implemented several working processes to analyze the challenges surrounding the 2030 Agenda and international cooperation from a narrative perspective. As a result of these processes, two publications have been produced featuring specific proposals to improve public perception of these issues.*

*In parallel, this area also works to actively engage young people in the implementation and dissemination of sustainable development through dialogue and the co-creation of new narratives that place youth at the centre.*

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