

TOOLKIT

Discourses and Conternarratives About Young People

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY... AND
HOW TO WORK AROUND THEM

From **Spain's**
Side Event at the

ECOSOC
Youth Forum
2026



Discourses and Conternarratives About Young People

Toolkit

Spain's side-event at the ECOSOC Youth Forum 2026

Conceptualisation

Spanish Youth Delegates to the United Nations (2025-2027)

jovenesdelegadosnnuu@gmail.com

@spain_unyd

Coordinated with

Spanish Youth Council

Institute of Youth of Spain - Spanish Ministry of Youth and Childhood

Permanent Mission of Spain to the UN in New York - Spanish Ministry of Foreign
Affairs, European Union and Cooperation

Background

Context

Structural barriers prevent young people from meaningful inclusion in decisionmaking processes. When rarely invited to participate, our role is to side events or symbolic consultations.

At the same time, public narratives increasingly portray young people as unstable, disengaged, radicalized, or problematic. These narratives deepen mistrust and justify exclusion, while ignoring the agency, values, commitment to democracy and diversity of young people.

Our proposal

This toolkit supports a shift in perspective: from seeing youth as the problem to understanding that democratic institutions are failing to meet their needs. It aims to help participants identify harmful arguments and build fair counter-narratives, which promote meaningful youth participation.

Key ideas from the introductory panel

1) Young people are not failing democracy. Institutions fail to respond to young people's realities and expectations	2) Youth are diverse democratic actors. They have different identities, experiences, political views, and local realities.
3) Reject harmful and alarmist narratives. Narratives that portray youth as dangerous, apathetic, or easily radicalized exaggerate minority trends and undermine trust.	4) Rebuild democracy as meaningful and livable. Democracy must offer young people material security, belonging, recognition, and real agency

Methodology

Participants were divided in three groups, each tackling a different topic:

- Political and Social Participation
- Youth in the Labour Market
- Youth in the Digital Space



Through guiding questions and a work template, the discussions navigated the origins of the challenges and proposed new narratives to counter negative discourses around youth in the chosen areas.

**DISCOURSES AND COUNTERNARRATIVES ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE:
THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY... AND HOW TO WORK AROUND THEM**

**UNDERSTANDING**
Identify the problem
What is the main message about young people in this situation?
Who is telling or reinforcing this narrative? Where does it appear most?
What assumptions are behind it? What is missing?

**REFRAMING**
Create a new narrative and list 2-3 key arguments or facts
How could this message be rewritten?
What arguments, facts or examples could change people's minds?
What can young people say or do when they face this narrative?

**MAKING IT USABLE**
Describe 1 practical action you can take and 1 communication method
Who should deliver the alternative messages? Through which means?
How can we individually or through our organisations contribute?
What recommendations can we draw for the institutions?



Resource: Work template

Political and Social Participation

Understand the Challenge

- Political systems often feel inaccessible or disconnected from young people.
- Older generations are often prioritised in decision-making because they are seen as established voters or taxpayers.
- Young people are underrepresented in decision-making spaces.
- Political language, technical vocabulary, and institutional jargon can exclude youth.
- Slang, cultural references, and communication styles can create misunderstandings between generations.
- These barriers create an “inside vs. outside” feeling, where young people feel displaced from political processes.

Reframe the Narrative

- Youth are not disengaged by nature; many are discouraged by institutions that feel closed or outdated.
- Social media can be used to expand awareness and mobilise communities.
- Grassroots organisations and NGOs can help connect youth with political action.
- Political documents and processes should be simplified and made more accessible.
- Intergenerational dialogue is essential because social realities have changed.
- Move away from an “us vs. them” mentality.
- Avoid working in silos; collaboration across sectors and generations is key.
- Representation matters, but it should be paired with real influence and measurable results.

Make It Usable

- Create intergenerational learning spaces.
- Make political language clearer, more visual, and easier to understand.
- Invest in civic education that teaches people how to think critically, not what to think.
- Include young people directly in decision-making teams.
- Build youth advisory boards with real power, not only symbolic roles.
- Design political participation opportunities that are accessible, inclusive, and youth-friendly.

Youth in the Labour Market

Understand the Challenge

- Young people are often seen as too relaxed or informal.
- Gen Z is sometimes associated with lack of professionalism.
- Informal language, clothing, or communication styles can be misread as immaturity.
- Young workers may be judged for voicing opinions openly.
- Older generations may hold closed-minded views about youth behaviour.
- Entry-level jobs are limited, poorly compensated and require experience.
- There are not enough accessible opportunities for young people.
- Communication skills are often expected but not always taught.
- Young people may be unfairly associated with AI disruption.
- Education requirements are increasing, making access harder.

Reframe the Narrative

- Youth are not a problem to manage, but an opportunity to improve workplaces.
- Young workers bring adaptability, digital skills, and new ways of thinking.
- Many young people are eager to learn and take on opportunities.
- Experience can be shown through projects, volunteering, leadership, digital work, and lived experience, not only formal employment.
- Youth can help workplaces become more inclusive and open.
- Respectful environments benefit all generations.
- The workplace should be built through intergenerational collaboration.

Make It Usable

- Create more fairly paid entry-level jobs and internships.
- Fund youth-led projects and early-career initiatives.
- Recognise social media, digital communication, and online community-building as valuable skills.
- Support more youth-led organisations and workplace initiatives.
- Offer mentoring between younger and older workers.
- Provide clear onboarding and communication training.
- Do not abandon traditional media or communication methods; combine them with digital tools.
- Build safe spaces where youth can contribute ideas without being dismissed.

Youth in the Digital Space

Understand the Challenge

- Young people use digital spaces to access news, information, and community.
- Social media is a major communication tool.
- Digital platforms can support large-scale connection and mobilisation.
- Online spaces can affect mental health.
- Short-form content may influence attention and concentration.
- Digital literacy is essential for navigating online information.
- Not all young people have equal access to internet, devices, or safe digital spaces.

Reframe the Narrative

- Digital spaces are not only distractions; they are spaces for learning, organising, and belonging.
- News and public information should be made more accessible to young audiences.
- Digital literacy can help young people better recognise misinformation.
- Online communities can connect people across distance, especially those who may feel isolated or marginalised.
- Digital engagement must be inclusive, accessible, and mindful of unequal access.

Make It Usable

- Create youth-friendly digital content using clear language and visual formats.
- Use social media to explain complex issues in simple, engaging ways.
- Build online spaces for community dialogue and peer support.
- Promote digital literacy education, especially around misinformation and online safety.
- Include mental health awareness in digital engagement strategies.
- Make sure digital participation does not exclude those without reliable internet or devices.
- Combine online engagement with offline opportunities when possible.

Core Principles

What Makes Youth Participation Work?

- **Accessibility:** Use simple language, clear visuals, and inclusive formats.
- **Representation:** Include young people in real decision-making roles.
- **Collaboration:** Build bridges between generations instead of divisions.
- **Fair opportunities:** Pay young people fairly and recognise diverse forms of experience.
- **Digital inclusion:** Use online tools while acknowledging unequal access.
- **Respect:** Create safe spaces where youth voices are taken seriously.
- **Action over symbolism:** Move beyond token representation toward real influence.





SPAIN

UN Youth Delegate
Programme



MINISTERIO
DE ASUNTOS EXTERIORES, UNIÓN EUROPEA
Y COOPERACIÓN



GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
DE JUVENTUD
E INFANCIA

injuve



CJE
Consejo de la
Juventud de
España