


“The Cowl *Does* Make The Monk”: Understanding the Emergence of Social Entrepreneurship in Times of Downturn

José Luis Molina¹  · Hugo Valenzuela-García¹ · Miranda J. Lubbers¹ · Paula Escribano¹ · Marta M. Lobato¹

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Abstract In order to contribute to the debate about social entrepreneurship, we take an empirical perspective and describe the phenomenon in Catalonia, Spain, during the financial crises of the early twenty-first century. For this aim, we conducted 43 in-depth interviews with social entrepreneurs, launched a web-based survey with 90 responses, and built a database with 347 organizations and/or ventures settled in Catalonia with an explicit social/environmental goal. The data show that many social/environmental initiatives emerged during the economic crisis, either as a self-employment alternative to unemployment, or as a commercial venture started by nonprofit organizations as a reaction to the reduction in public expense in this sector. In addition, the crisis fueled the emergence of ventures oriented to non-market exchange and social currencies. As a whole, we argue that this new reality can be conceptualized as the emergence of an unsettled Strategic Action Field where banks, business schools and public administrations alike promote the label of “social entrepreneurship” through awards and startup services, whereas other groups claiming the same social/environmental goals contest this market-oriented definition of the field.

Keywords Social entrepreneurship · Social economy · Nonprofit · Economic crisis · Strategic action fields · Transformation · Catalonia

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✉ José Luis Molina
joseluis.molina@uab.cat

¹ GRAFO, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Introduction

Continuous debate among academics about what social entrepreneurship *is* can not only be attributed to the fact that conceptual academic articles greatly outnumber the empirical ones (Short et al. 2009), but also to the fact that the public and private institutions that promote social entrepreneurship are keen to provide routine, prescriptive definitions of social entrepreneurship, namely those individuals, organizations, or ventures that achieve their social/environmental mission by market-oriented means, using innovative solutions, and reaching a high impact (Dacin et al. 2010; Dees 1998, 2007; Mair 2010; Seelos and Mair 2005; Zahra et al. 2009). This definition has been described as tautological (Santos 2012), promoted by consultants and foundations (Hervieux et al. 2010), and both vague (Defourny and Nyssens 2010) and difficult to measure (Young and Lecy 2014). In fact, consensus among academics and practitioners is limited to the achievement of social/environmental goals by market means, while what a social innovation is or how to measure social impact are issues subjected to debate (Manetti 2012; Pol and Ville 2009).

In this article, we contend that social entrepreneurship can be acknowledged as a field of entrepreneurial/self-employment activity, that (at least in the case of Catalonia, Spain) is promoted by public policies in a context of welfare state recession, and supported by a similar network of resources as is available for “commercial” entrepreneurs (Austin et al. 2006; Meyskens et al. 2010), such as business training, business incubators, credit opportunities, awards, and business events. In order to conceptualize this reality better, we will adopt the Theory of Strategic Action Fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2011; cf. the introduction to this special issue). A Strategic Action Field (hereafter SAF) is defined as “a meso-level social order where actors (who

can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships of the field (including who has power and why) and the field's rules" (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, p. 3). As we will argue below, we can conceive the field of social entrepreneurship as an emergent SAF in which there is little consensus about the logics of the field. In such an unsettled SAF, banks, foundations, and business schools aided by public policies promote the label of "social entrepreneurship" as the natural market-oriented response to societal challenges. Following the SAF terminology, these actors can be labeled as the incumbents of the field, the dominant actors who determine the interest and positions in the field. In this case, the public administration plays a secondary role in terms of funding, but it plays an important role in governance, providing the means for an effective coordination, dissemination, and promotion of the social entrepreneurship programs.

Contesting this market-oriented definition, we also find ventures claiming social/environmental goals, organized as cooperatives that foster alternative views on how to address societal challenges, i.e., through social currencies and self-provisioning. Following SAF terminology, we might refer to these actors as opponents. We herewith show that entrepreneurs may use the label of "social entrepreneur" in this field because of the positive image associated with it by the incumbents' propaganda or, conversely, they can present themselves simply as cooperative partners, interested in social justice and/or ecological sustainability through non-market means. Later on, we will present case studies that exemplify the large variability that can be found between these two extremes, including the case of commercial ventures launched by nonprofit institutions (Kerlin 2010, 2013; Salamon and Anheier 1998) in order to obtain revenues in a context of decreased public expenditure.

Taking this framework as an analytical tool, we have empirically investigated the population that owns and manages activities, organizations, or initiatives in Catalonia that have a particularly social, environmental, or community goal and that are at least partly based on commercial revenues. We have studied their motivations for starting a social enterprise, the characteristics of the ventures and of the individuals who lead or founded them, and the relationships with other individuals and entities in the field. With these empirical data, we aimed to understand what binds this population and what divides them internally, to help us advance the debate.

In order to fully understand what social entrepreneurship is, Mair (2010) argued that it is important to situate the phenomenon in its specific economic and cultural context. She emphasized that social entrepreneurship emerges as a

reaction to *locally* existing needs that the state or traditional organizations do not address and to the local opportunity structure. In this case, we situated our research in the context of Catalonia, during the financial crisis and we describe the local context before proceeding to our empirical data. Catalonia, like the rest of Spain and other European countries, has an important Social Economy sector (both commercial and nonprofit), which accounts for 6.7% of the total employment (Monzón Campos and Ávila Chaves 2012), with cooperatives being the most common societal form (81.5%, calculated on the basis of Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social, 2016). This sector has proven to be resilient during the financial crisis (Roelants et al. 2012, p. 11;¹ EURICSE 2013). The crisis is an important temporal context, as the majority of social entrepreneurship programs in Catalonia and Spain appeared precisely in this period of the crisis (see next section), mostly sponsored by banks and business schools with the support of the public administration.

In the next section, we will describe the emergence of this mostly urban phenomenon in Catalonia and in Spain during the financial crisis and identify the main actors in the field. Subsequently, we will introduce our empirical investigation. We conducted 43 in-depth interviews with social entrepreneurs in 2014 and 2015 and launched a web survey that captured data for another 90 entrepreneurs. Furthermore, we built a database with 347 organizations and/or ventures in Catalonia that have an explicit social/environmental goal. This information was complemented with secondary sources and interviews to key informants in the sector. After explaining the data sources and methods, we will first present the general tendencies observed in the total sample and then describe selected cases in depth in order to highlight the diverse manifestations of the phenomenon in Catalonia. Consequently, the findings will be interpreted with the aid of the SAF framework in order to provide a better conceptualization of this reality. To conclude, we will discuss the findings in light of the larger debate.

Social Entrepreneurship and the Financial Crisis in Spain (2010–2014)

After its inception in the 1980s with the creation of the international network *Ashoka* (Bornstein and Davis 2010), the concept of social entrepreneurship quickly gained popularity among academics, practitioners, and public and

¹ "Overall, CECOP-CICOPA Europe's annual surveys point out that compared to conventional enterprises, worker and social cooperatives are more resilient in countries with a strong level of cooperative implantation and experience such as Spain, France and in some sectors in Italy."

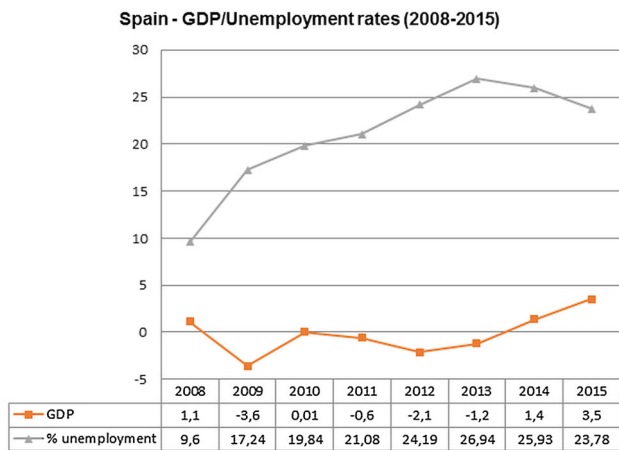


Fig. 1 Spain—GDP/Unemployment rates (2008–2015). Source: own elaboration from data available at www.ines.es

private institutions worldwide. However, despite the long-standing tradition of social economy in Spain, the expression “social entrepreneur” (“emprendedor social” in Spanish, “emprenedor social” in Catalan) only started to gain importance in Spain from 2010 onwards (see Google Trends <http://tinyurl.com/y83tm69z>).

At that time, the unemployment rate in Spain had reached 20% of the active population, while youth unemployment surpassed 45% (see Fig. 1). In 2010, the socialist government, forced by the European Union to reduce the public debt, diminished the salaries of public servants by 5%, froze pensions, and started a policy of financial cuts emphatically continued by the Popular Party from 2011 onward that cut back the public budget in health by 10% on average, education by almost 20%, and social protection by almost 13% in just a few years (Conde-Ruiz et al. 2016; del Pino 2013). This situation, combined with a tax system mainly supported by overcharging labor and consumption over capital (Navarro et al. 2011), put Spain in the highest position of the European inequality ranking only surpassed by Cyprus, with almost 30% of the population living below the poverty threshold (Hardoon et al. 2016).

During the period 2009–2014, the Spanish financial system received a public bailout of 61.5 billion euro. This intervention led to the restructuring of the financial system, which concentrated the banking sector in just a few players, and eliminated in 2014 almost all *Cajas de Ahorro* (Savings Banks), a historically important nonprofit institution that represented about half of the Spanish financial sector until that moment. The remaining *Cajas de Ahorro* were transformed into banks, and part of their social programs were managed by foundations. This issue is important because in 2008 the social expenditure of this sector was approximately 2 billion euro, a figure that was reduced to less than a half in 2012 until disappearing in 2014,

except for a few remnant foundations (Montero et al. 2015). As far as each *Caja de Ahorro* funded and managed its own social program, this void was not covered by other institutional actors. In Catalonia, the *Caixa de Pensions—La Caixa*, one of the most important Savings Banks in Spain, did not need a bailout and, after splitting itself in a bank and a foundation, it consolidated its dominant position in the sector.

In sum, the financial crisis deeply transformed the Spanish and Catalan societies, which had to face high rates of unemployment, a severe reduction in the public budget in health, education, and social protection, and the removal of the *Cajas de Ahorros* and most of its social expenditure. This vacuum was occupied in part by the most important banks, which started to launch programs to encourage social entrepreneurship in the framework of responsible banking: the *Momentum* program in 2010, sponsored by the bank *Banco Bilbao Vizcaya* and the business school ESADE, and, one year later, the program of social entrepreneurship launched by the bank *La Caixa*, with the support of IESE Business School. Both programs aim to promote and support social entrepreneurship by offering access to financing, counseling, training, and networks to promising social ventures. In 2011, the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (the regional government) also launched the program *@EmprenSocial* to support the development of social entrepreneurship initiatives through the organization of meetings, the provision of directories of resources, and active communication through the social media.

At the European level, the Social Business Initiative was passed in the same year with the aim to increase the visibility of “social enterprises,” improving access to funding, and exploring European legal forms that can be used for social entrepreneurship in Europe (see EUR-lex “COM(2011) 682 final”). On the national level, however, Spain has no specific labels, identification schemes, or legal regulations for social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship falls under the more general Law of Social Economy that was passed in 2011.

Methodology

Data for this article were collected in the framework of the research project “Social entrepreneurship: local embeddedness, social networking sites and theoretical development,” which was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. The project, which was led by the first author, was performed between 2013 and 2016.

In order to delineate the population of social entrepreneurs in Catalonia, we adopted a heuristic approach that only took the existing common denominator among practitioners and academics described in the introduction as a

starting point, without imposing further criteria. To operationalize this existing consensus (the achievement of social/environmental goals by market means), we first posed the question used by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) in its Report on Social Entrepreneurship (Hoogendoorn 2011b; Ryzin et al. 2009; Terjesen et al. 2012): “Are you, alone or with others, currently trying to start or currently owning and managing any kind of activity, organization or initiative that has a particularly social, environmental or community objective?”. The GEM is a widely used instrument, and the adoption of this question allows future international comparisons of our results. Note that this question is meant to capture both the nonprofit sector (associations, foundations, and social enterprises) and the social/environmental sector mainly supported by market revenues. Therefore, in order to delineate the sample further, we also asked what proportion of the income was generated by commercial activities. We excluded cases that did not have and had not had any income from commercial activities.

With this technique, we identified the main actors in the field and conducted exploratory interviews during the year 2013 in order to elaborate a list of social entrepreneurs and initiatives. We intended to maximize geographical variation in our initial approach. Following chains of references, we then interviewed the directors of 43 social/environmental initiatives during the year 2014 and the first trimester of 2015, after obtaining the respondents' consent. The interviews had two parts: the first part collected information about the initiative or organization and about the individual (see the section “Measures” below), while the second part was designed to collect data about the entrepreneur's support network. The interview typically lasted about two hours, and it was recorded. The personal network data were collected using the software EgoNet (sourceforge.net/projects/egonet). A few days after the interview, the informants received a document that gave feedback about the main network characteristics, compared with similar anonymous cases we had documented before. The respondents we describe in our selection of cases have had an opportunity to read the case descriptions and they were asked permission for using their names. A pseudonym was used when this permission was not given.

In addition, we launched a web survey (tinyurl.com/h2zxk46) between October and December 2015, using our own database and the mailing lists of several associations in the field, among which the *Xarxa d'Economia Solidària* (XES, xes.cat). In total, 93 respondents completed the survey after a three-month phone follow-up. We excluded 1 case from the database that had no income from commercial sources, and 2 cases that had already participated in the interviews in order to avoid overlapping between the two

sources. The web survey addressed the same issues as the personal interviews, but it did not include the network module.

Finally, during the project we built a database of 347 initiatives/organizations with social/environmental goals from three sources: our own data from the interviews and the web survey, additional databases, and internet sources, such as the “Map of the Solidarity Economy” of Catalonia (*Mapa de l'economia solidària*, pamapam.org), and the “Map of Actors of Social Entrepreneurship in Catalonia” (*Mapa d'Actors de l'Emprenedoria Social a Catalunya*; empenedoriasocial.cat), the roster of services available to social entrepreneurs published by the Catalan Government. This database thus includes the 113 cases that participated in the interviews and the web survey, as well as 234 other cases collected from additional databases and internet sources. Of each of the initiatives represented in these sources, we have recorded the form of business ownership, the economic sector, and the geographical location.

Measures

The interviews and the web survey included questions about the social enterprise such as sector, year of creation, form of business ownership, current number of partners, employees, and volunteers, annual revenues (in euros), percentage of the total revenues generated by selling products or services (in percent), other current sources of revenues, sources of capital at the startup, having received support from specific services for social entrepreneurs at the startup, and expectations about the future, as well as about the entrepreneur (sex, age, educational level, employment status before starting the business and other current jobs among others, as well as motivations for starting the business).

In order to measure the motivations for starting the business, respondents were asked to what extent they were driven by (1) social or environmental motives (examples that were given were: “to benefit the society or the environment, to help other people”); (2) economic motives (“self-employment, to have a (higher) income, to have a larger independence at work”); and (3) motives of personal fulfillment (“personal satisfaction, intellectual or spiritual growth”). Answers for each of the three items were scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). A separate category was created for the response “I don't know,” which was coded as missing for the descriptive analysis.

Respondents of the interviews were also asked to rate the importance of social media, personal contacts, and professional services for the startup, and for the development of the enterprise. Specifically, respondents were asked “on a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 10 (very important), how important have [social media platforms/

personal contacts and word-of-mouth/professional services and organizations] been for the [startup/development] of the enterprise?" A separate category was created for the response "I don't know", which was again coded as missing for the descriptive analysis.

Expectations about the future were measured by asking respondents whether they expected that the business *would NOT* continue to function in 5 years time (interviews) or *would* continue to function in 5 years time (web survey). In both cases, the response categories were (1) not likely; (2) there is a small probability; (3) somewhat likely; (4) very likely. A separate category was created for the response "I don't know."

Results

This section starts with presenting descriptive statistics of the social enterprises included in the three data sources (the interviews, the web survey, and the compiled database), focusing first on the characteristics of the enterprises (e.g., organizational form, location, activity sector, year of foundation, total revenues), and then on the profiles of the entrepreneurs (e.g., gender, age, education, previous occupation, and motivation). Subsequently, it presents a selection of five cases, with the aim to illustrate the large variability of the phenomenon under study.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the distribution of the different forms of business ownership in the three data sources. While social enterprises in Catalonia can take many different legal forms, our results show that the cooperative is the most important societal form among social enterprises, followed by the limited society. In the case of the "database," the traditional nonprofit sector (foundations, work insertion social enterprises, and social enterprises that employ disabled workers) accounts for 23% of the cases. Finally, associations are absent in the web survey database, most likely due to the absence of commercial revenues in many cases² and/or the high number of missing data associated with this method of research.

Figure 2a shows the geographical distribution of cases based on the database records, but cases in the other two sources have a similar distribution. The figure shows that the distribution of the 347 social enterprises in our database coincides with that of the general population in Catalonia, i.e., although initiatives are located in the whole area of

Catalonia, it is highly concentrated in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, showing the strongly urban dimension of the phenomenon (Fig. 2b).

In terms of the sector's activity, services (health, education, communication, consultancy) are the most prevalent activity (about 60%), followed by local organic production (20%). The word cloud of Fig. 3 summarizes these statements. In fact, many of the initiatives focus either on social inclusion or on environmental concerns.

We now turn to the more detailed information collected in the interviews and the web survey, starting with the characteristics of the initiatives. Table 2 shows that the majority of the social/environmental ventures or organizations analyzed were created in the last 5 years, during the crisis, although some of them were much older: the oldest one was founded in 1925. Among the older ones is *La Fageda* (lafageda.com; 1982), a social enterprise that employs mentally ill and intellectually disabled people and produces high-quality dairy products intended for urban areas and mostly well-educated people (see the 2014 report by the Ministry of Agriculture at tinyurl.com/hmwww8x). This is a very successful cooperative, both in terms of employment creation and returns, and in terms of the social value it creates (Elkington and Hartigan 2008), and it has been mentioned in newspaper articles, business reports, and documentaries as an example of social entrepreneurship in Catalonia (see: www.fageda.com/es/modelo-la-fageda/recursos-formativos).

Both in the interviews and in the web survey data, we observed that only a minority of the cases had started as an individual initiative; by far the most cases were led by at least three partners. The initiatives varied widely in annual revenues and in the number of employees, with the enterprises of the respondents we interviewed being on average somewhat smaller than the enterprises of the respondents who participated in the web survey. However, in both data sources, the majority of the ventures are small in size, both in terms of the number of employees ($M = 13.3$; $SD = 30.5$, and $M = 13.8$, $SD = 9.8$, respectively, for personal interviews and the web survey), and in terms of revenues, generating a median of 20,000€ (interviews) and 140,000€ (web survey) per year. The largest part (on average 86% in the interviews and 81% in the web survey) of the revenues was generated by commercial means, but this was often complemented with public and private sources. The most frequent sources were subsidies (46%, web survey) and donations (18%, web survey) and, to a lesser degree, investments, contributions of members or business partners, crowd-funding, awards and loans, revealing that many enterprises applied a hybrid business model.

Apart from these sources, some initiatives also relied strongly on volunteering time. However, volunteers are

² We conducted some interviews with representatives from associations, and we found that they did not generate commercial revenues; rather, they were funded by public resources and donations.

Table 1 Societal forms of the social enterprises in the three data sources

Societal form/type organization	Interviews (<i>N</i> = 43)	Web survey (<i>N</i> = 90)	Database (<i>N</i> = 347)
Cooperative (all forms)	17 (40%)	33 (57%)	142 (41%)
Limited company (all forms)	9 (21%)	20 (34%)	93 (27%)
Foundation	1 (2%)	–	46 (13%)
Work integration social enterprise and “Centre Especial de Treball” (disabled workers)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	33 (10%)
Association (all forms)	11 (26%)	–	22 (7%)
Anonymous Society (all forms)	1 (2%)	3 (5%)	8 (2%)
Valid <i>N</i>	39 (100%)	58 (100%)	344 (100%)
Missing/other ^a	4	32	3

^aAutonomous worker

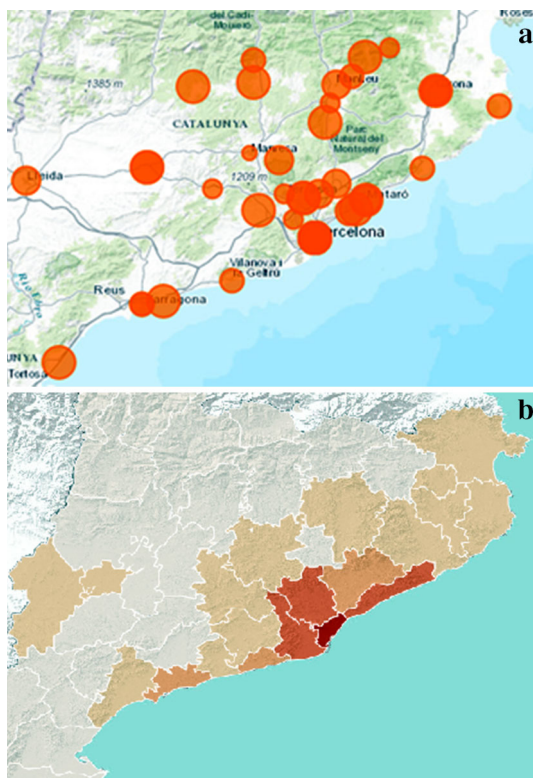


Fig. 2 a (Left) Map of the social/environmental organizations/initiatives in Catalonia. *Source:* Own elaboration from our database. **b** (Right) Population density in Catalonia. *Source:* Institut Cartogràfic i Geològic de Catalunya

mostly concentrated in some specific cases, such as *Sostre Civic*, a case that we will describe in detail in the next section.

Regarding the startup phase, the table shows that the majority of the ventures were mainly created using personal savings, complemented sometimes with small credits or donations. Many of these ventures also received support from professional business services for social entrepreneurs



Fig. 3 Word cloud of the sector in which the entities of our database were active, excluding Work Integration Social Enterprises and “Centres especials de treball” (social enterprises that employ disabled workers). Most important words have been translated to English

in their early stage (43 and 58%, for the personal interviews and web survey respectively; see Table 2), which were typically assessed as either “quite important for the business” or as “fundamental for the business” (not in table). However, when asked to rate their importance, both for the startup and for the development of the enterprise (see Table 3), a slightly lower rate was given to these professional services, on average, than to social media platforms (our respondents used a combination of media, mostly Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn, and blogs or webs) and a considerably lower rate than to personal contacts and word-of-mouth.

Table 2 further shows that in general, respondents are optimistic about their ventures’ future: In both the personal interviews and the web survey, more than 80% of the respondents expected that their enterprises will continue to exist in 5 years time, while only a minority had serious concerns about the future.

Finally, it is important to mention that the ventures and organizations represented in our sample are not isolated, but instead they are associated and federated in several ways, following the tradition of the social economy, which emphasizes cooperation as a central tenet of the sector. Figures 4 and 5 report the most common institutions to which the entities are associated, and the social/environmental initiatives most well known to the web survey respondents, respectively. Figure 4 shows that many

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of the social/environmental initiatives

Variable	Descriptive statistics	Interview data ($N = 43$)	Web survey data ($N = 90$)
Year of creation	Range	1925–2013	1940–2015
	Median	2009	2010
	Mean (SD)	2004 (17.0)	2005 (13.2)
	Valid N	43	90
Main source of capital at startup	N (%) per category		
	Personal savings	11 (26.2%)	46 (56.8%)
	Bank credits	2 (4.8%)	8 (9.9%)
	Loans family/friends	5 (11.9%)	2 (2.5%)
	Other	8 (19.0%)	21 (25.9%)
	Valid N	42	81
Startup support	N (%) per category		
	Yes	18 (42.9%)	50 (57.5%)
	No	24 (57.1%)	37 (42.5%)
	Valid N	42	87
Current annual revenues	Range	15,000–40,000,000	4000–17,000,000
	Median	20,000	140,000
	Mean (SD)	1225,374 (6,167,370)	2,076,779 (4,485,855)
	Valid N	43	42
Percentage of revenues obtained commercially	Range	0–100%	10–100%
	Median	100%	100%
	Mean (SD)	85.8% (30.2%)	80.9% (31.1%)
	Valid N	41	26
Other main source of income currently	N (%) per category		
	No other sources	(Freelist, most nominated: subsidies)	3 (3.3%)
	Subsidy		41 (45.6%)
	Donations		16 (17.8%)
	Crowd-funding		8 (8.9%)
	Inversion		8 (8.9%)
	Contribution partners		2 (2.2%)
	Others		8 (8.9%)
	Valid N		90
	Number of partners	N (%) per category	
0 partners		5 (13.2%)	0 (0.0%)
1 partner		5 (13.2%)	2 (2.2%)
2 partners		9 (23.7%)	6 (6.7%)
3 or more partners		19 (50.0%)	82 (91.1%)
Valid N		38	90
Number of employees	Range	0–174	1–32
	Median	3.0	13.5
	Mean (SD)	13.3 (30.5)	13.8 (9.8)

Table 2 continued

Variable	Descriptive statistics	Interview data ($N = 43$)	Web survey data ($N = 90$)
	Valid N	43	90
Number of volunteers	Range	0–90	0–1500
	Median	0	0
	Mean (SD)	5.3 (16.8)	24.9 (160.0)
	Valid N	41	90
Expectations future “How likely do you think it is that your enterprise will <i>not survive/survive</i> in 5 years time?”	N (%) per category	<i>NOT survive</i>	<i>Survive</i>
	Not very likely	22 (51.2%)	1 (1.9%)
	A little likely	16 (37.2%)	2 (3.8%)
	Quite likely	4 (9.3%)	17 (32.1%)
	Very likely	1 (2.3%)	27 (50.9%)
	I don't know	0 (0.0%)	6 (11.3%)
	Valid N	43	53

Highest frequencies are given in bold

Table 3 Importance of social media platforms, personal contacts, and professional services during the startup and during the development of the enterprise

Importance of ... on a scale from 1 to 10	Startup M (SD)	Development M (SD)
Social media platforms	4.9 (3.6)	6.6 (2.7)
Personal contacts and word-of-mouth	9.2 (1.0)	8.8 (1.2)
Professional services and organizations	3.8 (3.6)	5.2 (3.3)

ventures were associated with the “Network of Solidarity Economy” (*Xarxa d'Economia Solidària*), and to *Coop57*, a cooperative that offers ethically and solidarity-focused financial services. Among the most well-known social enterprises (see Fig. 5) are *Som Energia*, a case that we will describe below and that provides green energy to many initiatives, *l'Olivera* (a work integration cooperative), and *La Fageda*. The level of internal cooperation is further illustrated by the fact that respondents from the web survey were able to mention an average of no less than 25 other social/environmental initiatives in Catalonia (not in tables).

Regarding the individual attributes of social entrepreneurs (see Table 4), we found striking coincidences with the Report on Social Entrepreneurship of the GEM and other related surveys (see Hoogendoorn 2011a), namely that this population is predominantly male (61% for interviews; 63% for web survey), on average middle aged ($M = 40,2$ years, $SD = 8,0$ for interviews; $M = 42,9$ years, $SD = 10,6$ for web survey), and highly educated (more than 80% has university education, both for the interviews and the web survey). In terms of former employment (web survey), we observed quite some diversity. Most of the entrepreneurs were employed before starting the venture (67%), but others were unemployed (9%), students (9%), or self-employed (16%). Part of the

former employees had precarious or temporal jobs, but there were also a substantial number of directors, government employees, lawyers, psychologists, consultants, teachers, graphic and industrial designers, among others (not in table).

Furthermore, social entrepreneurs indicated that they are primarily driven by social/environmental and personal development motivations (Urbano et al. 2010), both of which they typically assessed as “very important” motives for starting the venture (4.6, interviews, and 4.7, web survey, on a scale from 1 to 5; see Table 4). Economic motivations, however, also had some importance, as respondents typically indicated that they considered them “a little” (personal interviews) or “quite” important (web survey). When asked to choose which of the motives was the most important (not in table), economic motives fell clearly behind the other two types. Even so, for 5% (interviews) and 12% of the cases (web survey), economic motives were reported as the most important motive to start the venture, indicating that some see social entrepreneurship mainly as a route to self-employment. Also, in the personal interviews, 42% of the respondents indicated that they had a combination of motivations (this category was not present in the web survey). Indeed, our impression from the personal interviews was that social motivations



Fig. 4 Word cloud of the most nominated affiliations in the web survey

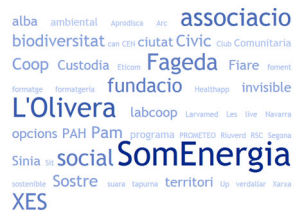


Fig. 5 Word cloud of the most nominated ventures in the web survey

were genuine, but that they were often mixed with economic motivations.

Finally, a sizable proportion of respondents had other, usually part-time occupations at the time of the interview (42% for the interviews, and 30% for the web survey; see Table 4), indicating that their initiatives did not always provide them with sufficient income.

Case Studies

After having presented the general tendencies in our data, we will now describe five of the cases in order to explore the different meanings that the phenomenon can take when we adopt a definition based on the existing consensus among academics and practitioners, that is, organizations that achieve social/environmental goals by market means, or a combination of market means and public or private funding. We have chosen to select cases that had overcome the survival stage (Churchill and Lewis 1983) and could therefore be considered as successful, as these are more meaningful for understanding what the phenomenon entails. Furthermore, we have selected cases that represented different manifestations of the phenomenon in the context of Catalonia, to explore what meanings are attached to this definition.

Our first case is *SostreCivic* (*sostrecivic.coop*), a cooperative that provides solutions for housing individuals and families who cannot afford to pay the rent at market prices in touristic cities as Barcelona. Raül Robert, the founder of *SostreCivic*, has received us patiently in his workplace several times, a “co-working” space in the center of Barcelona. He was awarded as *Ashoka* Fellow in 2010, and he indeed meets the ideal definition of a social entrepreneur, although, as he states, he never thought of himself as such before. He had the idea for the cooperative when he experienced difficulties to access affordable housing himself and observed similar problems in his environment. As

an industrial engineer, with experience in a European project on social and ecological housing solutions, and inspired by social movements such as the MST (Landless Workers’ Movement) in Brazil, a movement that fights for access to the land of poor workers through land reform, he took the decision to start on his own a cooperative for meeting this societal problem, first on a part-time and afterward on a full-time basis. After some years of activity, he and his associates have been able to influence the Catalan housing law, to cooperate with public and private institutions and professionals in order to find innovative solutions for each case or project, located mostly in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, and to build up a thriving community with partners, volunteers, and people interested in this kind of solutions.

La Tavella (*latavella.cat*), our second case, produces and commercializes local organic products as a means to provide suitable jobs, and personalized attention to disabled workers (11 out of 14 employees in 2014). The commercial venture (a Limited Company) was developed by two nonprofit associations with a long trajectory in the field of attention to disabled people through gardening initiatives (*Sant Tomàs* and *Fundació Viver de Bell-lloc*, respectively), as a means to overcome the cuts in the third sector. For this aim, they hired LJJ (pseudonym), an experienced professional, as a manager in 2011. Since his incorporation, the project has experienced a fast growth, doubling every year the revenues, and a deep organizational transformation from a nonprofit to a commercial model. From the beginning, the successful case of *La Fageda* (see previous section) was taken as a model to follow, and LJJ visited different social/environmental projects in Europe in order to get ideas on organic products. In Belgium, he found an institution very similar to *La Tavella*, based on a prosperous business model that helped him to define his own corporative strategy. The initiative was awarded during the first edition of the Momentum project, and this support was very important for the venture because LJJ could develop a business plan with professional advice and received a grant for starting up the business. The transition from a nonprofit entity funded by the traditional *Cajas de Ahorro* to a business-oriented organization has not been easy, but the balance is assessed as positive.

The third case is *Co-Shop* (*coshopcollection.com*, a project from Capipota Productions, a Limited Company) that distributes fashionable garments from local producers and designers, and NGOs that employ women in risk of exclusion. This initiative was started primarily as a means to create self-employment, but the owners also wished to address social and environmental concerns. SM (architect) and TN (engineer), concerned with the environmental impact of the garment industry, started the business in 2011 with the support of financial credits from both the state and

Table 4 Descriptive statistics of the social entrepreneurs

Variable	Descriptive statistics	Interviews ($N = 43$)	Web survey ($N = 90$)
Gender	<i>N (%) per category</i>		
	Male	26 (60.5%)	56 (62.9%)
	Female	17 (39.5%)	33 (37.1%)
	Valid <i>N</i>	43	89
Age	Range	25–66	21–67
	Median	39	42
	Mean (SD)	40.2 (8.0)	42.9 (10.6)
	Valid <i>N</i>	43	88
Education	<i>N (%) per category</i>		
	Primary school	1 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)
	Secondary school	2 (4.7%)	8 (9.1%)
	Interm. prof. education	1 (2.3%)	1 (1.1%)
	Higher prof. education	2 (4.7%)	5 (5.7%)
	University diploma	5 (11.6%)	9 (10.2%)
	University BA degree	21 (48.8%)	30 (34.1%)
	University MA degree	10 (23.3%)	30 (34.1%)
	University PhD degree	1 (2.3%)	3 (3.4%)
	Other	–	2 (2.3%)
	Valid <i>N</i>	43	88
Previous occupation	<i>N (%) per category</i>		
	Autonomous	<i>No information available</i>	13 (16.0%)
	Employed		54 (66.7%)
	Unemployed		7 (8.6%)
	Student		7 (8.6%)
	Valid <i>N</i>		81
Current other occupation	<i>N (%) per category</i>		
	Full-time employment	5 (11.6%)	3 (3.6%)
	Part-time employment	13 (30.2%)	11 (13.3%)
	Other	<i>[category not included]</i>	11 (13.3%)
	No	25 (58.1%)	58 (69.9%)
	Valid <i>N</i>	43	83
Motivation: Social/environmental (scale 1–5)	Median	5	5
	Mean (SD)	4.6 (0.5)	4.7 (0.7)
	Valid <i>N</i>	33	83
Motivation: Personal development (scale 1–5)	Median	5	5
	Mean (SD)	4.7 (0.6)	4.6 (0.9)
	Valid <i>N</i>	33	84
Motivation: Economic (scale 1–5)	Median	2	4
	Mean (SD)	2.1 (1.2)	3.8 (1.3)
	Valid <i>N</i>	33	85
Motivation: Most important	<i>N (%) per category</i>		
	Social/enviro. n. m.	9 (20.9%)	42 (48.3%)
	Personal development	8 (18.6%)	28 (32.2%)
	Economic	2 (4.7%)	10 (11.5%)
	Combination	14 (42.4%)	<i>[categories not included]</i>
	Don't know	0 (0.0%)	7 (8.0%)
	Valid <i>N</i>	33	87

Highest frequencies are given in bold

autonomous public programs, and especially from the Momentum project in 2014 that had the same positive impact as in the previous case for developing the business. *Co-Shop* presents itself as a “collaborative shop with local fashion designers.” Currently, it has four shops in Barcelona, and it is starting to offer a franchise for opening other shops in Spain. Recently, the initiative has been awarded by the city council of Barcelona as well.

So far, we have discussed three initiatives that have been awarded by different entrepreneurship programs, and consequently they have received considerable support at an early stage of the businesses. Our fourth case, *Som Energia* (somenergia.coop) is possibly the most outstanding case of business success in Spain in the last years, but it has never been awarded by one of the social entrepreneurship programs. *Som Energia* was started in 2010 by Gijsbert Huijink, who had obtained a Master Degree in Business Innovation and Technology Development at the University of Girona 2 years earlier. At the time that *Som Energia* was launched, he was an assistant professor in Economics at the same university. Gijsbert became interested in renewable energy when he was trying to find a solution for his own house. In the end, he decided to install solar panels and batteries, and when studying the possibility to invest in a wind turbine, the cooperative model came up. No cooperative in renewable energy existed at the time in Spain, so he started *Som Energia* with the aid of a few friends and students. Gijsbert had previous management experience as co-owner of a successful furniture company in Romania, expertise that was applied to the new venture. Soon, the cooperative had to face the reality of the energetic model in Spain, an oligopolistic, highly regulated sector where small players had no real chances to succeed. Instead of incentivizing green energy, the government has introduced taxes to solar energy, which hinders the emergence of energy cooperatives. With small grants, and against the predictions of business consultants, the cooperative has grown and nowadays it has over 33,000 members, more than 47,000 contracts, operates in different regions in Spain, and owns facilities for producing green electricity that account for almost 5% of all their energy sales. The growth continues at a good pace. In addition, *Som Energia* not only involves their partners in the generation of new projects (offering a fair return of the investment), but helps them actively to reduce their domestic energy consumption, and consequently, their negative impact on the environment. One of the keys of success of *Som Energia* is its social movement approach: members are not only conceived as consumers but also as activists committed to change the societal energy model. In this regard, currently there are 26 local action groups in Spain that advocate actively for this change of paradigm.

The final case is also quite different. *CAT Coop* (we use a pseudonym in this case) is a cooperative federation that

was launched in 2010 under the principles of self-employment, financial independence, non-compliance of (imposed) tax regulations, and environmental sustainability. *CAT Coop* headquarters are located in a business area of Barcelona city. The federation aims to contribute to the transformation of society toward a more democratic and sustainable model than offered by the capitalist market. In fact, they explicitly refuse to use the “social entrepreneurship” label. The cooperative promotes the use of social currencies (currencies of local use), solidarity values, cooperation, and gives priority and concern to social needs over economic profit. All the cooperatives that wish to become members of the federation have to demonstrate that their organic, social, or industrial projects meet a series of environmental/social standards in order to develop their activities within the cooperative.³ This point forcefully illustrates their discourse and practice, distinct from that of the establishment and the mainstream society, and their willingness to think outside the box and create an alternative world. The use of social currencies instead of the euro is promoted by the cooperative, offering a web-based platform to facilitate the exchanges. However, in reality the participants do use euros in their internal transactions, because beyond the self-provisioning ideal, they still rely on market exchanges for making a living. In 2015, more than 600 projects (ranging from health services to industrial products) were associated with the federation, with thousands of persons making a living in this institutional framework. Nonetheless, only one person from this federation collaborated with us, although we had the opportunity to interview two associated initiatives.

From the description of these five cases, it is clear that the respondents who use the label of social entrepreneurship for their initiatives, or quite the contrary, who actively refuse to use that label, have very different motivations, trajectories, business models, and levels of support obtained. This diversity of the five cases shows the existence of a contested field, with two alternative definitions struggling in unequal competition.

Summary and Interpretation Based on the SAF Framework

From the data presented in this article, a number of conclusions can be drawn regarding the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship in Catalonia. First of all, we conclude that we face a new field that has emerged during the process of

³ When we presented our research project to the executive committee for obtaining their collaboration in the research, their main objection to collaborate with us was precisely that we were funded by the Spanish government.

profound change that the Catalan society has experienced during the financial crisis (2008–2014), a societal change that it is still continuing. This new field can be conceptualized as an emergent Strategic Action Field (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). In this field, the main players of the financial sector occupied the vacuum left by the Saving Banks and started to actively promote social entrepreneurship programs with the positive sanction of Public Administration. With this move, they started to regulate the new field disseminating a label and a prescriptive definition that is coherent with their market ideology, and linking banks to positive social/environmental values in times of financial downturn. In this new scenario, with millions of unemployed people and a declining role of the welfare state, mostly highly educated people in urban areas started (and keep starting) socially/environmentally oriented ventures with their own savings and the aid of social connections as their main assets, but with an important network of both public and private startup resources at their disposal. We contend that we are facing a mostly urban mobilization driven by people with both post-materialistic values (Inglehart 1977, 2009), and the need to make a living in the new post-crisis scenario. In this regard, we have shown that some of these initiatives are primarily developed in order to create self-employment opportunities. In addition, traditional nonprofit institutions have started commercial businesses (like in the case of *La Tavella*) in order to face the disappearance of the *Cajas de Ahorros*, and its social expenditure along with the global reduction of the public budget in areas of social policy (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Weisbrod 1998). The positive image associated with “social entrepreneurship” due to the public endorsement of the incumbent definition, and the material rewards that some programs provide to selected initiatives, explain that most of these new entrepreneurs (“challengers” in SAF terminology) presented themselves in this way and that the tension experienced with the nonprofit sector when starting commercial ventures can be better managed by adopting this denomination (cf. Witkamp et al. 2011).

A second interesting observation is the level of commitment of the population under study with social/environmental goals. Even though some initiatives were mostly created for self-employment, we observed during the interviews that social or environmental motivations were *genuine*. We suggest that it is not just a feature of social entrepreneurs, but a feature of well-educated people in advanced economies who tend to hold “post-materialistic” values (Inglehart 2009) and pursue meaningful jobs (Overell 2008). In the interviews, the sense of self-realization and the genuine social/environmental concern of our informants were recurrent, even in cases of precarious subsistence. Therefore, the startup of a socially/

environmentally oriented venture can be seen as a type of activism and a natural consequence of the structure of opportunities available for a certain level of education and experience more likely to be found in urban settings.

A third interesting finding is that this new sector has to present itself as a *cooperative* venture in order to meet the historic and resilient sector of the Social Economy in Catalonia and Spain, despite that initiatives are often portrayed in the media as an achievement of individual “champions,” “heroes,” or “change makers.” *Sostre Civic* and *Som Energia* are two examples of cooperatives that could easily be portrayed “heroes” or “individual change makers.” However, it is through the institutional and well-connected world of the social economy that all these concerns and initiatives are expressed. Even the limited companies present themselves as Co-X or “co-entrepreneurship.” In this regard, it is interesting that a training program for social innovations, the program *estArter*, developed by the Institute of Government and Public Policy (IGOP) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (*estarter.cat*), precisely focuses on a collective and collaborative approach for developing social ventures. This level of cooperation is instrumental in keeping the SAF together.

Last, we observed that the field also integrates the collaborative anti-system and anti-market initiatives (such as the case *Cat Coop* we described earlier), an important issue in our view. Taking the traditional Social Economy as a model, about 600 projects were created intentionally outside the market and the euro (see the case *Cat Coop* described above), challenging the SAF by framing a totally different meaning that describes the process as “dispossession,” and “structural inequality” provoked by banks, and oligopolistic capitalism (see Harvey 2007). While occupying the same field as the entrepreneurs mentioned above who conform to the general logic and rules of the SAF, and offering similar ways for making a living through self-occupation compatible with a post-materialistic value system and collaboration, the latter actors oppose to the use of the term “social entrepreneurship,” and do not agree with the former group about the purpose and rules of the field and the position of some actors (such as banks) in it. We can therefore speak of an unsettled or disputed SAF where two sets of actors, the incumbents and the opposing challengers respectively, provide competing definitions of the new scenario.

In this context, we can understand that the questions “who are social entrepreneurs?” or “what is social entrepreneurship?” are too vague. Beyond epistemological debates, we are facing a complex reality where the label “social entrepreneur” has recently been promoted and imposed top-down, and where different kinds of actors use

or refuse to use it depending on their own interests and objectives.

Conclusions and Limitations

Although Catalonia has a long social economy tradition (Reventós 1960), the analysis shows a significant rise of social entrepreneurship initiatives since 2008, when the large financial crisis began. The causes of this emergence are multiple: first, it is due in part to a strong momentum of social entrepreneurship created by European, Spanish, and Catalan institutions. Banking foundations and business schools that have led a real transformation of this sector added to the momentum. Second, the decline of the welfare state and the disappearance of the *Cajas de Ahorros* (Savings Banks) had produced a void (in terms of providing solutions to social and environmental problems) that was filled by these new initiatives, in many cases started by nonprofit parties. Third, the high rates of unemployment and job insecurity resulting from the economic crisis have encouraged various forms of self-employment. Among these forms, we highlight the social, health, or environmental initiatives of people who have lost their jobs in the administration or in the nonprofit sector. Fourth, and in relation to the latter, a large segment of the population with high levels of education and post-material aspirations (i.e., incentives beyond salary, such as social justice, solidarity, sustainability, equity) has found a meaningful job in these social initiatives (Overell 2008), even though they may be worse off economically or in terms of labor conditions. The search of meaningful work (beyond economic profit) is a key issue for many of these new entrepreneurs, specifically for the highly educated living in urbanized areas.

The redefinition of the entrepreneurial field has subsumed different and varied initiatives under the same label (i.e., “social entrepreneurship”), from Foundations to Limited Societies, Anonymous Societies, Insertion Companies, and, most of all, Cooperatives. Due to the positive image associated with it, entrepreneurs in Catalonia chose to adopt this label, emphasizing the collective nature of the venture, in accordance with the strong cooperative tradition. Conversely, an important number of sustainable and meaningful initiatives developed within the cooperative framework *refuse* to adopt this label for its market-oriented and individualistic nature. We suggest that this reaction shows that the strategic action field is unsettled and its evolution difficult to foresee at this moment.

Our study has some limitations of which we are well aware. The most obvious limitation is the difficulty of collecting reliable data for several reasons. On the one hand, the high mortality of these businesses makes it difficult to establish an unequivocal census. In addition,

obtaining respondents’ collaboration has been a particularly tough task in this research: entrepreneurs are busy and unlikely to answer to lengthy surveys or interviews, but in addition, some politically driven entrepreneurs were actually reluctant to cooperate with what they interpreted as “the establishment.” On the other hand, the legal form in which companies are presented is heterogeneous, and sometimes they have several legal forms at the same time. As a matter of fact, the concept of “social entrepreneurship” is relatively new in Spain and some enterprises do not highlight the keywords that facilitate their identification as social initiatives (sustainability, social justice, etc.) on their Web site. For these reasons, even though our sample of social enterprises in Catalonia has a size (133 when we combine personal interviews and the web survey) that approaches the number of social enterprises that participated in the GEM Social Entrepreneurship survey for the whole of Spain (160), and our database is twice as large, we have to stress that it is not a random sample, and it may present biases. Nevertheless, the internal variation that the data display is an observed reality.

To conclude, we contend that in this complex societal transformation, “social entrepreneurs” are primarily those individuals who are awarded as such by homonymous funding programs. This is mostly an urban phenomenon, whose dwellers are facing profound societal changes, to which they are reacting with initiatives more suited to their values, education, and material conditions of life in a market economy. Possibly, we are facing a global trend. On the other hand, other people with the same social/environmental concerns, and the same capacity to mobilize resources for “changing the world,” are comfortably installed either in the cooperative or in anti-market sectors. The cowl *does* make the difference.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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