Abstract – Social Farming (SF) is a longstanding phenomenon in Europe, emerging mainly in the rural and periurban setting. In Catalonia, it has become especially evident within the last 10 years, due to the 2008 economic crisis. There are direct benefits from SF in terms of employment, education, training and therapeutic approaches at risk of social exclusion. It is important to assess the social return on public and private investments in this activity and evaluate its impact in areas such as local development and social cohesion. The present research is analysing the economic viability and social impact of a sample of SF projects, using two distinct methodologies: the CANVAS business model and social return on investment (SROI). The first attempts to provide guidelines for promoters of an SF initiative, from the emergence of the project idea to the creation of the enterprise. The second measures and quantifies the concept of value, incorporating costs and social, environmental and economic benefits. The study attempts to demonstrate how SF can be a profitable economic activity with an important social impact, while also contributing to better use of public resources and a more efficient system of social welfare.

Keywords – Social Farming, CANVAS Business Model, SROI, Catalonia, Local Development, Social Exclusion, Social Cohesion

INTRODUCTION

The SF concept has been described by many authors in the European context (Sempik, Hine, Wilcox 2010; Di Iacovo, O’Connor 2009; Hassink, Van Dijk 2006). However, with the exception of Italy (O’Connor, Lai, Watson, 2010; Di Iacovo, 2010), it has received limited research attention in South Europe (Guirado et al, 2014).

In the present study, SF is defined as a sector that includes a broad spectrum of activities that involve local agriculture-related resources and offer jobs, therapy, training and education to groups at risk of social exclusion, by which they can improve their personal health and well-being, social situation and empowerment, and that contribute to more socially and economically sustainable local development. To classify the SF projects in Catalonia and build a research database, we have considered three main aspects that define the nature of SF projects: a) the project goals, b) the groups that benefit from participating in the project, and c) the activity carried out (i.e., agricultural or agriculture-related, production of goods or delivery of services). In addition, data are collected about the legal status of each entity, the modality of the involvement by groups at risk of social exclusion and the application of organic agriculture criteria.

To date we have identified 146 entities, of which 99 are engaged in SF activities and the remaining 47 in gardening or landscaping activities. We have included the latter group as a potential sector for SF expansion because we have observed that some entities engaged in this sector have undergone a change towards SF because of the economic crisis, particularly because of the decline in the construction sector. Most of the included projects are private entities, some of them non-profit foundations (22.2%) or associations (15.2%) and others private businesses (19.2%) or cooperatives (14.1%). Encouragement of SF by public administration is increasing but remains insignificant. Depending on the project goals, we have seen that most of them promote employment opportunities (62.6%), while others are designed to provide food for individuals with limited resources (10.1%), or education and training (7.1%). Most of the projects benefit people with a disability or mental disorder (41.4%), but as a side effect of the economic crisis other groups have been included, such as those living in poverty (24.2%), the unemployed (8.1%) and other socially vulnerable groups: the young, the elderly, women, children, prisoners, new immigrants, or the homeless. The most common legal structure for social and workforce integration of these groups are Special Work Centres (Centres Especials de Treball, 36.4%) and Supportive Employment Sites (Empreses d’Inserció, 15.2%). A large portion of these entities focus their efforts on agriculture (69.7%), particularly organic horticulture, and food processing (11.1%), with the majority applying ecological agriculture production practices in their farms and workshops. Nonetheless, there are some projects engaged in other activities such as forest management and silviculture or services such as short supply chain product commercialization.
The main objective of the present research in Catalonia is to contribute to deeper understanding of the SF sector and to analyse the economic viability and social impact of SF projects, using two methodological tools: the CANVAS business model and Social Return on Investment (SROI). The specific objectives are to determine the changes generated by SF in the main groups of interest from a social, economic, and environmental perspective, on one hand, and demonstrate that SF is a productive as well as economically, socially and environmentally sustainable activity, on the other. One of our hypotheses is that SF initiatives contribute to more efficient use of public resources. Participation in SF projects by certain groups leads to less frequent use of health and social services, and therefore decreases public expense in this context. On the other hand, the appearance of SF initiatives generates important changes in the territory because they encourage sustainable local development, mainly in periurban and rural areas, while also contributing to social cohesion and minimizing environmental damage.

METHODOLOGY
Our study methods are focused on three basic points: first, analysis of the elements that constitute an SF project in order to establish categories that will allow us to develop a group of recommendations designed to encourage SF; second, analysis of economic data and the CANVAS business model for various SF projects with the goal of evaluating their economic viability and identifying the determining factors and internal structure of the entity; and third, analysis of SROI. Briefly, CANVAS permits a quick visualization of how an entity develops its value proposition in order to reach its clients, how it delivers that message, and how it captures part of that value for itself. This tool helps an entity plan how the enterprise will serve its clients and how it will generate income. SROI shows how these projects contribute important social benefits and generate change in the individuals with whom they work, both directly and in the society as a whole. This model is a strategic planning tool that helps to show how each entity generates value in order to obtain a specific monetary value. This is useful in attracting social investment in a project and SROI is increasingly being used by public institutions and nongovernmental organizations as a mechanism for evaluation.

In order to achieve these objectives, our research design has 7 methodological phases. The first phase of methodological planning consists of three specific actions: a) acquisition of deeper knowledge of both the CANVAS and SROI tools; b) development of a guide for applying each of these tools; and c) research on the social, economic and environmental changes generated by SF activities. The second phase is to acquire a general knowledge of the SF entities, with the goal of compiling the greatest possible volume of information, which will allow us to develop a detailed description. The third phase is the beginning of fieldwork in order to complete the CANVAS model and define the first steps in applying the SROI tool. In the fourth phase, we will analyse the data obtained from the fieldwork for the CANVAS model, together with the initial SROI design. In the fifth phase, we will complete the second part of the fieldwork and continue developing the SROI; this consists of quantifying the changes produced by SF entities and assigning value to their impact. In the sixth phase, we will process all the information obtained in the second part of the fieldwork and finalize a first version of the SROI. Finally, in the seventh phase, as required by the SROI methodology, we will submit the data obtained for evaluation by the entity being analysed, with the objective of achieving the best possible SROI results.

CONCLUSIONS
These case studies will allow us to validate our initial hypotheses and clearly show how SF is an activity with an increasing presence in Catalonia and meets current needs in Catalan society, becoming a sector with a clear component of social innovation that offers economic viability and social justice, and in which investments deliver a return to society by way of different channels: health and social services, provision of services and infrastructures, environmental improvements, the growth of organic agriculture, and short supply chains (“farm to table”).

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REFERENCES