

*SIDH – Servei  
d'Intermediació en  
Deutes de l'Habitatge -  
Housing Debt  
Intermediation Service in  
Barcelona (Spain)*

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## 1 The initiative and its organisers

SIDH stands for *Servei d'Intermediació en Deutes d'Habitatge* (Housing Debt Intermediation Service). It addresses people living in the province of Barcelona, who cannot afford their mortgage and are at risk of losing their home. It offers information, advice and mediation between users and financial institutions with the aim to maintain housing.

Users can access SIDH through municipal social services and local branches of the regional housing office or of the regional office for consumer rights. They receive personal advice for the restructuring of their debt by specialised lawyers, who prepare a proposal to be submitted to the financial institutions. *Ofideute*, a service of the Housing Agency of the Catalunya Region, evaluates the proposal and conducts a direct mediation with the financial institution. Finally, if the proposal is accepted, the users sign an agreement formalising the proposed solutions.

SIDH has been working since December 2012, it is a free service and is managed by the Provincial Government of Barcelona (*Diputació de Barcelona*), in collaboration with Catalunya Region (*Generalitat de Catalunya*), the municipalities of the province of Barcelona and the bar associations of the same province.

The Provincial Government of Barcelona is a local public institution offering technical, economic and technological support to the municipalities, especially to small ones, so that they can supply homogeneous local services in all the territory. SIDH is provided within this institutional mission. The province of Barcelona includes 311 municipalities and about five millions inhabitants.

It is delivered in strict collaboration with *Ofideute*, a service of the Housing Agency of Catalunya Region dealing with debt mediation related to mortgage payment. *Ofideute* provides legal advice and mediation to all the inhabitants of Catalunya (around 7.5 million people).

The seven bar associations of the province of Barcelona are also involved to provide specialised legal advice to the users of SIDH. They are private non-profit oriented associations. Their aims are to guarantee the professional interests of the law profession, to promote the implementation of the profession's deontological rules and to offer services of public interest. Within this mission, lawyers belonging to the bar associations provide legal advice to users of SIDH.

## 2 Basic information on the (local) context and the emerging problems

Spain is a country of homeowners, with a very small rental sector and a minimal presence of social housing (see Table 1). This is the result of a political orientation introduced by Franco's dictatorship which tried to compensate the lack of labour and social rights with access to homeownership. This policy was confirmed by the democratic governments following the dictatorship.

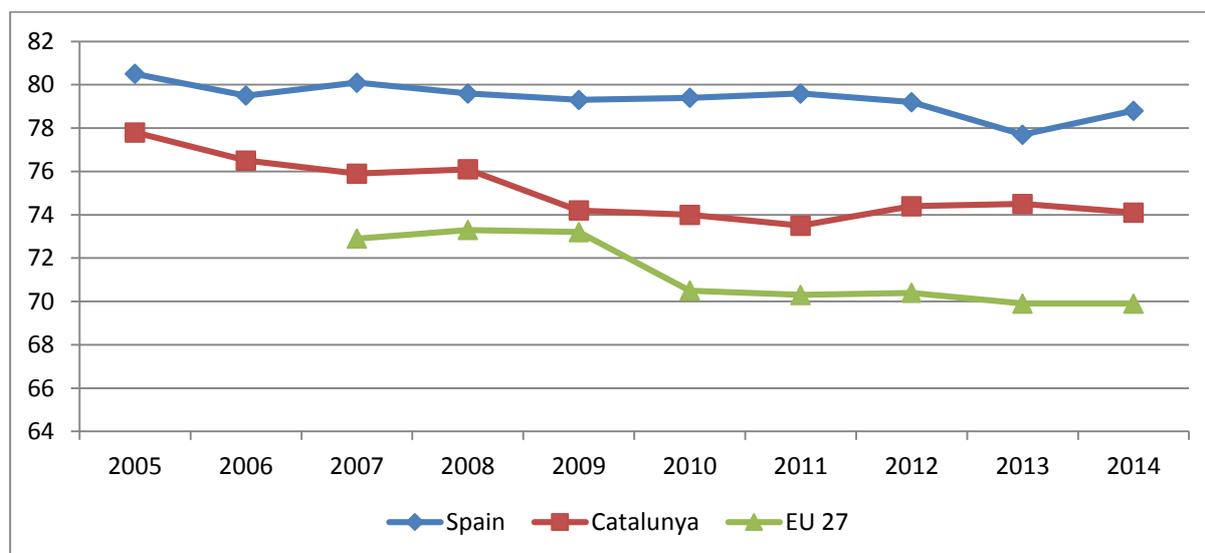
**Table 1. Tenure structure in Spain and Catalunya, 2014.**

	Owner occupancy	Rental market	Social rental market	Free transfer*
Spain	78%	12.4%	2.5%	7%
Cataluña	74.1%	18.1%	2.3%	5.5%

\* Contract through which a landlord transfers the use of a dwelling without the payment of a rent for a fixed period of time. It is usually used to transfer rights of use to children or other family members.

Source: INE, Encuesta de condiciones de vida<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 1. Share of owner occupancy in Europe, Spain and Cataluña, 2005 – 2014.



Sources: INE, Encuesta de condiciones de vida<sup>2</sup>, Eurostat<sup>3</sup>.

As it is clear from Table 1 and Figure 1 homeownership is historically the most diffused tenure regime both in Spain and, although with a slightly lower share, Cataluña. Both present higher shares than the EU average. Cataluña has a bigger rental market, which has grown after the 2007 crisis, when it was 13% (it is 18% in 2014). The social rental sector has always been irrelevant both at national and regional level. After the crisis, it has even decreased in both Spain (from 3.5% in 2005 to 2.5% in 2014) and Cataluña, where it was 5.7% in 2005, it increased to 6.8% in 2009, then had a sharp decrease to 2.3% in 2014. The tenure named “free transfers” refers to a special kind of contract through which a landlord transfers the use of a dwelling without the payment of a rent for a fixed period of time. It is usually used to transfer rights of use to children or other family members. This tenure form is growing both at national and regional level.

In the early 2000s Spain entered a phase of housing boom, with a big increase both in housing production and prices, which lasted until 2007, when the effects of the global financial crisis hit the Country hard, particularly the labour market and the housing market. The housing boom was caused by a strong demographic growth, mainly due to migration, the presence of relevant speculative investments (Cano Fuentes *et al.*, 2013), an accumulation regime mainly based on finance and real estate (Beker, 2014).

In these years, interest rates on mortgages were low and a process of liberalisation of the mortgage system made it easier for many households to obtain a mortgage, through the practice of subprime lending. Through this practice many households with unstable or low income or with a bad credit history could take out high loans. Special attention was dedicated to immigrants who, despite a very weak labour market position, could receive the so-called “welcome mortgages”. This situation led to a sharp increase in the number of mortgages, to around five million in the period 2003-2007, decreasing to less than two million in 2008-2012 (Rodríguez López, 2013). Between 1997 and 2007 the average amount of the mortgages increased from 50,800 Euros to 148,200, the share of the available income

<sup>1</sup> <http://goo.gl/ShdMIz>.

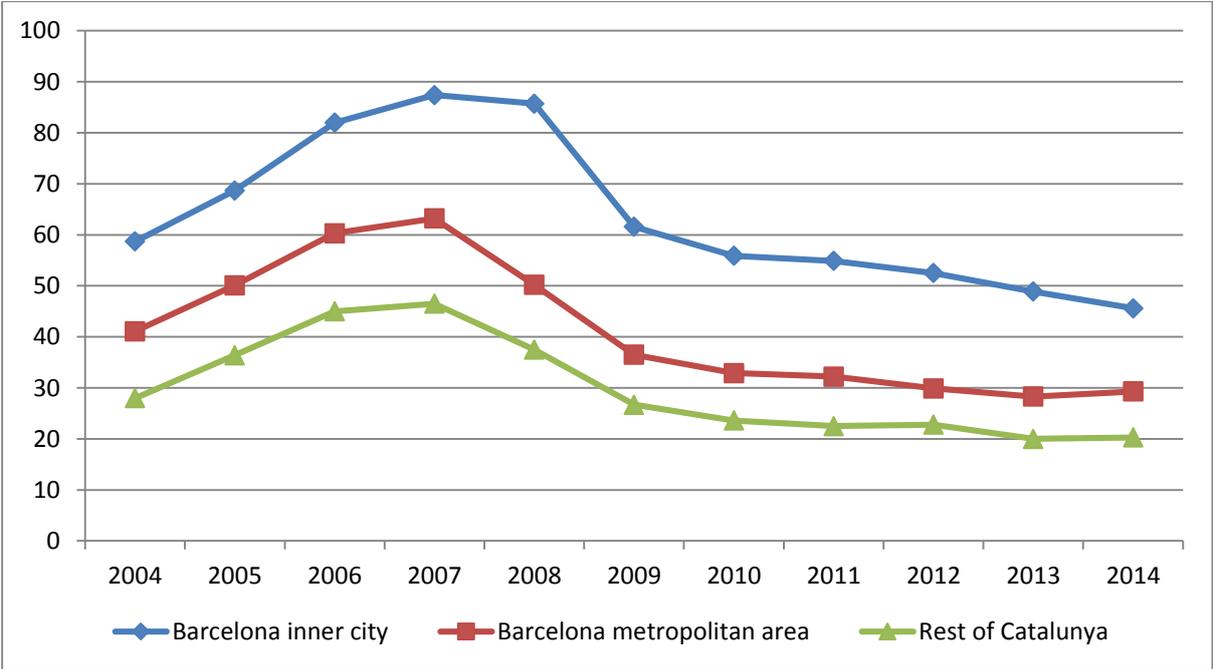
<sup>2</sup> <http://goo.gl/ShdMIz>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://goo.gl/khv5Ks>

devoted to housing rose from 28.4% to 51.3% and the housing prices increased by around 200% (*Ibid.*). In the period 1999-2008 the Spanish residential mortgage debt increased by 500%, from 100 billion euros to around 600 billion (Cano Fuentes *et al.*, 2013). The average debt load of the Spanish households (considering all the debts, not only housing) rose from 45% of the available income in 1997 to 111.4% in 2007 (Rodríguez López, 2013).

Cataluña was strongly hit by the global financial crisis. The regional GDP was constantly decreasing between 2007 and 2013; only in 2014 did it show signs of positive growth (+1.5%). Unemployment rose from 11.3% in 2008 to 25% in 2012 (it is 20.4% in 2014). In the period 2008-2013 only 70,000 new dwellings were built, while in the previous six years (2002-2007) the total number was 580,000 (Generalitat de Cataluña, 2015). Housing affordability was strongly jeopardised during the years of the housing boom and it only started to improve after 2007-2008, as shown in Figure 2.

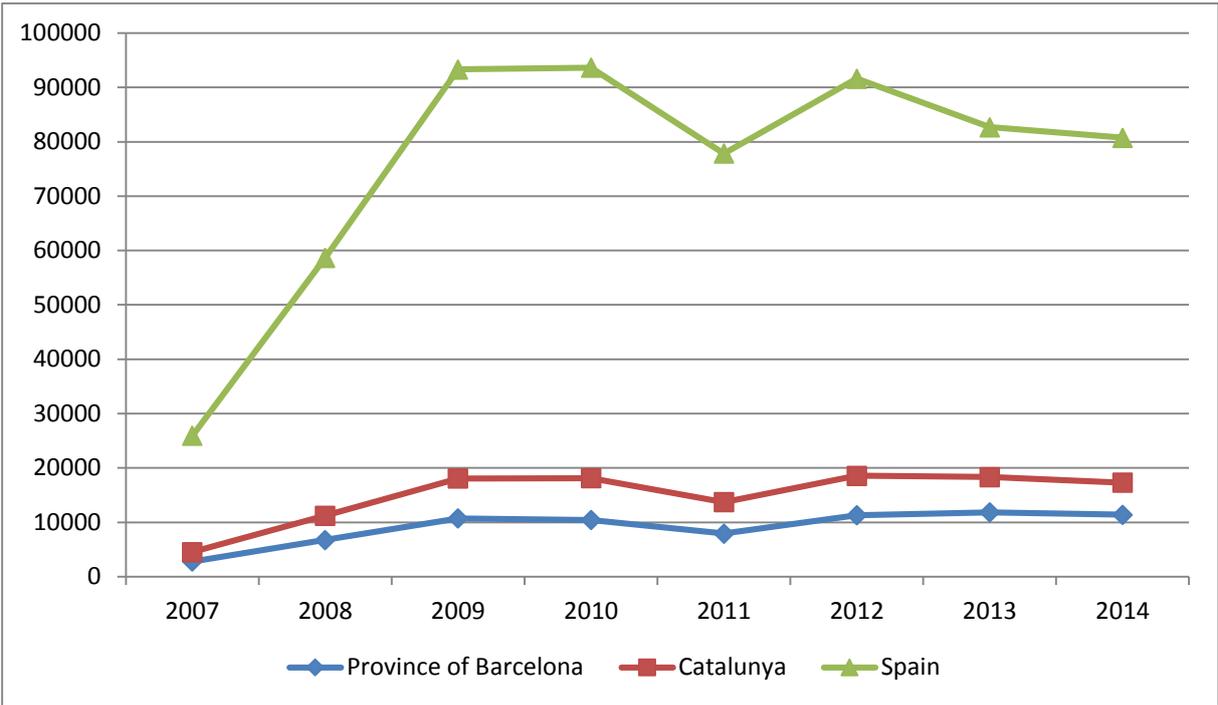
**Figure 2. Percentage of available income required to pay the initial quota of a mortgage, 2004-2014.\***



\* Household with a median income, mortgage with variable rates for a new dwelling of 90 sm.  
 Source: Generalitat de Cataluña, 2015.

These economic conditions, together with a general collapse of the housing market and the rise of the interest rates, determined the rising difficulty for a growing number of people in meeting the payment of their mortgage. If mortgage arrears last too long (at least three payments), they lead to a legal foreclosure procedure, through which the lender attempts to recover the collateral for the loan with an interest of around 20%. If this attempt does not yield any result, the following step is dispossession that means the household is deprived of the ownership of the dwelling, beyond having to re-pay the debt to the bank. Eviction is the final step. Foreclosures, dispossessions and evictions have sharply increased both in Spain and Cataluña since 2008 (see Figures 3 and 4).

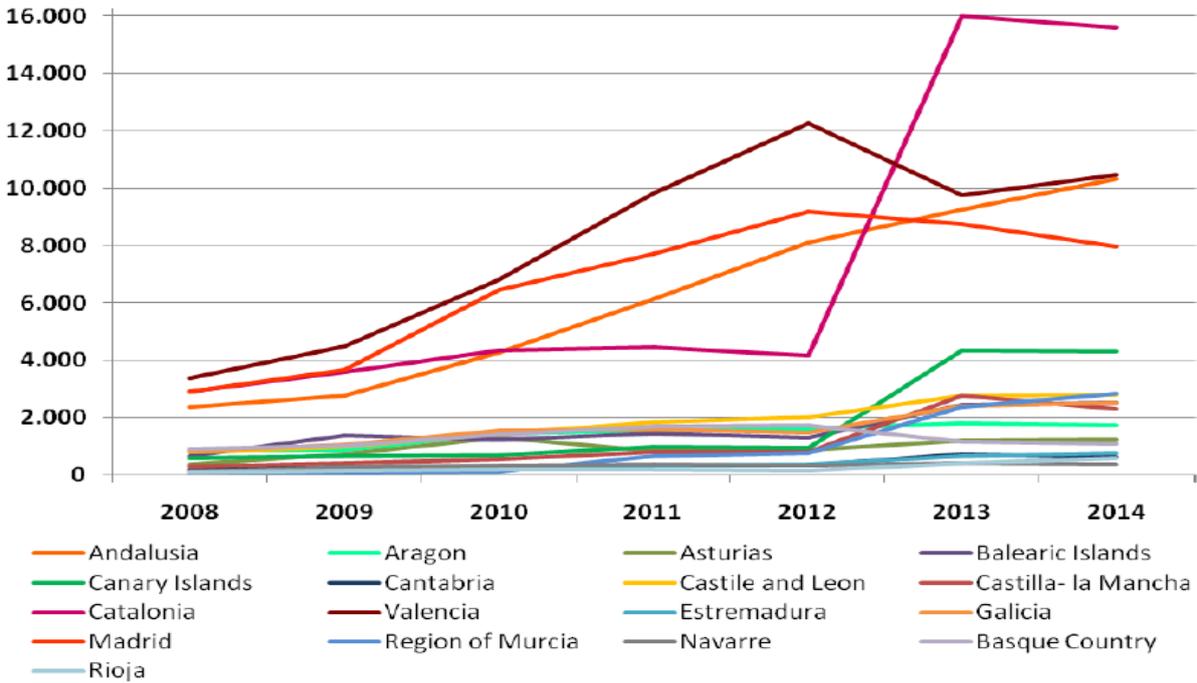
**Figure 3. Number of foreclosures in Spain, Cataluña and Province of Barcelona 2007-2014.**



Source: our elaboration from CGPJ (<http://goo.gl/9LFKrO>).

The tendency is similar until 2012, when foreclosures in Spain started to decrease while in Cataluña and Province of Barcelona they remained at almost the same level.

**Figure 4. Evictions in the Spanish Autonomous Communities 2008-2014.**



Source: Tribunal Superior de Justicia – Etxezarreta Etxarri et al., 2015

As it is evident from Figure 2, Cataluña is the Spanish region with by far the highest numbers of evictions in 2013 and 2014. Being one of the richest and most attractive regions, there were concentrated the most relevant causes and effects of the housing boom and following crisis: high speculation, great numbers of newly built dwellings with no comparable increase of population, massive use of the subprime lending practice, new weak but promising clients for the banks (like immigrants) and presence of strong financial institutions.

Spanish society strongly reacted to the critical situation described above. In 2009 the protests institutionalised in a social movement called *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform of people affected by foreclosures – PAH henceforth). PAH offers free advice to households at risk of being evicted, organises protests to stop ordered evictions and lobbies to gain laws, which protect households affected by the housing crisis. Since its foundation, it has been calculated that PAH has avoided 1,663 evictions and reallocated 2,500 people (Etxezarreta Etxarri *et al.*, 2015). Cataluña, and Barcelona in particular, has always been the territory where PAH is particularly strongly rooted. It was indeed founded in this context and Cataluña hosts 76 of the 229 local assemblies (*Ibid.*).

In February 2013 PAH presented a Popular Legislative Initiative to the Spanish Parliament, validated by more than one million signatures. The Parliament accepted with unanimity the proposal, which established that the so-called *Dacion en pago*<sup>4</sup> should be the preferred system to solve conflicts related to mortgage arrears and housing debts. Spanish legislation is indeed very severe with the debtors. Article 1911 of the Civil Code establishes that the creditor can make good his losses through access to all the debtor's assets to recover a loan. The financial institutions can also reclaim to the debtor the difference between the amount of the debt and the new lower value of the house (Rodríguez López, 2013). The popular law also establishes that the repossessed house should be transformed into a socially rented dwelling for the debtor for a period of five years, during which the rent cannot be higher than one third of the household's available income. The presence of PAH has been described by the interviewees as a favourable condition for fostering social innovation and stimulating public institutions, which started to search for new policies and interventions to counteract the severe social situation created by the housing bubble.

Policy responses to the problems of mortgage arrears, foreclosures and evictions have been formulated at both the national and the regional level. At the national level a mortgage assistance scheme was introduced in 2009. The scheme allowed a temporary reduction of mortgage payments by 50% for unemployed households with a debt less than 170,000 euros. The scheme involved a restructuring of the debt that should be paid within 15 years. The scheme was not working and was closed in 2011, since only 14,000 households took advantage of it (Cano Fuentes *et al.*, 2013).

In 2012 the Spanish government introduced the *Real Decreto* – Law 6/2012, known as *Codigos de Buenas Practicas* (Code of Good Practices). The law proposes a phased restructuring of the mortgage debts of households that are in arrears. The first phase consists in an interest rate reduction and/or mortgage term extension. In the second phase a debt reduction of up to 25% can be negotiated and in the last phase a so-called *Dacion en pago*<sup>5</sup> can be proposed. However, the conditions to access to the procedures are rather strict: all members of the household have to be out of work, the mortgage payments have to exceed 60% of the available income, available savings are evaluated, the price of the dwelling should be below 120,000 euros in the smaller municipalities and 200,000 euros in the

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<sup>4</sup> A legal procedure that allows households to cancel their debt. For a detailed description see chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> See note 4.

bigger cities and, most importantly, any individuals guaranteeing the mortgage should not be able to repay it. The latter is an important condition, since it is common in Spain that parents or other family members guarantee the mortgage loans of their children or other family members (*ibid.*).

The Spanish government also introduced an emergency measure to prevent evictions, the *Real Decreto* – Law 27/2012. This measure entails the immediate suspension of evictions of particularly vulnerable homeowners: large families (three children or more), one-parent families with two children, families with children under three years, families with disabled people, families in which the mortgage holder is unemployed and does not receive any unemployment benefit. There is also a limit of annual household income (19,200 euros) and the mortgage payment should exceed 50% of this income (*ibid.*).

In 2015 several norms have been adopted both at national and regional level improving the regulation concerning the situation of the debtors. In particular *Real Decreto* – Law 1/2015 introduced new mechanisms to protect the debtor (the so-called second opportunity mechanism) and *Real Decreto* – Law 13/2015 reformed the law on foreclosures with the aim to protect the debtors.

As reported by the Director of the regional Housing Agency, Cataluña Region gradually transformed its housing policy by being directed to sustain access to housing to being concerned with its maintenance and by extending its scope also to middle class. In 2009 the regional Housing Agency established a new service, called *Ofideute*, which directly addresses the issue of housing-related debts. Cataluña is the first and only Spanish region having established a structured service on this issue, while other regions only established fragmented initiatives. Other urgent measures have been implemented, both preventative and reactive ones.

Economic benefits (up to 3,000 euros) for people having temporary problems in repaying their mortgages have been introduced. Other economic benefits have been added in 2014 for long-term unemployed at risk of losing their house because of difficulties in paying their rent. A reactive measure has been introduced in 2013 to pay technical expenses to get a new rent for people who lost their house. These economic benefits are provided by the municipalities, which also select the beneficiaries, using funds of Cataluña Region.

In case of evictions that need an urgent intervention, the so-called *Mesa de Emergencia* (emergency task force) assigns a public house to the evicted household at a very low price (usually below 50 euros per month). In these cases the households skip the queue to get a public dwelling. In 2014 around 5,000 public houses have been devoted to post-eviction emergencies, which is 35% of the whole public stock.

Another measure is the so-called supported housing that is reserved to the most difficult cases, including homeless people and female victims of trafficking. The inclusionary housing is managed by a network of third sector organisations coordinated by the Housing Agency, which also pays 1,200 euros per household to the organisations. In these cases housing is provided together with social support. This measure has strongly increased in the last years, in terms of number of involved organisations (from 37 in 2006 to 180 in 2014), number of available apartments (from 203 in 2006 to 1,453 in 2014) and available budget (from 243,600 euros in 2006 to 1,684,900 in 2014) (Generalitat de Cataluña, 2015).

Finally, a very important reform has been introduced in 2015 (Law 24/2015), which establishes debt mediation as a compulsory *ex ante* conditionality in foreclosure procedures, with SIDH taking on this responsibility.

Apart from these urgent measures, there are others that were already working before the housing crisis. One is addressed to tenants of the public rented dwellings who cannot afford to pay the rent, which is, on average, 220 euros per month. Housing allowances are also provided to households who cannot afford the rent in the private market. In 2014 around 36,000 households received a form of support for the rent in Cataluña (including urgent and regular measures), with a total budget of around 67 million euros (*ibid.*).

Another strategy of the regional Housing Agency is to regenerate abandoned housing stock to use it for social purposes. In this case the Region provides support in terms of insurance and guarantee for the payment of the rent, while the municipalities are supposed to find private dwellings that can be used for this purpose. Hitherto 9,000 houses have been recovered to be devoted to social housing and are rented below the market price (of around 20-30% less). A further 1,200 houses have been found among the properties of the financial institutions that, after the housing crisis, have become owners of many empty apartments. Cataluña promotes agreements with them, in order to earmark them for social purposes.

Within this context SIDH has to be seen as a preventative service that allows people to maintain their house, so that Cataluña Region does not have to draw upon other resources.

### **3 Genesis of the initiative**

As described in chapter two, indebtedness related to housing, and in particular to mortgages, has been a huge problem in Spain and Cataluña since the end of 2007. A strong bottom-up social movement, PAH, was born to protest against the situation and propose collective solutions. It was particularly strong in Barcelona and Cataluña and put a certain pressure on public institutions, to the point that the former leader of the movement, Ada Colau, was elected to mayor of Barcelona in May 2015. The role of PAH was also important in empowering people: the circumstance of not being able to pay a mortgage was considered as a shame by many people. PAH let emerge the situation as a collective condition, thus taking away the personal stigma of those experiencing that situation. The severe social crisis hitting the territory and the pressure of social movements prompted the local public institutions to search for new solutions.

At the same time the municipalities, under the pressure of the population and social movements, addressed the Provincial Government of Barcelona asking for support to counteract the diffused problems of over-indebtedness and evictions. Thanks to the support of the Provincial Government, some legal advice for social services claimants was already in place since 2003. It was a service of free legal advice, called SOJ (*Servicio de Orientación Jurídica* - Service of legal advice), provided by the bar association of Barcelona with the financial support of the Provincial Government. Despite the service being transversal to all the sectors, the municipalities reported that more than one third of the cases were related to housing and that it was not enough to face the increasingly troubled situation.

Furthermore, Cataluña Region established in 2009 the already mentioned *Ofideute*, a specific service under the responsibility of the regional Housing Agency. The vast majority of the indebted households had a lack of information about their situation, their rights and the procedures to be followed. For this reason the core of the *Ofideute* service was since the beginning the provision of information and legal advice in collaboration with the SOJ. A second need was to overcome the local level. The situation presented itself at a very local level, as a conflict between the inhabitants of a municipality and the municipal branch of a bank. This situation appeared immediately without exit, since the citizens had

very little power and the local director of the bank had a very restricted scope and was required to strictly apply the rules of its institution. There was a need to conduct negotiations at a higher level, between *Ofideute* (representing Cataluña Region) and the central management of the banks, which have the power to change regulations and decide how to apply them. For this reason *Ofideute* sets itself up as the only mediator with the financial entities, trying to face all the cases with the same criteria, thus guaranteeing equal treatment to all the users in the region. *Ofideute* established several agreements with municipalities in Cataluña to bring the service closer to the citizens and more connected to the local administrations. For those municipalities not covered by those agreements, the service was offered from the central offices in Barcelona. The situation was therefore highly fragmented: some municipalities had their own agreement with *Ofideute* and/or with the bar association of its territory or with non-profit organisations like *Caritas*. The bigger municipalities, with their greater financial capacities, could afford specific services that smaller municipalities could not afford.

Considering the institutional context (both the pressure from municipalities and the presence of *Ofideute*) the Provincial Government of Barcelona started to think of a common solution that could take into account three main points: it should respect the different initiatives already in place in the municipalities; it should avoid inequalities among inhabitants of different municipalities; it should be transversal between housing and social policies.

The Provincial Government proposed to the bar associations already involved in the Service of legal advice to substitute the various agreements with the different municipalities with one single agreement signed with the Provincial Government. It turned into a difficult challenge: the smaller bar associations did not want to take part in the new service, since they already had in place agreements with the single municipalities. However, when the municipalities started one after the other to adhere to the new agreement, which offered them a more complete service at a lower cost, the bar associations had to accept the new situation.

At the same time, an internal collaboration within the Provincial Government of Barcelona was established between the housing and the social sector. A need for integration between the two sectors was evident after the crisis, in response to the situation described in chapter 2. Furthermore, there was a need to multiply the points of access to the service to avoid the stigma connected to being a user of the social services: when someone overcomes the barrier represented by the door of the social services, he/she has already been indebted for months, thus the intervention becomes much more difficult. In the words of the interviewees, this represented a challenge for the Provincial Government, which had never worked transversally. The result of this collaboration is mainly the multiplication of the points of access to the new service: social services, housing offices, consumer offices, public relation offices.

As a result SIDH was set up as a service involving different actors: municipalities managing the street level, *Ofideute* (Cataluña Region) providing mediation with the financial entities, bar associations (at the beginning only the one of Barcelona) offering legal advice from the street level. All this system is coordinated by the Provincial Government of Barcelona.

The system was first tested in the territory of a County Council (gathering very small municipalities) of 60,000 inhabitants. The pilot project allowed the promoters to understand that embedding the service in the local administrations and enhancing the resources for legal advice was helpful to reach widely those citizens needing support and to strengthen the capacity of service to provide a better support. As a result of all this process SIDH started its activities in December 2012.

## 4 The activities and organisation

SIDH is a service of advice and mediation addressed to individuals and families living in the province of Barcelona who are risking to lose their home because they are unable to meet their mortgage payments. It offers information, personalised legal advice and mediation between users and financial institutions through an integrated platform, with the aim to prevent the loss of housing as a result of non-performing the mortgage loans.

The access to the service is bound to the satisfaction of the following requirements: a single house should be at risk of being lost, it should be the applicant's main residence and his/her only property. The impossibility of meeting the mortgage payments should be due to the applicant having lost his/her job or to a substantial decrease in his/her income due to compelling reasons.

Users can access SIDH through municipal social services and local branches of the regional housing office or of the regional office for consumers' rights. There they obtain a first analysis of the problem by the administrative workers, who have the task to check that the case meets the requirements to access SIDH. If it does, the users are referred to the nearest of the 14 contact points hitherto opened by SIDH in the province of Barcelona (they have been increased to 30 in 2015). Here they receive the first general information, especially about documents they are requested to prepare and a meeting with a lawyer of the bar association. At this point the lawyer becomes the referent for the situation of the user, and two things can occur: the lawyer can give only legal advice on the issue and in this case the contribution of SIDH stops here. Otherwise he/she can start the procedure for the mediation of the debt with the financial institution. In this case the lawyer and the user write together a proposal of debt restructuring for the bank, considering the user's current financial situation, in order to make it feasible for him/her to keep his/her home. This first part of the procedure is managed at the local level, it involves the municipality of residence, the Provincial Government of Barcelona and the lawyer, and should take no more than two weeks.

When the proposal is ready the file is transferred to *Ofideute*, to ensure its technical quality and feasibility in a short period of two days. If it is correct it is sent to the financial institution, so that the process of negotiation can start. Being a service of Catalunya Region, a very powerful actor in the territory, *Ofideute* can obtain faster answers and conduct collective mediations for similar cases. A top-level board has also been established including the managers of the Housing Agency and of the main financial institutions. The activity of the board smoothens the relationship between the Housing Agency and the financial entities, with a positive impact on the success of the negotiations, which usually come to a resolution in a month. There are still some cases in which the bank does not answer or it takes longer, but they are increasingly rare, while it was common before SIDH was implemented. At the end of the mediation, the process comes back at the local level: the municipality calls the user and organises a meeting with the lawyer explaining the result of the mediation. If the proposal is accepted, the user and the lawyer sign the final agreement with the financial institution, otherwise a new proposal can be submitted. Through a computer program, the operators of SIDH continuously monitor the achievement of the final goal in terms of time passing from one step to another. In this way they can immediately realise when a case is stopped and at which step and can intervene to improve the situation.

Usually the cases are solved at the first attempt of mediation. In some cases there are problems related to the lack of documents that households should produce. These documents are not always easy to obtain, as is the case of migrant families where, for example, a member has come back to the country

of origin or moved outside Spain. When there is a disagreement between *Ofideute* and the financial institutions, it is usually managed and solved at the technical level between employees of the two organisations, otherwise there is a monthly meeting between higher level managers to solve the most difficult open cases.

As described in chapters six and seven, the most challenging issue is the regulation of the relationship between *Ofideute* and the financial institutions. The situation has however substantially improved in 2015, thanks to the issuing of new national and regional laws. Many financial institutions accepted to sign an agreement to recognise *Ofideute* as the preferential mediator with the users in case of mortgage arrears. Those agreements establish, among other, the maximum deadline that banks have to provide an answer to the proposals.

Tables 2 and 3 show the number of cases managed by SIDH hitherto, the kind of intervention provided (intermediation between users and financial institutions, legal advice or general information), the results of the intermediation processes and the kind of solutions achieved.

**Table 2. Number of cases managed by SIDH in 2013, 2014 and 2015 and kind of intervention provided.**

	2013	%	2014	%	2015*	%
New cases	502		954		750	
Closed cases	161		572		471	
<i>Of which</i>						
Intermediations	33	20.5%	197	34.4%	226	48.0%
Legal advice	70	43.5%	270	47.2%	178	37.8%
General information	58	36.0%	105	18.4%	67	14.2%

\*Until June included

Source: our elaboration from data of the Housing Agency of Cataluña

**Table 3. Results of the intermediation activity of SIDH in 2013, 2014 and 2015**

	2013	%	2014	%	2015*	%
<b>Accepted proposals</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>48.5%</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>76.6%</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>68.1%</b>
<i>Dación en pago</i>	4	12.1%	55	28.0%	46	20.4%
Restructuring of the debt	12	36.4%	88	44.7%	94	41.6%
Public interventions	-	-	-	-	1	0.4%
Other situations	-	-	8	4.1%	13	5.8%
<b>Refused proposals</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>30.3%</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>12.2%</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>14.6%</b>
Refused by financial entity	8	24.2%	15	7.6%	11	4.9%
Refused by the user	2	6.1%	9	4.6%	22	9.7%
<b>Not finalised proposals</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>21.2%</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>11.2%</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>17.3%</b>
Foreclosures	6	18.2%	5	2.5%	-	-
Other situations	1	3.0%	17	8.6%	39	17.3%
<b>Total of intermediations</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Until June included

Source: our elaboration from data of the Housing Agency of Cataluña

In 2014 SIDH opened 954 new cases and closed 572 cases. 375 cases stopped at the first step (general information or legal advice), while 197 cases entered the intermediation phase. 76.6% of the cases treated by SIDH found a solution that means the proposal is accepted by the financial institution. Usually the share of accepted proposals of *Ofideute* in the whole Catalunya is around 60%. The share of successful cases increased compared to 2013, when it was 48.5%. According to the interviewees, this sharp increase is due to many factors: the increase in the quantity and quality of the staff involved; the increase of the contact points; the establishment of a strong institutional network involving the Provincial Government of Barcelona, the Catalunya Region and the municipalities; the growth of a strong relationship between *Ofideute* and the financial institutions; the necessity of the latter to rebuild an image of trust in front of the citizens and to wash away the image of “the ones who evict people from their homes”.

The majority of the cases were solved with a restructuring of the debt, including measures like lower interest rates, longer terms for repaying the debt, reduction of the amount of the debt. These solutions are used in the least severe cases and allow the users to maintain the house and keep paying the mortgage. In the most severe cases the proposed solution is usually the so-called *dación en pago*. This term can be translated as “Giving in payment” or “Deed in lieu of payment”, or “Dation in Payment” but, since it is specifically based on the Spanish Civil Code, we use the Spanish term. A *dación en pago* as established by the Spanish Civil Code is a procedure where the borrower can cancel a creditors’ debt handing in exchange any of his/her assets. In the case of debts related to mortgages, the proposed solution is that the users hand back the house to the financial institution in exchange for the full discharge of the mortgage debt. This solution solves the debts but not necessarily the problem related to housing. Some users have resources enough to rent a new apartment or they can get the support of social networks, others remain without the apartments and do not have another solution. In this case the Housing Agency of Catalunya intervenes to enable the most appropriate housing measure described in chapter two. In the most complicated situations, when the users do not have any income, the so-called *Mesa de Emergencia* is activated to find a socially rented apartment. Otherwise the financial institution owning the apartment can make it available to the user in change of a lower rent. This happens because the financial institutions are left with a lot of vacant properties and through these agreements they can gain at least some earnings.

12.2% of the cases did not find any solution, mainly due to the presence of a plurality of debts with different institutions. In this case it is difficult to find an agreement, usually the judicial execution comes to the end with the eviction, and the Housing Agency is mobilised to find alternative solutions of social housing. Finally 11.2% of the cases were not finalised, mainly due to the presence of foreclosures or other similar situations.

As described in Tables 2 and 3, the number of cases is increasing in 2015. Data are available until June included and show a decrease in the share of successful mediations (from 76.6% to 68.1%). As reported by the interviewees this is due to a big effort made by the system to close cases that were open since months but without activity, because of the impossibility of finding the users or of collecting fundamental documents.

Many users come to SIDH with an ongoing judicial trial that goes on after the start of the intermediation. SIDH can obtain a statement to be presented during the trial, so that the judge can decide to suspend the trial until the end of the mediation process that usually lasts around six months. This procedure could be improved through a better promotion of SIDH to the judges involved in this kind of trials. In two cases the judge itself sent the user to SIDH to improve his/her situation, this would

be the ideal solution but it is still far to become the norm.

The whole project is financed by the Provincial Government of Barcelona and the total budget for 2014 is 387,108.72 Euro. The provincial Housing Office provides economic support to the municipalities for the cost of opening and managing the points of attendance to the public (129,600 euros), while the compensation to the bar associations for the service of the lawyers comes from the budget of the social services (257,508.72 euros). The Provincial Government also supplies training for the staff of the municipalities involved into SIDH. Cataluña Region does not provide specific budget for SIDH but it makes available the staff already working in *Ofideute*.

## **5 The innovative dimension of the initiative**

Drawing on social innovation literature the innovative dimension of SIDH is analysed using three basic dimensions (Gerometta, Häußermann and Longo 2005; Moulaert *et al.* 2005a,b; Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2013): a) the satisfaction of basic social needs (content dimension); b) the transformation of social relations (process dimension); c) the empowerment and socio-political mobilisation (linking the process and content dimension).

### **5.1 Content dimension**

SIDH was created to satisfy a growing social risk created by the functioning of the credit market and the impact of the crisis on the labour market and nor other market actors neither traditional welfare services were able to address it. The risk of losing housing due to the impossibility to pay the mortgage (because of unemployment or other social problems) was affecting an increasing share of the population and was manifested also in the action of very popular social movements, like PAH.

The need for housing in Spain has been since 2007 mainly an issue of maintaining housing more than accessing it. The economic crisis and the mismanagement by the credit market undermine housing stability for many households who took up a mortgage during the years of housing and economic boom. They risk to lose their house due to mortgage arrears and repossession by the financial institutions and to be overwhelmed by debts, since Spanish law is extremely creditor-friendly (at least until 2015). SIDH is an innovative solution to address this new type of housing need. Through renegotiation of housing-related debts SIDH remove from evicted or at risk of eviction household the burden of the debt. Furthermore thanks to its solid institutional structure it manages to provide alternative housing solutions for households who do not have any autonomous possibility after having lost their house.

### **5.2 Process dimension**

As regards the process dimension we can identify four main aspects. First, the internal institutional innovation occurred within the Provincial Government of Barcelona. The collaboration established between the housing and the social sector has been defined as “revolutionary” by the interviewees, who reported that for the first time the organisation was working transversally, reflecting the cross-sector social need to be satisfied.

Second, the building of the institutional network which designed, governs and implements the service is new for the Catalunya region. The complex network described in chapter six includes all the public institutions acting at the local level: Region, Province and municipalities. Furthermore the involvement of the bar associations was difficult to obtain (as described in chapter three) but innovative in a context where they were traditionally working in a fragmented way with the different municipalities. The main factor influencing this relevant institutional change was the bottom-up social demand coming from decentralised branches, small municipalities, massive social movements and directly from a growing number of citizens evicted or at risk of eviction. This strong institutional-popular alliance is introducing changes also in the structure of the financial institutions, which are changing their governance style and their concrete actions towards a sort of social responsibility, although with radical differences among different institutions and with ambiguous interests, as reported in chapter 7.6. This happens also thanks to a high level board implemented by Catalunya Region and including the top management of the Regional Housing Office and of the financial institutions.

Third, the above described strong institutional network allows for collective negotiations which result in more equal treatment of citizens. In this sense people who before had to face alone the big power of banks gained power and agency in negotiating with big financial institutions thanks to the mediation of public institutions, thus resulting in a changing in the established social relations.

Finally, this case shows that social innovation has to take multi-level governance into account. Avoiding the worst consequences of a bad and biased legislation which deepens poverty and increases the danger of sections of the middle class being thrown into poverty, is very important. But it remains a flop if legislation does not change. In this sense the institutional network sustaining SIDH is very strong at the local level but cannot influence the national level. In 2013 the Parliament of Catalunya issued a law to oblige financial institutions to adhere to services of collective negotiations, also on the basis of the results of SIDH. The law was however stopped by the Spanish Parliament, also because of lobbying action by the financial entities. The situation has changed in 2015, when important laws have been issued at the national and regional level (see chapter two), although it is too early to assess their efficacy.

### **5.3 Empowerment dimension**

SIDH helps indebted households individually, providing them with the necessary information and awareness about their rights, which was perceived as an important social need. Although it is an institutional service, SIDH was born as a consequence of the pressure coming from the municipalities and the social movements. In this sense it is the result of collective empowerment fighting for the recognition of apparently “private” and “personal” problems as social and political ones. In fact, the social innovation consists in the political struggle to have the right to housing be defended against a powerful legal system which defends the strong (the creditor who has given a mortgage to persons unable to repay it) and punishes the weak (the debtor who loses everything).

The powerful and unexpected grassroots pressure has over the last years empowered SIDH as an intermediary public institution to represent people with urgent social needs *vis a vis* financial institutions. It always aims to increase users’ awareness on their own situation, firstly through the provision of a complete information about their rights and an assessment of their situation, so that they can decide if and how to proceed. If they decide to proceed with the negotiation of the debt, the proposal to be submitted to the financial institution is drafted jointly by the user and the lawyer. At a

later stage the proposal is collectively negotiated by the side of *Ofideute* with the financial institutions. This must not be seen as a way to exclude users from the conduction of their own case, but as an instrument of empowerment. In fact, only a collective action led by *Ofideute* (Cataluña Region) can negotiate on equal terms with the financial entities that would otherwise have much more power than the single individual.

There has been an empowerment of professionals too: new know-how about debts related to housing has been constructed within public services at different levels (regional, provincial, municipal) and in different fields: legal, financial and social.

## 6 Institutional mapping and governance relations

The project involves the three major local public authorities acting in the territory of the province of Barcelona: Cataluña Region, Provincial Government of Barcelona and the municipalities.

The Provincial Government of Barcelona is a public local government whose aim is to support the action of the 311 municipalities of the territory of the province of Barcelona, especially the small ones; 200 of them have indeed less than 5,000 inhabitants. It has no legislative power but offers free economic, technical and technological support to the municipalities, so that they can provide local services to citizens in a homogeneous way. Its resources come from national budget; municipalities pay their taxes to central government that redistributes them to local authorities, including the provincial governments.

Cataluña Region is directly involved in the governance of SIDH through *Ofideute*, a service of the regional Housing Agency. *Ofideute* is a free service of information, advice and intermediation established in 2009 and addressed to individuals and families experiencing difficulties in paying mortgages. The great innovation of *Ofideute* was in the target group: for the first time the Housing Agency extended its services also to people living in private housing. The service is similar to SIDH but it was suffering from saturation and lack of territorial proximity. The Housing Agency is the public entity devoted to manage the regional housing policy described in chapter two.

Beyond the public institutions, the network governing SIDH also includes the bar associations operating in the territory of the province of Barcelona. Bar associations are private non-profit oriented associations, whose aims are to guarantee the professional interests of the law profession, to promote the implementation of the profession's deontological rules and to provide services of public interest. Within this mission, lawyers belonging to the seven bar associations involved in SIDH provide legal advice to the users of the service.

The involvement of the bar associations has been challenging. They already had direct agreements with some municipalities for the provision of legal advice regarding housing debts, although mediation with the financial entities was not included. These agreements were particularly advantageous for the bar associations, so they did not want to substitute them with a unique agreement with the Provincial Government for the provision of the service in the whole territory. In the end they were left with no alternatives, since the municipalities found it much more worthwhile to adhere to SIDH, which was financially covered by the Provincial Government and also offered a service of mediation. The first association to adhere to SIDH was the Barcelona Bar Association, which is the biggest one with around 20,000 members. Gradually also the other six associations signed the agreement, so that the network currently include all the seven associations operating in the province of Barcelona.

The added value of SIDH in terms of institutional arrangements has been the coordination of the system. The Provincial Government of Barcelona created links among different resources that were already present in the territory but were acting in a fragmented and inefficient way. *Ofideute* was an important service, with a very strong potential, but it was not adequately supported in terms of human and economic resources and could not reach the territory in a homogeneous way. The lawyers belonging to the bar associations were already offering services of legal advice through agreements with the municipalities and also in collaboration with *Ofideute*, using the already implemented service of free legal advice. However, they were working in a fragmented way, not covering all the territory, not providing a service of mediation with the financial entities, and not building a specific knowledge around the issue. The municipalities were trying to face a huge socio-economic issue, but did not have the adequate internal resources. The most organised municipalities created agreements with the bar associations in order to provide a service of legal advice on their territory, but it was clearly not enough to tackle such a big problem. They were acting often in reaction to initiatives of social movements but without a clear direction. Furthermore many small municipalities were completely excluded because of lack of human, technical and financial resources. The institutional innovation of the Provincial Government was to coordinate all these resources, providing a unique service in the whole territory offering both legal advice and mediation with the financial entities in a highly professional and efficient way. It has been a difficult process, starting with an internal effort of innovation within the Provincial Government: it is the first time that the housing sector and the social service sector are working together to satisfy a transversal social need. It then carried the action towards the outside, to involve the Cataluña Region, municipalities and the bar associations. The coordination of all these actors still entails problems and conflicts but the relationship has been reported as good.

This structure is financially supported by the Provincial Government of Barcelona, which gives economic support to the municipalities for the cost they have for opening and managing the contact points and to the bar associations, for the work of the lawyers. The budget comes partially from the housing sector and partially from the social services sector. The Cataluña Region does not provide direct funding but it makes available the staff of *Ofideute* for the operation of SIDH.

The maintenance of such a complex structure occurs through different mechanisms and instruments. As regards to the first phase of the process (first contact with the users, provision of information and legal advice and, if necessary, draft of a proposal of mediation), every two months the Provincial Government organises meetings with lawyers and with the staff of the municipalities to evaluate the evolution of the service provided, share updates on the legal side or on the policy side and to create a community, which is also prompted through an online community where each member of the staff of SIDH can pose questions and obtain fast solutions. In the second phase (mediation between *Ofideute* and the financial institutions), the relationship occurs at three levels. At the technical level, employees of the two sides continuously try to positively close the cases and solve possible conflicts using technical instruments. When this is not possible, cases are managed at the intermediate level during a monthly meeting between the heads of *Ofideute* and of the involved offices of the financial institutions. Finally, at the top level a board including the top management of the Regional Housing Agency and of the main financial institutions has been established. The board meets rarely but its existence is very important to include also the financial institutions in the process, to smoothen the relationship and, as a consequence, to increase the probability of success of the activity of mediation. All these processes, in both phases of the activity of SIDH, are supported by a computer program created and owned by the Regional Housing Agency, which allows for a real time update of the shared information and for a continuous monitoring of the open files.

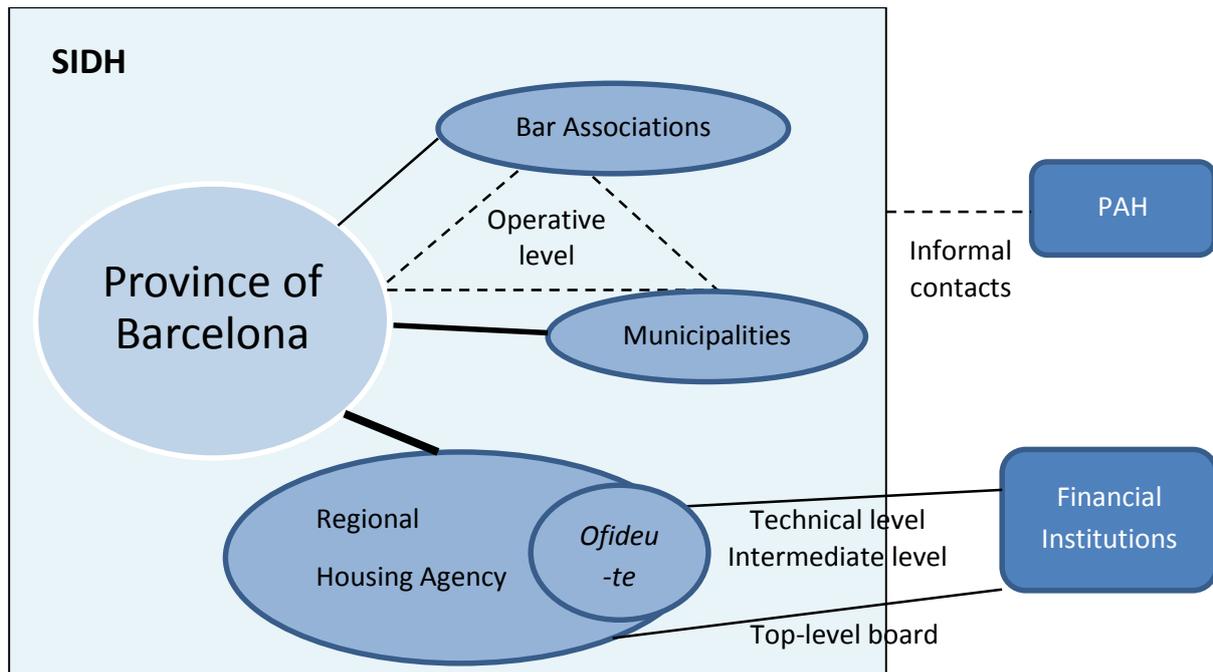
The strategic importance of SIDH is also due to its capacity of building and maintaining good relationship both with PAH, the biggest and strongest social movement born around the issue of evictions and housing debts, and with its greatest enemy, the financial institutions.

In particular, the relationship with the financial institutions is the real challenge for the success of the activity of mediation. The majority of them now consider positively the mediation of SIDH mainly for four reasons. First, it represents an occasion to wash away the bad reputation they have built after years of evictions due to mortgage arrears. Second, they are now owners of many apartments that are impossible to sell and that have a very low market value, so it could be more worthwhile to renegotiate the debt but keep the houses full. Third, it is better for them to negotiate with SIDH than with PAH. Fourth, they seem to have understood also the social side of the problem, also thanks to the activity of the top-level board. Despite of this, not all the financial institutions have achieved this awareness and, from a legal side, they are not obliged to accept the mediation of *Ofideute*, as explained in chapter 7.8.

SIDH and PAH do not have formal connections but it has been established an informal relationship through local participation boards. The presence of PAH has been perceived as an opportunity by the promoters of SIDH. It raised the issue of evictions and housing debt, creating a consensus around the necessity to tackle the problem. Before the action of PAH, having a debt was perceived as a shame and people who were evicted were stigmatised. PAH socialised the problem and removed the social stigma, so that now it is more socially accepted to address to services like SIDH. In general there is a good relationship between the two organisations. SIDH has been well accepted by PAH and its mediation has been requested and appreciated both by PAH and local authorities in case of conflicts and street protests. Some methodological conflicts emerge when PAH also wants to be part of the solution of the cases providing legal advice or directly rehousing people. According to the promoters of SIDH, the solution should be professional and not ideological, albeit recognising the importance of a political action to raise the issue. Some methods adopted by PAH can also exclude some citizens who do not feel at ease in big assemblies. This happened especially at the beginning of the experience of SIDH, while now there are cases in which PAH refers households to SIDH.

A gap in the institutional network of the service is represented by the weak connection with the judicial system. When a user comes to SIDH with an open judicial trial, this proceeds in parallel with the negotiation conducted by SIDH. In this way the users continue to receive requests of payment of the debts also during the time of the negotiation. However, *Ofideute* can ask to suspend the selling at auction of the house, and usually this request is accepted by the financial institutions, until the end of the activity of mediation.

Figure 5. The governance system of SIDH: actors and relationships.



Source: our elaboration from desk analysis, interviews and focus group.

## 7 Governance challenges

### 7.1 Mainstreaming social innovation

SIDH is reinforcing its presence in the territory of the province of Barcelona, mainly through the increase of the contact points, which have grown from 14 units in 2014 to 30 in 2015. Users can also access to the service through the offices of the municipalities.

An obstacle to the mainstreaming of the practice is the absence of a strategy of upscaling on the side of Catalunya Region. The latter should promote a process of diffusion of the project to the other provinces of the region: Girona, Tarragona and Lleida. *Ofideute* is working on this process but without a clear political mandate. Furthermore the implementation should be adapted to the institutional context of each province, which is slightly different.

A factor sustaining the process of mainstreaming is the clear social demand on the issue and the specific increase in the demand for the service, which would be politically difficult to dismantle.

A future scenario for SIDH is to deal with debts related to housing in general and not only to mortgages. The H of the acronym stands for Housing and it was a deliberate choice of the Provincial Government, not to prevent the possibility for the service to work also for tenants in difficulty in paying their rent. This evolution would entail a deal with private landlords using single negotiations and no longer with the financial entities, which are few, big and with clear representatives. Furthermore and differently from the banks, private landlords would not be able to cushion the lack of income because they need the rent as a source of living.

## **7.2 Governing welfare mix: avoiding fragmentation**

The issue of fragmentation has been strongly faced within the experience of SIDH. As described in chapter six, the Provincial Government of Barcelona has been able to integrate different goals and activities to overcome the limits of a fragmented welfare mix. A first internal institutional innovation has been the collaboration between the housing sector and the social service sector of the same institution, which had never worked together. Secondly, it fully implemented its mission of support to municipalities providing a common framework to meet the social demand regarding debts connected to mortgages. Finally, it created a connection with the already existing service of the Catalunya Region, *Ofideute*, which was offering a similar service but had some weaknesses. The coordination of the Provincial Government also allowed to create a single agreement with all the bar associations working in the territory of the province, while before each municipality had its own agreement with the bar association operating on its territory.

A result of SIDH is also that *Ofideute* is the referent for all the involved financial entities, and this permitted to establish common procedures and to increase the success in the mediation, since the Region of Catalunya is a much more powerful actor than the single citizen. Thanks to the direct involvement of the regional Housing Agency, SIDH is furthermore able to propose users alternative measures of social housing in case of need, i.e. if the user lacks income and is not able to afford a rent or he/she cannot rely on a familiar and social network to be re-housed.

The last piece of the puzzle (which is still out of the SID integrated system) is the judicial system. Judges managing the trials could suspend it while waiting for the result of the mediation, but only a few judges know about SIDH and use this opportunity.

## **7.3 Governing welfare mix: developing a participatory governance style**

The beneficiaries of the service are not directly involved in the governance of the project nor is PAH, despite its role in bringing the problem to the foreground. The issue was not explained by the interviewees.

The governance of the project tends to involve as much as possible all the staff involved and not only the managerial level. Every two months there is a meeting with the lawyers and people working in the frontline in the municipalities to assess the quality of the service, share news on legal issues and on housing policy issues. The creation of a team of professionals working on the issue is considered as an important added value in SIDH, both for personal and professional reasons. A Facebook group has been opened for all the staff of SIDH of the different organisations involved to exchange knowledge and get fast answers on practical open questions.

## **7.4 Equality and diversity**

The issue of equality and diversity is not explicitly addressed within SIDH. The service is open to all individuals and families who are at risk of losing their housing because of not being able to pay mortgage loans, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity or other personal or social feature.

## **7.5 Uneven access**

Access to SIDH is only limited to the meeting of some requirements: a single house should be at risk of being lost, it should be the applicant's main residence and his/her only property. The impossibility of meeting the mortgage payments should be due to the applicant having lost his/her job or to a substantial decrease in his/her income due to compelling reasons.

As regards the territorial dimension, the whole process of creation of SIDH was conducted with a worry to avoid inequalities among inhabitants of different municipalities, as it is in the mission of the Provincial Government. Before the implementation of SIDH only some municipalities, usually the bigger and richer ones, had a service dedicated to the issue of debts related to mortgages, while other inhabitants did not have this opportunity. *Ofideute* was acting since 2009 in all the territory of Catalunya but it was unable to meet all the demands and its offices were not close enough for many citizens, especially of the smaller municipalities, who were double discriminated. SIDH can therefore be seen as an intervention of equalisation of opportunities. It has opened 14 contact points (they are now 30 in 2015), but to ease the access especially to inhabitants of small municipalities, applicants can use different doors of access: the municipal social services, the local branches of the regional housing office and of the regional office for consumer rights. This was thought also to avoid the labelling effect usually created by the social services: there is a stigma connected to being a user of the social services, so that when someone overcomes the barrier represented by the door of the social services, he/she has been indebted since months, thus the intervention is more difficult. Furthermore, SIDH also addresses to users that do not use the social services, since having difficulties in paying the mortgage does not imply being a user of social services.

An issue of territorial uneven access emerges when considering the Catalunya Region, which is offering two kinds of services on its territory: SIDH in the territory of the province of Barcelona, which is giving better results in terms of success in the mediation and proximity to the citizens, and the traditional services in the other three Provinces. The regional Housing Agency, which is managing *Ofideute*, is aware of the question but there are not concrete plans to transfer the model to other provinces.

## **7.6 Avoiding responsibility**

SIDH is managed and funded by the Provincial Government of Barcelona, a public institution fully taking its responsibility as regards the issue of debts due to mortgage loans. Other public institutions are acting in response to the social problem of the mortgage debt and of the risk of housing loss, in particular Catalunya Region through the service *Ofideute*, established by the Housing Agency.

After the housing bubble, housing policies in Spain and Catalunya entered a time of crisis since they were completely inadequate to tackle the situation. Public institutions in charge of housing policy started therefore to reinvent strategies, services, measures and interventions, at least in Catalunya. Also due to the pressure of social movements, they took the responsibility of acting to face the changing situation.

The financial entities are instead acting ambiguously. They played a decisive role in the creation of the housing bubble, dumping mortgages also on people who did not have sufficient collateral. The situation has changed because of the action of the social movements and of the population, who identified in the banks the enemies of the right to housing. To wash this negative public image the financial entities (although not all) are accepting the attempts of the public institutions to mediate the

debts, but from the other side they are trying to prompt new juridical instruments to protect themselves. They have a great capacity of lobbying, especially at the national level and they can influence most important political decisions. This is the reason why, for example, it has been impossible hitherto to issue a law that would oblige them to make agreements with mediation services (see challenge 7.8).

### **7.7 Managing intra-organisational tensions**

SIDH represents an institutional innovation for the Provincial Government of Barcelona, which was used to work with a strong division between policy sectors. It was instead a first collaboration between the housing sector and the social services sector, with the two respective deputies and related staff working together to find common solution to a social problem which invested both sectors. This entailed some difficulties at the beginning, but no tensions were reported by the interviewees.

The most relevant tensions were reported within the bar associations. Before the implementation of SIDH, the lawyers were the main actors involved not only in the legal advice but also in the mediation with the financial entities. It was hard to accept to leave this important role to *Ofideute*, because some members of the bar associations saw this as a lack of recognition of their high professionalism, as if they were transformed into simple employees. Moreover there was also a financial aspect. Before SIDH, the bar associations had direct agreements with the municipalities, which were more advantageous for them than the new agreement signed within SIDH.

### **7.8 Enabling legal framework**

The main legislative obstacle to the action of SIDH is the lack of a law that obliges banks and other financial entities to make agreements with mediation services in case of mortgage arrears. The adhesion to mediation programmes is regulated at the national level, but only on a voluntary basis, that is not enough, as reported by the interviewees.

In general the law, as described in chapter two, sides with the creditor and punishes severely the debtor, who has very few legal mechanisms to defend his/her interests. The debtor's only possibility is to negotiate with the creditors but his/her individual position is very weak. For this reason it would be important to oblige financial entities to accept the intermediation of specialised services, like SIDH and *Ofideute*.

Currently *Ofideute* tries to fill this legislative gap by signing direct agreements with each financial entity. Hitherto just one financial institution accepted to use *Ofideute* as official intermediation agency with the users, but Cataluña Region is working at the institutional level to transform this practice into a norm. A law going in this direction was issued by the Parliament of Cataluña in 2013 and proposed to the Spanish Parliament for ratification. The latter stopped the law, also for reasons of lobbying by the side of the financial entities (see challenge 7.6).

This was the framework when the research was conducted (end of 2014). In 2015 some important reforms were introduced both at national and regional level (see chapter two). They could represent a substantial improvement of the legislative framework and could give more than a help to the operations of SIDH. However, it is too early to assess its impact on the service.

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## Appendix

In November 2014, the Urbino team conducted:

- analysis of documents concerning the innovative experience (e.g. project, agreements, reports, web sites of the actors involved), analysis of institutional documents and data, and researches to describe the local context (e.g. laws, public strategies, reports);
- 5 qualitative interviews involving the Project Coordinator of the Provincial Government of Barcelona, the Deputy in charge for social policies of the Provincial Government of Barcelona, the Director of *Ofideute*, the Director of the regional Housing Agency, and a lawyer of the Barcelona bar association;
- a focus group involving 6 participants: the Project Coordinator of the Provincial Government of Barcelona, the Director of *Ofideute*, an employee of *Ofideute*, the Director of the Social Affairs Department of the Provincial Government of Barcelona, the Coordinator of the service of free legal advice of the Barcelona bar association, and a lawyer of the Barcelona bar association.

## **ImPRovE: Poverty Reduction in Europe. Social Policy and Innovation**

Poverty Reduction in Europe: Social Policy and Innovation (ImPRovE) is an international research project that brings together ten outstanding research institutes and a broad network of researchers in a concerted effort to study poverty, social policy and social innovation in Europe. The ImPRovE project aims to improve the basis for evidence-based policy making in Europe, both in the short and in the long term. In the short term, this is done by carrying out research that is directly relevant for policymakers. At the same time however, ImPRovE invests in improving the long-term capacity for evidence-based policy making by upgrading the available research infrastructure, by combining both applied and fundamental research, and by optimising the information flow of research results to relevant policy makers and the civil society at large.

The two central questions driving the ImPRovE project are:

How can social cohesion be achieved in Europe?

How can social innovation complement, reinforce and modify macro-level policies and vice versa?

The project runs from March 2012 till February 2016 and receives EU research support to the amount of Euro 2.7 million under the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. The output of ImPRovE will include over 55 research papers, about 16 policy briefs and at least 3 scientific books. The ImPRovE Consortium will organise two international conferences (Spring 2014 and Winter 2015). In addition, ImPRovE will develop a new database of local projects of social innovation in Europe, cross-national comparable reference budgets for 6 countries (Belgium, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Spain) and will strongly expand the available policy scenarios in the European microsimulation model EUROMOD.

More detailed information is available on the website <http://improve-research.eu>.

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