

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London
Unit of Assessment: 23 Sociology
Title of case study: Raising awareness of the poverty and working lives of older people in India and catalysing change in pension policy
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Penny Vera-Sanso's two research projects, <i>Ageing, Poverty and Neoliberalism in Urban South India</i> (2007-10) and <i>Ageing and Poverty: the working lives of older people in India</i> (2012-13), have had significant impacts on public debate and public policy in relation to the rights and well-being of people aged 60 and over. The research raised awareness and understanding, in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, and in India more widely, of older people's poverty and their contribution to the economy through their paid and unpaid work. This led directly to changes in state policy on pensions in Tamil Nadu, and influenced campaigns for older people's pensions, livelihoods and rights within India and internationally.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Vera-Sanso, who joined Birkbeck in 2002, has undertaken research in South India since 1989, but two funded projects underpin the impact discussed here. As Principal Investigator of an international interdisciplinary project (2007-10), she conducted research in five low-income settlements of Chennai, the capital of the State of Tamil Nadu, India. This project, part of the UK <i>New Dynamics of Ageing</i> programme, was undertaken with Dr V Suresh and others from the Centre for Law, Policy and Human Rights Studies, Chennai, and with inputs from Professor Barbara Harriss-White, Oxford University, and Dr Wendy Olsen, Manchester University. Vera-Sanso then received ESRC Follow-on Funding (2012-13) to extend the research and its impact using innovative engagement and dissemination strategies.</p> <p>The research demonstrated that two assumptions about old age and intergenerational relations in India which inform policy and academic analysis are ill-founded in relation to people living on low incomes:</p> <p>Assumption 1: Older people are unproductive dependents and a looming social and economic burden. Before the research began the economic and social importance of older people's contribution to the Indian economy was unrecognized. The research challenged this by tracing <i>backward</i> and <i>forward linkages</i> of older people's paid and unpaid work in production and reproduction across economic sectors (refs. 1, 4, 5, 6). For example, as vendors distributing agricultural produce across the city older people <i>link back</i> to the agricultural economy, which employs 50% of India's people, and <i>forwards</i> to India's IT sector and to manufacturing for the national and global market. The research demonstrated that dominant conceptualisations of 'the economy', 'working generation' and 'old age' divest older people of rights and hinder the development of effective economic and social policies (refs. 1, 2, 4, 5).</p> <p>Assumption 2: In India families look after their aged. The research demonstrated that the 'tradition' of family (economic) support for elderly relatives is class dependent (primarily middle class). In a context in which nearly 90% of workers are employed in the informal economy, the growing demand for competitive advantage (through an increasingly educated, low cost labour force) is widening the rights and needs gap between generations. In poorer families, which require a high worker-to-dependent ratio, a child's education increases the burden of family poverty shouldered by elderly family members (refs. 1, 2, 3, 4). Inscripting the middle-class norm of filial dependence into legislation and policy actively threatens and undermines the livelihoods, income security and rights of older people (refs. 1, 3). Most notable is the national old age social pension (known as the IGNOAPS) which fails to meet needs due to its low value (currently £2 per month), its limited coverage and lack of implementation (ref. 2).</p> <p>Drawing on these insights the project provided arguments and evidence for: a) replacing the social pension with a significantly raised index-linked universal pension (ref. 1); and b) the need</p>

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to recognise older people as workers with rights, and to provide them with the means to strengthen their position within the family and tailor their hours and intensity of work to their capacities (refs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6).

From inception Vera-Sanso devised innovative interlinked research, dissemination and engagement methods including: an international conference in Chennai, involving researchers, academics and research users; a photographic essay, '*We too contribute!*', presenting the research findings to academics and non-academics (ref. 6); a project briefing document (ref. 1) and Policy Notes (2010 and 2011). A central feature of the second project was a national awareness-raising photo competition, initiated in April 2013 and launched as *The Hindu National Photographic Competition on the Working Elderly* in June 2013, which complemented a series of joint small research projects with NGOs and the making of two documentaries.

3. References to the research

1. Vera-Sanso, P. (2010) [Ageing, Poverty and Neoliberalism in Urban South India](#), *NDA Findings*, 5.
2. Vera-Sanso, P. (2010) 'Gender and Ageing in India: Conceptual and Policy Issues', in S. Chant (ed.) *International Handbook on Gender and Poverty*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp.220-226.
3. Vera-Sanso, P. (2012) 'Gender, Poverty and Old Age Livelihoods in Urban South India in an Era of Globalisation', *Oxford Development Studies*, 40:3, 324-340.
4. Harriss-White, B., W. Olsen, P. Vera-Sanso and V. Suresh (2013) 'Multiple Shocks and Slum Household Economies in South India', *Economy and Society*, 42, 3:398-429.
5. Vera-Sanso, P. (2013) 'Aging, Work and the Demographic Dividend in South Asia' in J. Field, R. Burke and C. Cooper (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Aging, Work and Society*, Sage, London, pp.170-185.
6. [Photo Exhibition/ Essay: 'We too contribute!' The elderly poor and Chennai's economy](#) presented to international public academic conferences in Chennai, Dublin, London 2009-13, and online as '*We work, we contribute, we don't retire!*' via the Indian charity, Centre for Law, Policy and Human Rights Studies.

Research grants

2007-2010 [Ageing, Poverty and Neoliberalism in Urban South India](#) (£152,669.66, FEC) RES-352-25-0027, funded as part of the AHRC/ BBSRC/ EPSRC/ ESRC/ MRC New Dynamics of Ageing research programme (2005-13). PI: Vera-Sanso. End of award assessment grade: 'Very Good' (see source 4). Nearly 50 outputs listed on ESRC website. One of 50 ESRC projects selected to showcase research impact (source 5).

2012-13 [Ageing and poverty: the working lives of older people in India](#) ESRC Follow-on Funding (£102,536, FEC), ES/J020788/1, PI: Vera-Sanso

4. Details of the impact

The research has raised awareness about, and sensitized policymakers, journalists, researchers, activists and civil society organisations to, the circumstances of the older urban poor, leading to changes in state policy on pensions in Tamil Nadu, and to more effective campaigns for older people's pensions, livelihoods and rights within India and internationally. By demonstrating how social discrimination impinges on older people's livelihoods, rights and well-being the research highlighted the need for a major shift in programmes addressing old age poverty. Specifically, as a consequence of the widespread dissemination of the findings of the research: 1) pensions in Tamil Nadu were increased by 25 per cent in 2010 and 100 per cent in 2011; 2) a new campaign network, the Pension Parishad (PP), was set up and pensions rights became a key issue in Indian national politics in 2012; 3) HelpAge International developed a new livelihood security agenda between 2010 and 2012.

From the beginning, the research was embedded in partnerships with research users, including HelpAge International (HAI) and HelpAge India and, from 2010, with the Right to Food and Work Campaign (RTF), an influential national coalition of food security activists and campaign groups.

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HAI, HelpAge India and PP provided additional funding in cash and kind for the research projects. Vera-Sanso, together with the project partners, disseminated evidence as it emerged to policymakers and in public forums, which steadily expanded interest in, and recognition of, the issues highlighted. The research challenged common assumptions and proposed alternative approaches to policy development which stimulated debate among opinion-formers, activists and journalists, catalysing new policy initiatives.

During the project Vera-Sanso, the research team and project partners organised a series of events and participated in public hearings, policy briefings, campaign conferences and rallies in India. These included a two-day international conference in Chennai in 2010, a photographic exhibition/ essay, '*We too contribute!*', and a series of public meetings in Chennai (November 2009 – March 2010) involving eminent public figures (including the Member Secretary of the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority and the Supreme Court-appointed National Commissioner on Food Security: **sources 1, 2, 3**). Vera-Sanso also presented the research findings to conferences between 2010 and 2013 attended by NGOs, policy advisers and academics in Chennai, London, Dublin, Paris, Barcelona, and Maastricht. The photographic exhibition/essay has toured widely in Tamil Nadu (2009-13), Delhi (March 2013) (**sources 1, 2**) and internationally (London, 2010, and Dublin, 2012).

At the project's international conference in Chennai, *The Hidden Contribution of Older People: Rethinking Age, Poverty, Opportunity and Livelihoods* (19-20 March 2010), the research findings and the photographic exhibition were presented to academics, campaigners and policymakers (**sources 1, 2, 3**). The research team were subsequently invited to the Fourth National Convention of the Right to Food and Work Campaign (Rourkela, Orissa, India 6-8/08/2010) where – after hearing the research findings – 2,000 representatives from across India passed a unanimous resolution demanding a universal, index-linked, up-lifted social pension (**sources 2, 6**). The team drafted two policy notes – one presented to the government of the State of Tamil Nadu and parties contesting the 2011 state elections (2010) and one for the National Advisory Committee, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office (2011) (**sources 1, 7**).

All project events were widely reported in the Tamil and English language press, on television news and in digital media, and the team was highly effective in getting newspapers such as *The Hindu* and the *New Indian Express* to publish stories that presented older people as workers, contributors and rights holders (**source 8**).

By raising awareness among the public and policy makers the research led to a significant shift in thinking about older people in Tamil Nadu and, more broadly, in India. As an ESRC research user evaluator wrote: '*This study has had impact at a number of levels. In Chennai and Tamil Nadu it has directly contributed to both enhanced understanding of and action to support economic security for older people. The study and related dissemination have played a key role in the campaign for a universal basic pension in Tamil Nadu state*' (**source 4**). This was also evidenced when the India-wide campaign network Pension Parishad (PP) was established in August 2011 by members of the Steering Group of the RTF 2010 Convention (mentioned above), including the influential social activists Aruna Roy and Kavita Srivastava, HelpAge India and others, to campaign for a universal, index-linked, uplifted social pension (**source 1, 2**).

The research led to a number of policy changes. During the 2011 election in Tamil Nadu, an enhanced pension became a key electoral promise across the main parties, and in April 2011 the Tamil Nadu government raised the social pension (for people aged 65 and over, widows and disabled people) from Rs500 per month to Rs1000 per month, benefiting over 2.3 million pensioners (**sources 1, 7**). More widely, in India, for the first time, the idea that older people have a right to a universal index-linked non-contributory old age pension gained acceptance among influential activists and MPs as a consequence of the PP's campaigning. The PP continues to campaign for a significantly increased, universal pension using the '*We too contribute!*' exhibition during its five day rally in Delhi 4-8 March 2013 to raise awareness about the position of older people in the Indian economy and society (**source 2**). In March 2013, the PP won acceptance from Central Government of the principal of index linked universal pensions and proposed a 50% increase in the pension to be put in place in two years' time (**sources 1, 2, 8**); however this falls below the PP's demands and their campaign continues.

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That the research outcomes continue to capture attention and influence thinking in India is evidenced by the agreement of *The Hindu*, one of India's most widely read English language newspapers, to support *The Hindu National Photographic Competition on the Working Elderly*, launched in June 2013. By 31 July 2013, *The Hindu* had created an online gallery of nearly 3,000 photographs taken across India, attracting 34,000 votes and judged by Aruna Roy of the Pension Parishad (**source 9**).

Finally, the research influenced international perspectives on ageing, leading HelpAge International, the most significant international NGO working on ageing and development, to undertake a major review of its global work on livelihoods and to establish a new livelihood/income security agenda (**source 3**). The organisation invited her to join its team to present her research to the Human Development Report Office of the UNDP, New York (February 2011) and to discuss her work with UK parliamentarians at an informal event on the Post-Millennium Development Goals agenda hosted by their sister organisation Age International in December 2012 (**source 3**). As an ESRC research user evaluation states: 'At a global level the study has provided important evidence in dialogues with a number of UN entities. In particular I am aware of its role in discussions with UNDP on their inclusion of an ageing theme in future HDRs' (**source 4**).

To sum up, in the words of the Supreme Court-appointed Special Commissioner on Food Security, Member of the National Advisory Council (Government of India, Prime Minister's Office) (2010-12), and Member of the National Social Assistance Committee on Pensions Task Force (2012-13), the research of Vera-Sanso and colleagues sparked 'a paradigm shift regarding old age poverty' in India, igniting 'an acknowledgement of the economic contribution made by older people to the Indian economy and an acceptance that enforced dependence on family, or on body and soul destroying work, corrodes dignity and wellbeing' (**source 1**).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Testimonials

1. Director, Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi, Supreme Court-appointed Special Commissioner on Food Security, Member of the National Advisory Council (Government of India, Prime Minister's Office), and Member of the National Social Assistance Committee on Pensions Task Force
2. National Convenor, [Right to Food Campaign](#), India
3. Director of Strategic Development, [HelpAge International](#)

Other sources

4. To be provided on request: Research User Evaluation, ESRC Project impact evaluation March 2011.
5. [ESRC Impact Case Study Report: Raising awareness of India's elderly](#), one of 50 ESRC projects showcasing research impact.
6. The [programme](#) of the 4th National Convention of the Right to Food Campaign (6-8 August 2010) features two presentations by V Suresh on 'Vulnerable Groups'. The [Summary Resolutions](#) of the Convention features two resolutions on universal old age pension Resolutions 1 and 7 under 'Vulnerable Groups', p6.
7. To be provided on request: Policy Note (2010) on Universal and Uplifted Pension presented to Government of Tamil Nadu and parties contesting the 2011 State elections and Policy Note (2011), presented to the National Social Assistance Committee on Pensions.
8. To be provided on request: a media file featuring articles about Dr Vera-Sanso's research from *The Indian Express* (26/11/2009) and *The Hindu* (25/11/2009; 19/03/2010; 20/03/2010; 07/03/2013; 08/07/2013; 27/07/2013) and about the Pension Parishad.
9. [The Hindu National Photographic Competition on the Working Elderly](#).