Two research projects in Chennai, capital of the state of Tamil Nadu in India, have uncovered the major contribution made by older people to the Indian economy.

Between 2007 and 2013, Dr Vera-Sanso and her collaborators at the Centre for Law, Policy and Human Rights Studies in Chennai carried out research in five low-income settlements in the city. Their research showed that the assumed tradition of family support for older people does not exist in poorer families, as families, including older people themselves, prioritise education of the youngest generation.

Dr Vera-Sanso’s findings demonstrated the need for a policy framework focusing on older people’s rights and choices, including a new approach to pensions, and caught the attention of policy makers and activists. Social pensions in Tamil Nadu rose by 125% between 2010 and 2011. In 2012 a campaign network, the Pension Parishad, was set up, making pensions a key issue in Indian national politics, and between 2010 and 2012 a leading international non-governmental organisation, HelpAge International, developed a new agenda on livelihood security.

The projects were part of the UK New Dynamics of Ageing Programme, an eight-year, £21m initiative funded by five UK research councils. Professor Alan Walker, Director of the programme, said: “Penny Vera-Sanso’s project on South India was the smallest in budget but, so far, has had the largest impact.”

By examining the resource and labour flows within family networks, and older people’s paid and unpaid work, Dr Vera-Sanso demonstrated that their labour helps families to bridge the gap between declining real incomes and inadequate government services. She found that older people’s work plays a significant role in India’s national economy, by expanding the workforce and keeping costs down. This is because older people take on the unpaid and low-paid work that younger people are no longer willing to do.

Older people provide low-cost inputs to industry and low-cost services to workers, and their paid and unpaid caring and domestic work underpins a chain of women that ends with women working for the global market in IT services, pharmaceuticals and others. Further, as the final point in the distribution network of vegetables, fruit, flowers and milk, older vendors play a critical role in linking the agricultural economy to the urban economy.

From the start, Dr Vera-Sanso and her collaborators undertook innovative projects to extend the scope of their research beyond the 800 households studied in the five Chennai slums.

A photo survey of other Chennai workers resulted in a photo essay, “We’re Still Working”, which was exhibited in Chennai, Delhi, London and Dublin between 2009 and 2013 – and was widely reported in the Indian media.

This led to their two documentaries, We’re Still Working and The Forgotten Generation, shot in rural Rajasthan, tribal Maharashtra and Chennai, and also to a national photo competition in the summer of 2013 on the working elderly undertaken with The Hindu, one of India’s most widely read newspapers.

Dr Vera-Sanso said: “The photo competition turned into a people’s project that produced a permanent online gallery of nearly 3,000 photographs of older people working across the length and breadth of India, and garnered over 34,000 public votes. Our innovative methods of research, engagement and dissemination played an important role in raising awareness, and spurred a national debate in India on the widespread nature of older people’s work, their lack of rights as workers and the need for a meaningful pension.”

Dr Penny Vera-Sanso is a Lecturer in Development Studies and Social Anthropology at Birkbeck. She was Principal Investigator for the research projects ageing, Poverty and Neoliberalism in Urban South India, 2007–10 and ageing and Poverty: the Working Lives of Older People in India, 2012–13.

For more information about the photography competition in The Hindu, visit http://bit.ly/16QQqRt