

## **Essay**

# **Pathways to Peace and Prosperity through Food Security**

**Bishow Parajuli**

**T**he world is facing a triple crisis of climate change, COVID-19 pandemic, and growing conflict that is driving hunger and food insecurity impacting millions globally. These multiple crises have not only pushed the global community back from the developmental gains committed through Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but also threaten global peace, progress, and security. While these global processes present unprecedented challenges for humanity, they also underline pathways, opportunities, and solutions for collaborative engagement by governments, citizens, and global communities.

This essay is broadly divided into three parts. First, it maps the current situation, primarily from the lens of hunger, malnutrition, and food security that constitute targets and commitments under the Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2) - Zero Hunger. The second part discusses the key drivers of hunger and food insecurity and based on that analysis looks at Africa. The third provides an analysis of India by looking at the dramatic progress the country has made over the past decades to attain food security, the challenges that we must continue to address, and lessons on inclusion, social safety nets, and adaptation for resilience. Food security is defined by the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security to mean that all people, always, must have access to safe, sufficient, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs for an active and healthy life.

The ideas and discussions presented here are drawn from my four decades with the United Nations, in close to ten countries, and the collective work that the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) does across 80 countries and specifically in India.

---

Bishow Parajuli is Representative and Country Director of India, United Nations World Food Programme.

National Security Vol. 5, No. 2, 2022

(April - June 2022) Page 133-145, ISSN 25-81-9658 (0)

©Vivekananda International Foundation

## **A Hungry World**

Six years after the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were officially adopted, chronic hunger has been rising. According to the World Food Programme data, in 2019, '650 million people around the world suffered from chronic hunger – 43 million more than in 2014. The situation in 2020 deteriorated drastically, with up to 811 million people classified as chronically hungry – an astounding 161 million people more than in 2019. Current projections show that around 660 million people may still face chronic hunger in 2030 – 30 million more than might have done so had the COVID-19 pandemic not occurred'.<sup>1</sup> It also says that an 'estimated 270 million people need urgent food assistance in 2021. A staggering 41 million people are confronted with emergency levels of acute hunger and more than half a million face famine-like conditions. Moreover, the global burden of malnutrition remains enormous, with almost 150 million children stunted, nearly 50 million wasted, and every other child – as well as two billion adults – suffering from micronutrient deficiencies'.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has doubled the population facing chronic hunger from 130 million to 270 million.

The agenda of ending world hunger and malnutrition in all its forms by 2030, enshrined in the SDG2, is facing formidable challenges. A key concern in the context of rising hunger is access to food as there is enough to feed the world. Globally, there has been increase in food production with advancement in science and technology that has been providing optimism on the supply side.

## **Conflict and Hunger**

With nearly 60 percent of the world's hungry live in conflict areas and in eight out of ten of the worst hunger crises, it is no surprise that conflict is the single major driver of hunger in the world today. The United Nations Security Council – responsible for maintaining international peace and security – in a historic resolution in 2018 linked hunger and conflict. Resolution #2417 (2018) recognises that hunger cannot be eliminated without establishing peace in the world. It is intuitive and well documented that food insecurity worsens with fighting as large numbers of people are driven out of their homes, their land, and lose their livelihoods.

'With almost 60 percent of the world's 811 million hungry people living in areas affected by armed violence, conflict is the single greatest challenge to achieving zero

hunger’, according to the WFP.<sup>3</sup> It notes that countries with the highest level of food insecurity, and also facing armed internal conflicts, have the highest outward migration of refugees. Coupled with poverty, food insecurity increases the likelihood and intensity of armed conflicts. This is a factor with clear implications for refugee outflows.<sup>4</sup> In conflict-affected countries, where agriculture and trade are disrupted, a simple plate of food can cost more than a day’s wages. WFP research has found that in South Sudan, people on an average would have to spend 186 percent of their daily salary on ingredients such as rice and beans for a basic meal. If someone in New York State had to pay the same proportion of their earnings for these ingredients, their meal would cost US\$393.<sup>5</sup>

### Climate Crisis and Hunger

The impact of Climate Change has become part of lived reality for communities across the planet, affecting everything, particularly agriculture and livelihoods. The term ‘Climate Crisis’ has become part of everyday conversation, highlighting how serious the situation is. The world is on the threshold of moving past the limit of 1.5°C rise in global temperature agreed to by 192 countries with serious implications for agricultural productivity, shift in rain pattern and seasonal variations. A 2°C rise in average global temperature above current levels could put 189 million more people at risk of hunger. With a 4°C rise this could reach a staggering 1.8 billion! In 2020, ‘extreme weather contributed to most of the world’s food crises and was the primary cause of acute food insecurity in 15 countries’, according to the United Nations.<sup>6</sup> It is evident that the climate threat is driving global hunger and it could cause an overwhelming humanitarian crisis, triggering wider hunger and food insecurity.

**It is evident that the climate threat is driving global hunger and it could cause an overwhelming humanitarian crisis.**

While climate change continues to threaten and destroy traditional land and water-based livelihoods from coasts to hills, the rising emissions and temperature will further rob these communities of dietary nutrients. I have witnessed increasing drought in Southern Africa affecting millions of people in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and other countries. This loss of dietary nutrients could aggravate nutritional deficiency for hundreds of millions of people already on the brink of paucity —mainly in the developing countries

of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) levels are rising globally at a rapid pace, on track to surpass 550 parts per million (ppm) by mid-century. Studies have found that, when grown under elevated CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations of 546–586 ppm, many food crops—including wheat, rice, barley, and soybeans—have lower concentrations of nutrients, including many that are important for overall health, such as iron, zinc, and protein.<sup>7</sup>

India and the sub-continent are extremely vulnerable to adverse impact of climate change and extreme weather phenomena. Floods, droughts, dry and wet spells, and cyclones disproportionately impact the poor and vulnerable communities not just in fragile geographies but also in urban areas, causing rising migration and insecurity. Impact of climate change on Indian agriculture was studied under the National Innovations in Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA). Rainfed rice yields in India are projected to reduce marginally (by 2.5 percent) between 2050 and 2080 and irrigated rice yields by 7 percent by 2050 and 10 percent by 2080 scenarios. Further, wheat yield is projected to reduce by 6-25 percent and maize yields by 18-23 percent by 2100.<sup>8</sup>

**India and the sub-continent are extremely vulnerable to adverse impact of climate change and extreme weather phenomena.**

Given the extensive evidence of conflicts driving hunger, if one adds climate crisis to the equation it becomes even more worrying as the climate crisis is a threat multiplier that could exacerbate conflicts, triggering displacement, and worsening social tensions. In 2020, climate extremes internally displaced 30 million people world-wide—three times more than displacement due to conflict alone. By 2050, this could increase to 216 million people! The impact of climate crisis on South Asia and Southeast Asia is expected to be severe, with far reaching consequences due to rising sea levels, heat waves, drought, and more intense and frequent rains. For instance, in Southeast Asia, sea levels are rising faster than elsewhere, and shorelines are retreating in coastal areas where 450 million people live. Rising water levels are projected to cost Asia’s major cities billions in damage this decade.

Therefore, preparedness, adaptation and mitigation are major tasks for countries like India, which face major climate risks. The way forward is income diversification, developing new varieties of crops and minimising use of water.

## **Food is Pathway for Peace**

The Nobel Peace Prize 2020 made a fundamental observation that unless everyone has food and dignity of food security there cannot be lasting peace in the world. The Nobel citation for WFP's work as the recipient of the award mentions "...its efforts to combat hunger, for its contribution to bettering conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict".<sup>9</sup> It further states, "the link between hunger and armed conflict is a vicious circle: war and conflict can cause food insecurity and hunger, just as hunger and food insecurity can cause latent conflicts to flare up and trigger the use of violence. We will never achieve the goal of zero hunger unless we also put an end to war and armed conflict".<sup>10</sup>

This recognition of the fundamental, and often causal link, between hunger and conflict was mentioned by the UN resolution 2417 explicitly. It called upon member states to ensure that food assistance reaches those in need and condemned the use of starvation as a method of warfare. Conflicts also drive distress migration that takes away assets, identity, and security. Millions move to different parts of the world in search of food and security for their families.

It is not only important to respond to hunger and food security needs of communities affected by conflicts but also to consider addressing them as part of global responsibility to reduce human suffering and meet the massive humanitarian assistance needed. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute points to the contributions of the WFP programmes in creating the conditions for peace in -- 'bolstering social cohesion, strengthening the link between citizen and state, and resolving grievances within and between communities'.<sup>11</sup>

## **COVID-19, Growing Poverty and Hunger**

Three years into one of the worst disruptions caused by a global pandemic, the world continues to reel under its social, economic, and health impacts. More people live in extreme poverty today than four years ago. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of people living below the extreme poverty line of USD 1.90 a day declined by nearly one billion. By 2019, the pace of poverty reduction had slowed, throwing into grave doubt the goal of eradicating poverty within the next decade. The COVID-19 pandemic

dealt an unprecedented blow to that goal, raising the total number of people facing extreme poverty to 732 million people in 2020 and 711 million people in 2021 – an increase of 97 million people from the pre-pandemic projections, according to the World Bank.<sup>12</sup>

The pandemic has had profound implications for food security and nutrition. The unfolding crisis has affected food systems and threatened people’s access to food via multiple dynamics. We have witnessed not only a major disruption to food supply chains in the wake of lockdowns triggered by the global health crisis but also global economic slowdown. These crises have resulted in lower incomes and higher prices of some foods, putting food out of reach for many, undermining the right to food, and stalling efforts to meet the SDG- 2: “Zero hunger” goal.

**The pandemic has had profound implications for food security and nutrition.**

### **Hunger Hotspots**

A new report this year by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and WFP, the Hunger Hotspots Report, highlights that insecurity is soaring across 20 hunger hotspots where conflict, economic shocks, natural hazards, and limited humanitarian access are putting millions of lives at risk. Most of these hunger hotspots are in Africa. Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen are at the highest alert level, according to the report, “In their last available assessments, these countries all had parts of populations identified or projected to experience starvation and death (Catastrophe, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification [IPC] Phase 5), requiring the most urgent attention”.<sup>13</sup> Organised violence or conflict remains the primary driver, actual or potential, for acute hunger in the hunger hotspots and globally. Weather extremes such as heavy rains, tropical storms, hurricanes, flooding, drought, and climate variability remain significant drivers in some countries and regions. The ongoing La Niña conditions, additionally, lead to an elevated risk of a two-year sequence of dry conditions, particularly in East Africa and Central Asia, says the report.

When we look at countries in the African continent, the impact of the crises discussed above seems far more intense. As we know, crises, human or natural, have a disproportionate impact on regions, nations, and communities that are vulnerable geographically, economically, socially, and politically. In addition to hunger, millions of

Africans suffer from widespread micronutrient deficiencies, while overweight and obesity are already significant public health concerns in many countries.<sup>14</sup> The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity within the population in Africa has, like the Prevalence of Undernourishment, risen in the 2014–2020 period. Nearly all countries in Africa experience the burden of malnutrition, mainly in the form of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. Overweight and obesity are nonetheless emerging as significant health concerns in several countries.

Africa is facing the worst impact of climate change. For example, while Southern Africa contributes only one percent to global carbon emissions, temperatures there are rising at double the global rate and climate impacts such as cyclones and droughts are rampant.

**Africa is facing the worst impact of climate change.**

### **India's Journey from Hunger to Surplus**

There are organic linkages and natural synergy between African countries, for that matter the Global South, and India's transformational journey from a country that inherited hunger from colonial rule to become a leading exporter of food grains. There is a clear expectation from India to extend humanitarian food assistance to countries in Africa and Asia. India has made enormous progress in food production over the years since the Green Revolution, with an inspiring journey towards self-sufficiency in food production. India produced over 300 million tonnes of cereals in 2020 and had built up a food stock of 100 million tonnes. The country has registered record harvests over the last few years. India exported a record 19.8 million tonnes of rice and wheat in FY21.<sup>15</sup>

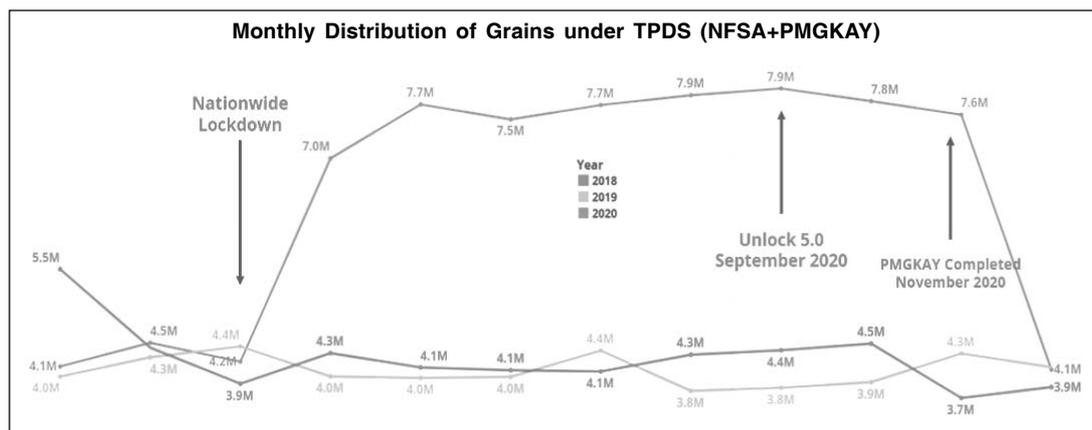
Despite being a net exporter and food surplus country at the aggregate level, India has a 50 percent higher prevalence of under-nutrition compared to the world average. But the proportion of the undernourished population declined from 21.6 percent during 2004-06 to 15.4 in 2018-20.<sup>16</sup> The Government of India and the States are seriously concerned about this paradoxical situation of being food surplus and at the same time, having 15 percent of the population undernourished. This is being addressed through several nutritional interventions. As announced recently, the supply of fortified rice through the public distribution system (PDS) and *Poshan Abhiyan* are two steps among many that have been taken to address the challenge of under-nutrition and malnutrition.<sup>17</sup>

There are lessons from India’s tryst with food insecurity. The long journey from chronic food shortage to being a surplus food producer offers several valuable lessons to other developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in land reforms, public investments, institutional infrastructure, new regulatory systems, public support, intervention in Agri markets and prices and Agri research, and extension as we saw through the Food Systems Summit review process. One of India’s greatest contributions to equity in food is its National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013 that anchors the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), the Mid-Day meals (MDM), and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Today, India’s food safety nets collectively reach over a billion people. Food safety nets and inclusion are linked with public procurement and buffer stock policy. This was visible during the global food crises 2008-2012 and more recently during the COVID-19 pandemic fallout, whereby vulnerable and marginalised families in India continued to be buffered against the food crisis by its robust TPDS and buffer stock of food grains.

**Today, India’s food safety nets collectively reach over a billion people.**

Key measures initiated by the Central government included allowing the States to lift their food grain allocations for six months in one go, in anticipation of a surge in demand for food grain supplied through the PDS. As data shows, there was an unprecedented spike in the uptake of subsidised and free food grain during the lockdown (see figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: Data as collected from PIB and other official sources.<sup>18</sup>

The PDS has become a lifeline for millions during the past two years of the pandemic. A dynamic analysis of the food security scenario and feedback from different stakeholders enabled the Indian government to increase entitlements given to NFSA beneficiaries in 2020. For instance, under the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana* (PMGKAY), 800 million NFSA beneficiaries received an additional 5 kg of foodgrain per person per month and 1 kg of pulses per family per month, free of cost, and under the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* package, 80 million migrants were provided 5 kg of foodgrain per month, free of cost.

The PMGKAY was introduced in 2020 initially for three months to provide relief to 800 million beneficiaries covered under NFSA from COVID-induced economic hardships and was extended in phases for two years. It has now been further extended till next year. The total PMGKAY outlay will add up to a total expenditure of ₹ 2,600,000 million over the first five phases, setting example across the world.

### **Reimagining Food Systems**

Quite clearly the global food systems — the networks that are needed to produce and transform food, and ensure it reaches consumers, or the paths that food travels from production to plate — are in a state of crisis in many countries, affecting the poor and the vulnerable. The global prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity has been slowly on the rise since 2014. The estimated increase in 2020 was equal to that of the previous five years combined! Nearly one in three people in the world (2.37 billion) did not have access to adequate food in 2020 – that’s an increase of almost 320 million people in just one year. While there are alarming concerns about growing global hunger, we must also acknowledge that malnutrition is increasing and access to healthy diets is severely compromised because of increasing costs, income inequality, loss of livelihoods, and the impact of the pandemic. In 2019 itself healthy diets are out of reach for around 3 billion people, especially the poor, in every region of the world.

These situations have a cumulative impact on SDG Goal 2.1 -- universal access to safe and nutritious food. This calls for an unprecedented need for adaptive response and in the longer-term sustainable recovery and rehabilitation needs. If long-term measures are not taken promptly this can pose a great challenge to achieving the SDG target 2.2 of ending all forms of malnutrition. The prolonged lockdowns and climate-

related extreme events, changes in rainfall patterns have already had a major impact on the target of doubling of the productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers (SDG Goal 2.3) and sustainable food production and incomes of small-scale food producers (SDG Goal 2.4).

The first and historic United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) 2021, which was held in September this year, concluded after an intense 'bottom-up' process conceived in 2019 by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres to find solutions and 'catalyse momentum' to transform the way the world produces, consumes, and thinks about food and help address rising hunger. In terms of larger goals, the food system transformation is considered essential in achieving the sustainable development agenda 2030. This makes strong sense as 11 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) out of the 17 are directly related to the food system. The summit created a mechanism for serious debates involving UN member states, civil society, non-governmental organisations, academics, researchers, individuals, and the private sector. The aim was to evolve transformative themes and ideas for reimagining food systems to enhance satisfaction of all stakeholders, including future generations. The debate and response focused on five identified action tracks namely: Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all; Shift to sustainable consumption patterns; Boost nature-positive production; Advance equitable livelihoods, and Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks, and stress. In terms of specific but not exhaustive recommendations, we need to prioritise the following actions.

Adaptation and resilience-building are critical for food security of the poor and vulnerable communities. The focus so far has been on reducing emissions and related targets as they are essential to protect livelihoods and the food security of millions. Massive efforts are, however, also needed to build resilient agriculture that is adaptive to changing weather, the introduction of newer varieties of crops, efficient irrigation systems, and the promotion of crops as per the agro-climate zones. Prompt actions are necessary in countries like India with some 1.2 billion people to feed, considering the climate uncertainties. Gearing food systems towards balancing growth and sustainability, measures to mitigate climate change, ensuring healthy, safe, quality, and affordable food, need investment from governments and the private sector in supporting farmers. Maintaining biodiversity, improving resilience, and offering attractive income and work environment to smallholders and youth are other key tasks.

Food safety nets and their optimal functioning, especially for at-risk groups including persons with disabilities, the elderly, single women-led households, transgender persons, HIV-affected persons, displaced persons, refugees, and orphan children, is at the heart of 'Leave No One Behind'. A third of all food produced is wasted. There should be enhanced efforts to prevent losses. Lost or wasted energy used for food production accounts for about 10 percent of the world's total energy consumption, and annual greenhouse gas emissions associated with food losses and food waste reaches around 3.5 gigatons of the CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent.<sup>19</sup>

Strong cooperation and partnership between governments, citizens, civil society organisations, and the private sector is needed to invest, innovate, and create lasting solutions in sustainable agriculture contribution to equitable livelihood, food security, and nutrition. India has so much to offer from its successes, and learning. It also has to prepare itself for the next 20 to 30 years. There is a need for balancing the goal of growth and sustainability, mitigating climate change, ensuring healthy, safe, quality, and affordable food, maintaining biodiversity, improving resilience, and offering an attractive income and work environment to smallholders and youth.

The global community and nations need to show urgent and renewed commitment towards prioritising people, the planet, peace, and equality. Food remains fundamental to both peace and development for nations like India.

## References

1. "WFP Strategic Plan (2022–2026) . "World Food Programme, July 23, 2021. [https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document\\_download/WFP-0000130225](https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000130225). pp.3.
2. Ibid.
3. "Nobel Peace Prize 2020 - Food Assistance as a Step to Peace and Stability." World Food Programme. <https://www.wfp.org/conflict-and-hunger>.
4. "At the Root of Exodus: Food Security, Conflict and International Migration." World Food Programme, May 2017. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2017-root-exodus-food-security-conflict-and-international-migration>. pp.6.
5. "The Cost of a Plate of Food: 2020." World Food Programme, 2020. <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/plate-of-food/>.
6. "Without Climate Action, Extreme Weather Will Trigger Global Humanitarian Needs ." UN

- News, February 25, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112742>.
7. Smith, Matthew R, Samuel S Myers, and Philip K Thornton. "The Impact of Rising Carbon Dioxide Levels on Crop Nutrients and Human Health." Gender, Climate Change, and Nutrition Integration Initiative (GCAN), July 2018. <https://gcan.ifpri.info/files/2018/07/GCAN-Policy-Note-10.pdf>.
  8. "Effect of Climate Change on Agriculture." Press Information Bureau, February 9, 2021. <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1696468>.
  9. "The Nobel Peace Prize for 2020." The Nobel Prize, October 9, 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2020/press-release/>.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Delgado, Caroline et al. "The World Food Programme's Contribution to Improving the Prospects for Peace." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2019. [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/wfp\\_global\\_report.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/wfp_global_report.pdf).
  12. "Updated Estimates of the Impact of Covid-19 on Global Poverty: Turning the Corner on the Pandemic in 2021?" World Bank Blogs, June 24, 2021. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-turning-corner-pandemic-2021>.
  13. "Hunger Hotspots: FAO-WFP Early Warnings on Acute Food Insecurity: February to May 2022 Outlook." UN World Food Programme, January 26, 2022. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/hunger-hotspots-fao-wfp-early-warnings-acute-food-insecurity-february-may-2022-outlook>.
  14. "Africa – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021. Statistics and Trends." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021. <https://www.fao.org/policy-support/tools-and-publications/resources-details/en/c/1470145/>.
  15. Parajuli, Bishow. "Lessons from India's Food Security Response." The Hindu, July 26, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/lessons-from-indias-food-security-response/article62105748.ece>.
  16. Parajuli, Bishow, and Ramesh Chand. "Reimagining Food Systems with Lessons from India." The Hindu, October 4, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/reimagining-food-systems-with-lessons-from-india/article36813294.ece>.
  17. Ibid.
  18. "75987138.23 Mt Total Allocation under PMGKAY (Phase –I to Phase-V): Centre." Press Information Bureau. Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, December

- 10, 2021. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1780091>.
19. Parajuli, Bishow. "Lessons from India's Food Security Response." *The Hindu*, July 26, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/lessons-from-indias-food-security-response/article62105748.ece>.