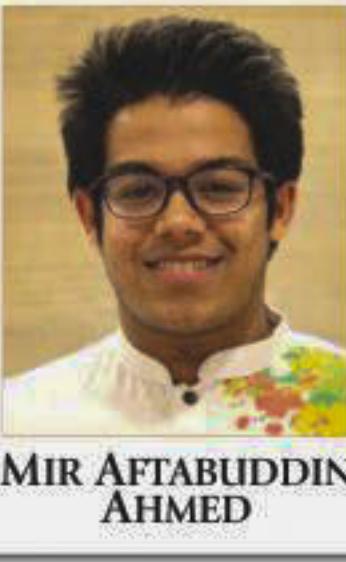


Key challenges for the education minister



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

PRESIDENT Abdul Hamid appointed 47 members to the new cabinet of Bangladesh this month with Dr Dipu Moni taking over the reins of the education ministry. The former foreign minister brings with her years of experience in the public health and legal sectors. And with credentials from institutions such as Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, Johns Hopkins University, University of London and Harvard University, it is with great expectations that we citizens hope for Dr Dipu Moni to efficiently carry forth the responsibilities assigned to her. As the face of a ministry having had both successes and its share of controversies over the past 10 years, she has immense challenges to address—and one hopes that she can do so by understanding the present needs of this sector.

In her first press conference following her appointment, Dr Moni stated that she aimed to maintain the pace of development in the education sector, while suggesting that curbing question paper leaks would be her main challenge. In the past 10 years, the Awami League government has overseen enhanced access to education in rural parts of the country. From initiating free textbook schemes to introducing ICT in classrooms, Dr Dipu Moni's predecessor Nurul Islam Nahid received acclaim in his initial years in office, for prioritising education as a key policy objective of the incumbent party in power. In fairness, the BNP government from 1991 to 1996 started experimenting with some crucial schemes in education, including making primary education mandatory for girls—a policy decision which was enhanced by all successive governments.

According to data of the Unesco Institute of Statistics, the literacy rate in Bangladesh rose from 46.66 percent in 2007 to 72.76 percent in 2016—a figure expected to grow even further in the near future. The Awami



Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni has a number of challenges ahead of her, including the need to address the longstanding problem of question paper leaks.

FILE PHOTO

League government has successfully increased public education services in the country, but they should also be the first to admit that much more needs to be done still to improve the quality of education across the aisle.

Question paper leaks are a major concern for the new education minister, and fixing it is a prerequisite to ensuring quality education in the country. Following high investments in the ICT sector, Bangladesh has seen stringent and, as most suggest, controversial digital security laws being enacted by the Jatiya Sangsad. Using these legal avenues and technology to curb question paper leaks, rather than misusing these to crush any and all forms of dissent, is a better option and could be a mechanism for the education ministry to limit question paper leaks online. Furthermore, a tri-ministerial committee, comprising of the education, ICT and home ministries, can be set up to investigate and control what is surely a social epidemic in the country.

In my opinion, the root cause of question paper leaks in the country stems from the perception of education as a commodity rather than a venture towards gaining knowledge and enlightening oneself. Past governments have prioritised numbers over value education, and, as such, parents and students have become accustomed to the idea of private coaching as a direct substitute to schooling, using corrupt means to enrol students in schools, and resorting to leaked question papers to yield so-called good results in examinations. As educationists have repeatedly suggested over the past years, this exam-centric nature of education in the country has resulted in the system itself being in such a dire condition.

Therefore, for Dr Dipu Moni, the challenge is not simply to provide leadership when it comes to ensuring increased access to education but also addressing the key issue of changing perceptions regarding what education should entail and why it should be valued.

Like many in Bangladesh, I am of the firm belief that students below grade 8 should not be tested via standardised examinations, which tend to promote rote memorisation from past question papers. But I am aware that hoping for such a thing is utopian, at least in the short run. In 2018, the government took a bold step to ensure that 100 percent of Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination questions are competency-based, and one hopes that this aspect of education reform is stressed upon and invested in by Dr Dipu Moni, her ministry and the primary and mass education ministry.

The education minister should also target acquiring a higher budgetary allocation for the education sector. Educationists have suggested that the ratio of the education budget to the GDP should be increased to six percent; however, over the past 15 years, the ratio has hovered around a mere two percent, a figure which is lower than many Asian countries. While nominal spending on

education has gone up over the past decade during the tenure of the Awami League government, with the number of students, academics and institutions increasing, the budgetary allocation has not increased in proportion to either the growth of the overall sector or in adjustment to inflationary pressures.

Another key area of concern is that the political determinants of our public sector have resulted in a high proportion of the education budget being directed towards non-developmental spending—mainly towards increasing teachers' salaries. Whilst ensuring increased salaries for teachers is important, enhancing training of our academics and simultaneously supporting the growth of quality education services demands a higher proportion of spending to be directed towards this sector. Therefore, we sincerely hope that the new education minister can convince her cabinet colleagues and urge the prime minister to look into this issue with greater depth and allow for more direct funds to address the problems of the education system.

Dr Dipu Moni has challenges ahead which are impossible for her to tackle alone, but given her credentials, I sincerely hope that she can, at the very least, kick-start a campaign to change the way education is perceived in the country. Her resume is top-notch, and it is because she has the necessary skills to tackle the shortcomings of the education sector that we expect more from her than the average politician. She helms what is, in my opinion, the most important cabinet portfolio in the country, and if she wants the Awami League to fulfil its electoral manifesto of providing higher standard of education at all levels, then she has the primary responsibility to push for reforms in the education system. Sincerely investing in quality education and striving to improve the system as a whole will ensure that the development of the country is sustainable, equitable and human-capital based.

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commissioning editors.

International coverage of Africa can sometimes feel patronising, either from a lack of local knowledge or because of sheer laziness. A recent photo essay in *The New Yorker* about some of Nigeria's biggest Afrobeats musicians fell flat with Nigerians, with some criticising its shallowness and the absence of quotes from the included artists. Hiring a well-versed Nigerian music critic (yes, they exist) would almost certainly have resulted in a deeper and more compelling feature.

Aside from commissioning African journalists to provide insight—which is the minimum we should expect—Western publications could improve their Africa coverage by surveying the views of contributing freelancers. It would also be beneficial for foreign media outlets to staff dedicated and robust Africa "desks" with local journalists and hire African editors who have the nuance and experience to identify topics and frame coverage in ways that best serve readers.

But, above all, African governments and philanthropic organisations need to assist African media startups, and media companies must pay journalists better, properly train their editorial staff, and resist the temptation to accept money for coverage. Only then will African stories be given the attention they deserve, and be told by journalists who are unencumbered by the skewed preferences of Western audiences and media.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Selling Africa's good news stories

SHAYERA DARK

ANYWHERE in the world, freelance journalism is an extreme career choice. The job requires withstand pitch rejections, ignored queries, stolen story ideas, and delayed payments. It means reconciling oneself with the economic precarity that comes with having little or no leverage in pay negotiations. But for African freelance journalists, covering the continent presents its own set of unique challenges.

In Nigeria, for example, most media companies need diligent editors, seldom publish incisive features and analysis, and struggle to compensate their staff due to lack of funding. Kenyan media entrepreneur and former CNN anchor Zain Verjee recently bemoaned the reluctance of African billionaires and governments to fund and implement policies that support African media startups, even though they bridle at often jaundiced Western media coverage. And, where positive coverage can be bought and sold, and journalism is viewed as glorified public relations, African freelancers can only dream of proper remuneration.

Consider a recent 800-word article I wrote for one of the country's largest newspapers; it ran barely edited and earned me a paltry 10,000 naira (about USD 30). And that was after I haggled with the editor to bump it up from 5,000 naira. A story of similar length would earn me USD 200 or more from a publication in the West. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that many Nigerian freelancers—including me—gravitate toward Western media.

But that leads to other problems such as an

over-emphasis on crises, strife, and other issues viewed as relevant to Western audiences. I've experienced this firsthand. I once pitched a story about a Nigerian Paralympian to a news website in the United States that frequently showcases African writers. The editor rejected it because it was too "optimistic." On another occasion, a Western magazine tried to edit my initial draft to suggest that a refugee's deceased parents were killed by armed militias when, in fact, her father's death was undisclosed and her mother died from an illness.

As Karen Rothmyer pointed out eight years ago in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, foreign media outlets seem beholden to the idea that Africa is in perpetual chaos. Rothmyer, who lived in Kenya for several years, traced the endless stream of bad news to nongovernmental organisations' use of data to justify their existence, which in turn shaped Western reporters' "frames of reference" before they even arrived on the continent. Eight years later, those reference points have not really changed.

This penchant to accentuate the negative does more than reduce Africa to stereotypes; it also feeds the one-dimensional narrative of Africa as a war-torn, disease-ridden, poverty-stricken hellscape where all hope dies. This inclination to fit people and events into simple plot lines leads to what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls the "danger of a single story." A limited viewpoint, repeatedly promulgated, comes to frame all coverage and emerges as the only truth.

And yet, editorial bias is not the only challenge for African freelance journalists.

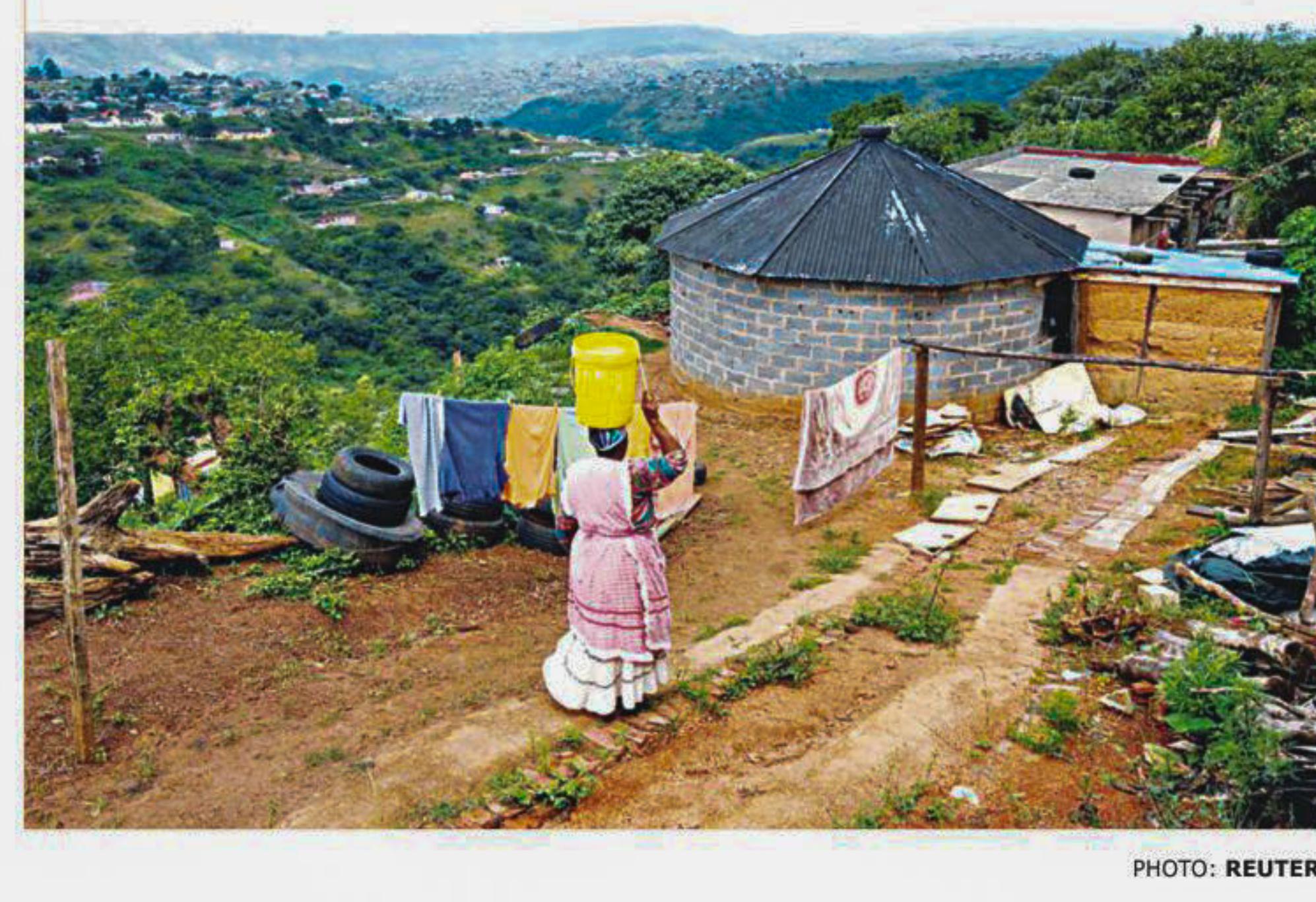


PHOTO: REUTERS

Another common problem is relegation to co-author or "fixer" status when assisting Western media. Nigerian photojournalist Fati Abubakar, who is often a source for foreign reporters writing about Northern Nigeria, describes the current situation as "a brain-drain sort of relationship," and says her consulting services should be compensated but rarely are. Changing this would obviously benefit local journalists and help foreign media avoid embarrassing and dangerous cultural faux pas, like revealing the identities of

assault victims or photographing dead bodies.

Then there is the issue of the pay discrepancy between African and Western journalists. Many publications expect local hires to charge less than their foreign counterparts. When Abubakar was just starting out, she accepted whatever was offered. Now, as an established and sought-after photographer, she is able to turn down work that pays too little. But most freelance journalists in Africa are not so lucky, which leaves many vulnerable to the whims of

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



January 13, 2001

EL SALVADOR EARTHQUAKE

The 2001 El Salvador earthquake struck with the epicentre 60 miles of San Miguel, El Salvador at a depth of 60km. At least 944 people were killed, 108,261 houses destroyed.

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