Editor's Note

FAMILY planning has long been touted as one of Bangladesh's success stories, and, in many ways, it has been. Long gone are the days of average birth rates of above five per adult woman, and in comparison to, say, India and Pakistan, we have certainly done well, with the current average rate hovering just above two children per adult women.

Nevertheless, even at this reduced rate, the population will continue to expand. One estimate has the current population of around 140 million doubling to 280 million by the middle of the century. By no estimate is the population expected to stabilise before we pass the 200 million mark.

Right now we are in the midst of a food crisis that can only be exacerbated as the population pressure and pressure on the land continues to grow. And let us not forget that, according to some estimates, global warming will result in rising sea waters that threaten to submerge as much as 40 per cent of the country by the middle of the century, to say nothing of the arable land that will be rendered useless long before that due to increased salinity.

The population problem seems to have fallen from the list of our top concerns as a nation from the 1970s and 1980s when it was generally considered our biggest single threat. But, even though, in terms of population growth rate, things are better than they were in the 1970s and 1980s, in concrete terms, things are much worse.

We had a population of roughly 70 million at independence and roughly 85 million ten years later. Today the figure stands at approximately 140 million. This is far less than it would have been had we not had the family planning success we have had over the past three decades or so, but in absolute terms the problem is far from solved.

It is funny to recall that at independence we thought we had an over-populated country. Now we look at 70 million and it seems like it must have been an idyllic world. We have cut down the poverty rate from eighty per cent to about forty per cent, a grand achievement by any measure, but the increase in population means that there are more people living in poverty today than there were at independence.

This is not to say all is lost or that we cannot find a way out of the problem. But we must once again acknowledge the enormity of the predicament and understand that addressing it must be our number one issue going forward. For if we do not, all our other gains will be for naught.

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Last month's piece The Conscience Keeper by Deb Mukherji first appeared in The Book Review.

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