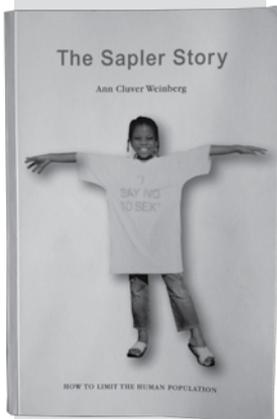


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THE SAPLER STORY
By Ann Cluver Weinberg
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BOOK REVIEW

The Sapler Story By Ann Cluver Weinberg

The Sapler Story begins tellingly: "...in 1990, I believed that people could be persuaded, influenced, or educated to think differently from the way they were then thinking... now... in 2010, I know that the frameworks of humans' thoughts can be so different and so fixed that influence is almost impossible."

For some 12 years, beginning in 1990, Ann Cluver Weinberg devoted her time and energy – and a not inconsiderable amount of her retirement savings – to an effort to make people think differently. She was, by her own account, largely unsuccessful.

The Sapler Story, then, is the story of some 12 years in the life of an idealist – perhaps even an ideologue. It's not a success story. Neither is it a tale of popularity.

The rather oddly named '*Spendingly Alive People Living within Existing Resources*' (SAPLER) germinated in 1990, following a rather acerbic exchange of published letters with Ina Perlman, the director of another NGO, Operation Hunger. In that sense, SAPLER began as it meant to go on!

Weinberg's cause is, in a nutshell, population limitation, particularly for the poor. A cause like that is understandably somewhat loaded for many South Africans who still remember some of the apartheid government's more insane, Bond villain-esque schemes and utterances. Weinberg acknowledges one particular such utterance, "Botha's babies" – Botha's 1960s incitement to white South Africans to have more babies in order to thin the black majority. But she dismisses it: "this simply seemed to non-Nationalists like apartheid madness and was ignored."

That dismissal unfortunately seems quite typical of Weinberg's engagement with her opponents in government and civil society. So convinced is she of the necessity and righteousness of her cause that she seems not to feel the need to counter her opponents' arguments, nor to support her own position with hard data. A single anecdote illustrates this intransigence:

"I phoned up the Women's Health Project and invited a few of them round to tea to discuss the issues that divided us... Barbara Klugman [the project director] explained that they disapproved of SAPLER for saying "Limit the Population and "Two-Child".

"We see it differently, that's all," I said.

There was no discussion... by this time I had support from leading thinkers around the world, and I had read books and journals by well-informed, clear writers. So I sat there calm but puzzled. Then they all trooped out again."

Weinberg's good intentions are beyond doubt. Every story she relates of engagement with those she sees as her constituents – teenagers making decisions about their

sex lives and rural women seeking greater control over their family situations – makes that perfectly clear. And her cause may well be righteous. Certainly many of the problems she points to – pollution, shortages of clean water, food security, soil erosion – are very real, and growing. And it may be the case that they can be traced, to some extent, back to overpopulation. Certainly, fewer mouths to feed mean more food and water to go round!

“The table of my friends is full, so I have come to the table of my enemies.”

But as anyone who has worked in the non-profit sector will know, convincing your apparent opponents of your correctness is sometimes more than half of your job. It’s hard to imagine anyone in this line of work without an idealistic streak, and surely most

activists are utterly convinced of the righteousness of their cause – why else would they become activists for it? In the end, it’s getting from activism to real, large scale action that is most difficult. It requires a commitment to engage with even (or especially) those people who doubt you, and persuade them otherwise – to see every opponent as a potential ally.

That commitment is not apparent in *The Sapler Story*. What comes through more strongly in the narrative is Weinberg’s continuing anger, frustration and disappointment with all those she encountered who were unable or unwilling to immediately understand the SAPLER position.

This again highlights Weinberg’s idealism and good intentions. But it has a more unfortunate effect too. Readers who are already persuaded of the need to control population growth through “strong birth-control guidance” may find the book compelling and convincing, and lament, with Weinberg, the failures of the post-1994 government in this regard. Those not already in Weinberg’s camp, though, may be unmoved, alienated, or perhaps most likely, simply bemused – like ANC MP Mary Turok was when, after a contentious discussion in Parliament, Weinberg sat next to her at lunch with the remark, “The table of my friends is full, so I have come to the table of my enemies.”

In the end, those sentiments, and this story, will be familiar to anyone from the strange world of NGOs.