



The World Economic Forum (WEF) and the “measures” (NPIs) During the Pandemic

Description

Our new study is published

For some time now, I have been conducting expert interviews documenting how various experts from science, the media, politics and civil society assess the pandemic, what factors they see at work, what their views are. Every now and then the idea comes up, that the World Economic Forum (WEF), which Prof. Klaus Schwab set up many years ago, could play a role.

I thought for a while about whether and how this theory could be tested. In the end, I came up with the idea that one could use the number of Young Global Leaders (YGL) that the WEF has trained over the years as a parameter and relate it to the intensity of “non-pharmaceutical interventions” (NPI), popularly and hereafter referred to as “measures”. This is what we, my colleague Johannes Klement and I, then did, at two points in time: at the beginning of the corona crisis, i.e. in March 2020, and at the second peak in the winter of 2020/2021. The study is now [published](#) in the peer-reviewed online journal “Cureus” and can be freely downloaded [1]. (Cureus is an interesting journal, by the way; our immunology survey was already published there [2]. It is a journal based in California and started by physicians who proceed without “conflict of interest” and very openly. It is peer-reviewed, usually with 3, at least 2 reviews.)

The perhaps exonerating news is that the WEF, at least in the form of the Young Global Leaders, is not responsible for countries having introduced measures, nor for their strength. This is because the number of Young Global Leaders in a country is not associated with the strength and extent of NPIs *during the first wave*. If the WEF had played an active role there, influencing policy through the network of YGLs, for example, we would have expected a positive correlation there. This correlation is not present.

The potentially unsurprising news is that *during the second wave* in winter 2020/21, the number of YGLs in a country is robustly, highly-significantly and clearly associated with both the median severity of NPIs and the maximum expression of NPIs in a country, with $\rho = .36$ (median severity) and $\rho = .33$ (maximum expression). We used the robust, non-parametric Spearman rank correlation as a measure of the association.

The trend and significance of the correlations over the entire period can be seen in Figure 1:

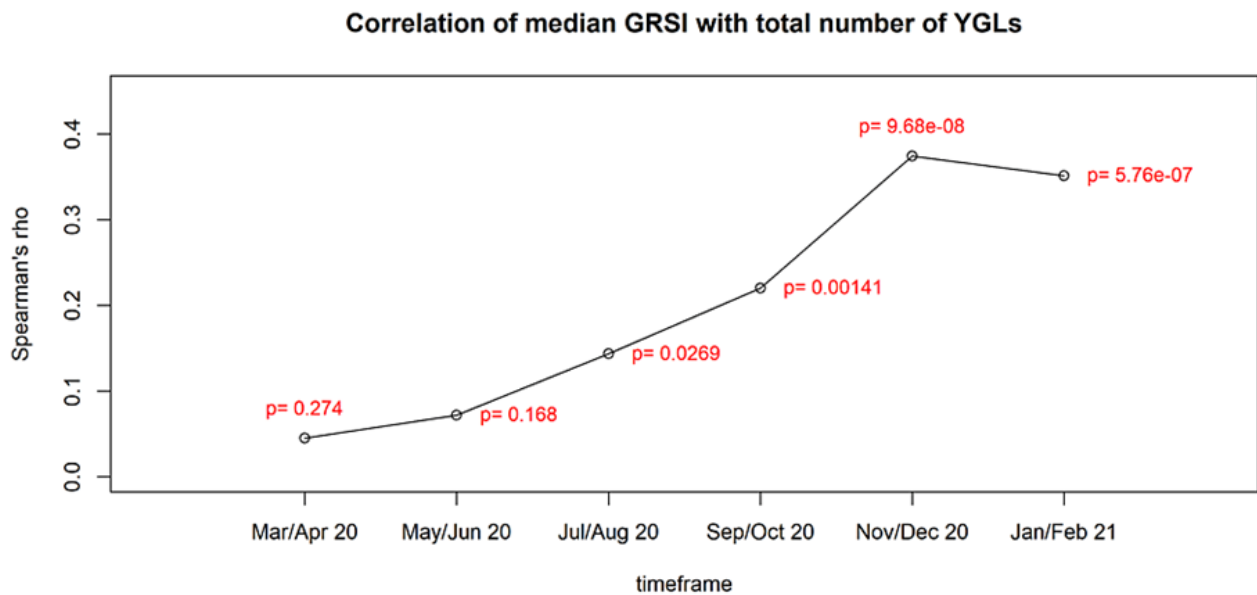


Figure 1 from [1]: The magnitude of the correlation (y-axis: Spearman's Rho) and associated significance levels over the first year of the pandemic between the number of Young Global Leaders trained by the WEF and the median strength of NPIs

To understand the context and our analytical approach, the following considerations and background information may be helpful.

Background: The WEF

The World Economic Forum (WEF) was launched in 1971 by Prof. Klaus Schwab as the European Management Forum in Switzerland, initially with the support of the European Union. A few years later, the focus on the world changed, and the Forum renamed itself WEF and the support from the European Commission ended. Anyone who wants to find out more about the history and social structure of this exclusive club would be well advised to read the book by Christina Garsten and Adrienne Sörbom [3]. The two anthropologists have spent a decade researching this organization through interviews, observations and literature studies. They call what the WEF does "liquid mandate" and "discrete power". "Liquid mandate" means that although the WEF has no democratic mandate whatsoever, because no one there is elected or represents a particular group, it exercises a kind of mandate. Because the 1,000 most powerful and largest industrial groups and companies are represented in it. Through their membership and the associated fees, about which there is no information as far as I know, they pay for the WEF's expenses, for the conferences, the generous headquarters near Geneva, the staff working there, the training of young, talented scientists, business leaders, media people, politicians. Whether the right ones are always chosen one could wonder, knowing that Ms Baerbock is just as much a so-called Young Global Leader as Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron.

This YGL training consists of these people being specifically selected and then invited to YGL conferences and seminars, but also to the Davos conferences. Sörbom and Garsten describe these very vividly because they have been there a few times. The idea is to introduce young, promising talents from academia, politics, the media landscape, business and civil society to the concerns, the culture, the views, in a sense the "creed" of the WEF.

This is clear from many publications: “to make the world a better place – to improve the world”. One means to this end is a kind of “global governance”. For the time being, this can only happen through UN bodies. And because these sometimes seem a little slow and dysfunctional, one can at best help things along. The informal channels provided by the WEF can be used for this purpose.

The special thing about these informal channels – the Davos Conference, but also many smaller conferences and workshops, working groups drafting position papers, YGL training seminars – is: they take place strictly by “invitation only”. You get invited, or you don’t get in. Therefore, it has its own nimbus to be one of the “invited”. It means: I am someone better, I have been noticed by the smart people of the WEF. I belong to those who help make the world a better place and am therefore important. Clearly visible in the pacifist course of our Foreign Minister, to give a concrete example. Therefore, Garsten and Sörbom note: although the WEF has no mandate, it is immensely influential, primarily through the views, ideas, values and goals it informally conveys. Schwab has described these in detail in various places [4-6]. These works are usually a mixture of clever analysis and some dystopian visions of the future. Schwab’s approaches are characterized by a delightfully naive view of man and his problems. They are simply engineering, freed from sceptic depth reflection. Show me a problem, Papa Schwab will solve it: The whole structure is paternalistic and imposes solutions, not violently and obviously, but through clever hypnotherapeutic, suggestive strategies, not through democratic search and solution processes, but through technocratic “I know best” know-it-alls.

Most people can bring their ideas to people’s attention by writing, publishing books, perhaps making films or videos, giving interviews or publishing websites. What is special about Schwab and his ideas is probably that he is one of those people who, through the WEF, have a huge amplification machine, a social amplifier, through which they can exert influence in many areas of life and culture.

Because, as Garsten and Sörbom nicely point out: The WEF’s invitation policy is inscrutable. Sometimes one is invited, then again not. Then a second invitation follows, then again not. This creates envy, the need to belong and thus a willingness to fit in. Even for the 1,000 companies that finance the WEF, it is not guaranteed that they will always be there. Sometimes they don’t even have a representative at a WEF event. And then the scissors in the head take hold, the well-behaved adaptation in order to belong. If you want to understand this in more detail, you should read the book by the two authors, or perhaps the shorter journal articles that have emerged from the project [3, 7, 8].

This makes the WEF arguably one of the most influential NGOs of our time in terms of developing agendas, shaping the future and macro planning in the economic and social spheres. These revolve around an inclusion of as many participants, “stakeholders”, as possible, around the use of computers and Artificial Intelligence (AI), in my opinion, also around an overly positive assessment of transhumanist approaches without perceptible skepticism [9].

Therefore, it is not surprising that some have immediately blamed Schwab and the WEF for the entire Corona crisis, even though I have always thought this misguided and far too simplistic.

Young Global Leaders

The corresponding book by Schwab “The Great Reset” [5] is then actually also a comparatively thin manifesto that tries to extract something good from the crisis – better that people stay at home and work from there than that they die and no one works anymore; one can finally use IT technology for the benefit of the people and try out new social ways, from Zoom meetings, home schooling to Whatsapp love affairs.

But of course one could see the Young Global Leaders as a vehicle through which Schwab and the WEF

incarnate their views worldwide. For this network of young people is spread all over the world, more of it in some countries, less of it in others. It penetrates all areas of society, from politics to religion to the media, economy, culture and NGOs.

Since 2016, about 1,250 people have been trained as Young Global Leaders through WEF's seminars. We have excluded candidates from previous years because it is not entirely clear how closely they are still associated with the WEF and its concerns.

The data comes from the WEF website (<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/03/meet-the-2021-class-of-young-global-leaders>; https://www.younggloballeaders.org/community?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=&status=alumni&class_year=§or=&). I have corrected the WEF data in some cases – concerning the assignment of a person to a social sector – where obvious errors had crept in. Otherwise, the data are those provided by the WEF itself.

The data on NPIs come from the [Oxford Policy Tracker](#), which has categorized measures for each week and country since the beginning of the crisis and ranked them on a standardized 100-point scale. This gives the intensity of the measures in a country for each week on a 100% scale.

The analytical approach

Because it's very easy to get caught up in fishing with a project like this, that is, to keep searching until you find what you're looking for, we decided in advance how to proceed:

1. We wrote a protocol and also [publicly made it available beforehand](#)
2. There we formulated that we use two phases for analysis, namely the first period of the crisis, from the beginning of March to the end of April 20 and then again from 12-01-2020 to 01-31-2022
3. We defined that we consider only correlations greater than $\rho = .3$ as relevant and set the significance threshold at $p < .005$
4. We performed regression analyses and other models as additional exploratory and sensitivity analyses, respectively.

We sent the first version of our paper to Mr Schwab with a request for comments if he had any, but received no reply.

The WEF has played no discernible role in the introduction of the NPIs

Contrary to what is often claimed, the WEF was not active in installing NPIs. Had this been the case, we should have seen a clear correlation between YGLs and NPIs during the first phase. This is not evident. Of course, this does not rule out less obvious collusion. But such things are not detectable with publicly available data anyway.

The WEF appears to play a role as an amplifier

The fact that there is a clear correlation between the number of YGLs and the strength of NPIs during the second wave of the pandemic shows that this network is acting as an amplifier. "His master's voice" is what Garsten and Sörbom called this function [8], and older ones among us still see the old record label of EMI in front of us, where the faithful dog sits under the gramophone listening to his master's voice.

So the more YGLs there are in a country, the stronger the median and also the maximum expression of NPIs in that country. It is very difficult to say whether this relationship is causal. Of course, there could be other factors

driving this correlation that we haven't seen and taken into account, and if someone has a good idea, then we can test it. In any case, it is interesting to see that the number of YGLs in a country at later time points has a correlation with NPIs.

Here's a little vignette: Uruguay has one YGL, Argentina 11. The two countries are neighbouring and have similar population densities, Argentina 16 inhabitants per sq km and Uruguay 20; however, their total populations are very different. Argentina imposed arguably one of the most severe lockdowns in the world over a long period of time, Uruguay took no practical action. Uruguay had hardly any problems, especially at the beginning, Argentina massive ones, despite, or because of the lockdown [10].

We do not see a differential relationship, i.e. that YGLs in the economy and those in politics would have had different effects, although there is a weak hint of this in our regression analyses, which I don't want to strain further.

It could be that public opinion, which YGLs are certainly helping to steer, has moved in this direction, so that policymakers have felt compelled to use these NPIs. It could be that YGLs were active themselves in leading positions. It could simply be that the network consolidated the opinion that NPIs were important and then spread it through various channels in the countries. Interestingly enough, the more YGLs, the more measures.

By the way, this is not an artefact of the fact that 8 countries (India, Germany, USA, Switzerland, Japan, England, Singapore, China) provide more than 30 YGLs. We have also calculated analyses without these countries and see similar effects.

In this respect, I think one can see the WEF as a kind of amplifier. Certain opinions and attitudes circulate there, in this case on the topic of NPIs, which then make their way through local channels into politics, the economy and decision-making.

Perhaps this is the post-modern political situation: the actual decisions are not (any longer) made by parliaments (legislature) and by elected representatives (government and executive). Instead, decisions are made in an intermediary – what the media and their representatives consider to be public opinion and then collate as such, what pollsters then unearth and politicians take seriously and, not to forget, what important informal bodies such as the WEF and possibly still others shape through their own networks and disseminate on all possible channels, especially on the net.

The subject of political decision-making in postmodernity is the internet, and who controls it.

Sources and literature

Image credit post image: [CC BY-SA 2.0 Generic by World Economic Forum 2010](#)

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