



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South
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Needs and challenges in the reopening of schools

The closure of educational institutions is one of the prevention measures for the Covid-19 implemented worldwide. According to UNESCO (2020), from the last half of March to almost the first half of April, no country in the world had all of its schools open. Most had their schools closed, while in some countries such as Australia, Japan, Russia, Iceland, Sweden and the United States the closure of schools remained localized, as shown in Figure 1. For their part, Turkey, Tajikistan, Belarus and Nicaragua were the first countries in the world to open their schools completely, as of April 10.

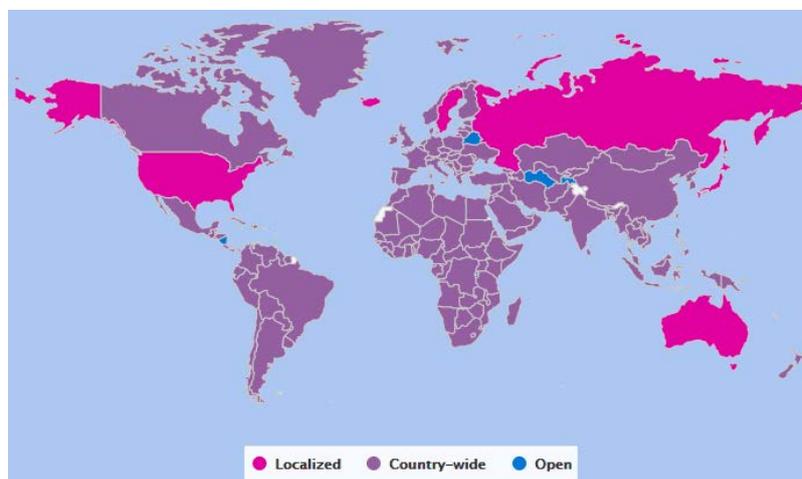


Figure 1. Global situation as of 10 April on school closures. Source: UNESCO, 2020.

Figure 2 shows that until August 3, the date with the most recent data, most countries kept their schools totally or partially closed. In almost all cases, these closures have been in place for more than four months.

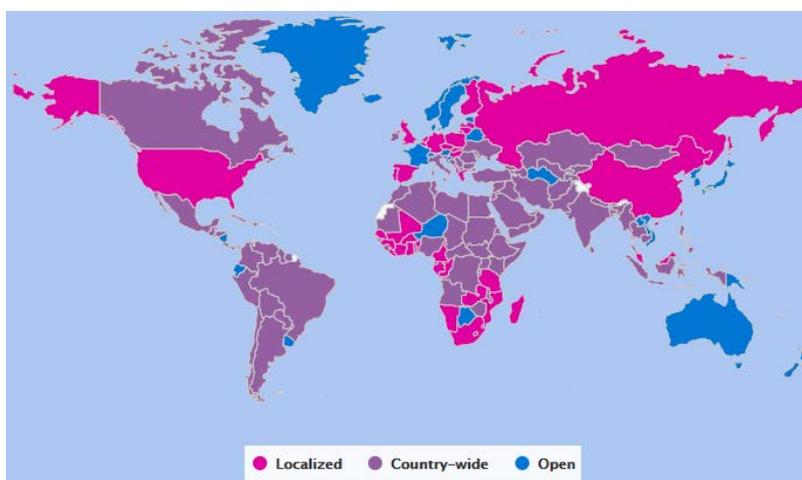


Figure 2. Global situation as of 3 August regarding school closures. Source: UNESCO, 2020.

According to a report by UNICEF (2020) along with other international agencies, the situation of the closure of educational establishments is particularly worrying. On the one hand, it can affect the learning capacity of children and generate stress and anxiety. On the other hand, it increases the risk of adolescent pregnancy, child marriage and situations of violence. Also, services provided by schools such as school feeding, vaccination and psycho-educational services are disrupted. Economically marginalized children are the ones who suffer most from these problems. Besides, the longer they are out of school, the more difficult it is for them to return. The report also states that the reopening of educational establishments must be carried out in safe conditions to ensure the protection of pupils and their families and of all teachers and non-teaching staff, and in line with each country's overall response to Covid-19.

A report by the *Ibero-American Development Bank (IDB)* lists a number of strategies for the safe reopening of schools. In general, these include: ensuring physical distance; keeping schools clean and disinfected; ensuring that students and teachers arrive and remain healthy at school; and ensuring access to handwashing facilities. This last strategy requires a continuous supply of safe, quality water. As mentioned in Reports N° 12 and N° 13, access to safe water is not assured in all countries in Africa and Latin America (BIOCOMSC, 2020a) (BIOCOMSC, 2020b). On the other hand, in order to make physical distance possible, the reopening of schools should take place gradually, with staggered arrival and departure times, widening the distance between desks, and avoiding crowding of students. This is especially difficult in some institutions where small classrooms house a large number of students, something very common throughout the African continent. In addition, keeping schools clean and disinfected would require more cleaning products and staff. This requires a large monetary investment that not all schools can make unless they have state support (IDB, 2020).

As mentioned above, some countries have already reopened their educational institutions partially or completely. One example is the case of South Africa, which reopened on June 8, prioritizing children's and adolescents' learning and academic future over the conditions of their institutions, according to the *African News*. Many of these facilities have been alerted to the lack of safe water, especially those in rural areas, making hand washing impossible. After an increase in cases, the government decided on July 27 to close public schools until August 24 and extend the school calendar.

Other African countries also have face-to-face classes. Among them is Côte d'Ivoire, which was one of the first countries on the continent to resume classes on May 25, according to the *Daily News*. Tanzania, on the other hand, never had a mandatory quarantine and began a phased reopening on June 1 that prioritized handwashing, physical distancing and the use of masks in the classrooms. Niger also reopened its schools on 1 June, according to the newspaper *Le Sahel*, even though they had not yet received handwashing devices. Emphasis was placed on physical distance and on raising teacher awareness, with teachers explaining the importance of prevention measures every day before classes.

Despite being one of the Latin American countries most affected by the pandemic, in Ecuador schools never completely closed in the cities, but they did in rural areas. According to the newspaper *Primicias*, the reopening of these schools began on July 15, with optional attendance. One Latin American country that never closed its public schools was Nicaragua,

according to the newspaper *La Prensa*. The priority in this country was the learning and socialization of children and adolescents. In spite of a protocol that includes hand washing, maintaining a distance of no less than one meter between desks and avoiding crowds of students, it has been warned that these preventive measures are not always followed.

A successful example of a return to school is the case of Uruguay, which began the staggered reopening on June 1 and completed it on June 29. According to the newspaper *Infobae*, this country never had a compulsory quarantine but appealed to the responsibility of the population. The same is true of the return to classes, which is voluntary and already has more than 250,000 students reincorporated. The reopening was carried out under a strict protocol drawn up by the *National Public Education Administration*, which establishes the modalities of entry and exit of students, guidelines for physical distancing, a questionnaire on possible symptoms to be answered by children and adolescents upon entry, as well as the use of masks and what to do in the event of a positive case of Covid-19 in a school. The weekly frequency of classes was established by each educational institution and should only consider two consecutive days with the same group. On Wednesdays, the cleaning and sanitation of the institutions is carried out.

In conclusion, school closures pose problems not only because students' learning capacity is affected, but also because educational institutions are spaces that provide essential services such as school feeding and vaccination, and are often safe and secure places for them. The reopening of schools is necessary and requires advance planning with policies in line with the country in question and its plan of action against covid-19. It should be noted that there is no single way to carry out such reopening and that not all strategies can be applied equally everywhere. Some of them will therefore have to be more or less flexible depending on the region, the resources available, the infrastructure, the economic situation of the institutions, the possibility of state aid and, above all, the needs of the pupils and educational staff, in order to ensure their health and well-being.

References:

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The research group BIOCOM-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>