

African countries with more extensive school meal programmes have re-opened schools earlier

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This short analysis presents an interesting finding: Among African countries falling within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or the East African Community (EAC), countries with schools which had re-opened by 16 July had a percentage of students in schools receiving school meals which was on average *four times higher* than that for countries which had not re-opened their schools. This is an important pattern. It suggests that in countries where poor households would typically be more dependent on a school nutrition programme, governments have realised that school closures would be especially detrimental to the well-being of students, and have thus re-opened schools relatively early.

What prompted this analysis was the 7 July announcement by the Kenyan government that schools would remain closed until January 2021. This came as a surprise to many, given the increasing emphasis by global bodies such as UNESCO on the harm school closures can inflict on children, in part due to the harm of interrupted school nutrition programmes. Fortunately, there is a research initiative which runs a systematic survey of nutrition programmes across (mostly) developing countries. This initiative, known as the Global Survey of School Meal Programs (or ‘GCNF global survey’²), and closely linked to the University of Washington in the United States, last compiled statistics for 2017-2018. There are of course many ways of defining what constitutes the recipient of a school meal programme, and the survey applies a uniform definition across all countries.

It turns out that Kenya has an especially low level of coverage with respect to school meals, which could explain its readiness to close schools for the rest of 2020. Households in Kenya are more accustomed to catering for the full nutritional needs of children than households in many other countries. The positive correlation between how early a country has re-opened its schools and the extent of its school nutrition programme extends across all SADC and EAC countries for which data were available.

To gauge whether schools had been re-opened, the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) dataset³ was used. This dataset is updated on a daily basis. Analysis of the data as it stood on 16 July produced the Figure 1 map below. OxCGRT classifies the level of stringency of pandemic-related responses in the education sector using a four-level scale:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 0 | No measures |
| 1 | Recommend closing |
| 2 | Require closing (only some levels or categories, e.g. just high school, or just public schools) |
| 3 | Require closing all levels |

OxCGRT captures the daily situation for virtually all countries in the world from 1 January 2020. For the map, ‘Never closed’ means a value of 0 was found for all dates. ‘Re-opened’

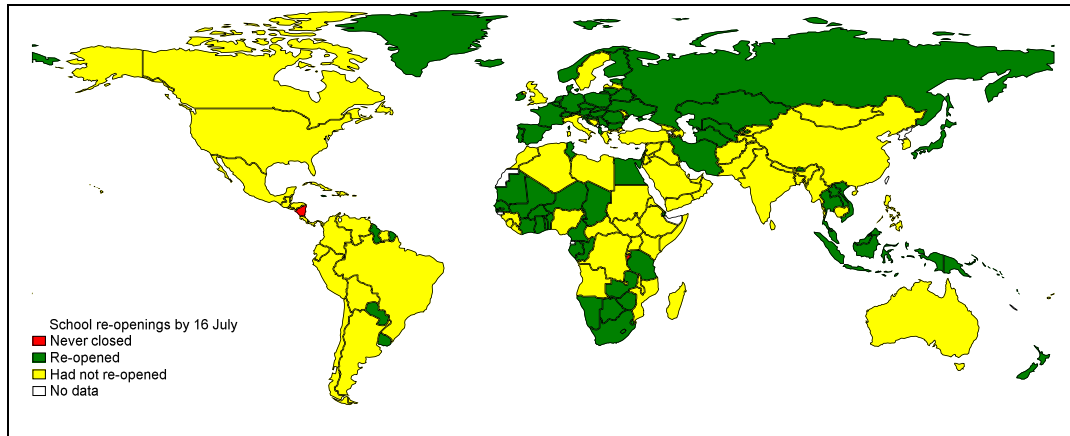
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² GCNF stands for Global Child Nutrition Foundation. The survey’s reports are available at <https://gcnf.org/survey>.

³ Hale *et al*, 2020.

was found by comparing the most recent value⁴ to the maximum value. If the maximum value exceeded the most recent value, stringency had declined, and this was considered a sign that there had been some form of re-opening. For instance, South Africa moved to the maximum level of 3 on 18 March, and then moved down to level 2 on 8 June, and was still at level 2 on 16 July. ‘Had not re-opened’ means the most recent value equals the maximum value, and neither of the values is 0. Though UNESCO has been generating maps displaying which countries *closed* their schools, it seems this type of map on school re-openings has not been produced. Among African countries in the SADC plus EAC group, there is a substantial number which had re-opened by 16 July, and a substantial number which had not.

Figure 1: School re-openings by 16 July 2020

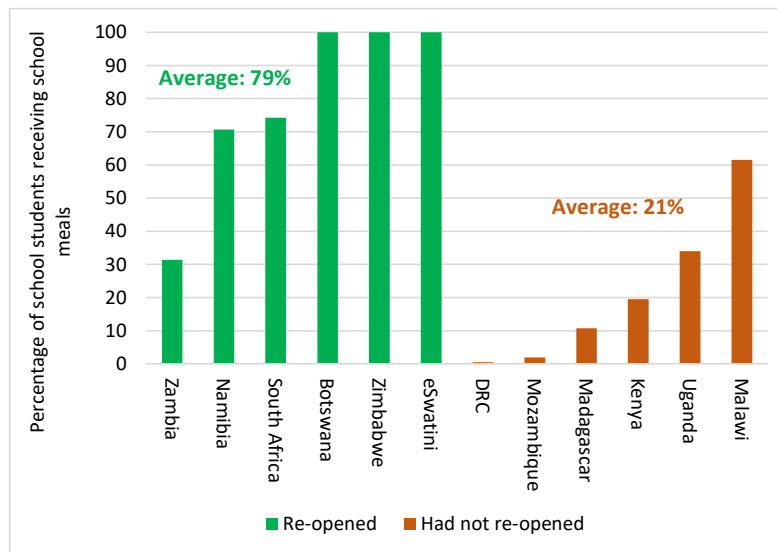


There were twelve countries in the SADC plus EAC group which had data available in both the data sources described above, and which were either in the ‘Re-opened’ or ‘Had not re-opened’ group⁵. In Figure 2 it is clear that on average the percentage of primary-level students receiving school meals is much higher among countries which re-opened. The outliers are Zambia, which re-opened while having a relatively low coverage for school meals, and Malawi, which had not re-opened yet, despite having a relatively high school meal coverage.

⁴ For the great majority of countries, this would be 16 July or a date during the preceding week. There are lags in the data capturing for some countries.

⁵ Burundi is one of the few countries in the world which never closed its schools, and is excluded from the analysis. Its school meals cover 29% of students at the primary level.

Figure 2: Re-openings and primary school meals in SADC plus EAC countries



Note: Averages are simple averages across the six national values.

A similar finding emerges if one focusses on the percentage of students at the secondary level, though only four countries provide students at this level with meals. Among the countries that re-opened, values for the secondary level are 100% in eSwatini, 66% in South Africa, and 11% in Zambia. Among countries which had not re-opened, only Uganda provided meals at the secondary level, covering 45% of students (this is in fact higher than what is reported at the primary level for Uganda). If one considers the primary and secondary levels together, then the gap between the two groups of countries becomes slightly larger: the two percentages in Figure 2 become 82% and 21% (the latter statistic remains essentially the same).

References

Hale, T., Petherick, A., Phillips, T. & Webster, S. (2020). *Variation in government responses to COVID-19: Version 4.0*. Oxford: Blavatnik School of Government.