

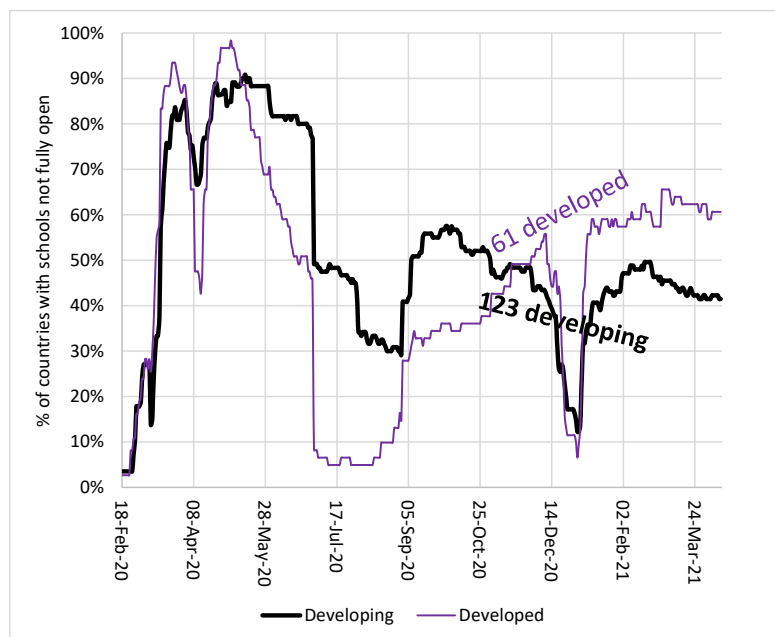
# Global school disruptions and the pandemic

## Developing countries less likely to close schools than before

19 April 2021  
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School closures in rich developed countries enjoy considerable media coverage. The UNESCO dataset on school closures provides a more global picture, and allows one to examine differences between developed and developing countries. The following graph, which draws from this dataset, displays a few interesting patterns. The graph covers 184 of the world's 195 or so countries, the 184 being countries with data available for this graph, and the graphs that follow. Only a few very small countries are excluded. The vertical axis in Figure 1 represents the percentage of countries whose schools were *not* fully open on the date represented by the horizontal axis. The UNESCO dataset is a little problematic when it comes to definitions of, for instance, 'fully open', which means 'For the majority of schools, classes are being held exclusively in person'<sup>2</sup>. Of course, majority could mean just 51%<sup>3</sup>. Nonetheless, the UNESCO dataset is good enough to provide general trends.

**Figure 1: School closures in developed and developing countries**



Source: UNESCO school closures dataset available at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#schoolclosures>.

Figure 1 shows how developed and developing countries began with similar and very high levels of school closures. Since around the start of September, the trend has been an upward one for developed countries, which have moved back towards restrictions, while developing countries have seen a downward trend, towards fewer restrictions. By the middle of April, developing countries had reached the lowest level of restrictions yet, of around 40%, if one

<sup>1</sup> Report prepared for the Department of Basic Education, Pretoria, South Africa.

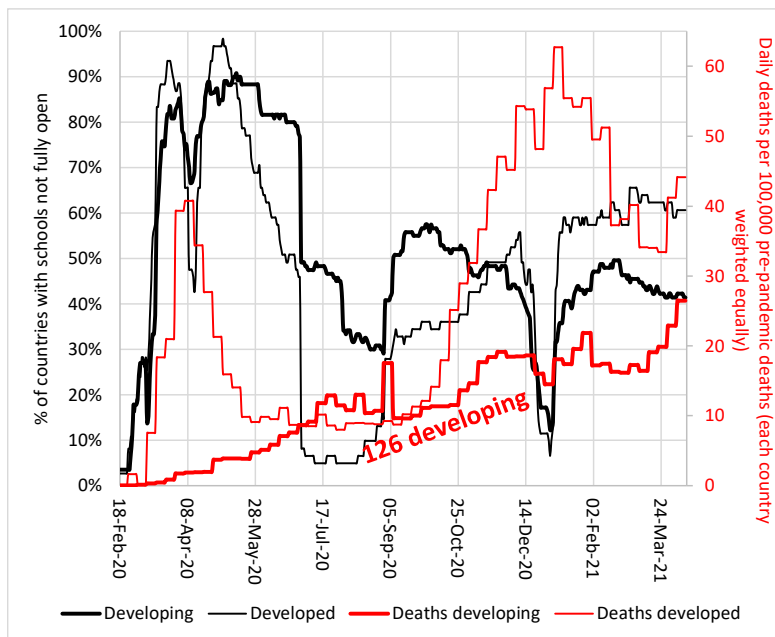
<sup>2</sup> UNESCO document available online titled *Global tracking of COVID-19 caused school closures and re-openings: Methodological Note* and dated 20 January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> South Africa's schools are classified as 'fully open' for June and July 2020, when learners in just a few grades could attend school every day, and 'partially open' in September 2020, when learners in all schools could in general attend every second day. This illustrates the definitional problems.

ignores the troughs representing academic breaks. (There is a wide trough for July and August 2020, when many Northern Hemisphere schools close, and a narrower trough around New Year.) In contrast to developing countries, developed countries had reached a 60% level of restrictions by mid-April, the highest level in almost a year.

Figure 2 reproduces the curves from the previous graph, and adds the trend for daily COVID-19 deaths, for developed and developing countries separately. It is clear that developing countries have, since around September 2020, reduced restrictions *while COVID-19 deaths were gradually rising*. The easing of restrictions is thus not in response to a diminishing level of infections, but for other reasons. Chief among these other reasons would be the realisation in developing countries that learning losses pose grave development risks, something UNESCO has been reiterating, but also that these countries do not have the resources to proceed with distance learning in a major or meaningful way.

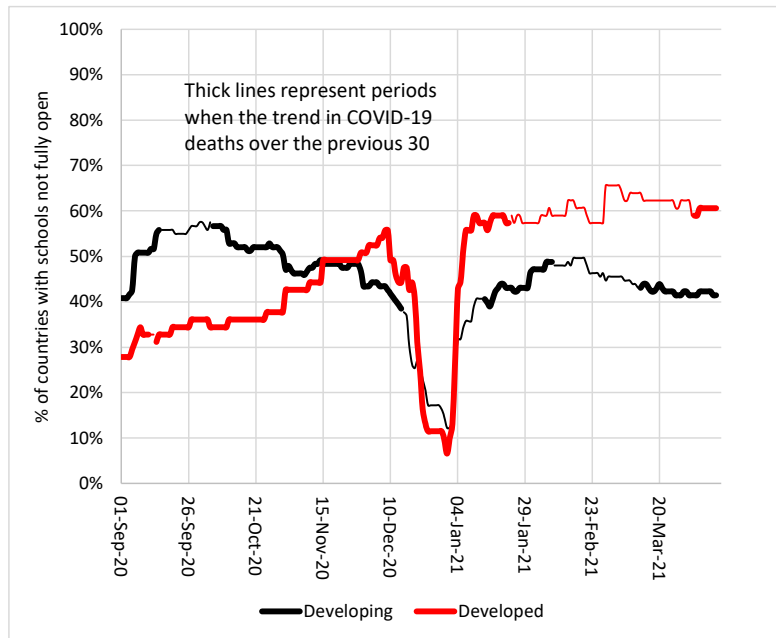
**Figure 2: School closures and COVID-19 deaths**



Source: For COVID-19 deaths, ECDC data at <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/data-national-14-day-notification-rate-covid-19>. Inconsistencies in the numbering of the weeks in the data were corrected.

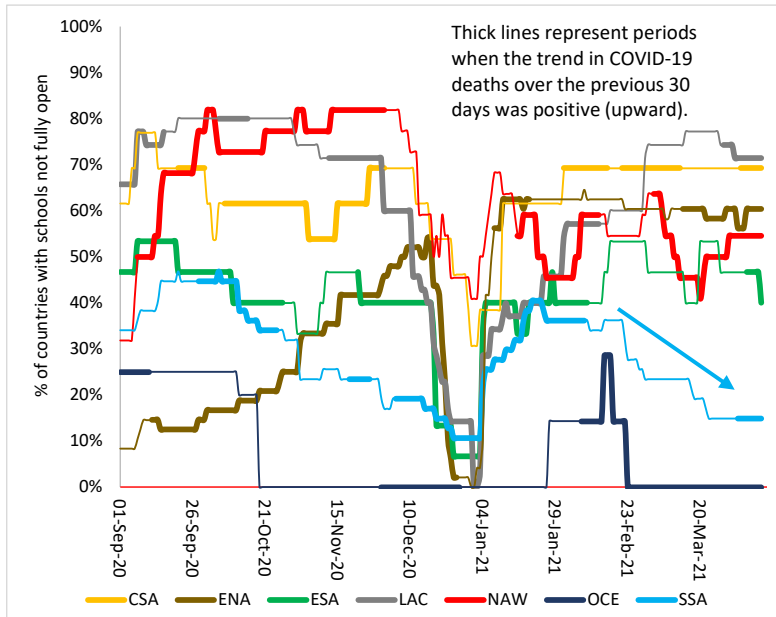
Figure 3 below provides a more compact view of the data, focussing on the period from September 2020. Again, it is clear that developing countries have reduced restrictions even as deaths were increasing.

**Figure 3: School closures and COVID-19 deaths from September 2020**



Finally, Figure 4 does what Figure 3 does, except here the breakdown is UNESCO world region. It is clear that much of the lifting of restrictions during 2021, but even before then, has occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) – see the blue arrow.

**Figure 4: School closures and COVID-19 deaths by UNESCO world region**



Acronyms: Central and Southern Asia (CSA); Europe and Northern America (ENA); Eastern and South-eastern Asia (ESA); Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC); Northern Africa and Western Asia (NAW); Oceania (OCE); Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).