

The Aid Orphan Myth

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Abstract

The term 'aid orphan' refers to a developing country forgotten or abandoned by the development community. This metaphor has featured prominently in the development assistance policy and research literature over the past decade. Development practitioners, policy makers and researchers have defined aid orphans in manifold ways and often expressed concern over the potential fate or impact of such countries. In this paper, we first examine the many definitions of aid orphans and then review the main concerns raised about them. Next, we empirically examine more than 40 years of bilateral aid data to identify aid orphan countries and their common characteristics. Our findings suggest that very few countries meet the definition of aid orphan and fewer still raise the concerns collectively expressed about the orphan phenomenon. We conclude by suggesting researchers and practitioners abandon the orphan metaphor and instead focus on issues of equitable aid allocation.

Keywords: foreign aid, donor agencies, aid effectiveness, harmonization, aid orphans

Introduction

The large – and growing – number of foreign aid donors each allocates funds based on its own priorities and criteria, often reflecting historical ties and geopolitical considerations. In principle, no developing country (which, by definition, could benefit from assistance) would be deprived of aid, unless it were as a result of an exceptional deliberate decision, such as sanctions.¹ However, the lack of coordination among donors and similarities in their methods of aid allocation suggest that there is a potential risk of certain countries constituting aid ‘darlings’, while others become metaphoric ‘orphans’. Numerous authors and reports have expressed concern about the existence of aid orphans ‘largely deserted by the international community’,² and warn of the threat they pose to their populations, in their respective regions, and globally.³

Despite the references to orphans that pepper academic and policy papers, surprisingly few authors specify what they mean by orphans or investigate the extent to which they actually exist or pose threats. This paper therefore seeks to unpack the concept of aid orphans and explore their prevalence since the end of the Cold War, according to a few different definitions. It also aims to identify common characteristics of orphans. We find that definitions tend to be vague or highly inconsistent and generally idiosyncratic. The most frequent explicit conception of orphans is better described as under-aided or under-resourced countries,⁴ but the criteria for such assessments vary too widely to be able to identify a meaningful list of orphan countries. Using a more literal definition of a country bereft of aid donors reveals that there actually are no orphans, other than a few anomalous temporary ones.⁵ Conceptualizing orphans as recipients where one aid donor has a monopoly does produce a list of countries, but the latter are mainly wealthy oil producers, upper-middle-income countries, or small island states that do not appear to pose the threat that analysts have invoked. Though increased aid coordination and donor cooperation remain important global goals and many recipient countries could benefit from increased aid, aid orphans per se have not actually constituted a problem over the past 30 years, if not longer. We conclude that aid scholars and practitioners should abandon the use of the aid orphan metaphor owing to its lack of precision and limited connection to reality, and focus instead on the issue of equitable aid allocation.

We begin our paper with a review the various definitions of aid orphans in the literature. Next, we consider the importance of orphans. We subsequently conduct an empirical analysis of actual aid orphans according to several criteria, followed by a conclusion.

What is an aid orphan?

Despite many authors’ invocation of the potentially serious problem of aid orphans, they often only do so in passing and fail to explain what they mean by the term (including us).⁶ Some, however, do provide a sense of what they mean, even if not fleshed out.

We have identified several competing conceptions of aid orphans in the literature. The term is most commonly used to characterize countries considered under-resourced by aid, either in absolute or relative terms. Some authors refer to the absolute volume of aid. For instance, Hoeffler and Outram use orphans to describe countries that receive ‘very little’ donor support, while Brown specifies ‘little or no assistance’.⁷ Brown and Olender define them as ‘countries that would otherwise [if not for multilateral aid] receive very limited assistance because of bilateral donors’ lack of interest’.⁸ Collier describes orphans as ‘countries that have only weak historical ties with the important bilateral donors’, suggesting

low aid flows and perhaps a smaller number of donors as well.⁹ An OECD document uses the word in the title of a figure of ‘donor darlings and donor orphans among fragile states’, representing the countries in decreasing order by total official development assistance (ODA) receipts in 2010, regardless of the size of the country, its needs, etc.¹⁰ One can only surmise that those that receive lots of aid (Afghanistan was the top recipient) are the darlings and those that received little are the orphans (Kiribati obtained the least), but the cut-off points are unclear. Also, it seems appropriate that Kiribati, a tiny island in the Pacific with only 100,000 inhabitants, receive a low amount of aid, without ipso facto making it an ‘orphan’. Absolute aid levels therefore are not a useful metric.

To take a country’s size into account, one could consider instead the relative size of ODA. The simplest such measurement would be based on per capita aid flows. This is the approach adopted by Koch, who speaks of a ‘donor-orphan divide’. Though he does not define those terms, he finds that ‘countries such as Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Togo, India, Moldova and Central African Republic are now largely bypassed by both bilateral donors and NGOs’, based on per capita aid levels, and they presumably constitute in his view orphans.¹¹ However, equal amounts is not the same as equitable amounts, as that measurement assumes that people require or deserve the same amount of aid, regardless of the characteristics of the country in which they live, including poverty levels and performance. One could argue that aid should favour poorer countries and be, for instance, inversely proportional to per capita gross national income. Others would assert that some very poor countries do not have the capacity to absorb high levels of aid and put it to good use, including those with low state capacity or affected by conflict. A single criterion is thus insufficient to assess orphan status.

Consequently, other studies of orphans relate aid volume to needs, and sometimes capacity as well. For example, Oxfam International names two cases of aid orphans, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, as countries that ‘have received far smaller shares of aid relative to their needs’, but does not specify the basis for this calculation.¹² An OECD brief on aid orphans refers to ‘geographical gaps’ whereby in certain countries ‘aid is insufficient’.¹³ Similarly, the title of Utz’s paper illustrates how he considers orphans a synonym of ‘countries that receive insufficient aid’,¹⁴ while Schulz defines them as ‘southern countries that, in spite of their great needs, mainly related to their institutional fragility, receive very little international aid’.¹⁵ An IMF/World Bank document describes them as ‘countries that typically receive far less aid than would seem warranted by their needs and absorptive capacity’.¹⁶ Of course, which countries can be considered orphans hinges on how one defines very little or insufficient, but none of those documents define the thresholds.

Other studies are more specific about levels of aid merited. As Rogerson and Steensen note, it requires previously ‘selecting one of several normative benchmarks for apportioning aid across countries against which actual aid can be tallied’.¹⁷ Different methods for factoring in countries’ needs, their capacity to use funds effectively or other criteria will produce varying lists of which countries should be receiving more aid than they do.

For example, Davies and Klasen define aid orphans as ‘recipients... largely deserted by the international community’, which could suggest that they might be looking at the number of donors, but they are in fact interested in aid levels.¹⁸ First, they estimate a longitudinal regression model with donor and recipient country characteristics to calculate a predicted level of dyadic aid flow between two countries. Based on these predicted aid flows, they categorize countries into two categories: orphan or darling. Orphans are countries that have a mean negative residual across donors and receive lower levels of ODA than predicted in their model, whereas those with mean positive residuals that receive more aid than predicted are labelled darlings. It is thus a dichotomous variable; they classify all countries in their sample as being either an orphan or a darling. Of their sample of 52 recipient countries analysed over a 20-year period, they consider 25 to be orphans (48%) and 27 darlings

(52%).¹⁹ Many of the so-called orphans they identify may be far from being ‘largely deserted’ by donors (for instance, Bangladesh, Malawi, Morocco, Nepal and Senegal).

Bigsten and Tengstam ‘define “aid orphan” as a country that receives less aid than [the authors’] allocation rule recommends’.²⁰ Their allocation rule is based on a formula with multiple variables, including population, gross domestic product, growth and headcount poverty that boils down to an optimal level of aid for each country that never exceeds 10% of GDP. Using this rule, they identify 34 orphans to assess how best aid could be reallocated globally to maximize poverty reduction, with Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Kenya at the top of the list for recommended aid increases, despite the fact that some of these so-called orphans receive large amounts of aid from numerous donors.²¹ Utz applies four different benchmarks to 54 low-income countries and finds that the lists of orphans they generate produce remarkably little consensus: only Guinea and Togo receive insufficient aid according to all four assessments. Nineteen countries are judged to get insufficient aid according to one of the formulas, but not the other three.²² The large variations in results based on different definitions of aid sufficiency suggest that such approaches to orphans are not concretely useful. To complicate matters further, Utz’s calculations are based solely on the period 2005–2006; lists of orphans could also vary significantly from year to year. Also, if the threshold for ‘sufficient aid’ is set high, a large proportion of developing countries – even all of them – could be labelled orphans, despite receiving substantial amounts of aid from a significant number of different donors.

In any case, it is not clear what purchase is gained by using the term orphans to describe countries where aid is considered insufficient, rather than simply referring to them as ‘under-aided’, ‘under-resourced’ or some other expression of their unmet needs or entitlements. In this vein, a recent OECD discussion paper focuses instead on ‘potentially under-aided countries’, cautiously noting that some might appear ‘chronically under-funded’ but not actually warrant an increase in aid.²³ Arguing that country-specific studies would therefore be required to make that determination, it eschews the term orphan completely. Instead, it examines ‘under-aided’ countries by comparing their aid allocation against four normative needs and performance-based benchmarks. Tallying countries’ performance on all four benchmarks in 2011, the OECD identifies eight potentially under-aided countries which merit the donor community’s attention: Madagascar, Malawi, Bangladesh, The Gambia, Guinea, Niger, Togo and Nepal. Looking back from 2011 through 2006, the report shows that these eight countries have been under-aided by these criteria for much of that period, though their status varies from year to year with their aid flows. This variability is further complicated by how aid is defined. If multilateral aid is excluded from the calculations, the list of under-aided countries changes significantly.²⁴

The aid orphan waters are further muddled by a few sources that apply the term to more than just countries. A briefing paper by the UK-based non-governmental organization Publish What You Fund defines ‘donor “orphans” or “darlings” – where aid flows disproportionately to a particular region, sector, issue or ministry’.²⁵ However, examples provided pertain only to sectorial allocation, not country allocation, and it remains unclear according to what criteria proportionality is to be determined. Winters warns that ‘excessive concentration in particular sectors or geographic regions’ will create “aid darlings” and “aid orphans” within a country’, also moving the focus away from orphan countries to misallocation of resources within each country.²⁶

To be true to the orphan metaphor, it makes more sense to consider the number of donors.²⁷ Some authors use the term to invoke a small number of donors, but without specifying how few, or potentially none at all. The *Reality of Aid 2008* report refers to ‘aid orphans entirely neglected’ by donors, which implies no aid at all.²⁸ Similarly, Brown’s use of the term suggests low-income countries cut off from bilateral aid.²⁹ In a slightly more nuanced version, Brown and Swiss describe orphans as “unpopular” recipient countries to whom no

donor wishes to provide a critical mass of aid', but they provide no indication of how to determine what would constitute a critical mass.³⁰

One European Union definition of aid orphans constitutes a hybrid of several of the approaches explored above, combining the number of donors criterion with the additional variables of need and aid flows per capita: 'countries "forgotten" by international aid, the countries characterised by real need, in which a limited number of donors are active and where the level of ODA per capita is low'.³¹ The OECD's conception of orphans, as expressed in its principles for engagement in fragile states, combines number of donors and quantity of aid, adding the capacity to interact with donors: It describes orphans as 'states where there are no significant political barriers to engagement, but few international actors are engaged and aid volumes are low'.³² Again, in both cases, the threshold for low remains undefined. A study by Corre *et al.* adopts three clearly defined criteria: a Human Development Index score below 0.5, fewer than 20 donors and less than US\$50 in per capita ODA, which produces a list of 27 countries. However, they do not call them orphans, but rather 'marginalized countries', a term that carries its own ambiguities.³³

The most literal definition of an orphan would be a country that does not receive any aid from any bilateral donor.³⁴ Alternative conceptions include having no donors below a certain threshold (to be defined) or having only one or two (or another low number) of donors, either in absolute terms or below a given threshold. Despite the prevalence of the metaphor, such definitions are rare, though one OECD report expresses concern over countries that 'depend on one donor for over half of their aid'.³⁵

Below, we conduct our own empirical analysis based on the both the number and concentration of bilateral donors. Conceiving of aid orphans in this manner places attention on aid as a relationship between countries, rather than simply tallying the total of all funds received. Building on the manifold definitions and thresholds outlined above, we focus on the definition of either an absolute orphan – where there are no bilateral donors present – or the orphan with only one dominant donor. These two definitions best reflect the 'at risk' notion associated with the aid orphan metaphor and at the same time avoid the extreme difficulties of assessing how much aid a country *should* receive. First, though, we consider the question of why orphans matter.

Why worry about aid orphans?

Ample evidence has shown that aid allocation depends on myriad factors, many of which reflect the interests of donor countries, especially the larger ones, such as the US, UK, France and Japan.³⁶ Donors' self-interest and lack of coordination, let alone cooperation, create a risk of aid orphans, regardless of what definition is adopted.

This risk has moreover varied over time, at least in theory. During the Cold War, for instance, recipient countries could play donors off one another, especially East versus West. Most, as a result, were likely to receive assistance from at least one major power. However, in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the end of superpower rivalry and cuts to global aid budgets increased the odds of some countries being orphaned, that is to say, being left without aid donors. By the early 2000s, the risk of orphans further increased with the rise of aid selectivity, which was based on the principle that aid should go to those best able to translate it into development, usually measured by economic growth, thereby encouraging donors to back presumed 'winners' and potentially abandon countries unable to achieve economic growth. Similarly, the expanding norm of country concentration and efforts to decrease donor fragmentation suggested that countries could increasingly be left behind.³⁷ The 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action, 2011

Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and the European Union Code of Conduct made orphans more likely by promoting a division of labour among donors, under the principle of harmonization, though they do emphasize the needs for a concomitant coordination process among donors to address the problem of countries receiving insufficient aid. The rapid increase in aid flows in the 2000s may have initially mitigated these risks, as did Western donors' concerns about security and other threats from 'failed and fragile states', which could result from being orphaned.

The problem of orphans is usually taken to be self-evident and concerns are rarely spelled out. A significant one is that the lack or withdrawal of aid resources will create instability at home,³⁸ that could spread to their region and even create 'blowback' in donor countries, including armed conflict, drug and human smuggling, refugees flows, terrorism and the spread of epidemics.³⁹ So-called fragile states tend to receive less aid than non-fragile countries (though not post-conflict fragile states) and it tends to be more volatile, with aid levels unpredictably fluctuating from year to year.⁴⁰ Their very fragility may prevent them from being able to use effectively higher levels of aid, though aid could ideally help increase absorptive capacity. As Corre *et al.* point out, however, many aid orphans could be fragile states, and vice versa, but the terms refer to different phenomena and there is no 'intrinsic link' between them.⁴¹ In fact, several fragile states can be considered darlings.⁴² The concerns related to fragile states should therefore not be conflated with apprehensions about aid orphans.

A few papers express worry about orphans beholden to a small number of donors, sometimes without spelling out the problem. For example, an OECD report expresses concern for 'Extreme donor concentration', noting that the 'Republic of Congo, Iraq and the four small-island states of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and the Solomon Islands all depend on one donor for over half of their aid'.⁴³ This would not necessarily create a problem of insufficient funds, but could involve donor cartelization. Hayes with Delph warn of donors 'ganging-up' on recipients and imposing their will, which they refer to as 'harmonization without alignment'.⁴⁴ It also subjects recipients to a greater risk of aid volatility.

Bilateral donors' lack of coordination can also place an additional burden on multilateral agencies. The OECD notes that orphan countries place the multilateral system under 'growing pressure... to deliver in countries and regions where bilateral donors are exiting or unable to intervene'.⁴⁵ It is unclear, however, if and where that is actually taking place.

Given the weaknesses with the above arguments and concerns, one can conclude that the main problem of aid distribution is a normative one. To the extent that aid has humanitarian or solidaristic motivations, it does follow that its distribution should not exclude any countries. The next section will explore the extent to which that has actually happened.

How many aid orphans?

To examine empirically the question of aid orphans over time, we compiled a dataset of all bilateral aid flows contained within the OECD's Development Assistance Committee aggregate statistics database.⁴⁶ We then examined the frequency of certain criteria for aid orphans over time to identify aid orphans in each year.

The sample data consists of net bilateral ODA disbursements in 2005 constant US dollar terms between all DAC donor member countries and nearly 150 recipient countries over the period from 1969 through 2010, though we focus most of our analysis on the period from 1980 onward. Some data is also reflected for non-DAC donors, but is neither exhaustively or consistently present over the timeframe of the dataset. Several larger non-

DAC donors are excluded from the database, as are hybrid multilateral-bilateral actors like the EU.⁴⁷ We included recipient countries in our sample if they were both independent and deemed eligible to receive ODA by the DAC in a given year. Our sample of aid recipient countries ranged from a low of 90 in 1969 to a high of 146 eligible recipients in 1994 and 1995.

To look for aid orphans in our data, we created criteria to demarcate two types of orphans. First, we consider the ‘true’ or ‘absolute’ orphan in the sense of a country in receipt of no net positive ODA flows from any bilateral donor.⁴⁸ Second, rather than counting the absolute number of donors, we created a category for countries where a single donor comprises 75% or more of all bilateral ODA flows to the country in a given year.⁴⁹ These countries where a single donor monopolizes the flow of aid are those where a donor concentration and cartelization can potentially leave recipients at the mercy of a dominant donor dictating development policies and program priorities, or subject them to extremely high volatility of aid flows.

[Table 1 About Here]

Table 1 reflects these two recipient-country categories over the period from 1969 to 2010. The table reflects all ODA eligible, independent countries in a given year. Several trends are notable. First, we can see that the overall number of aid-eligible countries for which data is available increases sharply between 1969 and 1995 and begins to decrease after that year, reaching a total of 136 countries in 2010.

Second, the number of orphans – those countries with no donors in a given year – is negligible throughout the 42-year period in our sample. Never does the count of orphans exceed six, and in no year is the total proportion of orphans in the sample above 5%. Indeed, the mode for the orphan sample is zero, and for the entire decade of the 1980s and since 2005 there have been no countries which meet the absolute orphan criterion. Figure 1 showcases this absence of the absolute orphan country in 18 of 42 years in our sample. After disappearing altogether in the 1980s, the absolute orphan country reappears at the end of the Cold War and disappears again in 2005.

[Figure 1 About Here]

The final trend of note in Table 1 is that the number and proportion of countries where a single donor is responsible for three-quarters or more of all aid received is much larger than the number of absolute orphans. Ranging from a high of 41% of the sample in 1969 to a low in 2000 and 2001 of only 6.5% of the sample, these countries are much more a reality than the true orphan. The absolute number of such countries has declined significantly from the 1970s onwards, but in 2010 there are still 12 such countries in our sample. Figure 1 highlights the discrepancy between the two types of orphans we identify, with those countries with a dominant donor far exceeding the absolute orphans throughout.

Collectively, these trends underline an important finding: aid orphans, whichever of the two criteria one applies to define them, are a minimal and shrinking subset of all eligible aid recipient countries. Despite the collective worry expressed within the academic and policy literature about the fate or potential effects of aid orphan countries, in terms of sheer quantity the absolute aid orphan is a myth rather than a reality. Countries where single donors monopolise aid appears to be a more real concern, though their number has declined significantly since the 1970s.

Having identified the magnitude of the orphan phenomenon, in the next section we turn to an examination of which countries comprise the two categories of orphan we have identified.

Who are the aid orphans?

Beyond revealing the extent of the orphan phenomenon, our data also illustrate which countries can be considered orphans at various points in the past four decades. We identified countries in the absolute orphan category and did likewise for the countries with a dominant donor.

[Table 2 About Here]

The list of all absolute orphan countries is displayed in Table 2 above. Only 11 countries in the dataset meet this orphan criterion at any point in our sample. Several are orphan countries for a prolonged period, while others have no donors for only a single year or two. In the earliest decades of our analysis, the orphans tend to be either politically/economically isolated countries such as Cuba (who in the given year would likely still have been a recipient of significant Soviet Bloc aid not tracked in our dataset) or relatively wealthy oil-producing countries such as Qatar. Following the Cold War era, the only aid orphan countries are either newly independent states in Eastern Europe, or relatively well-off middle-income countries with being subjected to international sanctions, as in South Africa during the final years of apartheid or Qaddafi's Libya in the early 2000s.

This list of orphans is telling in that it does not include any countries that might be considered particularly needy of aid but which simply were not receiving donor attention. The moral panics associated with needy but ignored developing countries appear unfounded. Likewise, there is little evidence to support the idea that some country might not receive aid and be forgotten by the international community. In all cases except Belarus, no country is an orphan for more than a five-year consecutive period. Moreover, Eastern European countries were especially likely to receive multilateral aid from the European Community/European Union, while Belarus and to a lesser extent Ukraine received significant bilateral support from Russia. Those flows are not captured by our dataset.

The story told about absolute aid orphans is thus that they are few in number, wealthier than most aid recipient countries, newly independent, and with a possibility of some underlying economic or political dimension which might make donors consciously decide not to provide aid. Simply put, the aid orphan as a threat to the development of the poorest countries in the world appears to be little more than a chimera.

[Table 3 About Here]

In contrast to the absolute orphans, recipient countries where a single donor dominates the bilateral aid landscape are more common. In our sample of 147 recipient countries, 109 experience a dominant single donor at least once over the timeframe of the study, for a total of 721 country-year observations in the entire sample. With a substantially larger number of countries affected over time, it is impractical to list every country and year in which it had a dominant donor. Instead, in Table 3, we isolated four cross-sectional snapshots from the dataset to illustrate which countries had dominant donors and, correspondingly, which donor it was that monopolized their aid flows in that year.

Several distinct patterns are apparent in this table. First, unsurprisingly, in a number of cases the dominant donor in a group of countries is the former colonial power. Suriname, Côte d'Ivoire, and others all find their bilateral aid heavily dependent upon their former colonizer. The second emergent pattern is that several recipients find their aid dominated by a key political or economic power in their region, even if not the former colonizer (for example, Israel receiving most of its aid from the US or Japan providing aid to both Malaysia and Thailand). Finally, the last emergent pattern in Table 3 is that countries that have a single

dominant donor tend to be smaller nations with lower-than-average populations. Island states such as Nauru, St. Lucia, Mauritius and Grenada all fit this small nation description. A number of other smaller states also feature in the list, including Panama, Bahrain, Swaziland and Israel.

When contrasting the recipients dominated by a single donor with the rest of the sample, on average states with a single dominant donor have smaller population and are wealthier than other countries. In our sample, those countries have a median population of approximately 1.8 million, while the rest of the sample's median population is more than triple that figure at almost 6.4 million people. Likewise, the countries with a dominant donor tend to be wealthier than the rest of the sample. In our sample, such countries have more than double the national income with a median per capita GDP of \$2,010, while the rest of the sample has a median GDP per capita of only \$989 (all figures in constant 2010 USD). States with a dominant single donor also tend to receive on average less total aid than the rest of our sample – with a median total ODA of only \$68.2 million compared to \$120.6 million for the rest of the sample. This discrepancy is even greater in the decade of the 2000s, when the countries with a dominant donor averaged a median total ODA of only \$47.6 million and the rest of the sample had a median total ODA of \$139.7 million (all ODA figures are constant 2000 USD). Interestingly, though the rest of the sample countries receive on average a higher total of ODA flows, when expressed as an aid per capita amount, the countries with a single dominant donor receive more per inhabitant. Median aid per capita in countries with a single dominant donor in our sample is \$39.20, while for the rest of the sample it is only \$21.06 (constant 2000 USD). Thus, though receiving less overall aid, the 'orphan' dominated by a single donor actually receives substantially more on a per-person basis, despite being twice as wealthy.

Whether defining aid orphans as those with absolutely no donor ties or as those countries where a single donor dominates the aid landscape, our analysis reveals that these states tend to be smaller, richer, newly independent, or subject to international sanctions. In none of the cases we identify here do we see the type of aid orphan feared in much of the literature, where a desperately impoverished state is abandoned by the world community through neglect.

Conclusion

The usage and working definitions of the term aid orphan vary greatly, when they are specified at all. The most common explicit conception of orphans is as under-aided countries, but the criteria for making that determination disagree too much to be useful and are sometimes contradictory. Different methods of calculation of appropriate aid levels produce highly divergent lists of countries, many of which correspond in no meaningful way to the orphan metaphor. Having explored some alternative – and equally problematic – uses of the term, we consider the more basic meaning of a country with no bilateral donors or where one donor has a monopoly position in the provision of aid.

Do aid orphans merit the concern they have provoked in the development community and research literatures? Applying our preferred definitions empirically reveals that very few aid orphans actually exist and that none matches up with the concerns expressed in the literature. Aid orphans are not impoverished, neglected countries, suffering from a lack of aid. Nor are they on the verge of collapse or threatening regional or global security and stability. Indeed, very few countries ever meet the definition of having no bilateral donors. We thus concur with Corre *et al.*'s observation that 'no country is truly an "aid orphan" but rather in a more or less precarious situation with regard to its ODA level and therefore more or less

‘marginalized’ within the framework of international cooperation’.⁵⁰ Certainly there are countries which receive less aid than their levels of national income or poverty might suggest is warranted. Still, sifting through more than 40 years of bilateral aid data reveals that, in reality, the aid orphan feared by development donors and researchers appears to be little more than a myth. Despite global norms around donor concentration and harmonization,⁵¹ there is no evidence that these norms are translating into the abandonment of eligible aid recipients. The importance of multilateral aid institutions and the increase in aid from bilateral donors that do not report their flows to the OECD/DAC further suggest that no country will be ‘left behind’.

Beyond the existence and potential pitfalls of the aid orphan itself, the darling/orphan pairing frequently used in the literature is semantically problematic. The opposite of darling would actually be unpopular or neglected, which are far less absolute terms than orphan. Very few of the cases we examined here could even be described as an unpopular or neglected state worthy of far more international attention. Though some of the states that experience a single dominant donor may not receive aid from many other donor countries, they still tend to receive on average a much higher per capita amount of ODA than countries with a more diverse set of donors. This suggests that though they may not be as popular as other countries in terms of the total number of donors, they are by no means neglected: They may make up for it through having a generous small set of donors providing their ODA.

Our findings contribute to the way in which discussions of aid allocation should approach the issue of aid orphans. Undoubtedly, donors and the broader international aid community should be careful not to create the conditions under which the much feared risk of the aid orphan would become a reality. Yet, according to our findings, in the present day and over the past 40 years, the aid orphan ‘problem’ is more hypothetical than real. The aid orphan myth has been built on a very limited base of empirical evidence and an overdose of worry surrounding the possibility of countries being neglected or left behind.

Readers should not mistake our conclusions to suggest that the question of equity is not worthy of attention. Indeed, we would hope that the donor community would make the equitable distribution of a limited pool of bilateral aid funds a central concern of their efforts to collaborate and harmonize. Under-aided countries definitely merit greater assistance. The term orphan, however, is of very limited use in that endeavour and should be abandoned.

Though we have concentrated our attention here on the orphan phenomenon, future research should pay more attention to other problems of aid allocation, including the unpredictability/volatility of aid flows, the question of what constitutes equitable or optimal distribution and the issue of aid darlings – those countries which appear to be a magnet for a disproportionate share of aid.

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Table 1. Recipient Countries by Status, 1969–2010

Year	Orphan	One dominant donor ($\geq 75\%$)	Other aid recipients	Total
1969	2	37	51	90
1970	1	35	55	91
1971	2	33	60	95
1972	2	24	69	95
1973	1	22	74	97
1974	1	20	77	98
1975	1	26	78	105
1976	1	23	82	106
1977	1	19	87	107
1978	1	18	90	109
1979	0	19	93	112
1980	0	15	99	114
1981	0	17	99	116
1982	0	12	104	116
1983	0	16	101	117
1984	0	18	99	117
1985	0	18	99	117
1986	0	13	104	117
1987	0	16	101	117
1988	0	9	108	117
1989	0	14	104	118
1990	0	15	111	126
1991	6	15	111	132
1992	6	17	118	141
1993	5	18	122	145
1994	3	22	121	146
1995	3	16	127	146
1996	3	15	123	141
1997	2	11	126	139
1998	2	14	123	139
1999	2	14	123	139
2000	3	9	127	139
2001	3	9	127	139
2002	3	13	124	140
2003	3	11	124	138
2004	3	15	120	138
2005	0	12	125	137
2006	0	15	122	137
2007	0	15	122	137
2008	0	13	123	136
2009	0	16	120	136
2010	0	12	124	136

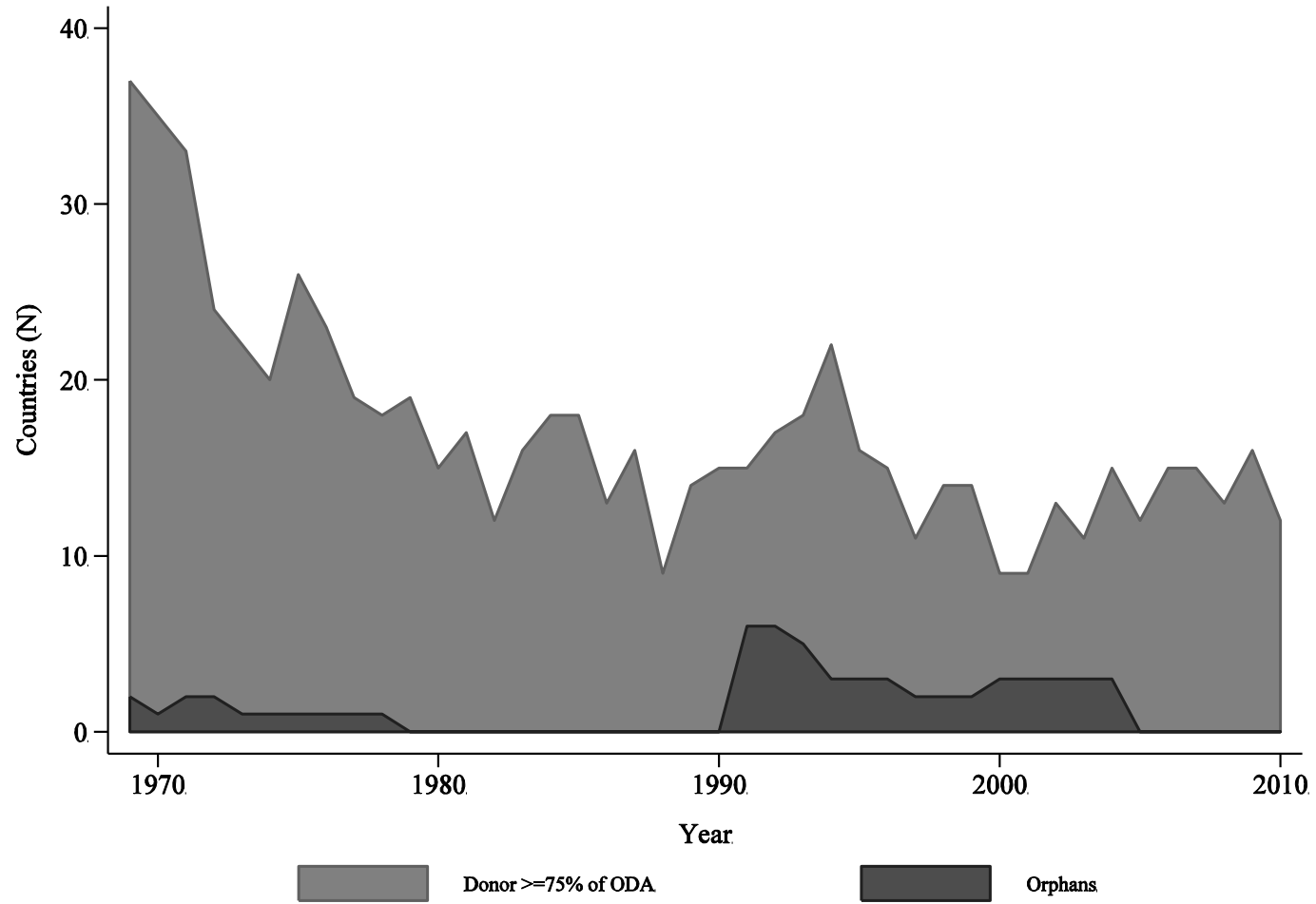
Table 2. Orphan Countries by Year

Orphan	Years
Belarus	1991–2004
Croatia	1991; 1993
Cuba	1969
Equatorial Guinea	1969–1972; 1975–1978
Libya	2000–2004
Macedonia (FYROM)	1992
Moldova	1991–1996
Qatar	1971–1974
Slovenia	1991–1993
South Africa	1991–1992
Ukraine	1991–2004

Table 3. Recipient Countries and Dominant Donor ($\geq 75\%$ of ODA) at Four Time Points

1980		1990		2000		2010	
Recipient	Donor	Recipient	Donor	Recipient	Donor	Recipient	Donor
Bahamas	UK	Bahrain	Kuwait	Comoros	France	Antigua/Barbuda	Japan
Central African Rep.	France	Comoros	France	Malta	Italy	Grenada	Japan
Congo, Rep.	France	Congo, Rep.	France	Marshall Islands	US	Iraq	US
Côte d'Ivoire	France	Côte d'Ivoire	France	Micronesia	US	Marshall Islands	US
El Salvador	US	El Salvador	US	Oman	UAE	Mauritius	France
Gabon	France	Gabon	France	Seychelles	UAE	Micronesia	US
Israel	US	Israel	US	St. Lucia	Japan	Nauru	Australia
Kuwait	Germany	Kuwait	UAE	Swaziland	Japan	Panama	Japan
Nauru	Australia	Libya	Italy	Thailand	Japan	Papua New Guinea	Australia
Oman	UAE	Malaysia	Japan			São Tomé & Príncipe	Portugal
Panama	US	Nauru	Australia			Solomon Islands	Australia
Papua New Guinea	Australia	Panama	US			Suriname	Netherlands
St. Lucia	UK	Papua New Guinea	Australia				
St. Vincent & Grenadines	UK	Suriname	Netherlands				
Suriname	Netherlands	Venezuela	Germany				

Figure 1. Count of Orphan and Dominant-Donor Countries over time



Notes

- ¹ An underlying assumption in this article is that aid can be useful, even if sometimes it is wasted or can have negative results in recipient countries.
- ² Davies and Klasen, “Of Donor Coordination,” 2.
- ³ Harborne, “Aid,” 45; Marysse *et al.*, The Aid ‘Darlings’ and ‘Orphans’; McGillivray, “Aid Allocation,” 2
- ⁴ For instance, OECD, *Development Co-operation Report 2013*, 145.
- ⁵ In this article, we consider only developing countries to be potential orphans, as defined by the list of countries designated as eligible for official development assistance (ODA) maintained by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/DAC). The list is revised every three years, typically taking off countries that have attained a high level of per capita gross national income and adding newly independent countries. In 2011, for example, Barbados, Croatia, Mayotte, Oman, and Trinidad and Tobago were removed from the list and South Sudan was included (OECD, “History of DAC Lists”). We use aid as a synonym for ODA, which refers to governmental assistance that is meant to advance economic development and welfare (see OECD, “Official development assistance”).
- ⁶ See Brown, “CIDA under the Gun,” 100; Brown, “Aid Effectiveness”; Brown and Morton, “Reforming aid and development cooperation,” 4; also Baranyi and Desrosiers, “Development cooperation in fragile states,” 445; Carbone, “Between EU actorness and aid effectiveness”; Châtaigner and Gaulme, “Beyond the fragile state,” 3; Commission for Africa, *Our Common Interest*, 351; European Think-Tanks Group, “New Challenges,” xviii; Hayes with Delph, “Harmonization and Alignment,” 16, 20; Leipziger, “Multilateralism,” 30; Olivé, “Newcomers to Like-Minded Aid,” 765; Picciotto, “Multilateral Development Cooperation,” 64; Rogerson *et al.*, “The International Aid System,” 17; Stewart and Brown, *Greater than the Sum*, 1, 65, 103; Tezanos Vásquez, “Aiding Middle-income Countries,” 427, 433; UNDP, *Towards Human Resilience*, 151; World Bank, *Engaging with Fragile States*, 87, 89. One document confusingly describes aid orphans three different ways: ‘weak states that were not consistently assisted by donors’, ‘countries at risk of instability that are yet under-aided’ and ‘characterised by low engagement and field presence’ (Cammack *et al.*, “Donors and the “Fragile States” Agenda,” 22, 45, 102). These definitions variously suggest that the criteria are state fragility, insufficient funding and insufficient contact between donors and recipients.
- ⁷ Hoeffler and Outram, “Need, Merit or Self-Interest,” 9; Brown, “Creating the world’s best development agency,” 222.
- ⁸ Brown and Olender, “Canada’s Fraying Commitment,” 161.
- ⁹ Collier, “Is Aid Oil?” 1490.
- ¹⁰ OECD, *Fragile States*, 66.
- ¹¹ Koch, “Blind Spots,” 16–17.
- ¹² Oxfam International, “Whose Aid,” 9.
- ¹³ Rogerson and Steensen, “Aid Orphans,” 1.
- ¹⁴ Utz, “Will Countries.”
- ¹⁵ Schulz, “International Division of Labour,” 5.
- ¹⁶ IMF/World Bank Development Committee, “Country-Based Scaling Up,” 10.
- ¹⁷ Rogerson and Steensen, “Aid Orphans,” 1; see also discussion in OECD, *Identification and Monitoring*, 9–11.
- ¹⁸ Davies and Klasen, “Of Donor Coordination,” 2.
- ¹⁹ Davies and Klasen, “Of Donor Coordination,” 39.
- ²⁰ Bigsten and Tengstam, “International Coordination,” 6.
- ²¹ For instance, our dataset shows that Bangladesh received over \$700 million from 23 bilateral donors in 2010, while Ethiopia received more than \$1.5 billion from 31 countries. These figures exclude multilateral sources of aid, which sharply increase the amount of total ODA received by these countries. Maintaining aid relations with over 20 bilateral donors and

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- receiving hundreds of millions in aid suggests that such countries cannot meaningfully be classified as orphans.
- ²² Utz, “Will Countries,” 17.
- ²³ OECD, *Identification and Monitoring*. A previous OECD document on ‘under-aided countries’ also warned against ‘mechanical re-balancing from darlings to orphans within any given global resource pool’, calling such endeavours ‘undesirable as well as impractical’ (OECD, “Aid Orphans,” 4).
- ²⁴ OECD, *Identification and Monitoring*.
- ²⁵ Publish What You Fund, “Why Aid Transparency Matters,” 2.
- ²⁶ Winters, “The Obstacles to Foreign Aid,” 319; see also Leiderer, “Donor coordination”, 32.
- ²⁷ We should note here that we are conscious of the fact that orphan is both literally and figuratively a paternalistic metaphor, a further reason not to use it. It casts developed countries as parents and developing countries as children who may be cut off from financial support because of bad behaviour.
- ²⁸ Management Committee of the Reality of Aid, *The Reality of Aid*, 226.
- ²⁹ Brown, “National Development Agencies,” 156.
- ³⁰ Brown and Swiss, “The Hollow Ring,” 740.
- ³¹ Corre *et al.*, “Current Dilemmas,” 22.
- ³² OECD, “Principles for Good International Engagement,” 3.
- ³³ Corre *et al.*, “Current Dilemmas,” 56–58
- ³⁴ We specify bilateral here because no country is excluded from all multilateral aid, which is usually allocated by more transparent criteria. Some multilateral organizations have universal mandates, for example various United Nations development-related agencies. Thus, if multilateral aid were included, there would be never be any orphans.
- ³⁵ OECD, *Fragile States*, 65.
- ³⁶ Alesina and Dollar, “Who Gives Foreign Aid”; Schraeder *et al.*, “Clarifying the Foreign Aid Puzzle.” For a list of 166 publications in English on aid allocation prior to 2006, see Christensen *et al.*, “Master list of the AAL.” Many more have been published since then and in other languages.
- ³⁷ On the issue of concentration/fragmentation, see Brown and Swiss, “The Hollow Ring.”
- ³⁸ Harborne, “Aid,” 45.
- ³⁹ Marysse *et al.*, “The Aid ‘Darlings’ and ‘Orphans’”; McGillivray, “Aid Allocation,” 2.
- ⁴⁰ Carment *et al.*, *Security, Development, and the Fragile State*; Levin and Dollar, “The Forgotten States”; McGillivray, “Aid Allocation.”
- ⁴¹ Corre *et al.*, “Current Dilemmas,” 22.
- ⁴² According to the OECD, half of the aid to fragile states in 2010 went to seven ‘donor darlings’, including Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti and Pakistan (see OECD, *Fragile States*, 14, 41, 66), suggesting that there is also an allocation problem within the category of fragile states.
- ⁴³ OECD, *Fragile States*, 65.
- ⁴⁴ Hayes with Delph, “Harmonization and Alignment,” 20.
- ⁴⁵ OECD, *2011 DAC Report*, 21.
- ⁴⁶ OECD, “QWIDS.”
- ⁴⁷ The OECD/DAC data is the best available dataset for tracking bilateral official development assistance flows over time, despite its limitations, including the lack of data on most non-DAC donors.
- ⁴⁸ Such countries may have received aid from multilateral sources or bilateral donors not currently recorded in the DAC database.
- ⁴⁹ We use the 75% threshold as an indicator of a donor monopoly based on the threshold of monopoly reflected in the US’s 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act. We also conducted our analysis using both 80% and 90% thresholds, which revealed similar results.
- ⁵⁰ Corre *et al.*, “Current Dilemmas,” xv.
- ⁵¹ Brown and Swiss, “The Hollow Ring.”