



**African Peoples Advocacy Policy Brief**

# **An Unsung African Marvel:**

The case for Somaliland's recognition

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## Introduction

There is an African state offering its people democracy, peace and security in a war-torn part of Africa. Several presidential elections, widely acknowledged as free and fair by international observers, have been held there without violent incidents being reported before or after these elections. None of its presidents has sought to alter the constitution in order to perpetuate their tenure, as has happened in countless African states. Furthermore, this country's presidential incumbent was recently defeated by one of the opposition candidates. He did not attempt to discredit the election or resort to intimidation and violence to cling to power, as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Mwai Kibaki of Kenya and Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire, to name but a few, have done. Instead, he graciously congratulated his opponent and, in accordance with the constitution, relinquished power a few days later.

This state could serve as an inspiration not only to the African continent, but also to the whole world. Within a few years, it has managed to accomplish a feat that has seemingly eluded almost all African states for decades, since their so-called independence. It has incorporated key elements of traditional African structures of government into a modern democratic system based on free and fair elections. In so doing, this country has, on the one hand, enabled its people to hold their rulers accountable and control them through democracy. On the other hand, it has allowed different clans and ethnic communities to co-exist peacefully by resorting to effective, centuries-old African conventions to resolve grievances and differences that mere elections, however free and fair, would not settle otherwise. As its population is almost entirely Muslim, this state is in a position to show to the whole world that democracy and Islam are far from being incompatible.

An African state that not only Africa, but also the whole world could look up to? This statement may seem laughable. Unsurprisingly, most people are reluctant to believe that such a marvel could possibly exist. This state is not recognised by any other state in the world. Instead of being congratulated for its unique, extraordinary achievements, it is being shunned and derided. Instead of being hailed as a peace haven and a precious islet of democracy in a sea of bloody dictatorships and covert tyrannies, this state is being ostracised. The state in question is called or rather, more accurately, calls itself Somaliland.

This paper examines and refutes the most common objections to Somaliland's recognition. It argues that the African Union, Western nations, and the international community should

support the independence of this territory without delay. Such a stance will act as a catalyst for economic development in Somaliland, and will give this state the stature it needs to operate as a unique democratic role model for African and other countries.



Somaliland women queuing to vote at the 2010 election



Somaliland men queuing to vote at the 2010 election

## I. Analysis and Refutation of the Objections to Somaliland's Recognition

One of the main reasons often given to justify the non-recognition of Somaliland as a state is the fear of opening the floodgates by recognising a breakaway region of a sovereign nation, thus threatening the integrity of every nation in the world.<sup>1</sup> Those who use this argument to perpetuate the perception of Somaliland as nothing more than a region of Somalia fail to acknowledge that the recognition of Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia and all the other states that declared themselves independent following the collapse of Yugoslavia did not lead to the disintegration of other countries all over the world. Nobody can seriously believe that the acceptance of one African state is likely to have more repercussions around the world than the recognition of nearly ten European countries.

As so often when dealing with African issues, some people may be tempted to use double standards. They may argue that the African context is so different, or that the situation is so volatile in the Horn of Africa that the status quo is better than the many problems that the recognition of Somaliland could trigger. It would certainly be very easy for superficial observers of African affairs to cite the countless civil wars that have ravaged African countries in order to justify the view that separatist aspirations should not be encouraged in this continent.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Abdulkadir Mohamoud, "Somalia: Why Somaliland Is not Kosovo: the case of the failed recognition", *Horseed Media* (12 August 2010), retrieved online on 2 January 2011 <http://www.horseedmedia.net/2010/08/12/somaliland-is-not-osovo/> .

But Africans are not intrinsically more war-prone than other human beings. An in-depth analysis of these African conflicts reveals that almost all of them were either direct consequences or by-products of the Cold War policies that had transformed Africa into the playground of the Soviet Union, the United States and their respective allies. Now that the international circumstances that did wreak so much havoc on Africa have changed, a new, bold, imaginative approach to African problems is required from Africans, Westerners, and the international community in general.

Although Somaliland submitted its application for recognition as a state to the African Union (AU) in 2005, this organisation has not yet processed the said application. Such an attitude is mainly attributable to the AU's desire to maintain the borders inherited by African countries from Western colonisers. Bearing in mind that these borders were designed with total disregard for ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural divisions, it is certainly true that many African states could collapse if the secessionist desires of these heterogeneous groups were actively encouraged.

But Somaliland is not seeking independence from Somalia on the grounds of ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural differences. Somali people are mainly united, not divided by these elements. In an ideal world, they would all be living in a single African state. But in the real world, they are already living not only in Somalia, but also in different African countries, including Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. They were divided, not by the secessionist aspirations of Somaliland, but by historical and external circumstances beyond their control. The notion of Greater Somalia is now widely acknowledged by most Somalis as a dangerous chimera.

Ironically, in accordance with the AU's principle of preserving the borders bequeathed by former colonisers, Somaliland has an undeniable claim to statehood: when it obtained independence from British colonial rule on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1960, Somaliland was recognised as a sovereign state not only by the United Nations but also by more than thirty countries. Somaliland decided to join the former UN Trust Territory of Somalia (which was formerly Italian Somalia) on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1960 to form a new entity called Somali Republic. This was designed to be the first step of the unification of all the Somalis in the Horn of Africa under one state, a project opposed by the African Union's predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity, which subsequently failed to materialise.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Some Somalilanders use this as a basis to argue that strictly speaking, Somaliland did never become part of a country called Somalia.

The problems and divisions confronting the union from the onset, the marginalisation of Somaliland people, the destruction of Somaliland by the dictatorial regime of Siad Barre, the popular uprisings by the people of Somaliland, and the all-community conferences which approved the decision to withdraw from the union on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1991, are all well known and equally well documented.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by resolute steps towards democracy culminating in a series of democratic elections. For instance, there was a referendum on the new Somaliland constitution in 2001; municipal elections were held in 2002, 2003 and 2009; parliamentary elections took place in 2005, while presidential elections were held in 2005 and 2010.

The legal rules that were applied to the Gambia when it was recognised as a state after its secession from Senegal in 1989 should also be applicable to Somaliland. The argument that the Horn of Africa's territories should be treated differently because of the volatility of this region does not stand up to scrutiny. The international recognition of Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1993 did not lead to an avalanche of applications for statehood recognition from neighbouring territories.

The AU itself acknowledges that sticking to the ironclad maxim of the inviolability of borders inherited from colonialism would be neither wise nor appropriate in the case of Somaliland. The report of an AU fact finding mission to Somaliland between 30<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> May 2005 states that this territory's "case should not be linked to the notion of 'opening a Pandora's box'. As such, the AU should find a special method for dealing with this outstanding case"; and adds, "The lack of recognition ties the hands of the authorities and people of Somaliland, as they cannot effectively and sustainably transact with the outside to pursue

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<sup>3</sup> An excellent historical overview of the union between Somaliland and the former Italian Somalia, and the emergence of Somaliland, is provided by Franco Henwood in "A Contribution to the Case for Somaliland's Recognition", *Holler Africa*, originally published in the November/ December 2006 edition of *African Renaissance*, retrieved on 2 January 2011

<http://www.hollerafrica.com/showArticle.php?artId=202&catId=1>.

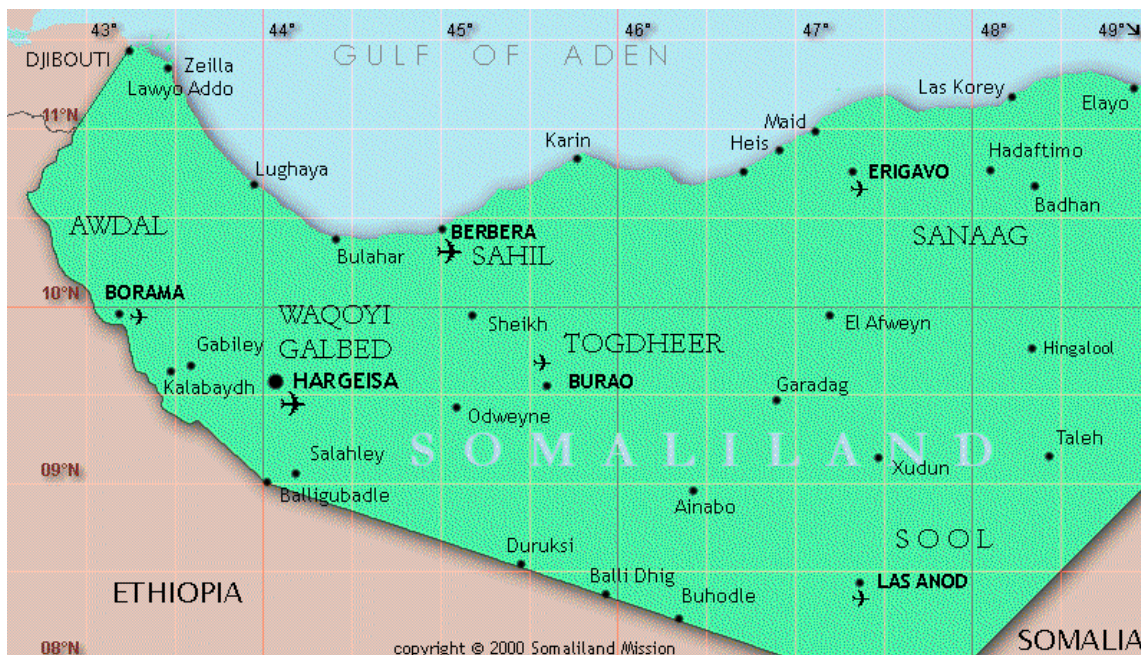
A report from Kenya's members of parliament fact finding mission to Somaliland in December 2006 also provides very insightful background information. It is available online on *Somaliland Patriots*, retrieved on 2 January 2011

<http://www.somalilandpatriots.com/news-2898-0> .



the reconstruction and development goals.”<sup>4</sup> The obvious question is why, almost five years later, the AU has not yet acted upon these bold and judicious recommendations.

Despite its acknowledgement of the special circumstances of Somaliland, as well as the negative impact of the lack of recognition on the people of Somaliland, the AU has not yet attempted to end the status quo because it is still hell-bent on pursuing its long-standing policy of following the diktat of the international community or rather, more accurately, the diktat of Western nations. In 2006, the AU agreed to support the Western-backed invasion of Somalia by Ethiopian troops in order to oust the Islamic Courts (IC) and strengthen the control of the country by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). This was not an action demanded or approved by the Somali people. It was mainly triggered by United States’ perception of the IC as hostile Islamic terrorists. The subsequent splintering of the IC into several armed factions opposed to the TFG, the emergence of the radical organisation Al-Shabaab, the continuous meddling of the United States, Ethiopia, Eritrea and other countries, are only some of the factors that will make peace and stability elude Somalia for years, if not decades.



Map of Somaliland

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Jean-Jacques Cornish in “AU Supports Somalia Split”, *Mail & Guardian Online* (2006), retrieved on 2 January 2011 <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2006-02-10-au-supports-somali-split> .

## II. Recommendations for the African Union

With nearly 10,000 of its troops operating in Somalia to prop up the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the African Union is torn between its realization that Somaliland has a strong, legitimate claim to statehood recognition, and its support of the TFG, which is opposed to Somaliland's independence. The AU should stop dithering and take the lead in implementing the recommendations of its own fact finding mission to Somaliland. The reliance of the TFG on AU troops for its survival gives the AU an excellent bargaining chip. The AU can use these circumstances to initiate negotiations with Somalia, and strive to persuade this country to follow in the footsteps of Ethiopia by consenting to the independence of Somaliland just as Ethiopia consented to the independence of Eritrea in 1993.

When negotiating with Somalia, the AU should stress that it is absolutely not motivated by a desire to divide the Somali people. The AU should make it clear that it is driven by the wish to end the suffering of Somali communities. Somalia should be convinced that clinging to Somaliland against the wish of most of this territory's inhabitants is very likely to exacerbate tensions and divisions amongst Somali people in the long term. Granting Somaliland independence will provide a way of settling disputes that if left unsolved now, will inevitably plunge Somalia and Somaliland back into chaos in the future.

Somaliland's claim over the territories of Sool and eastern Sanaag is contested by the Puntland State of Somalia, which was created in 1998 and which, unlike Somaliland, regards itself as part of the Federal State of Somalia. However, Puntland is not viscerally opposed to the independence of Somaliland. In an interview granted to the BBC in May 2006, the then Puntland president, Mohamud "Adde" Muse, asserted that Puntland would not interfere with Somaliland's independence plans, and declared: "We hope they will work with us in a brotherly, Somali way."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, while the current president of Puntland, Abdirahman Muhammad Farole, has expressed his desire to control the disputed territories, the African Union is fully aware that his government is far more preoccupied by security threats from Al-Shabaab and acts of

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in International Crisis Group, *Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership*, Africa Report No 110, 23 May 2006, p. 10.



banditry, and that the leaders and elites of the disputed areas are now seeking to become autonomous.<sup>6</sup> The AU is in a position to persuade Somaliland to take into consideration the preoccupations of the people of these areas in exchange for statehood recognition, and convince Puntland to drop its claim over Sool and Sanaag in exchange for the security that a recognised, stable and peaceful Somaliland would guarantee. But neither the AU nor any of the advocates of the union between Somalia and Somaliland can persuade Somaliland's young generations and future leaders to give up the independence of their state. For they have never lived under the union, and for them, an independent Somaliland is an integral, non-negotiable part of their identity.

The AU should take the lead, and seek to convince Somalia that maintaining the status quo and carry on opposing the independence of Somaliland is not only merely postponing the unavoidable, but also holding the people of Somaliland hostage to the uncertain fate of Somalia. Furthermore, it is akin to inflicting a cruel, short-sighted collective punishment on Somalilanders, who are not responsible for the current sorry state of Somalia.

Some may argue that instead of seeking statehood recognition, Somaliland should merely administer itself while waiting for Somalia to be stabilised.<sup>7</sup> But they are missing a crucial point that the AU has already grasped: lack of recognition is preventing Somalilanders from exploiting their natural resources. Somaliland is ostracised, unrecognised by potential trade partners and investors, and unable to deal with institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Consequently, though surveys have revealed that their country has mineral deposits, as well as many offshore and onshore oil and natural gas reserves, Somalilanders are forced to live in abject poverty, and rely only on agriculture and remittances from the Diaspora. This situation was rightly deplored in 2009 by the then Somaliland foreign minister, Abdillahi Duale: "We rely on ourselves and our Diaspora, which accounts for almost \$600m of revenue a year. People get by but it is very difficult without infrastructure," he pointed out before declaring, "We need butter, we are not asking for guns."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> African Union, *Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Situation in Somalia*, 8 January 2010, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Abdulkadir Mohamoud, op cit.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by James Melik in "Riches of Somaliland Remain Untapped", *BBC News* (15 March 2009), retrieved on 2 January 2011 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7935139.stm> .

The AU should seek to convince Somalia that consenting to the independence of Somaliland would not be a sign of weakness, but a wise move that would benefit not only Somalilanders, but also Somali people in general. For the ties bounding Somali communities transcend mere borders, and the benefits from an economic prosperity enjoyed by Somalilanders are likely to trickle down to other Somali people. Granting independence to Somaliland will provide this country with the tools that will enable it to show that when left alone, Somali people are capable of governing themselves in a peaceful and democratic way, eradicate corruption, manage their national wealth for the common good, and achieve economic prosperity.

It is true that the citizens of many African states with natural resources have not benefited from this wealth. But unlike these countries, before starting to exploit its resources, Somaliland has endowed itself with a social and political structure that will help prevent the rulers from embezzling public funds. The elected representatives of the lower house are accountable to the electors as well as the upper house, and the elders of the upper house are accountable to the members of their clans.



Inauguration of President Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo in July 2010

### III. Democracy as a True African Form of Government

Democracy is a fragile, albeit precious commodity that needs concrete, tangible positive results to satisfy people's legitimate aspirations and in so doing, remain sustainable. Somaliland can consolidate its fledgling democracy by giving economic development to its people. The AU should champion international recognition as a way of boosting economic development in Somaliland. Such a stance would enable this organisation to show that it has

the capacity to effectively tackle one of the main challenges facing the African continent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the need to rid itself of the failed, disastrous dictatorial system bequeathed and backed mainly by former Western colonisers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and embrace democracy as a true African form of government.

Expressions such as “African big men” and “African despots” are frequently used to refer to dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) or Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, as if such tyrants were African idiosyncrasies. But far from being peculiar to African culture, these tyrants were often chosen and kept in power by Westerners who used them to control their former African colonies. As they did not enjoy the overwhelming support of their compatriots, these dictators had to resort to mass slaughter to crush dissidents. They did not hesitate to do so, safe in the knowledge that their Western allies would back them as long as they served Western interests. For instance, while he repeatedly carried out massacres in Mataberland in the 1980s, Mugabe was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath on the advice of John Major’s government in 1994.

Genuine African culture is intrinsically democratic. This is why in the past, most African communities had a place called “discussion tree”, where chiefs and leaders would discuss important issues with their people, and consult them before acting. These rulers knew that they could not govern without popular approval, and that they had to prioritise the common good over their personal interests. By supporting democracy in Somaliland, the African Union would be letting tyrants such as Laurent Gbagbo and Robert Mugabe know that it could no longer allow them to use opportunistic, hypocritical anti-Western rhetoric and fake African nationalism to ignore the will of their people and perpetuate themselves in power. A genuine African leader would not have relied on French troops to quell an insurrection as Gbagbo did in 2002; it would not have been necessary for a ruler chosen by African people to sign the Lancaster House Agreement before obtaining power, as it was for Mugabe.

#### **IV. The Need for Westerners to Support Democracy in Africa**

This is the right time for the African Union to champion democracy in Africa, and make bad African leaders understand the following once and for all: wealth looted by African-born thieves is as needed by Africans as wealth taken by colonisers, and the lives of Africans slaughtered by African egomaniacs are as irreplaceable as the lives of Africans killed by foreigners. The time is ripe for such a stance because most Westerners are now prepared to let Africans choose their own leaders. They may not necessarily do so out of the belief that

Africans can now rule themselves effectively, but because they realize that in a world increasingly dominated by China and other non-Western nations, they can no longer impose their will on other people in a blatant way. Nevertheless, the most important thing is that most Africans currently have a unique opportunity to turn their backs on decades of autocratic rule that had given them nothing but untold suffering and abject poverty.

The need to keep communism at bay was used as a justification by Westerners to install and maintain tyrants in power all over Africa throughout the Cold War period. After the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 attacks, there was a real danger that they would emulate this policy, and use the need to combat “Islamic” terrorism as a pretext to impose their chosen allies as African rulers. The intervention of the French troops in Côte d’Ivoire in 2002 to prevent the toppling of the Christian Laurent Gbagbo by the Muslim Alassane Ouattara, and the 2006 ousting of the Islamic Courts, deemed too radical by the United States, could be seen as concrete manifestations of this policy. But a few years later, many Western countries have grasped the fact that the world has changed too much for them to be able to keep suppressing the democratic aspirations of African populations as they did during the Cold War. France and other Western nations’ acceptance and ongoing support of Alassane Ouattara as the democratically elected president of Côte d’Ivoire illustrate this change of attitude.

Westerners’ past support of dictatorial rulers could be used by critics and sceptics to portray them as non-credible backers of democracy in the African continent. But their actions were not attributable to an evil streak peculiar to Western people. They were, like all human beings, mainly motivated by self-interest. In a world where it is no longer possible for them to act unilaterally and cover their actions, Westerners could become committed supporters of democracy in Africa if they were to grasp the fact that such a stance would serve their interests far better than if they were to remain neutral or carry on backing autocrats. For instance, should Western nations decide to reward the democratic efforts of Somaliland with recognition, they would be in a privileged position to invest in this territory and make themselves as well as local populations benefit from Somaliland’s riches. Furthermore, they would have friendly, democratic allies in a part of Africa where anti-western radicals stemming from dictatorial regimes abound.

Given the spectacular economic development of dictatorial China, some Africans may be tempted to argue that African nations should imitate the Chinese and prioritise economic development over democracy. But alongside the African Union and the advocates of Africa’s democratisation, the West is in an ideal position to produce a powerful counter-narrative that

will resonate throughout Africa for the foreseeable future: dictatorship is a form of government alien to Africans that has already repeatedly failed to deliver economic prosperity in Africa. African ways, lifestyle and values are closer to the Western rather the Chinese model. As George Ayittey rightly put it:

The Chinese communist model is fundamentally alien to indigenous Africa. [...] Africa's salvation lies in returning to its roots and building upon its own indigenous heritage of free village markets, free enterprise, free trade and participatory democracy based upon consensus.<sup>9</sup>

By consenting to proposals for a democratic, independent Botswana in 1964, the British showed that Westerners could support Africa's return to its democratic roots. The proof that democracy is the way forward for Africa is that in terms of impressive economic development, peace and stability, Botswana is one of the very few African success stories. But it is extremely difficult, if not impossible for the rest of African countries to emulate this model: decades of tyrannical rule and injustice have created an explosive climate of ethnic, religious or cultural tensions, resentment and confrontation that does not exist in Botswana. This is why the case of Somaliland's democracy is particularly useful.

The African Union, Western nations and the international community should support Somaliland's democratic form of government as a successful model that can and should be replicated all over the African continent. As stated earlier, Somaliland's formula of adopting free and fair elections as well as elements of traditional African structures of government allows divided communities to overcome problems that cannot be solved through elections alone. The recognition of Somaliland as a state will end the international community's

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<sup>9</sup> George Ayittey, "Economist Debates: Africa and China, The Opposition's Rebuttal Remarks", *The Economist* (17<sup>th</sup> February 2010), retrieved on 2 January 2011 <http://www.economist.com/debate/days/view/467> .

tendency to associate this territory with the on-going Somali chaos. This will give Somaliland the respect, exposure and platform it needs to stop being an unsung African marvel, and function as a role model for African as well as other nations.

## Conclusion

There is a pressing need for the recognition of Somaliland. The most common objection to the acknowledgement of this territory, namely that such a move would jeopardise the integrity of African as well as other states, does not stand up to scrutiny. The volatility of the Horn of Africa, the past African civil wars, and the contestation by Puntland of Somaliland's claim over the territories of Sool and Eastern Sanaag cannot justify the status quo either. Opposing the independence of Somaliland is merely postponing the unavoidable, as an independent state is now a non-negotiable part of the identity of Somaliland's young generations and future leaders. Furthermore, factors such as the incapacity of the Transitional Federal Government to defeat the various armed factions opposed to it, the strengthening of Al-Shabaab and the interference of many interested countries and groups, will keep peace and stability at bay in Somalia for the foreseeable future. Continuing to view and treat Somaliland as a region of Somalia is tantamount to holding Somaliland people hostage to Somalia's troubled fate, and inflicting an unfair collective punishment on them.

Against all the odds and expectations, Somaliland has managed to deliver peace, security and several democratic governments to its people. The African Union, Western nations and the international community should show their admiration for these accomplishments and seek to safeguard them by recognising Somaliland as an independent state. This will prove hugely beneficial not only to Somaliland people, but also to African nations as well as the international community as a whole. Recognition will enable Somaliland to increase the exploitation of its resources and offer economic prosperity to its citizens. Achieving statehood status will also allow Somaliland to serve effectively as a democratic inspiration to African states and to Muslim nations all over the world.





## About African Peoples Advocacy (APA)

APA was created in the United Kingdom in 2008 to provide a platform for the engagement and education of African peoples and the wider public on issues that are of relevance to African communities. The activities we carry out to achieve our goals include research on African countries and communities, research on policies towards Africa and African peoples, and programmes aimed at promoting public knowledge of African issues.

The *African Peoples Advocacy Policy Brief* aims to provide a platform for discussion of issues that are of interest to African communities and the wider public.

## About the Author

**Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell, MPhil**, is the founder and director of African Peoples Advocacy.

The facts presented and views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the African Peoples Advocacy.

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