

Population estimates for Somaliland

Population estimates for Somaliland vary widely. The most frequently given estimate is 3.5 million people, according to a UN Population Fund (UNFPA) count of 2014. Somaliland's Ministry of Planning, applying a net growth rate of 2.93% per year, estimates the population in 2021 at 4.3 million (Somaliland Ministry of Planning, July 2021: "Estimating Somaliland's Population"). The National Electoral Commission uses a figure of 5.1 million.

A full census has never taken place and the presence of nomads makes counting the population complicated. When a lineage is asked for population numbers, it will tend to inflate them to increase its weight relative to other lineages, who exaggerate for the same reasons. Modern local administrators and humanitarian agencies (who keep tallies of their own, e.g., how many children go to school) share a rationale to inflate population numbers: to increase aid and budget allocations. Besides the multitude of actors, including the national government, that have an interest in inflating population numbers, there is a clear reason for skeptics not to voice their doubts: they will face angry reactions by all those who benefit from these inflated numbers.

I have no such concerns. I may be blamed for neo-colonial interference and belittling of the Somalis, but I have been too closely concerned for years with this country to accept these inflated numbers. Given voter registration data, personal visits to most of Somaliland, analysis I performed for an NGO research organization and Google Earth analysis, I consider a safe estimate of Somaliland's population in 2022 is **2 to 2.5 million people**. Below is an explanation of how I arrive at that estimate.

Table 1: Population in Somaliland by district, with author's corrections

Region	District	Rural	Urban	IDP	UNFPA 2014	exagg factor	My 2020 estimate	2017 Voter Reg	VR rate my estim	VR rate UN estim
Awdal	Baki	92,642	4,243	-	96,885	180%	53,825			
	Borama	127,504	271,045	60	398,609	150%	265,739			
	Lughaye	86,552	6,407	7,860	100,819	180%	56,011			
	Zeylac	70,754	6,127	70	76,951	180%	42,751			
	Total	377,452	287,822	7,990	673,264		418,325	147,031	35%	22%
Maroodi Jeex	Gabiley	69,997	36,917	-	106,914	120%	89,095			
	Hargeysa	223,229	691,852	44,000	959,081	120%	799,234			
	Total	293,226	728,769	44,000	1,065,995		888,329	312,634	35%	29%
Sahil	Berbera	101,447	73,971	590	176,008	120%	146,673			
	Sheekh	40,967	34,937	-	75,904	150%	50,603			
	Total	142,414	108,908	590	251,912		197,276	78,842	40%	31%
Togdheer	Burco	58,584	376,010	25,760	460,354	120%	383,628			
	Buuhoodle	33,768	49,979	-	83,747	200%	41,874			
	Oodweyne	78,560	22,798	-	101,358	150%	67,572			
	Total	170,912	448,787	25,760	645,459		493,074	178,506	36%	28%
Sanaag	Ceel Afweyn	73,907	26,043	-	99,950	150%	66,633			
	Ceerigaabo	119,389	85,119	810	205,318	135%	152,087			
	Laasqoray	190,200	48,555	100	238,855	300%	79,618			
	Total	383,496	159,717	910	544,123		298,339	85,222	29%	16%
Sool	Caynabo	38,108	19,572	1,400	59,080	120%	49,233			
	Laas Caanood	76,520	76,498	3,420	156,438	135%	115,880			
	Taleex	59,950	13,579	-	73,529	200%	36,765			
	Xudun	27,036	11,344	-	38,380	150%	25,587			
	Total	201,614	120,993	4,820	327,427		227,465	71,096	31%	22%
Somaliland		1,569,114	1,854,996	84,070	3,508,180		2,522,808	873,331	35%	25%

The exaggeration factor is an estimate based on the following criteria:

1. Clan conflict in an area pushes constituencies to exaggerate their numbers (Ceel Afweyn, Taleex, Lughaye, Buuhoodle, Ceerigaabo etc)
 2. Political conflict pushes stakeholders to exaggerate numbers (Buuhoodle, Laasqoray, Taleex, all Sool)
 3. Common sense and observation, including of settlements on Google Earth.
eg Laasqoray is unlikely to have a greater population than Ceerigaabo, or Awdal more than Togdheer
eg Rural populations given for Awdal, Berbera, Oodweyne, Ceel Afweyn, Laasqoray and Taleex are improbable given the harsh environment
eg Borama cannot have nearly four times the urban population of Berbera
 4. Distance from the political heartland makes exaggeration of numbers easier (Awdal, Sanaag & Sool)
 5. Higher administrative capacity reduces exaggeration, as in Berbera and Sheekh and regional urban centres generally
- Voter registration data was used to confirm these exaggeration factors, bringing VR to 30-38% of entire population in each region*
The total tally of 2.5 million inhabitants in Somaliland corresponds to the opinion of experts such as Markus Hoehne (2018)

The table below seeks to reconcile the 2014 population data for Somaliland from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA)—the internationally most often quoted source—with 2017 Voter Registration (VR) data (one of the most credible census-like activities undertaken in the past years by Somaliland’s authorities), the population figure of 2.2 to 2.5 million estimated by Markus Hoehne (2018)¹ and personal observation². I have applied an ‘exaggeration factor’ of 120 to 300% for each district, based on the criteria mentioned beneath the table. The reason I have engaged in this speculative work is to gain a better understanding of population distribution and participation. When 873,000 Somalilanders register as voters, which percentage of the eligible electorate is this?

Estimating urban populations

It is estimated that 40-50% of the population dwells permanently in Somaliland’s towns and cities. The major towns of Somaliland in terms of population are Hargeisa and Bur’o; secondary towns are Borama, Las ‘anod, ‘erigabo and Berbera. According to the table above, estimations of the urban population in each district is around 600,000 (Hargeisa), 300,000 (Burco), 180,000 (Borama) and 60,000 (Berbera, Laas Caanood and Cerigaabo) if one applies the same urban/rural ratio as used by the UNFPA (although it is unlikely, for example, that in the super-dry coastal district of Berbera more people live in rural areas than in towns). Of course, the UNFPA may have considered other locations than the district centres as ‘urban’ (but which? The non-district towns I’ve driven through seem to contain a hundred houses at most, with a few rare exceptions). Otherwise, these figures, when compared to the surface of the built area as measured on google earth, seem very high. This would put the urban density of such spacious, often single-story towns near to that of central districts in European and Asian cities. This obviously doesn’t make sense. Below are my own measurements.

- ‘eel Afweyn ca 360 houses on 0.83 km² built surface = about 3000 inhabitants counting 8 inhabitants per house (incl commercial, public and light industrial structures); add 50% semi-nomadic population (living in aqal/tents) gives about 4500 inhabitants. Compare to UN data above of 26,000 inhabitants; there are no other towns of consequence in the district. But probably many inhabitants of the district are registered in ‘eel Afweyn town as inhabitants, for administrative convenience. How the UN calculates the rural population is a mystery.

=> Considering ‘eel Afweyn a typical town, this provides 5000 inhabitants/km² of built urban area³
With this high estimate, population estimations are

- Sheekh 1.3 km² 6,500 inh
- ‘erigabo 6.5 km² 32,500 inh
- Las ‘anod 8.5 km² 42,500 inh
- Berbera 5.7 km² 28,500 inh
- Borama 12.3 km² 61,500 inh
- Bur’o 27.2 km² 136,000 inh
- Hargeisa 70.5 km², 350,000 inh

This gives for the six main towns of SL (not counting Sheekh) about 650,000 inh... adding all other towns of SL, less than a million inhabitants; counting 40% urban population, we again arrive at around the 2 million mark

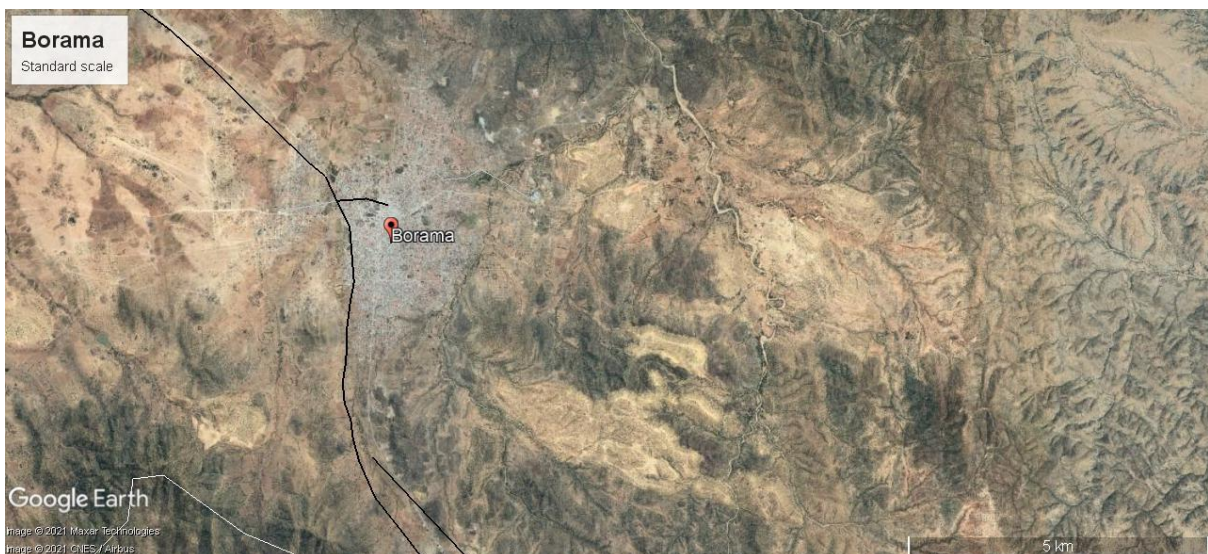
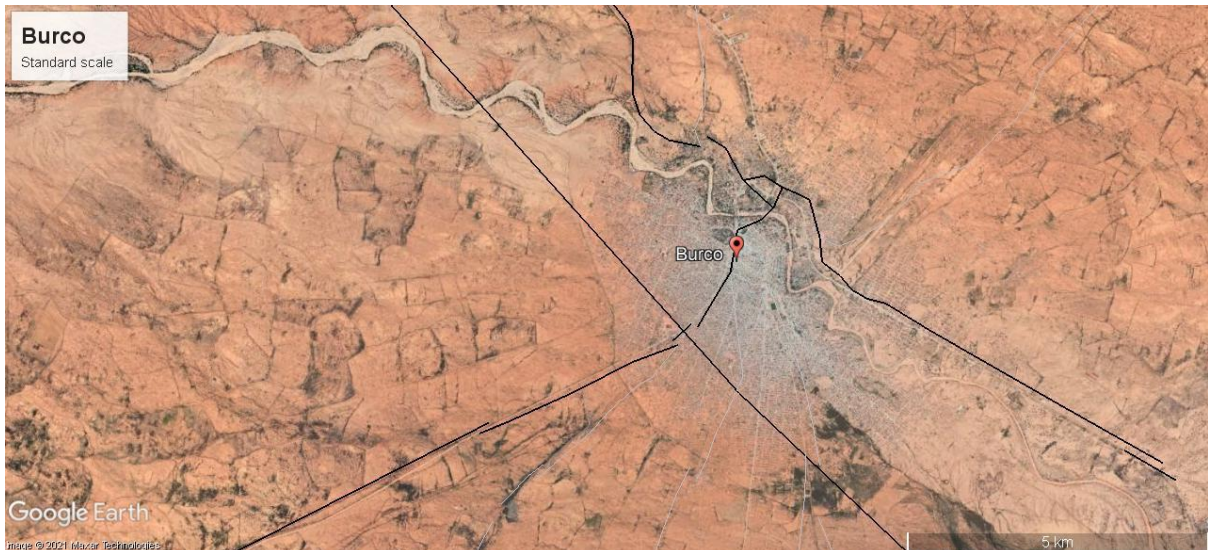
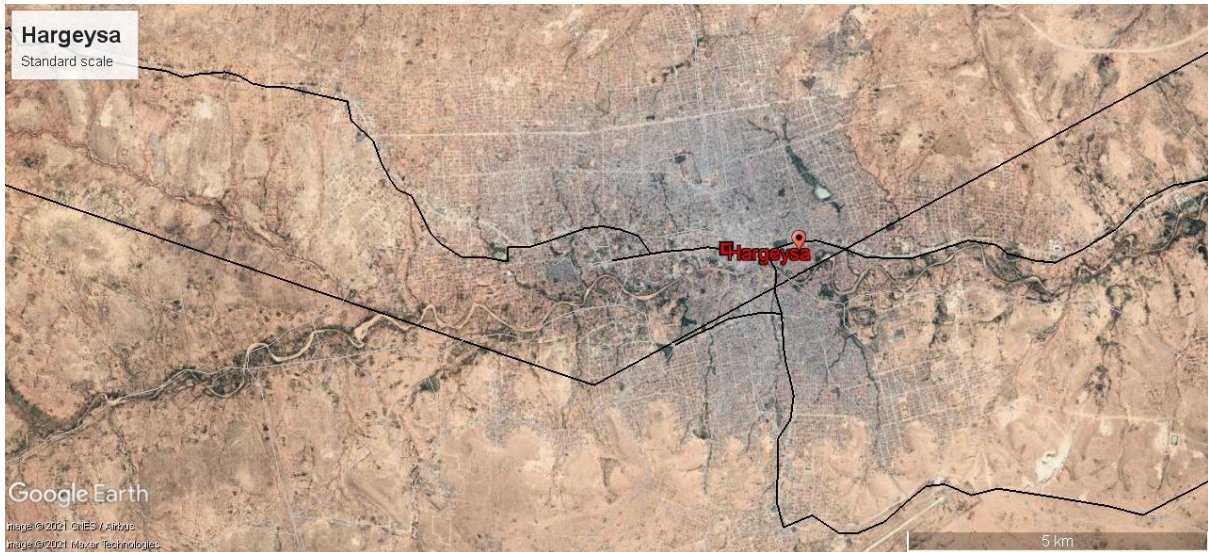
Google Earth images used to estimate population of major towns in Somaliland

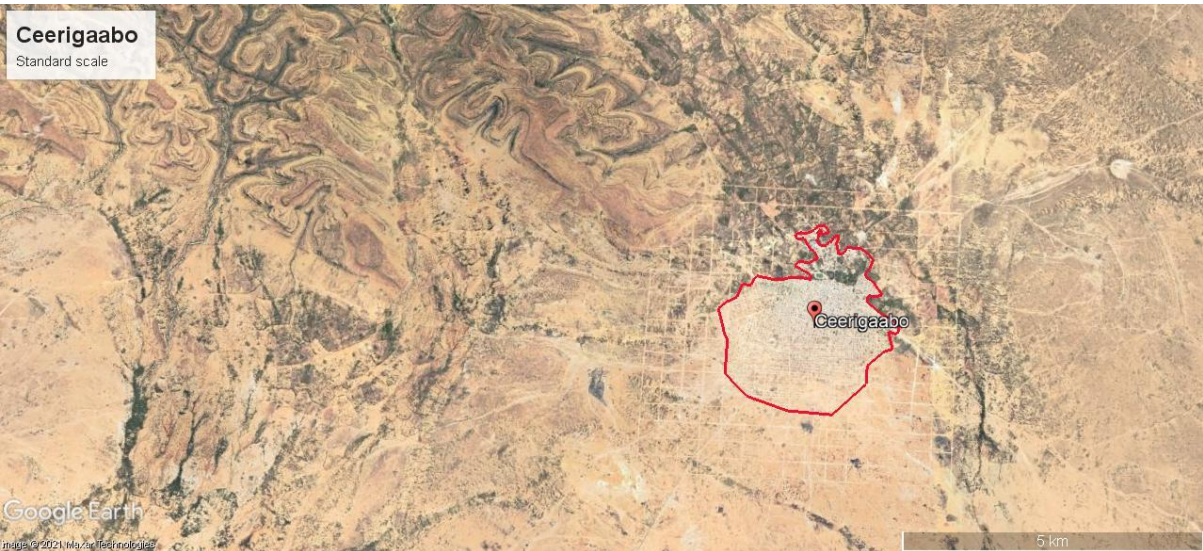
¹ *Hoehne 2018b:5. The UNFPA figure of 3.5 million (in 2014) is low compared to other population estimations used by the Somaliland government; on the other hand a specialist such as Roland Marchal believes that there are not more than 1.5 million inhabitants in Somaliland.*

² *As an analyst specializing in access for the NGO community, I travelled through all districts of Somaliland between 2016 and 2019, except Zeyla’, Baki, Lughaye, Odweyne and Xudun. I also spent much time on Google Earth examining roads and settlements, and I wrote briefs about many of Somaliland’s district centres.*

³ *In comparison, Auxerre has 35,000 inh on 12.5 km = 2800 inh/km. This area includes public buildings, parcs etc which are not in SL, but also flats and areas with high population density also not featured in most of SL. So 5,000 inh/km² urban area seems in any case a HIGH estimate).*

On the standard scale maps below I have drawn a perimeter around all built structures in the urban area (including public and commercial buildings and what are probably industrial facilities or hangars) and let Google Earth calculate the surface.





Note: the red lines do not denote any administrative city limit but were used to calculate the surface area of the inhabited parts of each town while zooming in on google earth. Sometimes one sparsely inhabited neighbourhood is not included to make up for another one with many empty lots.