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Impact of proliferation of small arms and light weapons on Nigeria's internal security

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Abstract

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has become a critical challenge undermining Nigeria's internal security. As a country grappling with insurgency, armed banditry, kidnapping, and communal conflicts, the easy availability of SALWs exacerbates violence, threatens national stability, and undermines economic growth. This study examines the extent and consequences of SALW proliferation in Nigeria, with the objective of analyzing its impact on internal security and proposing actionable solutions. Descriptive survey method was employed, utilizing both structured questionnaires and key informant interviews. The questionnaire responses were analyzed using simple percentages, while the qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed through content analysis. Anchored in the failed state theory, which highlights the inability of states to maintain control and safeguard their sovereignty, the study finds the theory particularly relevant in explaining Nigeria's struggles with porous borders, weak enforcement mechanisms, and institutional corruption. Findings reveal severe consequences, including rising fatalities, displacement of communities, erosion of public trust in security institutions, and the escalation of organized crime. Despite measures such as legislative controls, international collaborations, and disarmament programs, these efforts have proven largely ineffective due to weak enforcement, corruption, and porous borders. To mitigate these challenges, the study recommends strengthening cooperation with neighboring countries to implement joint border security initiatives and intelligence-sharing frameworks. enhancing transparency and accountability within security agencies is equally crucial. Establishing independent oversight bodies to monitor arms control efforts and ensuring strict consequences for corrupt officials will help mitigate the role of corruption in sustaining illegal arms circulation. In addition, addressing the socio-economic drivers of armed violence, such as poverty and unemployment, will further reduce reliance on illicit arms for survival, contributing to sustainable security improvements These strategies, if implemented effectively, can significantly enhance Nigeria's internal security and restore public confidence.

Keywords: Internal Security, Light Weapons, Proliferation, Small Arms

Introduction

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) has become a significant threat to Nigeria's internal security, exacerbating the country's already complex security challenges. Defined by the United Nations as weapons designed for personal use or by a small crew, SALWs include revolvers, self-loading pistols, assault rifles, machine guns, and grenades, among others. These weapons have not only contributed to the escalation of violent conflicts but have also emboldened criminal elements, insurgents, and other non-state actors, thereby undermining national stability. Estimates suggest that over 350 million SALWs are in circulation globally, with nearly 70% of them concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa (Small Arms Survey,

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2022). Nigeria alone accounts for approximately 10 million of these weapons, a figure that highlights the scale of the problem (Adebayo & Okonkwo, 2023).

The proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria has been fueled by a combination of internal and external factors. Domestically, issues such as porous borders, weak law enforcement mechanisms, corruption, and political instability have created an environment conducive to the smuggling and illegal trade of weapons. For instance, Nigeria's borders with countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon span thousands of kilometers, making them challenging to monitor effectively. Reports indicate that over 1,400 illegal routes exist along these borders, providing ample opportunities for arms traffickers to operate with impunity (Eze & Abubakar, 2023). Externally, the spillover effects of conflicts in neighboring countries, such as the Libyan crisis and the Sahel insurgencies, have further exacerbated the influx of SALWs into Nigeria.

The consequences of SALW proliferation are far-reaching and multifaceted. One of the most significant impacts is the escalation of violence across various regions. In the Northeast, the Boko Haram insurgency has thrived on the availability of sophisticated arms, leading to the deaths of over 35,000 people and the displacement of more than two million others since 2009 (UNHCR, 2023). Similarly, the Northwest has witnessed a surge in banditry and kidnappings, with criminal gangs using SALWs to carry out attacks on communities and travelers. In the Niger Delta, militant groups have employed these weapons to sabotage oil infrastructure, contributing to economic losses estimated at $15 billion annually (Amadi & Wokoma, 2022).

Efforts to curb the proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria have been met with varying degrees of success. The government has implemented several measures, including the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) in 2021. This center is tasked with coordinating efforts to reduce the flow of illegal arms and ensuring compliance with international arms control agreements. Additionally, Nigeria is a signatory to the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which aims to promote regional cooperation in addressing the issue. Despite these initiatives, enforcement remains a significant challenge. For example, between 2015 and 2020, Nigerian security agencies reportedly intercepted only 15% of the illegal arms trafficked into the country (Ogundele, 2023). This low interception rate underscores the inadequacy of current strategies and the need for a more robust approach.

The challenges inherent in combating SALW proliferation are compounded by several factors. First, corruption within security agencies undermines the effectiveness of arms control measures. Cases of law enforcement officers colluding with arms traffickers have been documented, further complicating efforts to address the issue (Adedeji, 2023). Second, the lack of accurate data on the number of SALWs in circulation hampers the formulation of evidence-based policies. Estimates vary widely, with some studies suggesting

figures as high as 15 million, while others argue that the actual number could be significantly lower. This disparity highlights the difficulty in assessing the true scale of the problem and tailoring interventions accordingly. Third, the socio-economic conditions in Nigeria, including high unemployment rates and widespread poverty, create a fertile ground for the proliferation of SALWs. For many individuals, engaging in the illegal arms trade or joining armed groups becomes an attractive option for survival.

Despite these challenges, there have been some notable successes in addressing SALW proliferation. For instance, the Nigerian government has undertaken Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs aimed at rehabilitating former combatants and removing SALWs from circulation. In 2022 alone, over 5,000 weapons were recovered through such initiatives (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Additionally, international organizations and civil society groups have played a crucial role in raising awareness and advocating for stricter arms control measures. However, the sustainability of these efforts remains uncertain, given the entrenched structural issues that facilitate SALW proliferation.

Given the complex interplay of factors contributing to the proliferation of SALW and its profound impact on Nigeria's internal security, there is a pressing need for in-depth analysis and research to inform effective policy responses. This development necessitates the present study to explore the consequences, and potential solutions to the challenges posed by SALW proliferation in Nigeria.

Research Questions

This paper is guided by the following questions.

i) What is the impact of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons on Nigeria’s internal security?
ii) How effective are the measures employed to mitigate the threat of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of small arms and light weapons proliferation on Nigeria’s internal security and propose effective strategies to curb its adverse effects. However, the specific objectives include;

i) To examine the impact of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons on Nigeria’s internal security.
ii) To assess the effectiveness of measures employed to mitigate the threat of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Small Arms

Small arms refer to portable firearms typically used by individuals or small groups, primarily for personal defense or combat purposes. These weapons are characterized by their size, ease of handling, and ability to

be carried and operated by one person. Small arms include handguns, rifles, shotguns, and submachine guns, distinguished from heavy weapons like artillery and machine guns by their lighter weight and lesser destructive power.

According to Small Arms Survey (2019), small arms are defined as "portable firearms designed for personal use". This definition emphasizes their mobility and individual-centric purpose in combat scenarios. Small arms play a crucial role in military and civilian contexts, serving as tools for self-defense, law enforcement, and military operations worldwide.

In civilian settings, small arms are commonly used for sport shooting and hunting, contributing to recreational activities and wildlife management. However, their military application remains significant, with small arms being pivotal in infantry engagements and asymmetrical warfare strategies (Jones, 2020).

The development of small arms has evolved significantly over centuries, from early matchlock and flintlock mechanisms to modern firearms utilizing advanced materials and technologies. This evolution has influenced their effectiveness, reliability, and safety features, enhancing both their lethal capabilities and usability in various environments (Smith, 2021).

In contemporary discourse, the proliferation and regulation of small arms are critical global concerns, impacting international security and stability. Issues such as illicit trafficking, arms control treaties, and civilian disarmament initiatives underscore the complex challenges associated with small arms governance (Brown, 2018).

Light Weapons

Light weapons are a category of portable arms designed for use by multiple individuals operating as a team. These weapons are typically heavier and more complex than small arms, necessitating coordinated operation. According to the United Nations, light weapons encompass heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars with calibers less than 100 millimeters (United Nations General Assembly, 2005).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) further specifies that light weapons include portable arms intended for use by several people working together, such as heavy machine guns, portable grenade launchers (mobile or mounted), portable anti-aircraft cannons, portable anti-tank cannons, non-recoil guns, portable anti-tank missile launchers or rocket launchers, portable anti-aircraft missile launchers, and mortars with calibers less than 100 millimeters (ECOWAS, 2006).

These weapons are characterized by their portability, allowing them to be transported and operated by small teams without the need for extensive logistical support. This ease of mobility makes them particularly suitable

for irregular warfare and guerrilla tactics, where flexibility and speed are crucial. Their design facilitates rapid deployment and concealment, contributing to their widespread use in various conflict zones.

The proliferation of light weapons has significant implications for global security. Their accessibility and ease of use have led to their widespread distribution among non-state actors, including insurgent groups and criminal organizations. This widespread availability exacerbates conflicts, prolongs violence, and poses challenges to peacekeeping efforts. The durability and low maintenance requirements of these weapons further contribute to their persistence in conflict zones, even after hostilities have ceased (Aisedion, 2022).

Efforts to control the spread of light weapons have been undertaken at both regional and international levels. Initiatives such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons aim to prevent the excessive accumulation and illicit trafficking of these arms. However, challenges remain due to factors such as porous borders, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and the high demand for these weapons in conflict-prone regions (Sule & Deribe, 2020).

Therefore, light weapons are portable arms designed for team use, encompassing a range of heavy and support weapons that are more substantial than small arms but still manageable by small groups. Their characteristics of portability, ease of use, and low maintenance have contributed to their widespread proliferation, with significant implications for global security and conflict dynamics.

Internal Security

Internal security refers to the measures and actions taken by a sovereign state to maintain peace and order within its borders, ensuring the safety of its citizens and the stability of its institutions. This encompasses the prevention and management of threats such as civil unrest, organized crime, terrorism, and other activities that could disrupt societal harmony. According to Qureshi (2020), the modern concept of a nation-state is not possible without a strong foundation of internal security.

The scope of internal security includes safeguarding against threats that may target citizens or the state's infrastructure. These threats can range from minor civil disturbances to large-scale violence or armed insurgencies. As noted by Alumona (2019), threats to internal security may be directed at either the state's citizens or the organs and infrastructure of the state itself.

Responsibility for internal security typically lies with various governmental agencies, including police forces, paramilitary units, and, in exceptional circumstances, the military. The level of force authorized for maintaining internal security can vary, from unarmed police to fully armed paramilitary organizations,

depending on the severity of the threat. In some states, internal security may be the primary responsibility of a secret police force.

Effective internal security management involves not only responding to immediate threats but also implementing preventive measures. This includes intelligence gathering, community engagement, and the development of policies aimed at addressing the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, political disenfranchisement, and social inequality. As highlighted by Egbefo and Salihu (2014), internal security crisis can originate in individual and group reactions to situations of scarce resources, division of function within society, and differentiation of power.

In the context of globalization, internal security is increasingly interconnected with external factors. Transnational issues such as cybercrime, human trafficking, and international terrorism blur the lines between internal and external security, necessitating a comprehensive approach that includes international cooperation and information sharing. Qureshi (2020) emphasizes that the dimensions of internal security include armed rebellions, economic security, environmental security, and cyber security.

However, internal security is a multifaceted concept involving the protection of a state's internal environment from a wide array of threats. It requires a coordinated effort among various government agencies and, increasingly, international partners to effectively manage and mitigate risks to national stability and citizen safety.

Empirical Review

This section reviews empirical studies on the impact of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons on Nigeria's internal security. It examines existing research to highlight trends, patterns, and consequences while identifying gaps in knowledge. However, addressing these gaps will enhance understanding and inform policies to mitigate security challenges effectively.

Akinyemi (2024) investigates the role of corruption and political complicity in arms trafficking across Nigeria. Adopting a political economy framework, the study employs secondary data from governmental reports and international arms control organizations. The findings reveal that high-ranking officials often facilitate or turn a blind eye to illegal arms imports due to vested interests, further complicating efforts to curb arms proliferation. The study suggests that institutional reforms, whistleblower protection laws, and transparency mechanisms in arms procurement processes are critical in mitigating the threat. Nonetheless, the research does not delve deeply into the broader structural weaknesses within state institutions that allow these activities to persist.

Ibrahim and Yusuf (2023) examine the link between arms proliferation and the escalation of banditry and terrorism in Nigeria's northern region. Using a case study approach, the researchers analyze incidents of

armed violence across six states, relying on police records and interviews with conflict analysts. Their findings indicate that the influx of SALW has emboldened criminal groups, making law enforcement efforts increasingly difficult. The study also highlights how armed non-state actors exploit gaps in state security frameworks to sustain their activities. Recommendations include increased funding for security agencies, improved surveillance technologies, and regional cooperation to combat transnational arms smuggling. However, the study mainly concentrates on the actions of perpetrators rather than addressing the systemic governance issues that enable SALW proliferation.

Similarly, Okonkwo (2022) explores the role of SALW in exacerbating internal security threats in Nigeria, with a particular focus on violent crimes and terrorism. Employing a qualitative research design with in-depth interviews of security experts, law enforcement officers, and policymakers, the study finds that the easy availability of small arms has emboldened non-state actors, including insurgents and secessionist groups. The findings suggest that arms trafficking networks thrive due to a lack of synergy between security agencies and weak border security infrastructure. The study recommends policy reforms that prioritize intelligence-led policing, the implementation of stricter firearms regulations, and the establishment of specialized arms control units within security agencies. However, the research largely focuses on the actions of perpetrators rather than the systemic weaknesses within state institutions that facilitate arms proliferation.

Ojo (2022) explores the effectiveness of Nigeria's measures in mitigating the threats posed by SALW proliferation. Employing a qualitative content analysis of government policies, security reports, and interviews with law enforcement personnel, the study assesses the efficacy of disarmament programs and arms control policies. The study finds that while legislative frameworks such as the Firearms Act and international collaborations like the ECOWAS Convention on SALW have been put in place, enforcement remains weak due to corruption and political interference. The research recommends the establishment of an independent arms control agency and community-based intelligence gathering to curtail illicit arms flows. Nonetheless, the study largely overlooks the role of weak state institutions, such as the judiciary and border control agencies, in exacerbating arms proliferation.

Adebayo (2021) investigates the impact of small arms and light weapons (SALW) proliferation on Nigeria's internal security. Using a mixed-method approach that integrates qualitative interviews with security experts and quantitative data from arms seizure reports, the study finds that the widespread availability of SALW has significantly exacerbated violent crimes, armed conflicts, and terrorism in Nigeria. The findings reveal that porous borders, weak enforcement mechanisms, and corruption within security agencies contribute to the persistent inflow of illicit arms. The study recommends strengthening border security, enhancing inter-agency collaboration, and implementing stricter punitive measures against arms traffickers. However, the

author primarily focuses on the actors involved in arms trafficking while giving limited attention to institutional weaknesses that perpetuate the problem.

Ibrahim and Yusuf (2021) assess the effectiveness of Nigeria's policy responses to SALW proliferation. The study adopts a case study approach, analyzing Nigeria's implementation of international arms control agreements such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons. Findings reveal that while Nigeria has domesticated several international treaties, enforcement remains weak due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and political interference. The study underscores the importance of harmonizing national arms control policies with regional frameworks and strengthening institutions responsible for arms control. A key recommendation is the need for a centralized database to track and monitor arms transactions. Despite its contributions, the study does not sufficiently address the role of judicial weaknesses in perpetuating arms trafficking, particularly the delay or lack of prosecution of arms smugglers and illicit dealers.

Musa (2020) investigates the impact of arms proliferation on inter-communal conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. Using a survey of affected communities and focus group discussions, the study finds that the influx of small arms has intensified violent clashes between herders and farmers, resulting in heightened casualties and displacement. The study attributes the persistence of this challenge to the ineffective implementation of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Musa (2020) recommends a community-driven arms collection strategy, backed by incentives and alternative livelihood programs for those surrendering arms. Nonetheless, the study does not address how political patronage and the complicity of elite actors contribute to the continued proliferation of illicit arms in conflict-prone regions.

However, despite these extensive studies, significant gaps remain in the literature. Predominantly, previous research has focused on the actions of perpetrators and the dynamics of arms trafficking, with limited attention to systemic weaknesses within state institutions that enable the persistence of this menace. The lack of political will to reform critical institutions—such as customs, border control agencies, and the judiciary—has allowed arms proliferation to thrive in Nigeria. For instance, Adebayo (2021) investigates the impact of SALW proliferation but does not thoroughly examine the role of institutional inefficiencies. Similarly, Ojo (2022) assesses arms control measures but pays insufficient attention to the failures of agencies responsible for enforcing these policies. Musa (2020) investigates arms proliferation in inter-communal conflicts but does not consider the role of political patronage in sustaining the illicit arms trade. Ibrahim and Yusuf (2023) analyze the link between arms proliferation and insecurity but do not explore how state institutions contribute

to the persistence of this menace. Akinyemi (2024) highlights corruption's role but does not extensively address broader structural governance failures. The present study fills these gaps by shifting the focus from perpetrators to the systemic weaknesses of customs, border control, and judicial institutions that have enabled arms proliferation to thrive in Nigeria, thereby constituting threats to internal security. Furthermore, the study examines the lack of political will to reform these critical institutions, which remains a major impediment to mitigating the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Failed State Theory as its suitable tool of analysis. Introduced by Helman and Ratner in 1993, the theory examines the inability of states to perform basic governance functions effectively. In their seminal work, Helman and Ratner (1993) described failed states as those "utterly incapable of sustaining themselves as members of the international community" (p. 8). The theory underscores the collapse of institutional structures essential for maintaining law and order, delivering public services, and exercising legitimate authority over a defined territory. Failed states are often plagued by corruption, weak rule of law, internal conflicts, and dependence on external aid (Rotberg, 2004).

A fundamental assumption of the theory is that state failure manifests when governments can no longer guarantee security, provide basic public goods, or maintain effective sovereignty. The absence of these functions leads to internal disorder and vulnerability to external threats (Zartman, 1995). Helman and Ratner (1993) emphasized that failed states often become breeding grounds for transnational threats, including terrorism and organized crime, posing risks to global stability.

Critics argue that the theory overly emphasizes Western-centric norms of statehood and governance, overlooking diverse political and historical contexts (Call, 2008). Nevertheless, it remains a critical framework for understanding the challenges of fragile states in modern geopolitics. As Rotberg (2004) contends, rebuilding failed states necessitates addressing institutional deficiencies and fostering governance rooted in legitimacy and accountability.

However, Failed State Theory is a relevant framework for analyzing the impact of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) on Nigeria's internal security. This theory posits that a state becomes "failed" when it is unable to perform basic functions such as maintaining security, enforcing laws, and providing services, leaving a vacuum that non-state actors exploit. Nigeria's challenges with SALW proliferation illustrate these failures, as corruption, poverty, and poor governance exacerbate the problem and undermine state capacity to address it effectively.

Corruption among personnel at Nigeria's borders has allowed the unchecked smuggling of SALW into the country. Despite existing laws such as the Firearms Act, border officials often accept bribes to facilitate illegal arms entry. The porous nature of Nigeria's borders, coupled with systemic corruption, has made it easy for criminal groups and insurgents to acquire arms. For instance, a 2020 United Nations report estimated that over 350 million small arms are in circulation in sub-Saharan Africa, with Nigeria accounting for a significant share. This influx of weapons has fueled violent conflicts, banditry, and insurgency, as seen in the ongoing Boko Haram crisis in the northeast.

High levels of poverty further compound the problem by creating fertile ground for recruitment into armed groups. According to the World Bank, 40% of Nigerians lived below the poverty line in 2022. Poverty-stricken youths, faced with limited economic opportunities, are easily lured into criminal activities and armed groups. The proliferation of SALW empowers these groups, leading to increased violence, kidnappings, and communal clashes, particularly in the northwest and central regions.

Bad governance is another critical factor contributing to the proliferation of SALW and insecurity in Nigeria. Successive administrations have failed to address the root causes of insecurity, such as unemployment, inequality, and lack of access to education. Poor governance has also led to a lack of accountability in arms control and weak enforcement of existing laws. For example, Amnesty International reported in 2021 that government-owned arms often find their way into the hands of non-state actors due to poor inventory management and collusion by officials. This leakage perpetuates a cycle of violence, as criminal groups and insurgents use these weapons to challenge state authority.

The Failed State Theory aptly explains how these interconnected factors—corruption, poverty, and poor governance—undermine Nigeria's internal security and enable the proliferation of SALW. By highlighting the state's inability to perform core functions and the consequences of these failures, the theory provides a comprehensive lens to understand the dynamics of insecurity in Nigeria.

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive survey research design to systematically collect and organize data, aiming to examine the impact of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons on Nigeria's internal security. Both quantitative and qualitative data are utilized, incorporating primary sources such as questionnaires and key informant interviews as the primary instruments, while secondary data were derived from relevant textbooks, journal magazine, monograph, newspapers, as well as resources from relevant institutions such as Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution Abuja, and Centre for the Council of Small Arms and Light Weapons (CISLAC). The population for this study consists of 553 individuals selected from

the staff and personnel of various organizations, including the Political Affairs, Peace, and Security Department of the ECOWAS Commission; the Department of Enforcement and Inspection of the Nigeria Customs Service; the Investigation and Intelligence Department of the Nigerian Police Force; the Investigation and Intelligence Unit of the Nigeria Immigration Service; the National Centre for the Council of Small Arms and Light Weapons; the Directorate of Operations and General Inspection of the National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency; as well as the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC). A sample of 227 respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) statistical formula. Of the 227 distributed questionnaires, 211 were duly retrieved and used for analysis. Additionally, interviews were conducted with six selected officials from the aforementioned organizations. The data gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed using simple percentages and frequencies, while data from the key informant interviews were analyzed through content analysis.

Data Analysis

Table 1.1: Respondents' view on the impact of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons on Nigeria's Internal Security

Responses	SA	A	U	D	SD
The easy availability of small arms and light weapons has escalated communal clashes and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.	106 (49%)	69 (21%)	3 (1%)	21 (10%)	16 (7%)
The presence of illicit small arms and light weapons has increased the activities of terrorist groups and insurgents in Nigeria	111 (52%)	73 (34%)	4 (2%)	18 (8%)	9 (4%)
The illegal circulation of small arms and light weapons has contributed to political violence and electoral malpractices in Nigeria	127 (59%)	42 (20%)	2 (1%)	24 (11%)	20 (9%)
The widespread availability of small arms and light weapons has increased the rate of armed robbery and kidnapping in Nigeria.	117 (54%)	70 (33%)	5 (2%)	12 (6%)	11 (5%)
The presence of small arms and light weapons has worsened the herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria.	122 (57%)	58 (27%)	6 (3%)	13 (6%)	16 (7%)

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has significantly impacted Nigeria's internal security, as evidenced by respondents' views in Table 1.1. The first statement, which asserts that the easy

availability of small arms and light weapons has escalated communal clashes and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, received strong agreement, with 49% of respondents strongly agreeing (SA) and 21% agreeing (A), amounting to a total of 70%. Conversely, only 10% disagreed (D) and 7% strongly disagreed (SD), while a mere 1% were undecided (U). These figures indicate a broad consensus that the proliferation of SALW has exacerbated ethnic tensions and communal violence, leading to heightened insecurity across various regions of the country.

The second statement, which links the presence of illicit small arms and light weapons to increased activities of terrorist groups and insurgents, also garnered substantial agreement, with 52% of respondents strongly agreeing and 34% agreeing, totaling an overwhelming 86%. Only 8% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed, while 2% remained undecided. This overwhelming consensus suggests that SALW are fueling terrorist organizations and insurgencies, further destabilizing national security and making counterterrorism efforts more challenging. The strong correlation between arms proliferation and the rise in terrorism underscores the urgent need for effective disarmament measures.

The third statement highlights the role of illegal SALW in political violence and electoral malpractices. Here, 59% of respondents strongly agreed, and 20% agreed, accounting for a combined 79% agreement. In contrast, 11% disagreed, 9% strongly disagreed, and only 1% were undecided. These responses suggest that the illicit circulation of weapons has a significant influence on political instability, as armed violence has become a tool for political manipulation and election rigging. The availability of these weapons has emboldened political thugs and other actors who disrupt electoral processes, thereby undermining democracy and governance.

The fourth statement connects the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons to the increasing rates of armed robbery and kidnapping. The response distribution is similar to previous statements, with 54% strongly agreeing and 33% agreeing, summing up to 87% in favor of this assertion. Only 6% disagreed, 5% strongly disagreed, and 2% were undecided. The high level of agreement suggests that respondents recognize the role of SALW in escalating violent crimes such as armed robbery and kidnapping. Criminals, emboldened

by the easy access to sophisticated weapons, are able to carry out attacks with greater impunity, further worsening the state of insecurity in the country.

The final statement addresses how the presence of small arms and light weapons has worsened the herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. Here, 57% strongly agreed, while 27% agreed, bringing total agreement to 84%. Meanwhile, 6% disagreed, 7% strongly disagreed, and 3% remained undecided. This overwhelming agreement highlights that the availability of illicit weapons has transformed farmer-herder disputes from minor skirmishes into full-blown violent confrontations. The easy access to firearms has led to a high casualty rate, displacement of communities, and deepening animosities between affected groups.

The implications of this analysis are dire for Nigeria's internal security. The widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons has created a vicious cycle of violence, making it increasingly difficult for security agencies to restore order. Ethnic conflicts, terrorism, political violence, armed robbery, and farmer-herder clashes have all intensified due to the availability of illicit weapons, undermining national stability and economic growth.

To complement the above responses, an interview was conducted with key officials of the selected organizations. From the investigation, the findings show that spread of small arms and light weapons is a major threat to Nigeria’s security. An officer from the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department of ECOWAS Commission confirmed that;

> These weapons fuel violence, criminal activities, and insurgencies. The easy availability of arms allows armed groups and criminals to attack communities and security forces. It also worsens conflicts and slows development. ECOWAS has laws to control arms movement, but enforcement is weak. Stronger border security, better tracking systems, and regional cooperation are needed to stop the illegal arms trade (Field Survey, 2024).

A senior officer from the Investigation and Intelligence Unit of the Nigeria Immigration Service explained that:

> Illegal arms smuggling is worsening Nigeria’s insecurity. Many weapons enter through porous borders, helping criminals and terrorists operate freely. These arms make kidnappings, armed robberies, and communal clashes more violent. Security agencies work hard to track and intercept illegal weapons, but smugglers find new ways to bypass checks.

> Strengthening border patrols, using technology, and improving intelligence sharing between agencies will reduce arms trafficking and help restore peace in affected regions (Field Survey, 2024).

A member of the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) highlighted that:

> The uncontrolled flow of small arms is deepening insecurity in Nigeria. Armed groups, bandits, and political thugs use these weapons to terrorize citizens, weaken governance, and disrupt elections. The government's response has been slow, and corruption makes enforcement difficult. CISLAC pushes for stricter gun control laws, better tracking of weapons, and accountability for those involved in illegal arms trade. If the government prioritizes disarmament and arms control, Nigeria can reduce violence and improve security (Field Survey, 2024).

However, data from the secondary sources indicate that the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has significantly compromised Nigeria's internal security. Estimates suggest that over 6 million SALW are in the hands of civilian non-state actors in Nigeria, while the combined arsenal of the military and law enforcement is approximately 586,600 firearms (Small Arms Survey, 2021). This disparity underscores the challenges faced by security agencies in maintaining order.

The proliferation of these weapons has led to a surge in violent crimes, including armed robbery, kidnapping, and communal clashes. For instance, in December 2024, armed men abducted at least 50 people in Maradun, Zamfara State, highlighting the persistent threat posed by well-armed criminal groups (Associated Press, 2024). Similarly, in January 2025, a confrontation in Borno State resulted in the deaths of six soldiers and 34 insurgents, illustrating the ongoing challenges in combating insurgency (Associated Press, 2025).

The porous nature of Nigeria's borders has facilitated the influx of SALW, exacerbating internal conflicts. A report by the Small Arms Survey (2021) indicates that locally manufactured arms contribute significantly to the weapons in circulation, particularly in regions like Benue and Plateau States, where over 50% of crimes involve such arms. This local production, combined with smuggling, has intensified conflicts between farmers and herders, leading to mass displacements and loss of lives.

The impact of SALW proliferation extends beyond immediate violence. It undermines public confidence in security institutions, disrupts economic activities, and hampers development efforts. The widespread availability of these weapons has emboldened various non-state actors, challenging the state's monopoly on the use of force and threatening national cohesion.

Table 1.2: Respondents' view on the effectiveness of measures employed to mitigate the threat of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in Nigeria

Responses	SA	A	U	D	SD
The Nigerian government has implemented effective policies to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.	134 (62%)	37 (17%)	3 (1%)	21 (10%)	20 (9%)
Security agencies are adequately equipped to prevent the illegal circulation of small arms and light weapons.	80 (37%)	74 (34%)	4 (2%)	25 (12%)	32 (15%)
Corruption among security agencies hampers the effectiveness of measures to prevent small arms and light weapons proliferation.	163 (76%)	34 (16%)	2 (1%)	6 (3%)	10 (5%)
The judicial system ensures strict penalties for those involved in the illegal trade of small arms and light weapons.	8 (4%)	9 (4%)	4 (2%)	159 (73%)	35 (16%)
There is sufficient collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organizations in addressing arms proliferation.	24 (11%)	30 (14%)	5 (2%)	95 (44%)	61 (28%)

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 1.2 above presents respondents' views on the effectiveness of measures employed to mitigate the threat of small arms and light weapons (SALW) proliferation in Nigeria. The first statement assesses whether the Nigerian government has implemented effective policies to curb this proliferation. A significant majority of respondents, 62%, strongly agreed (SA), while 17% agreed (A), indicating that 79% of respondents believe the government has been proactive. However, 10% disagreed (D) and 9% strongly disagreed (SD), totaling 19% of respondents who feel otherwise. This suggests that while there is a perception that the government has taken steps to address the issue, a substantial minority remains unconvinced of their effectiveness.

Regarding the adequacy of security agencies in preventing the illegal circulation of SALW, 37% strongly agreed, and 34% agreed, amounting to 71% of respondents who consider security agencies equipped for the task. However, 12% disagreed, and 15% strongly disagreed, totaling 27% who doubt the sufficiency of resources available to these agencies. The 2% who were undecided (U) suggest a minor level of uncertainty among respondents. These figures indicate a generally positive perception of security agencies' capabilities, though a significant portion of respondents still question their effectiveness.

A critical concern is the impact of corruption among security agencies on efforts to prevent SALW proliferation. Here, 76% strongly agreed, and 16% agreed, culminating in a staggering 92% of respondents

acknowledging corruption as a major impediment. Only 3% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed, showing that a negligible portion of respondents dismisses corruption's influence. These statistics highlight a pervasive lack of confidence in the integrity of security agencies, suggesting that even if policies exist, their implementation may be undermined by corrupt practices.

The fourth statement assesses the effectiveness of the judicial system in ensuring strict penalties for individuals involved in the illegal arms trade. Responses reveal a strong lack of confidence in the judicial system, as 73% disagreed and 16% strongly disagreed, making up an overwhelming 89% negative perception. Only 4% strongly agreed and another 4% agreed, while 2% remained undecided. These figures suggest that the judicial system is widely perceived as ineffective in enforcing stringent legal consequences against offenders, thereby reducing the deterrent effect of legal penalties.

Collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in addressing arms proliferation is met with a largely negative perception. Only 11% strongly agreed, and 14% agreed, making up 25% who believe there is sufficient collaboration. In contrast, 44% disagreed, and 28% strongly disagreed, a total of 72% who find the collaboration inadequate. The remaining 2% were undecided. This overwhelming negative response suggests a significant gap in coordinated efforts between government bodies and NGOs, which could hinder comprehensive action against SALW proliferation.

The implications of this analysis are profound. While respondents acknowledge that the Nigerian government has implemented policies and that the judicial system enforces strict penalties, corruption among security agencies is seen as a major obstacle. The overwhelmingly negative view of the judiciary's role points to a need for comprehensive judicial reforms to ensure stringent penalties for illegal arms dealers. Moreover, the lack of effective collaboration between government agencies and NGOs indicates that efforts to curb SALW proliferation are fragmented. To improve effectiveness, policies must address corruption within security agencies, strengthen inter-agency and NGO collaboration, and ensure that judicial measures serve as a genuine deterrent to illicit arms trade.

However, an interview was conducted with Officer from the Department of Enforcement and Inspection, Nigeria Customs Service. The officer explained that:

> The agency has been working hard to stop the illegal entry of small arms and light weapons into Nigeria. He said customs officers carry out strict border checks, use scanners, and rely on intelligence to seize illegal arms. However, he admitted that smugglers still find ways to bring in weapons through weak border points. He believes better technology, stronger cooperation with other agencies, and more manpower will improve the fight against arms smuggling (Field Survey, 2024).

An officer from the Investigation and Intelligence Department of the Nigerian Police Force shared that:

> the police are tracking down illegal arms suppliers and working with communities to recover weapons. He mentioned that arrests have been made, but some criminals still manage to hide

> their weapons. He believes that enforcing stricter gun laws and increasing police patrols in hotspots will help. While efforts have led to some success, he admitted that corruption and weak enforcement make it difficult to stop arms from spreading completely. He called for more government support and tougher penalties for offenders (Field Survey, 2024).

A personnel from the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons said the agency is working to control illegal arms through policies, awareness programs, and partnerships with security forces. He stated that:

> The centre collects and destroys illegal weapons and also tracks arms sources. However, he pointed out that many weapons are still in circulation, fueling crime and conflict. He emphasized the need for better border security, regional cooperation, and educating the public about the dangers of illegal arms. He believes stronger laws and better enforcement will improve the situation (Field Survey, 2024).

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria remains a significant challenge, despite various measures implemented to curb their spread. Efforts such as the 2009 amnesty program aimed at disarming militants in the Niger Delta initially saw some success, with increased oil production and the surrender of a limited number of arms. However, this success was short-lived, as the government failed to address the underlying economic injustices driving the agitation, leading to a resurgence of militancy and continued proliferation of SALWs (The Nation, 2025).

In 2016, the Presidential Committee on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PRESCOM) conducted the National Small Arms and Light Weapons Survey (NSALWS) to assess the prevalence and impact of SALWs in Nigeria. The survey revealed that firearms-fueled armed violence was a significant concern among Nigerians, with variations across regions. Despite poor security in many communities, most Nigerians did not feel the need to own weapons and were unaware of the sources of firearms. The survey highlighted the importance of addressing structural conditions such as poverty and insecurity to effectively limit arms proliferation (Small Arms Survey, 2021).

Despite these initiatives, SALWs continue to thrive in Nigeria due to systemic weaknesses. Corruption within security agencies hampers effective enforcement of arms control measures. For instance, some security personnel have been implicated in the illegal sale of arms, thereby undermining disarmament efforts (Malami, Abdullah & Yusoff, 2021). Additionally, Nigeria's porous borders facilitate the smuggling of weapons into the country. A report indicated that there are over 1,400 illegal routes through which arms are trafficked, exacerbating the proliferation problem (The Nation, 2021).

Furthermore, inadequate data management impedes the tracking and control of firearms. The Auditor General's report in 2021 revealed that records of 178,459 firearms were unaccounted for, raising concerns about the management of the nation's armory (The Street Journal, 2021). This lack of accountability allows for the diversion of arms to unauthorized users.

Local manufacturing of firearms also poses a significant challenge. Small-scale illegal production contributes substantially to the number of weapons in circulation. In regions like the North Central zone, locally made weapons are estimated to be used in over 50% of crimes committed (The Nation, 2021).

Discussion Of Findings

The first objective of this paper seeks to examine the impact of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) on Nigeria's internal security. Findings from respondents indicate that the widespread availability of SALW has significantly contributed to the rise of violent crimes, armed conflicts, and terrorism across the country. Many respondents emphasized that the easy accessibility of illicit firearms has fueled criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and communal clashes, making it difficult for security agencies to maintain law and order. A major factor highlighted by respondents is the porous nature of Nigeria's borders, which allows for the unchecked inflow of illegal arms from neighboring countries. Additionally, weak enforcement mechanisms and corruption within security agencies were identified as key contributors to the proliferation of SALW. These findings align with Adebayo (2021), who argues that the widespread availability of small arms has exacerbated Nigeria's security challenges. Adebayo's study highlights the role of ineffective border controls and institutional corruption in facilitating the circulation of illicit weapons, which ultimately empowers criminal groups and insurgents, making internal security more fragile. Respondents in this study also pointed out that the inability of law enforcement agencies to effectively track and confiscate illegal arms further deepens the crisis, as criminal elements continue to operate with impunity.

The second objective focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of measures employed to mitigate the threat of SALW proliferation in Nigeria. Respondents acknowledged that while legal frameworks such as the Firearms Act and international collaborations like the ECOWAS Convention on SALW exist, their enforcement remains largely ineffective. Many cited corruption, political interference, and inadequate surveillance infrastructure as major obstacles to effective arms control. Furthermore, respondents emphasized that security agencies often lack the necessary resources and political will to implement existing policies effectively, leading to a continuous influx of illegal arms. These findings are consistent with Ojo (2022), who argues that despite Nigeria's participation in regional and international arms control initiatives, enforcement gaps persist due to systemic corruption and weak governance structures. Ojo's study further highlights that political elites sometimes exploit security loopholes for personal or political gains, thereby undermining efforts to curb arms proliferation. Respondents in this study similarly observed that arms trafficking networks often operate with the connivance of influential figures within the political and security establishments, making it difficult to dismantle such operations. As a result, efforts to combat SALW proliferation remain largely ineffective, exacerbating Nigeria's internal security challenges.

Conclusion

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) remains a critical challenge to Nigeria's internal security, significantly exacerbating the nation's socio-political instability. This study has thoroughly examined the multifaceted impact of SALW on Nigeria's internal security dynamics, highlighting its role in fueling violence, insurgency, banditry, and communal conflicts. The findings reveal that the widespread availability of SALW has not only intensified the scale and lethality of violent crimes but has also undermined the authority of the state, eroded public trust in security institutions, and aggravated human rights abuses.

Key drivers of SALW proliferation in Nigeria include porous borders, ineffective arms control policies, corruption, and the socio-economic conditions that foster demand for these weapons. The study underscores the cyclical relationship between insecurity and SALW proliferation: insecurity drives arms acquisition, while the influx of arms further deepens insecurity. This vicious cycle perpetuates an environment conducive to criminality, terrorism, and armed conflicts.

To address this menace, policy and strategic interventions were employed by the Nigerian government, this includes the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW), arms buyback programs, and security sector reforms aimed at improving enforcement capacity. In addition, the government has intensified efforts to partner with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to implement its Convention on SALW and bolster cross-border surveillance mechanisms. Despite these interventions, challenges persist due to corruption, political interference, and the continuous demand for weapons by armed groups. The study underscores the need for sustained commitment, accountability, and robust international cooperation to effectively tackle this multifaceted issue and restore peace and security in Nigeria.

Recommendations

In view of the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to address the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and its impact on Nigeria's internal security:

1. To effectively address the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Nigeria and its impact on internal security, the government must strengthen border control mechanisms and enhance security sector accountability. Given that porous borders and weak enforcement mechanisms facilitate the inflow of illicit arms, a comprehensive approach involving advanced surveillance technology, increased border personnel, and inter-agency collaboration is necessary. Additionally, Nigeria should strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries to implement joint border security initiatives and intelligence-sharing frameworks. Enhancing transparency and accountability within security agencies is equally crucial. Establishing independent oversight bodies to monitor arms control efforts and ensuring strict

consequences for corrupt officials will help mitigate the role of corruption in sustaining illegal arms circulation.

2. Furthermore, the effectiveness of legislative measures against SALW proliferation can be improved through stricter enforcement and depoliticization of security policies. While existing laws and policies provide a framework for arms control, political interference and weak institutional enforcement hinder their impact. Strengthening the judiciary to expedite arms-related cases, enforcing mandatory firearm registration, and implementing stricter penalties for illegal possession will deter arms trafficking. Additionally, fostering community engagement through disarmament programs, arms buy-back initiatives, and awareness campaigns will help reduce civilian weapon stockpiles. Addressing the socio-economic drivers of armed violence, such as poverty and unemployment, will further reduce reliance on illicit arms for survival, contributing to sustainable security improvements.

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