

PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS (SALW) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE NIGERIA NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract: The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria poses a significant threat to national security and undermines socioeconomic development. This study explores the root causes, consequences, and potential responses to the growing presence and illicit circulation of SALW across the country. Guided by the Failed State Theory and employing a qualitative research design based predominantly on secondary data, the research identifies the key drivers of arms proliferation as porous national borders, institutional weaknesses, endemic political corruption, and the operations of insurgent and criminal networks. The analysis reveals that the widespread availability of these weapons has intensified security threats, fueling insurgencies, militant activities, and organized crime. Moreover, the socioeconomic fallout includes disruptions in agricultural productivity, trade, and investment, all of which contribute to rising poverty levels and hinder development efforts. The study concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for multidimensional, holistic, and strategic interventions to tackle the systemic issues that enable the spread of SALW in Nigeria.

Keywords: SALW, Failed State Theory, Porous Borders, National Security, Nigeria

1. Introduction

National security and state sovereignty are intrinsically tied to a country's ability to control and regulate its borders. Effective border governance over land, air, and maritime entry points is critical not only for regulating legitimate movement and mitigating transnational security threats. However, in Nigeria, border management remains one of the most significant internal security challenges. With approximately 10,000 unofficial and unmonitored routes crisscrossing its borders, Nigeria has become increasingly vulnerable to illicit cross-border activities, including arms trafficking, human smuggling, and the movement of non-state armed actors (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). This structural weakness in border governance has directly facilitated the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), contributing to a surge in banditry, insurgency, election violence, and communal conflicts across the federation.

While border porosity has often been highlighted as the primary enabler of arms proliferation, a holistic understanding of the crisis requires a deeper interrogation of the economic, political, and social contexts that drive both the demand and supply of illicit weaponry. On the demand side, Nigeria's deteriorating socio-economic landscape, marked by high levels of poverty, youth unemployment, regional inequality, and political disenfranchisement, has spurred the emergence and growth of various non-state armed groups. These include

Islamist insurgents such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, ethno-nationalist militias like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and criminal networks involved in mass abductions, extortion, and trafficking. These actors rely heavily on SALWs to challenge state authority, control territory, and enforce their agendas, creating a persistent demand for firearms (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). On the supply side, Nigeria's geopolitical position in West Africa places it in close proximity to conflict-ridden states, including post-conflict Libya, Mali, and the Sahelian corridor, which serve as primary sources of SALWs. Weapons trafficked from these unstable regions exploit Nigeria's poorly regulated frontiers and are often funneled through transnational criminal networks that evade detection and prosecution. Moreover, internal sources such as weapons diversion from national security agencies, oil-for-arms exchanges in the Niger Delta, and arms recycling by political militias intensify the proliferation crisis. In the oil-producing Niger Delta, the arms economy is linked to resource exploitation, where armed groups trade crude oil for weapons with the involvement of retired military officers and local political elites (Egobueze, 2025). The circulation of illicit weapons has had a cascading effect on Nigeria's security dynamics. Armed groups have employed SALWs to intensify attacks on civilian populations, disrupt elections, and perform kidnappings for ransom. The impact is especially severe in regions such as the Middle Belt, where long-standing farmer-herder tensions have evolved into deadly clashes, with both sides arming themselves for protection and retaliation. According to IFPRI (2025) and Crisis Group (2018), these encounters often result in mass casualties and prolonged cycles of communal violence. Similarly, in the northern states, notorious bandit leaders like Bello Turji and Buhari Daji have built criminal empires based on SALW access, undermining the state's presence and public confidence in security institutions. Despite an expanding body of literature, existing research has largely focused on Nigeria's porous borders as the singular driver of arms proliferation. However, Amali and Buthelezi (2025) contend that such an approach overlooks the multi-layered political economy of SALWs, where border governance failures intersect with deep-seated socio-political grievances and regional instability. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge that analytical gap by addressing the following research question: How does border porosity facilitate the inflow and circulation of illicit arms?

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria has produced far-reaching and deeply destabilizing consequences for national and regional security. The widespread availability of these weapons has not only escalated the frequency and intensity of violent incidents but also contributed to the prolongation of armed conflicts. Communal clashes, insurgent activities, and criminal violence have become significantly more lethal due to the ready accessibility of SALWs, particularly in conflict-prone regions such as the Northeast and North-Central zones of Nigeria. Empirical findings by Yusuf and Musa (2021) underscore that the presence of these arms tends to increase both the duration of conflicts and their casualty toll, creating a vicious cycle of violence and instability. Beyond direct conflict impacts, the proliferation of SALWs has intensified broader humanitarian crises. These include large-scale internal displacement, as civilians flee violence-affected areas, as well as widespread violations of human rights, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and forced recruitment into armed groups. The pervasive insecurity fueled by SALWs has also led to a significant erosion of public confidence in state institutions, particularly in law enforcement and security agencies' capacity to maintain law and order. Communities increasingly turn to vigilante groups and informal security arrangements, which often further complicate security dynamics.

In response to this growing threat, Nigeria has implemented several policy and institutional measures. Notably, the country ratified the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and Other

Related Materials in 2006, which seeks to harmonize regional approaches to arms control. Domestically, the creation of the National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons represents a key institutional effort to coordinate disarmament, arms regulation, and public awareness campaigns. Despite these initiatives, structural and operational shortcomings continue to limit progress. Scholars, such as Akinyemi and Adeoye (2022), point to a persistent lack of political will and inadequate funding as major barriers. Furthermore, the absence of robust regional cooperation and intelligence-sharing mechanisms hampers effective border monitoring and arms interception. These weaknesses are compounded by corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency, which undermine enforcement efforts and enable continued arms trafficking across porous national boundaries. While Nigeria has taken important steps to confront the proliferation of SALWs, the scale and complexity of the problem demand more comprehensive, well-funded, and politically committed strategies at the national and regional levels to ensure meaningful progress and long-term stability. By examining these interconnected variables, this study aims to contribute to the design of more effective and sustainable policy interventions. It argues that curbing SALW proliferation requires not only strengthening physical border security but also targeted responses to the economic, political, and ideological conditions that foster the demand for armed violence. Nigeria can only hope to mitigate the destabilizing impacts of illicit arms on national security and community resilience through such a comprehensive approach.

2. Literature Review: Understanding SALW Dynamics in Nigeria

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), as defined by the United Nations, include any portable lethal weapon that discharges a projectile through an explosive action. This broad category includes rifles, pistols, submachine guns, and other easily transportable firearms. The 1997 United Nations "Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms" emphasizes SALWs' lightweight design, portability, and lethality of SALWs, which significantly facilitate their misuse in regions affected by conflict and insecurity (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). The proliferation of SALWs has profound implications for global and national security, particularly in weakly institutionalized states. Nigeria exemplifies this vulnerability, with scholars attributing the widespread availability of SALWs to porous borders, inefficient regulatory enforcement, and deeply entrenched corruption (Afuzie, 2025; Atidoga, Yakubu, & Lamidi, 2024). These gaps have allowed transnational arms trafficking networks to thrive, worsening internal insecurity and contributing to a cycle of armed violence.

The challenges posed by SALW proliferation are not solely logistical or infrastructural. Many scholars argue that underlying socioeconomic grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion, further fuel the misuse of these weapons (Usman, Matthew, & Aho, n.d.). Thus, efforts to regulate arms must be holistic, addressing the physical flow of weapons and the sociopolitical environments that incentivize their use. Nigeria's commitment to international frameworks, such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), is noteworthy but insufficient. The lack of political will and operational capacity has undermined the country's ability to effectively implement these agreements. Challenges such as limited surveillance technologies, overlapping jurisdiction among security agencies, and persistent political resistance hinder enforcement efforts (Bassey, Arikpo, & Edet, 2025; Andrew, Ochaja, & Asala, 2024.). Given the dual nature of the arms trade, which spans both licit and illicit networks, regulation demands robust international collaboration and localized strategies. Border security alone is inadequate; instead, a blend of intelligence-sharing, community-based disarmament, and evidence-driven peacebuilding initiatives is essential to dismantle the conditions sustaining SALW proliferation (Fatima, 2016).

The proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria is underpinned by a complex interplay of porous borders, weak institutional capacities, and systemic governance failures. Nigeria's vast, unguarded frontiers, particularly in the northern regions, serve as conduits for arms trafficking, a vulnerability exacerbated by minimal inter-agency coordination and corrupt border enforcement (Sule, Mikail, & Yahaya, 2020). Political instability and the lack of robust regulatory mechanisms compound the challenge, facilitating both the inflow and local circulation of illicit weaponry (Adejumo, Owa, & Peter, 2021; Bankale & Uchegbu, 2021). SALW proliferation aggravates regional and ethnic tensions, particularly in conflict-prone zones such as the northeast and northwest. Ethno-political militias and insurgent groups have intensified communal clashes, resulting in the erosion of trust in formal security institutions (Owa, 2021; Bassey, Arikpo, & Edet, 2025.). In Adamawa State and similar areas, civilians increasingly adopt self-defense strategies, further driving informal arms markets.

The proliferation of SALWs imposes dire humanitarian and developmental consequences. Armed violence has displaced millions of people and disrupted agriculture, trade, and education, especially in rural areas. Communities suffer from persistent fear and insecurity, which erodes economic productivity and amplifies poverty levels (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025; Afuzie, 2025). Illicit arms are frequently deployed in the context of electoral violence. Politicians exploit armed youth militias to intimidate opponents and manipulate outcomes during election cycles. These weapons often re-enter criminal networks after the election, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence (Fatima, 2016; Abubakar, 2007). Despite Nigeria's ratification of international frameworks like the ECOWAS Convention on SALWs, its enforcement is grossly inadequate. Key challenges include weak legal implementation, inter-agency rivalry, and a lack of political will to enact critical reforms (Malami, 2020). Poor monitoring, limited border technologies, and underfunded regulatory agencies further impair effective arms control (Bankale & Uchegbu, 2021). The proposed remedies emphasize strengthening institutional frameworks, leveraging border control technology, and fostering regional collaboration. Agendas for reform include arms biometric tracking, international cooperation on intelligence sharing, and peacebuilding initiatives to empower local communities (Sule et al., 2020; Afuzie, 2025).

Adebayo (2017) employed a quantitative methodology to identify the primary drivers behind the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria. Drawing on survey data from the Middle Belt region, the study found that inadequate border surveillance (65%), political unrest (55%), and ongoing insurgency (45%) were the most influential contributing factors. The research emphasized that Nigeria's extensive and porous borders, particularly those shared with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, serve as significant channels for the illegal inflow of arms, facilitated by persistent instability in those neighboring countries. Building on this, Aluko and Ajala (2021) examined the broader West African context, focusing on the role of transnational criminal networks in fueling arms proliferation. Utilizing secondary data from global organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), their analysis revealed that over 70% of illegal arms circulating within Nigeria were trafficked via transnational smuggling routes. The Sahel region was identified as a key hub due to its geopolitical volatility and poorly regulated cross-border trade.

Eze (2020) focused on the local implications of SALW proliferation, specifically its correlation with escalating communal violence in Nigeria's North-Central region. Through a series of case studies in the Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa states, the study demonstrated a strong link between the availability of illicit arms and the recurrence of violent clashes between farmers and herders. Strikingly, 78% of these conflicts involved the use of SALWs, which were often obtained either through underground markets or through unregulated local manufacturing.

Similarly, Yusuf and Musa (2021) explored the intersection of arms proliferation and organized violence. Based on interviews with security operatives and local leaders in Borno and Zamfara states, the study found that militant groups such as Boko Haram, as well as criminal bandit networks, relied heavily on SALWs sourced through smuggling operations, battlefield captures, and corrupt officials within the national security apparatus. The socioeconomic consequences of SALW diffusion were highlighted in Ogundele's (2020) study of the Niger Delta. Through household-level surveys and interviews with stakeholders in the oil industry, the research uncovered that SALW-facilitated armed militant activity had significantly disrupted economic operations. In particular, attacks on oil infrastructure led to annual financial losses exceeding \$2 billion, severely undermining national revenue streams.

Complementing this, Okeke (2019) investigated the economic toll of SALW-related violence on Nigeria's agricultural sector. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study found that the widespread displacement of farming communities due to armed conflict had led to a 30% decline in agricultural productivity in the most affected regions. Amnesty International (2020) provided a critical human rights perspective on the issue. Their report, grounded in extensive field documentation, revealed that 65% of recorded abuses, including mass killings, sexual assaults, and forced displacements, were perpetrated by SALWs. Notably, 20% of the documented violations were attributed to the state security forces' excessive use of force, underscoring the dual nature of the threat posed by both state and non-state actors. This synthesized account reveals how the availability and misuse of SALWs not only escalates insecurity but also exerts profound socioeconomic, political, and humanitarian impacts across Nigeria. Each study illustrates the urgent need for comprehensive disarmament strategies, improved border governance, and national and regional regulatory reforms.

3. Theoretical Framework: Failed State Theory

The FST offers a compelling analytical framework for examining the decomposition of governmental institutions and its wide-reaching consequences for national stability and human security. According to this theory, a state can be categorized as "failed" or "fragile" when it loses the capacity or political will to fulfill its fundamental responsibilities. These responsibilities encompass the enforcement of the rule of law, provision of public services, maintenance of internal peace and security, and preservation of territorial integrity through the legitimate monopoly on the use of force (Rotberg, 2004). The erosion of these state functions typically arises from a combination of internal and external stressors, such as entrenched corruption, political volatility, economic stagnation or collapse, and violent conflict. Rotberg (2004) emphasized that one of the most telling indicators of state failure is the breakdown of central authority, which often manifests in an inability to control borders and maintain order within the state's territory. Non-state actors, including insurgent groups, terrorist networks, ethnic militias, and organized criminal enterprises, exploit institutional frailty to assert their own forms of power. These actors frequently operate through violence and coercion, relying heavily on illicit arms markets to procure Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), thereby compounding insecurity and undermining whatever remnants of state control remain (Patrick, 2011; Ghani & Lockhart, 2008). In contexts marked by state fragility, the lack of an effective rule of law fosters an environment in which impunity thrives. Citizens, disillusioned with the state's inability to provide physical protection and justice, may turn to alternative security providers or arm themselves as a means of self-preservation (Call, 2010). This reactive militarization among civilian populations further intensifies the cycle of violence and institutional degradation. As conflict escalates, the legitimacy of the state

erodes even more, perpetuating a downward spiral where governance becomes increasingly ineffective and fragmented (Zartman, 1995).

Nigeria stands as a quintessential example of such dynamics. The Nigerian state has persistently struggled to govern large swathes of its territory, particularly in the northeast where the Boko Haram insurgency persists, the Northwest where armed banditry is rife, and the Niger Delta where militant groups engage in violence linked to resource control. In these regions, the government's inability to secure national borders has facilitated the inflow of SALW. Weapons often enter the country through porous routes and are disseminated through informal, often illicit, networks (Olawale et al., 2024; Oghuvbu, 2020). The circulation of these arms not only heightens the frequency and lethality of violent encounters but also highlights the intrinsic link between state fragility and proliferation of arms. Further compounding the problem is the outdated nature of Nigeria's firearms legislation, the lack of robust enforcement mechanisms, and endemic corruption within the country's security agencies. These systemic flaws have created a permissive environment in which SALW trafficking and possession flourish relatively unchecked (Olanrewaju et al., 2022). Consequently, non-state actors, including vigilante groups and insurgent factions, have filled the governance void left by the retreating state. Their rise underscores the privatization of security and decentralization of authority, phenomena extensively documented by scholars like Menkhaus (2007) and Kaplan (1994). In Nigeria, this erosion of centralized authority has resulted in widespread violence, massive population displacement, and the normalization of armed conflict as a tool for expressing grievances or securing resources. Therefore, FST not only helps to contextualize the proliferation of SALW in Nigeria but also frames it as a symptom of deeper, systemic failures in governance. This study reveals the intricate ways in which institutional decay, weak rule of law, and insecurity are interlinked, offering a comprehensive lens for understanding the multifaceted challenges of state fragility.

4. Porous Borders, Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), and National Security in Nigeria

Nigeria's national security landscape is increasingly shaped by the persistent challenge of porous borders, which have emerged as a critical vector for the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs). These borders stretch across approximately 4,477 kilometers and are shared with Niger to the north, Chad and Cameroon to the east, and Benin to the west. This geographical vulnerability has enabled transnational criminal networks, insurgent groups, and arms traffickers to exploit Nigeria's frontier zones, resulting in far-reaching implications for internal security, regional stability, and human development (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). While institutions such as the Nigeria National Boundary Commission (NNBC), the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), and the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) have been mandated to safeguard and regulate the borders, their efforts have often been inconsistent and reactive rather than strategic. These agencies have recorded some successes, including occasional weapons and contraband interdictions. For instance, the NCS intercepted illegal arms shipments en route to insurgent groups in the Northeast. However, these victories are overshadowed by significant failures. The protracted and ultimately unfavorable resolution of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute with Cameroon is a case in point. Analysts have attributed Nigeria's loss of this vital territory, in part, to the failure of the NNBC to undertake timely border surveys and enforce demarcation agreements, ceding strategic leverage to international arbitration mechanisms (Ebonyi, 2021).

Arms trafficking remains rampant despite the legal frameworks and enforcement bodies in place. Corruption among some border enforcement officials, coupled with the absence of effective inter-agency coordination, has created loopholes that traffickers readily exploit. Insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and its splinter faction,

the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have capitalized on these weaknesses. These groups have developed sophisticated logistical networks that allow fighters and arms to flow in and out of Nigeria with minimal detection. This operational flexibility has enabled them to execute cross-border attacks, retreat into neighboring states, and regroup without significant interruption from Nigerian security forces (Odey, Bassey, & Ikhwan, 2022). The implications of porous borders extend far beyond conventional military threats. Border communities have been deeply affected by violence, instability, and socioeconomic deprivation. These regions often serve as recruitment hubs for terrorist organizations and criminal syndicates, largely because of their marginalization and limited state presence. In addition to arms trafficking, these corridors are used for smuggling narcotics, human trafficking, and unregulated commerce. The trafficking of women and children, particularly for sexual exploitation and forced labor, has been reported in border towns in Jigawa State, such as Babura and Mai'gatari. These activities not only violate human rights but also contribute to the spread of communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS, which often accompany the return of trafficked individuals (Onuoha et al., 2021); (Nte, 2011).

Economically, the porousness of Nigeria's borders has dire consequences. Smuggled goods influx undermines domestic industries and deprives the government of crucial custom revenue. Estimates show that billions of naira are lost annually due to illicit trade that bypasses official channels. The thriving black market for petroleum products further exacerbates the situation. Unchecked cross-border movements facilitate oil theft and illegal bunkering, representing a significant form of economic sabotage. These activities divert national resources into the hands of private actors, often with ties to transnational criminal networks, weakening the government's capacity to finance development, healthcare, education, and security initiatives (Malam, 2014). Given the multiplicity of threats and the depth of their societal impacts, Nigeria's border security must be reframed as an integrated component of national resilience spanning defense, economic development, and human security. Scholars and policymakers have increasingly called for a holistic approach that moves beyond border post construction or personnel deployment. Effective border governance must incorporate advanced surveillance technologies, such as drones and biometric systems, cross-border intelligence sharing among West African states, and inclusive governance and economic incentives to empower local communities. Strategic partnerships with regional bodies like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), can further amplify collective border management frameworks (Aja, 2024). In conclusion, Nigeria's porous borders represent a multidimensional crisis that demands a nuanced, multi-agency, and regional response. Securing these borders is not merely a military objective but a prerequisite for economic sovereignty, human dignity, and sustainable peace in Nigeria and its neighboring states.

5. Illicit SALW Proliferation in Nigeria: Internal and External Dimensions

5.1. Internal Diversion by Security Forces: The Crisis of Integrity

A critical yet often understated driver of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) proliferation in Nigeria is the internal diversion of weapons from state armories. This issue strikes at the very core of national security, revealing systemic flaws in Nigeria's defense and law enforcement architecture in terms of accountability, oversight, and integrity. Active and retired members of the security services, including the military, police, and paramilitary agencies, have been implicated in facilitating or directly engaging in the unauthorized transfer of state-issued weapons to unauthorized individuals and non-state actors (Afuzie, 2025; Onuoha, 2011). These diversions are not incidental but often systematic, leveraging weak inventory controls, inadequate record-keeping, and a lack of

transparent audits in the handling of national armories. State-controlled weapons, originally procured for legitimate defense purposes, are frequently redirected to criminal syndicates, armed militias, and political thugs, either for monetary gain or as tools for political manipulation (Okeke & Oji, 2014; Edeko, 2021). The porous nature of Nigeria's arms management framework has made it difficult to trace missing weapons or hold perpetrators accountable, fostering a culture of impunity within security institutions (Ikelegbe, 2005).

A historically significant contributor to this problem is the mismanagement of legacy stockpiles from the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), many of which were never properly decommissioned or documented. These arms have resurfaced in various regional conflicts, demonstrating the long-term risks posed by poorly secured arsenals (Mordi, 2013). Additionally, weapons brought back from Nigerian military peacekeeping missions abroad, particularly from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, have also found their way into local black markets due to the absence of comprehensive post-mission disarmament protocols (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Onuoha, 2014). In 2002, former President Olusegun Obasanjo acknowledged that a large proportion of arms in civilian possession were originally sourced from Nigeria's security institutions, further validating concerns over internal diversion (Mordi, 2013). This admission highlights the depth of institutional complicity and the pressing need for reform in the security sector. In some instances, security personnel have reportedly rented or sold weapons to criminal groups for use in armed robbery, communal violence, or electoral violence, thus directly undermining the mandate of the institutions they represent (Afuzie, 2025; Ekhomu, 2019). The implications of internal arms diversion are profound. It not only erodes public trust in law enforcement and the military but also emboldens violent non-state actors who gain access to state-grade firepower. Furthermore, the diversion of weapons compromises counter-insurgency efforts, as arms intended for fighting terrorist groups like Boko Haram or bandits in the North-West are often repurposed by the very adversaries they are meant to combat (Edeko, 2021; Salifu & Aning, 2019). To address this integrity crisis, Nigeria must implement robust weapons accountability systems, including biometric tracking, digital inventory databases, and routine forensic audits of armory contents. Moreover, whistleblower protections and independent oversight bodies are essential to breaking the cycle of institutional complicity and restoring credibility to the nation's security apparatus.

5.2. Cross-Border Smuggling: The External Supply Web

Nigeria's extensive international boundaries spanning over 4,000 kilometers, remain insufficiently monitored, rendering it vulnerable to persistent illicit arms inflows. These porous borders, particularly those shared with Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin, have become entrenched corridors for smuggling operations across borders. The inadequacies in border surveillance infrastructure are compounded by widespread institutional corruption, limited inter-agency coordination, and the absence of advanced surveillance technologies (Akinyemi & Ibekwe, 2020; Omitola & Oluwadare, 2019). Transnational criminal networks frequently utilize strategic smuggling routes to exploit geopolitical instability in neighboring states, such as Chad and Niger, where insurgencies and arms proliferation are prevalent. These networks leverage informal trade paths and under-governed border settlements to facilitate the seamless movement of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) into Nigeria (Edeko, 2021; Onuoha, 2011). Border communities, such as Idi-Iroko and Seme in the southwest and Warri in the Niger Delta, as well as frontier towns in Borno and Yobe States, have emerged as critical nodes in the regional arms trade nexus. These locations are favored not only for their proximity to neighboring countries but also for their embedded informal economic networks and the occasional complicity of customs and immigration officers (Tar & Adejoh, 2021; Ibani & Jacobs, n.d.).

The persistence of arms smuggling into Nigeria also reflects regional security deficits and governance challenges. Weak regulatory oversight and fragmented enforcement mechanisms across West Africa have made establishing a unified front against the proliferation of illicit arms. Furthermore, the interplay between local insurgent groups and foreign arms suppliers sustains a mutually beneficial exchange that perpetuates insecurity in Nigeria's northeast and north-central regions (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Salifu & Aning, 2019). Therefore, the smuggling of arms across Nigeria's borders is not merely a local policing issue but a complex transnational security challenge. It necessitates robust bilateral and multilateral cooperation, comprehensive border security reform, the deployment of modern surveillance technologies, and anticorruption initiatives targeting security personnel operating along these borders (Akinyemi & Ibekwe, 2020; Onuoha, 2011).

5.3. Indigenous Manufacturing: A Hidden Industry

Although international attention often centers on the smuggling and importation of foreign-made weapons, indigenous firearm manufacturing has become a critical yet underexplored component of Nigeria's domestic arms proliferation. This clandestine industry, driven by skilled local artisans and blacksmiths, has matured from the production of rudimentary single-shot devices to the assembly of semiautomatic and high-caliber firearms that closely resemble commercially produced weaponry (Okeke & Oji, 2014; Onuoha, 2014). Illicit arms production is particularly prevalent in the southeastern states of Anambra and Enugu, as well as in selected northern regions such as Zamfara and Kaduna. These areas serve as hubs for local gunsmithing enterprises operating in informal economies largely beyond the reach of regulatory authorities (Adebayo, 2019; Olojo, 2013). In these communities, weapons are not only fabricated for criminal syndicates and armed gangs but also used in communal conflicts, political thuggery, and, in some cases, by local vigilante groups seeking to compensate for the failure of state security forces (Aghedo & Eke, 2013). The proliferation of these indigenous weapons manufacturers is symptomatic of Nigeria's security and regulatory institutions' broader structural weaknesses. The ineffective enforcement of the Firearms Act, which prescribes stringent licensing, registration, and monitoring requirements for firearm possession and production, is a key contributor. However, in practice, enforcement remains lax, and illegal arms producers often operate with little fear of prosecution due to poor intelligence gathering, corruption, and logistical constraints within law enforcement agencies (Edeko, 2021; Onuoha, 2011).

This unregulated industry also poses a direct threat to the viability and strategic relevance of the Defense Industries Corporation of Nigeria (DICON) the state-owned military production company. While DICON is tasked with supplying Nigeria's security forces with domestically manufactured arms and ammunition, it has struggled with underfunding, bureaucratic inefficiency, and limited production capacity (Ikelegbe, 2005). In contrast, indigenous arms producers, fueled by high local demand and minimal oversight, can operate flexibly and quickly adapt to the needs of non-state actors. Furthermore, the rise of indigenous arms manufacturing reflects a deeper public disillusionment with the state's ability to provide security. In regions where the presence of the state is weak or contested, communities have increasingly turned to local means for arming themselves either for protection or aggression, further entrenching the informal arms economy (Akinyemi & Ibekwe, 2020; Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). The unregulated spread of locally manufactured weapons significantly contributes to Nigeria's internal security crises, worsening cycles of violence and weakening state authority. Addressing this issue requires a multi-pronged strategy that includes robust enforcement of firearms regulations, investment in community disarmament programs, and the revitalization of the Defense Industry Cooperation Network (DICON) to offer viable alternatives for arms production within a regulated framework.

5.4. Institutional Weaknesses: Governance and Capacity Deficits

The persistent circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) across Nigeria reflects deeper institutional dysfunctions, particularly in governance structures and the operational capacities of security agencies. These challenges are multidimensional, encompassing entrenched corruption, inadequate inter-agency collaboration, and chronic underinvestment in technological and human resource infrastructure (Adeyeye & Awotayo, 2024; Onuoha, 2011). Together, these deficiencies have undermined the state's ability to effectively control arms flows and mitigate the risks associated with arms proliferation. Corruption remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria's security and custom institutions. Security personnel at ports, border posts, and storage facilities have frequently been implicated in the diversion of state-owned arms to non-state actors through bribery, negligence, or active complicity (Alemika, 2013; Edeko, 2021). The lack of transparent accountability frameworks within agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force, Nigerian Customs Service, and the Department of State Services has created opportunities for weapons meant for national defense to leak into illicit markets (Okereke, 2017). Moreover, the absence of effective coordination among key agencies hampers intelligence sharing and joint operational planning. Institutional rivalries, unclear mandates, and overlapping jurisdictions prevent cohesive responses to arms trafficking, enabling smugglers and criminal networks to exploit bureaucratic inertia (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Salifu & Aning, 2019). These structural weaknesses often result in duplicated efforts, delayed responses, and fragmented enforcement strategies.

Nigeria's poor stockpile and arms inventory management are a critical area of concern. Many government-owned weapons caches remain untracked or poorly secured, increasing the likelihood of theft or unauthorized access (UNREC, 2016). The absence of a centralized, digitized arms management system further complicates oversight efforts and limits the government's capacity to audit or trace weapons effectively (Onuoha, 2014; Akinyemi & Ibekwe, 2020). In addition, the country's response has been hindered by limited access to advanced surveillance and tracking technologies. The border security infrastructure remains rudimentary, lacking drones, biometric scanners, or real-time data systems that could aid in monitoring arms flows. These technological deficits are compounded by a lack of political will to prioritize long-term reforms in security governance, often due to vested interests that benefit from maintaining the status quo (Omitola & Oluwadare, 2019; Okoli & Orinya, 2013). Ultimately, these institutional weaknesses not only facilitate the proliferation of illicit arms but also erode public trust in state institutions. When citizens perceive that the state is either unwilling or unable to enforce security and justice, it breeds a culture of self-help, contributing to the demand for arms by individuals, communities, and private militias (Adeyeye & Awotayo, 2024; Aghedo & Eke, 2013).

5.5. Ripple Effects: National Security and Socioeconomic Fallout

The unchecked proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria has unleashed a cascade of security and socioeconomic challenges, fundamentally altering the landscape of national stability and development. The widespread availability of illicit firearms has served as a catalyst for escalating violence, enabling criminal actors and non-state groups to carry out violent acts with unprecedented ease and lethality (Malami, 2020; Onuoha, 2014). One of the most visible manifestations of SALW proliferation is the surge in armed banditry and kidnaping-for-ransom, particularly in the NW and NC regions. Armed groups, many of whom operate from forested hideouts, have leveraged access to sophisticated weaponry to carry out mass abductions, terrorize rural communities, and extort large sums from both individuals and state governments (Aghedo, 2021; Edeko, 2021). This growing insecurity has resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of people and

disrupted agricultural and commercial activities vital to local economies. The long-standing farmer-herder conflict has also intensified because of the proliferation of weapons. What were once disputes over grazing rights have evolved into protracted violent confrontations, exacerbated by ethnic and religious divisions and fueled by the use of automatic rifles and military-grade weapons by both parties (Okoli & Uhembe, 2021). These clashes have not only resulted in thousands of deaths and injuries but have also created deep-rooted mistrust among communities, complicating reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts more complex.

Political violence is another critical dimension impacted by the availability of illicit arms. During electoral cycles, politicians and their proxies arm thugs and local militias to intimidate opponents and manipulate voter turnout, thereby undermining democratic institutions and processes (Okereke, 2017; Onapajo & Uzodike, 2013). The entrenchment of such practices reinforces a culture of impunity and further erodes the legitimacy of the state. From a developmental standpoint, the economic implications of SALW proliferation are profound. Persistent insecurity discourages FDI, disrupts trade routes, and compels the reallocation of public funds from health, education, and infrastructure to military and policing expenditures (Akinyemi & Ibekwe, 2020; Ekhomu, 2019). The indirect costs are also significant: school closures due to insecurity, the collapse of rural livelihoods, and increasing youth involvement in armed groups due to lack of opportunity and state presence. Compounding these challenges is the dearth of reliable data on the number and distribution of illicit weapons in circulation. This data gap severely hinders evidence-based policymaking and prevents the design of targeted interventions or effective disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs (Malami, 2020; UNREC, 2016). Without accurate metrics, security agencies and international partners are forced to rely on anecdotal or fragmented intelligence, resulting in misallocation of resources and poorly calibrated responses. Ultimately, the ripple effects of arms proliferation in Nigeria extend beyond immediate security concerns, embedding themselves in the country's political, economic, and social fabric. A multi-sectoral approach that integrates improved arms control, data collection, security sector reform, and community-based interventions is essential to reverse this dangerous trajectory.

6. Impact of Proliferation of Small Arms in Nigeria

6.1. Escalation of Armed Violence

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has emerged as a critical driver of armed violence and insecurity in Nigeria and the broader West African sub-region. The widespread availability of these weapons has not only prolonged existing conflicts but also intensified their lethality and complexity, making peaceful resolution more difficult. In Nigeria, the saturation of illicit firearms has led to the militarization of communal, ethnic, and political disputes, transforming once-manageable disagreements into deadly confrontations (Adamu et al., 2018; Onuoha, 2014). According to Ban (2015), the unchecked circulation of SALWs has fueled or exacerbated over 250 armed conflicts across Africa in recent decades, resulting in over 50,000 deaths annually have been fueled or intensified by the unchecked circulation of SALWs. In Nigeria, these arms have found their way into the hands of various actors, including insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, separatist militias, bandits, and politically aligned thugs (Awotayo et al., 2022; Edeko, 2021). The result is a rapidly deteriorating security environment characterized by mass killings, abductions, violent extremism, and forced displacement.

Civilians remain the most affected demographic group in this rising tide of armed violence. Women and children face devastating consequences, including sexual violence, economic marginalization, and displacement from

ancestral homes. The internal displacement of populations has risen sharply, with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimating over 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria as of 2023, many of whom have been uprooted due to violence perpetrated with SALWs (IOM, 2023; UNHCR, 2022). The porous nature of Nigeria's borders, combined with weak institutional oversight and high levels of corruption, has allowed militant insurgents, pirates, and organized criminal networks to stockpile weapons with minimal resistance (Salifu & Aning, 2019; Akinyemi & Ibekwe, 2020). Arms trafficking routes across the Sahel and ECOWAS region serve as pipelines through which these weapons flow, creating an intricate web of transnational arms exchange that supports non-state actors in destabilizing entire regions (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2013). West Africa currently hosts an estimated 7–10 million SALWs, with tens of thousands believed to be under the control of insurgent or criminal factions in Nigeria alone (Awotayo et al., 2022; UNREC, 2016). These weapons, which are often more advanced than those issued to local security forces, give non-state actors a tactical edge, enabling them to conduct highly coordinated attacks, establish territorial control, and challenge the sovereignty of the Nigerian state. The persistent rise in armed violence underscores the urgent need for comprehensive disarmament initiatives, strengthened cross-border collaboration, and modern tracking and arms management technologies. Furthermore, regional frameworks like the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons must be rigorously enforced, and national arms control policies should be harmonized with international standards to curb further proliferation (Edeko, 2021; Adamu et al., 2018).

6.2. Oil Bunkering and Arms Financing

The nexus between oil bunkering and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) is a central security concern in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Oil bunkering, defined as the illegal tapping, siphoning, and sale of crude oil from pipelines and export terminals, has evolved into a complex criminal enterprise that fuels armed militancy and destabilizes national and regional security. This illicit industry not only deprives the Nigerian state of billions of dollars in revenue annually but also serves as a financial and logistical conduit for arms trafficking (Agbiboa, 2013; Onuoha, 2011). Militant groups in the Niger Delta, such as the now-fragmented Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and its offshoots, have used proceeds from oil theft to procure sophisticated weaponry, particularly AK-47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and explosives. In many cases, crude oil is a barter commodity, exchanged directly with international arms dealers for weapons and ammunition, a practice that circumvents traditional monetary transactions and leaves minimal forensic trace (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Nwankpa, 2014). This barter system enabled insurgent groups to maintain operational autonomy and replenish their arsenals despite counterinsurgency efforts. The proliferation of arms through oil bunkering is facilitated by the region's difficult terrain mangroves, creeks, and waterways, which enables militants to evade law enforcement and establish hidden supply routes. The complicity of local actors, including corrupt security officials, community elites, and informal oil marketers, further entrenches the illicit economy and weakens state authority (Ikelegbe, 2005; Ojatorotu & Gilbert, 2010).

Notably, the involvement of foreign oil companies in security operations has also contributed to the escalation of armed violence and arms proliferation, albeit indirectly. As Davis, Von Kemedi, and Drennan (2006) argued, these companies have often established parallel security arrangements with private military contractors (PMCs) and local vigilante groups, bypassing national security institutions and regulatory oversight. Such uncoordinated collaborations can lead to the arming of non-state actors under the guise of protecting oil infrastructure, thereby worsening the militarization of the region and eroding the legitimacy of official security forces. The economic

consequences of oil bunkering are equally severe. Nigeria is estimated to lose between 200,000 and 400,000 barrels of oil per day due to theft, translating to billions of dollars in annual losses (NEITI, 2021). This diverts vital resources away from public services and development projects while simultaneously empowering criminal networks. Furthermore, the environmental degradation resulting from frequent oil spills and pipeline sabotage contributes to public discontent, which militants exploit to justify their actions and recruit supporters (Zalik, 2004; Okaba, 2005). Addressing the link between oil bunkering and arms proliferation requires an integrated strategy that combines robust maritime and pipeline surveillance, judicial reform, anticorruption measures, and economic alternatives for local communities. Regulation of private security operations and the enforcement of transparency in oil-sector contracts and community engagement are also required.

6.3. Socioeconomic and Political Consequences

The widespread availability of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria has not only intensified armed conflicts and profoundly destabilized the country's socioeconomic and political systems. Nowhere is this more evident than in the North-East region, particularly in Borno State, where the Boko Haram insurgency sustained and empowered by the illicit proliferation of SALWs has caused immense humanitarian and developmental devastation (Adisa, 2019; Premium Times, 2017). Since its escalation in 2009, the Boko Haram crisis has displaced over 2.5 million people, created tens of thousands of widows and orphans, and destroyed essential infrastructure across several states in the Lake Chad Basin (IOM, 2023; UNHCR, 2022). The group's access to automatic rifles, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and other light weaponry has allowed it to sustain a prolonged insurgency, resist military offensives, and terrorize civilian populations (Onuoha, 2014; Adamu et al., 2018). The consequences for affected communities have been catastrophic. Economically, SALW-driven violence has crippled regional productivity. The disruption of agriculture, the primary livelihood in many affected communities, has led to severe food insecurity, with the Northeast facing some of the worst malnutrition and hunger statistics in sub-Saharan Africa (FAO, 2022). Farmlands have become no-go zones due to fear of attacks, abductions, or landmines, forcing many residents into internal displacement camps where access to employment and food is minimal (Adebayo & Okonkwo, 2021).

Public health and education systems have also suffered extensively. Hundreds of health care centers and schools have been destroyed or shut down due to insecurity. The 2014 abductions of schoolgirls from Chibok remains emblematic of the long-term psychological and educational toll of the crisis. In conflict zones, school enrollment, especially for girls, has plummeted, exacerbated gender inequality, and limited the future labor force (Brown, 2018; Adisa, 2019). Politically, the proliferation of SALWs has empowered non-state actors to challenge state authority, eroding the government's monopoly on violence and legitimacy. Armed groups not only contest territorial control but also disrupt electoral processes, coerce local populations, and undermine democratic institutions through politically motivated violence (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2013; Okereke, 2017). In the absence of effective governance, communities have resorted to informal security arrangements such as vigilante groups, some of which have become perpetrators of human rights abuses. The broader sociopolitical fallout includes the normalization of daily life violence, growing intercommunal mistrust, and a steady decline in civic engagement. This erosion of social cohesion further complicates post-conflict recovery and peacebuilding efforts, particularly in areas where ethnic, religious, and economic grievances intersect with the easy availability of arms (Salifu & Aning, 2019). In summary, the socioeconomic and political consequences of SALW proliferation in Nigeria

extend far beyond battlefield deaths. They manifest in generational cycles of poverty, weakened state capacity, and the entrenchment of insecurity challenges that require a multi-dimensional, peace-centric policy response.

6.4. Undermining Governance and Peace Efforts

The unchecked proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) continues to pose a grave threat to governance, stability, and peacebuilding across Nigeria and the African continent. The widespread availability of SALWs has destabilized political institutions and undermined efforts to establish sustainable peace by facilitating the empowerment of anti-state actors, weakening law enforcement agencies, and complicating peacekeeping operations, the widespread availability of SALWs has destabilized political institutions and undermined efforts to establish sustainable peace (Danwanka, 2021; Onuoha, 2014). One of the most troubling aspects of SALW proliferation is the sheer scale of civilian weapon ownership. Over 79% of all SALWs in Africa are held by civilians, many of whom possess these arms illegally and without formal oversight (Danwanka, 2021; Small Arms Survey, 2018). In Nigeria, this trend has transformed several regions, especially those with longstanding ethnic or resource-based tensions, into de facto war zones. The civilian militarization of communities fuels local arms races, erodes state authority, and fosters cycles of retaliatory violence that are difficult to interrupt through conventional peacekeeping or policing efforts (Onuoha, 2011; Adamu et al., 2018). As SALWs circulate freely among insurgents, criminal gangs, ethnic militias, and politically affiliated thugs, law enforcement agencies' operational capacity is systematically eroded. Many police and military personnel are outgunned, under-resourced, and demoralized, rendering them ineffective despite well-armed non-state actors (Alemika, 2013; Edeko, 2021). In this context, security agencies often adopt reactive, rather than proactive, measures and resort to the excessive use of force, further damaging their credibility and inflaming public distrust.

Peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts are also significantly impaired. Armed non-state groups frequently disrupt peace negotiations by wielding military leverage and threatening violent reprisals. The presence of SALWs shifts the balance of power away from legitimate state authorities and toward violent actors, who often use weapons as instruments of negotiation or coercion (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). Additionally, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs have had limited success in Nigeria and elsewhere due to the ease with which demobilized fighters can reacquire weapons and rejoin armed movements (Oghuvbu, 2020; Salifu & Aning, 2019). The economic costs of armed conflict fueled by SALWs are staggering. Between 1990 and 2005, African countries lost more than \$300 billion due to conflict-related destruction, military expenditures, loss of investment, and humanitarian crises—an amount equivalent to all foreign aid received by the continent in that period (Oghuvbu, 2020). In Nigeria, conflict-driven spending continues to divert critical resources from essential sectors, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, worsening poverty and social inequality. The erosion of governance capacity and peacebuilding potential due to the proliferation of SALWs cannot be overstated. Strengthening arms control mechanisms, improving border security, implementing community-based disarmament strategies, and enhancing public trust in state institutions are essential for reversing this trajectory and laying the groundwork for long-term peace and development.

6.5. Intensification of Ethno-Religious Conflicts

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has dramatically intensified ethno-religious conflicts across Nigeria, escalating otherwise manageable disputes into violent confrontations with devastating consequences. Ethnic and religious heterogeneity in cities such as Kano, Kaduna, Jos, and Bauchi, once emblematic of cultural plurality, has increasingly become a flashpoint for armed violence exacerbated by the easy

availability of firearms (Chizea & Iyare, 2006; Edeko, 2021). In Nigeria's urban centers, pre-existing grievances are often tied to historical marginalization, resource competition, and politicized religious identities are now expressed through the barrel of a gun. Minor provocations, such as disputes over land, religious expression, or political allegiance, can quickly spiral into deadly confrontations due to the widespread civilian possession of SALWs (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). These dynamics have been particularly visible in Kano and Kaduna, where ethno-religious riots in the early 2000s and beyond resulted in thousands of fatalities and extensive property destruction (Suleiman, 2015; Suresh & Babaji, 2017). Youth are disproportionately affected by the militarization of identity-based conflict. Many are both perpetrators and victims, recruited into armed vigilante or militia groups under the guise of community defense. With limited economic opportunities and state presence, SALWs offer a tool for asserting power, achieving political objectives, or enacting revenge, thereby embedding violence into the sociopolitical fabric of these communities (Adebayo & Okonkwo, 2021; Danwanka, 2021).

Moreover, the prevalence of firearms has led to an alarming rise in urban gun violence, transforming communal clashes into mass casualty events. According to reports, homicide and gun-related injuries have significantly increased in conflict-prone areas, reflecting an ongoing "arms race" among communities who feel compelled to arm themselves for protection or retaliation (Suresh & Babaji, 2017; Onuoha, 2014). The cycle of fear, retaliation, and rearmament fuels a self-perpetuating security dilemma, where no side feels secure without escalating its own firepower. This militarization also weakened traditional and religious conflict resolution mechanisms, which historically played a crucial role in maintaining social harmony. The resort to arms has undermined the authority of elders, religious leaders, and community mediators, making reconciliation efforts increasingly ineffective in the face of armed resistance (Chizea & Iyare, 2006; Okoli & Uhembe, 2021). Addressing the intensification of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria necessitates a dual strategy: one that removes SALWs from civilian circulation through robust disarmament and arms control measures, and another that fosters inclusive governance, interfaith dialog, and economic empowerment for marginalized populations, particularly the youth.

6.6. Economic Implications of the Proliferation of SALW in Nigeria

The widespread availability and use of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) have had significant adverse effects on Nigeria's economic development, severely disrupting key sectors, discouraging investment, and intensifying poverty. The agricultural sector, which accounts for around a quarter of Nigeria's gross domestic product, has been particularly hard-hit. According to a 2024 report by the Nigerian Economic Summit Group, agricultural productivity in regions plagued by banditry and conflicts between farmers and herders fell by as much as 40% between 2020 and 2023. In Benue State, often referred to as Nigeria's "food basket," more than 200,000 hectares of farmland were abandoned in 2022 due to insecurity, resulting in a sharp decline in food supply and a nationwide spike in food prices (Akinyele, 2021). Nigeria's oil and gas industry, the country's most critical source of foreign exchange, has also suffered significant losses. The Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI, 2023) reported that oil theft and vandalism, frequently perpetrated with SALWs, cost the country approximately \$10 billion between 2021 and 2022. In 2022, an armed group seized an oil installation in Bayelsa State, halting production of over 100,000 barrels per day for several weeks.

The tourism and hospitality sector has also experienced a steep decline due to growing insecurity. The Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC, 2023) noted a 50% reduction in international tourist visits from 2020 to 2022, largely attributed to security challenges. Once-popular tourist destinations, such as Plateau State, celebrated for its cool climate and picturesque landscapes, have experienced a downturn, with many resorts

ceasing operations due to recurrent violence. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has not been immune to the ripple effects of insecurity. Data from the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission (NIPC, 2024) show that FDI inflows dropped by 35% between 2020 and 2023. Notably, 70% of foreign firms that opted not to invest in Nigeria during this period cited the widespread presence of arms and the resulting insecurity as key deterrents. The informal sector, which constitutes a substantial share of employment in Nigeria, has been similarly disrupted. Research by the Center for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA, 2023) found that in urban areas grappling with frequent armed robberies and kidnappings such as parts of Lagos and Abuja, small businesses reported a 40% drop in economic activity during evening hours between 2021 and 2023. This has contributed to job losses and worsening poverty levels. Transportation and logistics services have also been strained by security concerns. The Nigerian Shippers' Council (2023) reported a 25% rise in transportation costs for goods moved within the country between 2020 and 2022, largely due to the need for heightened security measures and the avoidance of high-risk routes. These increased logistical costs have resulted in higher prices for goods and services, compounding economic hardship across the country.

7. Evaluating Nigeria's Border Security Initiatives and Regional Cooperation Efforts

Over the years, the Nigerian government has undertaken various strategic initiatives to enhance border security and suppress illicit goods smuggling. These efforts include the establishment of joint border task forces, adoption of surveillance technologies, and diplomatic cooperation with regional bodies like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). While these interventions have led to some measurable progress, persistent structural and institutional challenges have undermined their overall effectiveness.

7.1. Border Control Initiatives and Outcomes

In response to the persistent challenges of cross-border smuggling and the need to facilitate lawful trade, the Nigerian government has implemented several notable border security initiatives. Among the most prominent is the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) Joint Border Patrol Team, launched under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS). This initiative was designed to streamline the cross-border movement of goods, ensure adherence to trade protocols, and curtail the influx of contraband. Initial reports following its deployment indicated a 15% reduction in smuggling activities across key border corridors, indicating that improved surveillance and law enforcement mechanisms were beginning to yield tangible benefits (Udeh & Nwkorobia, 2022). Despite this early success, the program's broader impact has been limited due to systemic constraints. One of the primary challenges has been the lack of adequate logistics, including poor infrastructure and insufficient mobility tools for personnel stationed at border points. Compounding this issue is chronic underfunding, which hampers the procurement of advanced surveillance technologies, such as drones and integrated database systems that are crucial for real-time monitoring and intelligence sharing (Obikaeze, Efanodor-Obeten, & Inah, 2023). The widespread corruption within border control agencies remains another critical impediment. Numerous allegations have implicated border officials, particularly within the Nigeria Customs Service, in colluding with smuggling syndicates. This internal sabotage has significantly undermined the credibility and effectiveness of enforcement efforts (Omoyeni, 2023; Omoniyi, 2023). Furthermore, poor coordination and jurisdictional disputes among key agencies, including the Nigeria Immigration Service and the NCS, have often resulted in operational inefficiencies and border surveillance lapses.

A notable example of the complex outcomes of border policies was Nigeria's partial land border closure between August 2019 and December 2020. The policy aimed to curb the smuggling of rice and other restricted goods, with

the intention of stimulating local agricultural production. Although the closure temporarily boosted local rice cultivation and reduced the inflow of smuggled agricultural products, it also had several adverse consequences. Food prices surged significantly, pushing basic commodities beyond low-income households' reach, particularly in border communities that rely heavily on informal cross-border trade (Uwak & Ebong, 2023; Purokayo & Jan, 2014). Moreover, the policy sparked diplomatic tensions with neighboring ECOWAS member states, including Benin and Niger, which criticized the move as a violation of regional trade agreements and the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and Goods. These frictions underscored the delicate balance Nigeria must strike between enforcing national security interests and upholding its commitments to regional economic integration (Addo & Offiah, 2024; Omoyeni, 2023). In essence, while initiatives such as the Joint Border Patrol Team reflect a strategic intent to secure Nigeria's borders and formalize trade, their long-term success hinges on addressing deep-rooted structural issues. These include interagency collaboration, corruption control, infrastructural investment, and regional diplomatic engagement. Nigeria can sustainably manage its border security while promoting economic resilience in line with ECOWAS objectives only through a holistic, evidence-based, and cooperative approach.

7.2. Challenges with the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol

The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, originally instituted to promote regional integration, trade, and social cohesion, has become a double-edged sword in the West African sub-region. While it has enabled the mobility of citizens and fostered economic interdependence among member states, it has also inadvertently created significant security vulnerabilities, particularly for Nigeria. Criminal networks have systematically exploited the liberal provisions of the protocol to traffic several illicit goods, including counterfeit pharmaceuticals, petroleum products, narcotics, and small arms and light weapons (SALWs). Nigeria's northern and western borders are already characterized by porousness and limited state presence and have become key transit corridors for these illegal activities. This exploitation has contributed to the surge in transnational organized crime, including armed banditry, insurgency, and terrorism, particularly in regions such as the North East and North West (Addo & Offiah, 2024; Obikaeze, Efanodor-Obeten, & Inah, 2023). Weak institutional capacity, limited surveillance infrastructure, and insufficient coordination between national and regional enforcement bodies have allowed non-state actors to operate with impunity across borders. The lack of uniform border controls and inconsistent implementation of ECOWAS regulations by member states have further aggravated the situation. For instance, some states are more lenient in monitoring cross-border movements, enabling smugglers and traffickers to use their territories as launchpads for criminal operations in Nigeria (Nebeife, Chinwuba, & Onwuanibe, 2022).

Moreover, the current security architecture in the region lacks the agility to adapt to the evolving dynamics of CB crime. This challenge has prompted scholars and policy experts to call for a critical revision of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol. They argue that while the protocol remains vital for promoting regional trade and integration, it must now be reimagined to include stronger safeguards against its abuse by criminal networks (Omoyeni, 2023). The development of a more structured and enforceable framework that prioritizes security alongside economic cooperation is key among the proposed reforms. This includes implementing biometric screening systems at border points, integrating real-time surveillance technologies, such as drones and automated entry-exit data systems, and establishing centralized intelligence-sharing platforms across ECOWAS states (Obikaeze et al., 2023). Additionally, scholars emphasize the importance of holding member states accountable

for noncompliance. Countries that fail to monitor and report abuses of the protocol should face sanctions or restrictions to ensure a collective commitment to regional security (Omoniyi, 2023). Without such reforms, Nigeria and its neighbors risk undermining both national and regional stability. Maintaining the spirit of economic integration while mitigating its unintended security consequences is a challenge. As migration and trade continue to evolve across borders, so too must the frameworks that govern them.

7.3. Institutional Failures and Interagency Rivalries in Nigeria's Border Security Management

Despite various policy reforms and investments aimed at securing the nation's frontiers, institutional weaknesses and interagency conflicts have significantly undermined the effectiveness of Nigeria's border control efforts. A critical obstacle to progress has been the pervasive corruption embedded within key enforcement agencies, most notably the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS). The depth of institutional compromise became evident in a 2021 report by the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU), which revealed that some senior customs officials were actively collaborating with smuggling syndicates involved in the illicit trade of arms and contraband goods. This revelation highlighted not only the ethical decay within the system but also the extent to which corruption can cripple national security from within (Uwak & Ebong, 2023; Omoniyi, 2023). Nigeria's border security framework suffers from persistent rivalries and poor coordination among agencies tasked with managing different aspects of border operations. The Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), and other paramilitary organizations often work in silos, marked by overlapping responsibilities and territorial disputes. These frictions frequently hinder swift operational decisions and compromise the effectiveness of interventions. A notable example is the 2023 Sokoto Border Security Audit, which documented how bureaucratic wrangling between NIS and NCS over operational authority delayed the interception of a significant arms shipment, a delay that could have had serious national security implications (Sokoto Border Security Audit, 2023; Omoyeni, 2023).

The absence of a centralized and unified command structure intensifies these problems. Communication gaps and redundancy are common without a cohesive chain of command, resulting in fragmented enforcement and disjointed responses to cross-border threats. Agencies often duplicate efforts, compete for limited resources, and withhold critical intelligence from one another, all of which weaken the country's border integrity and allow transnational criminal networks to exploit institutional loopholes (Nebeife, Chinwuba, & Onwuanibe, 2022). Policy analysts and security experts have advocated the establishment of a centralized border security coordination agency or command center. Such a body would be mandated to integrate the operations of all border-related institutions, harmonize intelligence gathering, and oversee joint enforcement protocols. This structure would not only improve efficiency but also foster trust and collaboration among agencies. In countries with similar security challenges, centralized border management systems have been effective in reducing corruption, accelerating response times, and improving strategic planning (Udeh & Nwokorobia, 2022; Obikaeze, Efanodor-Obeten, & Inah, 2023). In summary, Nigeria's border security apparatus will continue to fall short of its objectives without tackling institutional failures and interagency rivalries head-on. The fight against smuggling, trafficking, and arms proliferation requires not only resources and equipment but also a fundamental restructuring of governance and accountability within enforcement institutions.

7.4. Recommendations for Reforming Policy

Addressing Nigeria's persistent border security challenges requires a multidimensional and forward-thinking policy framework. Reforms must be evidence-based, transparent, and backed by robust accountability

mechanisms that cut across all layers of enforcement and governance to be effective. First, Nigeria must embrace data-driven policy reform, where real-time intelligence, empirical risk assessments, and geospatial data inform security interventions. Currently, many border policies are reactive and not anchored in comprehensive surveillance or predictive modeling. The deployment of technology-driven surveillance tools, such as drones, infrared sensors, biometric scanners, and automated border control (ABC) systems, can significantly improve detection and deterrence capacity. These tools have proven successful in various international contexts and, if well-integrated into Nigeria's security architecture, could help cover vast and difficult-to-monitor border terrains (Obikaeze, Efanodor-Obeten, & Inah, 2023; Udeh & Nwokorobia, 2022). In addition to hardware, institutional transparency and accountability are urgently needed. Corruption has consistently undermined Nigeria's border initiatives; hence, implementing routine performance audits, third-party oversight mechanisms, and whistleblower protection laws would foster greater integrity within the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), and other enforcement agencies (Omoniyi, 2023; Uwak & Ebong, 2023). A clear chain of command, interagency training programs, and transparent procurement procedures are also essential for minimizing operational inefficiencies and power struggles.

At the regional level, enhanced cooperation with the ECOWAS is indispensable. While the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol has brought economic and social benefits, it requires serious recalibration to prevent abuse. Nigeria should revise the protocol to include clauses that allow for sanctions or penalties against member states that fail to monitor illicit movements within their borders. Furthermore, the creation of a real-time, integrated intelligence-sharing system among ECOWAS member states could allow for better tracking of smuggling networks, arms dealers, and human traffickers across the region (Addo & Offiah, 2024; Nebeife, Chinwuba, & Onwuanibe, 2022). Additionally, a holistic regional approach that balances economic development with security priorities is needed. The development of critical border infrastructure, such as roads, customs facilities, and surveillance outposts, is vital for facilitating trade and deterring illicit activities. For example, improved infrastructure in Nigeria's northeast and northwest border regions could simultaneously stimulate economic growth and enable faster deployment of security personnel (Purokayo & Jan, 2014).

Harmonization of customs and immigration procedures across ECOWAS states is equally important. Standardizing documentation, digitizing customs clearance, and reducing procedural bottlenecks can minimize bribery opportunities and reduce delays that often fuel informal trade and smuggling. Finally, community-based security models, such as community policing and local border watch groups, should be integrated into formal security frameworks. Engaging local communities not only enhances surveillance but also fosters trust and information-sharing between residents and security agencies. Locals are often the first to detect suspicious activities and can play a critical role in early warning systems if they are empowered and supported appropriately (Obikaeze et al., 2023; Omoyeni, 2023). In conclusion, Nigeria's border security requires a multi-layered approach that integrates cutting-edge technology, institutional reform, regional cooperation, and community participation. When combined with a commitment to transparency and development, these elements can transform Nigeria's borderlands from zones of vulnerability into corridors of security and prosperity.

8. Conclusion

The unchecked proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria constitutes a deeply entrenched and multifaceted crisis that endangers not only national security but also the foundational principles of human rights and sustainable socioeconomic development. This research has underscored the convergence of

critical structural and systemic vulnerabilities ranging from poorly secured borders and institutional fragility to persistent insurgency and pervasive organized crime that have coalesced to drive the surging availability of illicit weaponry. The consequences of this arms saturation are devastating, both in their immediacy and long-term ramifications. On a fundamental level, the widespread accessibility of SALW erodes the state's exclusive authority over the legitimate use of force, thereby weakening the rule of law and undermining public confidence in governmental institutions. This institutional fragility is further compounded at the escalating frequency and brutality of violent confrontations that not only claim lives but also fracture communities and deepen societal divisions. The profound human costs are equally distressing. The pervasive availability of arms has emboldened insurgent groups and criminal syndicates, fueling a cycle of violence that has led to mass displacement, trauma, and a burgeoning humanitarian emergency. Entire regions have become ungovernable, schools have been shuttered, hospitals are underutilized or destroyed, and citizens' basic rights, such as the right to life, education, and security, are routinely violated. These conditions undermine social cohesion and the trust necessary for collective resilience and peacebuilding. Economically, the insecurity fostered by arms proliferation is a corrosive force. It deters both foreign and domestic investment, stalls infrastructure development, disrupts agricultural and commercial activities, and inhibits critical public services. The net effect is a paralyzed economy, where long-term planning is replaced by short-term crisis management, and where persistent instability leads to the loss of opportunities for development.

A coordinated and sustainable strategy that is both nationally rooted and regionally aligned is required to address this complex challenge. Nigeria must prioritize the modernization and integration of its border security apparatus through investment in advanced surveillance technologies, improved intelligence capabilities, and interagency collaboration. However, no nation can combat transnational arms trafficking in isolation. Meaningful cooperation with neighboring countries, such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, is indispensable. Joint border patrols, real-time intelligence sharing, and legal and regulatory framework harmonization can significantly disrupt trafficking networks that exploit regional vulnerabilities. Simultaneously, reforming governance structures remains a cornerstone of any effective response. The entrenchment of corruption, particularly within the security and law enforcement sectors, must be met with resolute institutional reforms. Strengthening transparency, instituting independent oversight mechanisms, and ensuring meaningful civilian participation in governance are essential steps toward reclaiming state legitimacy and accountability. These reforms, though politically challenging, are not optional. They are imperative for restoring the rule of law and curbing the impunity that enables the arms trade to flourish. Ultimately, reversing the tide of SALW proliferation in Nigeria requires more than technocratic fixes; it requires a profound reimagining of security, governance, and regional solidarity. The success of this endeavor hinges on sustained political will, robust institutional frameworks, and the mobilization of civil society actors who can advocate for peace, mediate local conflicts, and build trust within affected communities. Nigeria can break free from the cycle of violence and lay the groundwork for a more just, secure, and prosperous future only through such a comprehensive, inclusive, and persistent effort.

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