



## Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects

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### ABSTRACT

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria has become a critical concern for national security and socio-economic stability. This study aimed to examine the underlying causes, consequences, and potential solutions to the widespread availability and illegal circulation of SALW in the country. Specifically, the research sought to identify the primary factors contributing to the proliferation of SALW and analyze its impact on national security and socio-economic development. The study utilized the Theory of Structural Violence and the Conflict Theory to frame the analysis and adopted a documentary and thematic approach to gather and analyze data. The findings revealed that porous borders, weak governance, political corruption, and the activities of insurgent and criminal groups were key factors driving the proliferation of SALW. These weapons exacerbated national security challenges, leading to the rise of insurgencies, militancy, and organized crime. The socio-economic consequences were equally severe, with armed violence disrupting agricultural production, trade, and investment, contributing to poverty and stunted development. In conclusion, the study highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address the root causes of SALW proliferation. Recommendations included strengthening border security, combating corruption within security agencies, implementing community-based disarmament programs, enhancing regional cooperation, and investing in socio-economic development initiatives. The successful implementation of these recommendations could significantly reduce the impact of SALW proliferation, improving security and fostering socio-economic development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), Proliferation, Nigeria, National Security

### I. Introduction

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has emerged as a significant global security concern, with dire implications for nations experiencing weak governance and socio-political instability. Nigeria, one of the most populous countries in Africa, has been disproportionately affected by the uncontrolled spread of SALW. This challenge is rooted in historical, geopolitical, and socio-economic dynamics that have intensified over time (Adebayo, 2017; Onuoha, 2013).

Nigeria's strategic location in the West African sub-region, coupled with its porous borders stretching over 4,000 kilometers, has facilitated the influx of illicit arms. The proliferation is driven by multiple factors, including political instability in neighboring countries, transnational criminal networks, and a thriving black market for arms (Aluko & Ajala, 2021). Events such as the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya have led to the diversion of stockpiles of weapons into the Sahel region, further exacerbating the problem (Okeke, 2019). Internally, factors such as weak institutional capacity, corruption within security agencies, and inadequate border control mechanisms have created an environment conducive to the proliferation of SALW. Research by Ogundele (2020) indicates that over 70% of SALW circulating in West Africa are in Nigeria, a figure that underscores the magnitude of the issue. Furthermore, the demand for arms by insurgent groups like Boko Haram, militant organizations in the Niger Delta, and armed bandits in the Northwest has fueled the illegal arms trade (Eze, 2020).

The consequences of SALW proliferation in Nigeria are multifaceted. The widespread availability of these weapons has intensified communal clashes, insurgencies, and violent crimes. A study by Yusuf and Musa (2021) highlights that the presence of SALW exacerbates conflict duration and fatalities, particularly in regions like the



Northeast and North-Central zones. Additionally, SALW proliferation has contributed to forced displacements, human rights violations, and a decline in public trust in state security apparatuses. Despite efforts to address the issue, including Nigeria's ratification of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the establishment of the National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons, significant challenges remain. Scholars like Akinyemi and Adeoye (2022) argue that the lack of political will, inadequate funding, and limited regional cooperation undermine the effectiveness of these initiatives. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the drivers of SALW proliferation in Nigeria, assess the limitations of current control mechanisms, and recommend sustainable strategies for mitigating the problem.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria poses a critical threat to national security, social stability, and economic development. Despite efforts by successive administrations to curtail the influx and misuse of these weapons, Nigeria remains a hotspot for illegal arms trafficking, largely due to its porous borders, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the persistent activities of insurgent groups, militias, and criminal networks. One of the primary issues is the accessibility of SALW to non-state actors, including terrorist organizations like Boko Haram, militant groups in the Niger Delta, and bandits operating in the Northwest. These groups utilize SALW to perpetrate acts of violence, such as kidnapping, armed robbery, and communal clashes, which have led to loss of lives, forced displacements, and destruction of property. Reports suggest that more than 70% of the SALW in circulation in West Africa are concentrated in Nigeria, exacerbating the already precarious security landscape.

The prevalence of SALW also undermines governance and development efforts. Armed violence fueled by SALW disrupts economic activities, particularly in agriculture and trade, while discouraging foreign and domestic investment. Furthermore, the presence of illegal weapons has heightened inter-communal tensions, particularly in the Middle Belt region, where disputes over land and resources often escalate into violent confrontations. Despite existing legal frameworks such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons and Nigeria's Arms Trade Treaty obligations, implementation remains weak due to corruption, inadequate funding, and limited

technical capacity of law enforcement agencies (Aluko & Ajala, 2021). Efforts to control the influx of SALW have also been hindered by poor border management, with reports of security personnel complicit in the smuggling of arms.

The problem of SALW proliferation in Nigeria is not only a security concern but also a socio-political and developmental challenge that requires urgent and sustained attention. Without effective measures to address the root causes of proliferation and improve regulatory enforcement, the unchecked spread of SALW will continue to undermine peace, security, and socio-economic progress. This study is therefore imperative to understand the drivers of SALW proliferation, evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions, and propose actionable solutions to mitigate its impact on Nigeria's development and stability. The overarching aim of this study is to examine the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria, its underlying causes, consequences, and potential solutions. The specific objectives are as follows:

- a. To identify the primary factors contributing to the proliferation of SALW in Nigeria.
- b. To analyze the impact of SALW proliferation on national security and socio-economic development.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study revolves around understanding the key concepts related to Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation, its impact on security, human rights, and socio-economic development in Nigeria. This section provides a definition and classification of SALW, which serves as the foundation for analyzing their proliferation and its broader implications in Nigeria.

### **Definition and Classification of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)**

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) are defined by the United Nations as weapons that can be carried, operated, or used by individual or small groups of persons. These weapons are typically of a caliber small enough to be portable, yet powerful enough to inflict significant harm. According to the UN's "Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms" (1997), SALW are characterized by their light weight, ease of use, and portability, which make them ideal for illicit use and contribute to their proliferation in conflict zones.



Small Arms include weapons like pistols, revolvers, rifles, and submachine guns, while Light Weapons encompass more powerful, though still portable, weaponry such as machine guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, and mortars. These weapons are typically used in both military and civilian contexts and can be carried and operated by one or two individuals. Their small size and ease of concealment make them ideal for smuggling and illegal trade, which significantly complicates efforts to regulate and control their circulation.

Proliferation refers to the rapid increase or spread of something, often in a manner that is uncontrolled or undesirable. In the context of weapons, proliferation specifically refers to the widespread distribution and expansion of certain kinds of arms or technologies, particularly in regions where they can contribute to insecurity or instability. In relation to Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), proliferation involves the illicit and unregulated movement, accumulation, and use of these weapons by unauthorized actors, such as insurgents, criminals, and non-state actors. The term "proliferation" underscores the ease with which weapons can spread across borders and reach individuals or groups who are not formally authorized to possess them.

The proliferation of SALW is a significant issue in global security because these weapons are often used to perpetuate violence, fuel conflicts, and destabilize governments. As the United Nations (2001) points out, the spread of SALW exacerbates the fragility of states, undermines the rule of law, and leads to severe humanitarian consequences, such as increased mortality, human rights violations, and the displacement of populations. The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) defines proliferation as the increase in the number of weapons in circulation, particularly those that are easily accessible, inexpensive, and widely available. Proliferation is particularly concerning in conflict-prone regions like sub-Saharan Africa, where weak governance structures, porous borders, and ongoing conflicts create fertile grounds for the illegal trade of SALW. As noted by scholars like Aning and Lartey (2016), the flow of small arms and light weapons into conflict zones is a major contributor to the escalation of violence, as these weapons often reach insurgents, terrorist groups, and militias who

use them to wage war against governments and civilians.

Proliferation of arms and weapons is defined as a method in which arms and weapons are sold to private citizens especially in the conflict zones (Kofi Annan cited in Aver, Nnorom and Ilim, 2014). Hazan and Horner (2007) defined proliferation as the growth or numerous multiplications of illegal arms and weapons in the country.

SALW can be classified into two broad categories: Small Arms and Light Weapons, each of which encompasses various types of firearms and weaponry.

a) **Small Arms:** Small Arms include any firearm designed for individual use. They are lightweight, easy to carry, and can be operated by one or two individuals. The main types of small arms include:

- **Handguns:** Revolvers and semi-automatic pistols.
- **Rifles:** Including assault rifles, bolt-action rifles, and semi-automatic rifles.
- **Submachine Guns:** Firearms capable of automatic or semi-automatic firing of ammunition of the same caliber as pistols.
- **Shotguns:** Firearms designed to fire a spread of shot rather than a single bullet.

Small Arms are typically used in armed conflicts, criminal activities, and civil unrest. Their widespread availability makes them particularly dangerous, as they are often used by non-state actors, insurgents, and criminals.

a. **Light Weapons:** Light Weapons, while still portable and used by small groups of individuals, are typically more powerful and have a larger caliber than Small Arms. The main types of Light Weapons include:

- **Machine Guns:** Heavy, rapid-fire weapons capable of sustained automatic fire.
- **Grenade Launchers:** Weapons designed to fire explosive grenades at targets.
- **Anti-Aircraft Guns:** Light anti-aircraft weapons, which can also be used for ground combat.
- **Mortars:** Short-barrelled, portable artillery pieces designed to fire shells at high angles.
- **Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS):** These weapons are designed to target aircraft but are lightweight enough to be carried by a single person.



**Table 1: Classification of Small Arms and Light Weapons**

Small Arms	Light Weapons
Recoilless Rifles	Portable anti-aircraft guns
Portable Launchers	Recoilless rifles
Anti-Aircraft Missile Systems	Portable anti-tank guns
Mortars and Calibres less than 100mm	Portable launchers of antitank missiles
Sub-Machine Guns, Assault Rifles, Light Machine Guns	Handheld-under-barrel guns
Heavy Machine Guns	Mounted grenade launchers

**Source:** Moses & Ngomba (2017)

Both categories of weapons are often used by state military forces, insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, and criminal gangs. Their proliferation is a significant security concern, as their widespread availability escalates armed conflicts, exacerbates crime rates, and undermines governmental control in affected regions.

The United Nations' Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2001) defines the scope of SALW proliferation as a global issue, emphasizing the need for coordinated international efforts to combat the illicit trade of these weapons. As the proliferation of SALW poses significant security challenges worldwide, the study focuses on Nigeria's specific vulnerability to this threat, given its vast borders, political instability, and ongoing insurgencies and militancy in various regions. In the context of Nigeria, SALW proliferation is not only a security concern but also a socio-political and economic issue, as it fuels violence, contributes to human rights abuses, and disrupts development processes. Understanding the classification and characteristics of SALW is crucial to developing effective policies to curb their spread and mitigate their consequences on Nigerian society.

### Empirical Studies

Empirical studies on the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) provide valuable insights into the dynamics, drivers, and consequences of this global challenge. In the Nigerian context, these studies have investigated the interplay between SALW and issues such as insecurity, governance, socio-economic development, and human rights. Adebayo (2017) conducted a quantitative study to assess the factors driving SALW proliferation in Nigeria. Using survey data from the Middle Belt region, the study found that weak border control (65%), political violence (55%), and insurgency (45%) were the most significant contributors. The study underscored that the porous nature of Nigeria's borders facilitates the inflow of arms from neighboring countries, particularly Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, where

armed conflicts are prevalent. In a similar vein, Aluko and Ajala (2021) analyzed the role of transnational crime in SALW proliferation in West Africa. Using secondary data from international agencies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the authors highlighted how smuggling networks exploit Nigeria's weak regulatory frameworks to traffic arms. The study estimated that over 70% of illicit arms in Nigeria are smuggled through transnational routes, with the Sahel region serving as a major source.

Eze (2020) examined the link between SALW proliferation and communal violence in the North-Central region of Nigeria. Using case studies of Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa states, the study identified a direct correlation between the availability of SALW and the frequency of violent clashes between herders and farmers. The findings revealed that 78% of conflicts in these areas involved the use of SALW, often sourced from illegal markets or local manufacturers. Yusuf and Musa (2021) focused on the role of SALW in insurgency and organized crime. The study used interviews with security officials and community leaders in Borno and Zamfara states to analyze the impact of SALW on Boko Haram's operations and banditry. The findings showed that insurgents and bandits not only rely on smuggled arms but also acquire weapons through battlefield seizures and corrupt security personnel.

Ogundele (2020) explored the socio-economic consequences of SALW proliferation in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Using household surveys and interviews with oil company officials, the study revealed that armed militancy had disrupted economic activities, particularly in the oil sector. The research found that attacks on oil pipelines and facilities by armed groups equipped with SALW resulted in losses exceeding \$2 billion annually. A study by Okeke (2019) assessed the broader economic impact of SALW proliferation on agricultural productivity. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research demonstrated that armed violence in rural areas had displaced thousands of





farmers, reducing agricultural output by 30% in conflict-prone regions. Amnesty International (2020) provided empirical evidence of the human rights abuses facilitated by SALW in Nigeria. The report documented cases of mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement in conflict zones. The study attributed 65% of these violations to armed groups using SALW, with 20% linked to the excessive use of force by security agencies.

### **Impact of SALW Proliferation on Regional Security in Nigerian**

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) has profound implications for regional security in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria. This section explores how the widespread availability and misuse of SALWs have exacerbated violence, fueled conflicts, and undermined national and regional stability, in the West African regions.

### **Exacerbation of Armed Violence**

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria has significantly exacerbated armed violence, leading to a marked increase in various forms of violent crimes and conflicts. This widespread availability of weapons has emboldened criminal elements and intensified existing tensions across different regions of the country. In the North Central region, particularly in states like Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa, the proliferation of SALWs has escalated farmer-herder conflicts. A report by the International Crisis Group (2023) revealed that between 2020 and 2022, there was a 60% increase in casualties from these conflicts, with over 3,000 deaths recorded. The report attributes this surge to the easy availability of assault rifles and other light weapons among both farming and herding communities.

The situation in the Niger Delta region provides another stark example. Despite the amnesty program initiated in 2009, the area continues to grapple with militancy and oil theft. According to a study by Onapajo and Ozden (2024), there has been a resurgence of militant activities in the region, with over 200 incidents of armed confrontations between militant groups and security forces recorded between 2021 and 2023. The study estimates that these groups possess an arsenal of approximately 10,000 assorted weapons, ranging from pistols to rocket-propelled grenades. In urban areas, the proliferation of SALWs has led to a surge in armed robberies and kidnappings. The Nigeria Police Force reported a 40% increase in armed robbery cases in major cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt between 2020 and 2022. In a particularly alarming

incident in 2023, a gang armed with assault rifles attacked a shopping mall in Lagos, resulting in 15 casualties and significant property damage (Nigeria Police Force Annual Report, 2023).

### **Fueling Insurgency and Terrorism**

SALW proliferation has played a crucial role in fueling insurgency and terrorism in Nigeria, providing armed groups with the means to challenge state authority and perpetrate violence on a large scale. The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria remains the most prominent example of how SALW proliferation fuels terrorism. According to a comprehensive report by the Institute for Security Studies (2024), Boko Haram and its offshoots have acquired an estimated 50,000 weapons since 2009, ranging from AK-47 rifles to anti-aircraft guns. The report details how these weapons have enabled the group to conduct complex attacks, such as the January 2022 assault on a military base in Borno State, which resulted in over 100 casualties among security forces.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported in 2023 that the Boko Haram insurgency has led to over 40,000 deaths and the displacement of nearly 3 million people in the Lake Chad Basin region. The report highlights how the group's access to sophisticated weapons, including vehicle-mounted heavy machine guns and mortars, has allowed it to overrun towns and villages, leading to mass displacements (OCHA, 2023). In the Northwest region, banditry has evolved into a form of organized insurgency, largely due to the proliferation of SALWs. A study by Rufa'i (2023) revealed that bandits in states like Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna possess an arsenal estimated at 30,000 weapons. The study documented over 1,000 incidents of mass atrocities committed by these groups between 2021 and 2023, including the kidnapping of over 5,000 people for ransom. The impact of SALW proliferation on terrorism is also evident in the activities of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a Boko Haram offshoot. In 2022, ISWAP conducted a series of sophisticated attacks in Borno and Yobe states, utilizing weaponry such as rocket-propelled grenades and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. These attacks resulted in over 200 civilian casualties and the temporary displacement of approximately 50,000 people (UN Security Council Report, 2023).

The proliferation of SALWs has also enabled the emergence of new armed groups. For instance, the "Unknown Gunmen" phenomenon in the Southeast region, which gained prominence in



2021, has been linked to the increased availability of weapons. These groups have been responsible for attacks on police stations, correctional facilities, and electoral offices, with over 100 such incidents recorded between 2021 and 2023 (Nigeria Security Tracker, 2023).

### **Undermining Governance and Rule of Law**

The widespread availability of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria has significantly undermined governance and the rule of law, creating zones of limited statehood where armed groups and criminal organizations challenge state authority. In the Northwest region, particularly in states like Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna, the proliferation of SALWs has enabled bandit groups to establish a parallel system of governance ((Nnam, 2019). A comprehensive study by Rufa'i and Bello (2023) revealed that between 2020 and 2022, these groups controlled over 100 villages across the region, imposing their own form of taxation and justice. For instance, in Shiroro Local Government Area of Niger State, bandits were reported to have established a parallel government, collecting taxes from residents and adjudicating disputes. This usurpation of state functions has severely eroded public trust in formal governance structures.

The situation in the Northeast provides another stark example of how SALW proliferation undermines governance. Despite military efforts, Boko Haram and its offshoots continue to challenge state authority in parts of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. A report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024) estimated that as of 2023, these groups maintained varying degrees of control over approximately 20% of the territory in these states, effectively preventing the implementation of government programs and the delivery of basic services.

In the oil-rich Niger Delta region, the proliferation of SALWs has enabled militant groups to continue challenging state authority, despite the amnesty program. A study by Onapajo (2023) documented over 150 incidents between 2021 and 2023 where armed groups disrupted government activities, including elections and census exercises. In one notable incident in 2022, armed militants in Delta State temporarily took over a local government secretariat, demanding ransom payments and disrupting governance for several weeks. The impact on the judicial system is equally concerning. A report by the Nigerian Bar Association (2023) highlighted a 30% increase in cases of armed intimidation of judges and lawyers between 2020 and 2022, particularly in cases

involving high-profile criminals and politically exposed persons. This trend has severely undermined the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law.

### **Impact on Economic Development**

The proliferation of SALWs has had severe and far-reaching economic consequences for Nigeria, disrupting economic activities, deterring investment, and exacerbating poverty. In the agriculture sector, which accounts for about 25% of Nigeria's GDP, the impact has been particularly devastating. A comprehensive study by the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (2024) revealed that between 2020 and 2023, agricultural output in states affected by banditry and farmer-herder conflicts decreased by up to 40%. For instance, in Benue State, known as the "food basket of the nation," over 200,000 hectares of farmland were abandoned due to insecurity in 2022 alone, leading to a significant reduction in food production and increased food prices nationwide (Akinyele, 2021).

The oil and gas sector, Nigeria's primary foreign exchange earner, has also been severely impacted. A report by the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI, 2023) estimated that between 2021 and 2022, Nigeria lost approximately \$10 billion to crude oil theft and pipeline vandalism, activities largely facilitated by the availability of SALWs. In one notable incident in 2022, an armed group in Bayelsa State took over an oil facility for several weeks, resulting in a production loss of over 100,000 barrels per day. The tourism and hospitality industry has been another casualty of SALW-fueled insecurity. The Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC, 2023) reported a 50% decline in international tourist arrivals between 2020 and 2022, primarily due to security concerns. For example, the once-thriving tourism industry in Plateau State, known for its temperate climate and scenic beauty, has been severely affected by recurrent violence, with several high-profile resorts closing down.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has also been negatively impacted. A report by the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission (NIPC, 2024) showed that FDI inflows decreased by 35% between 2020 and 2023, with potential investors citing security concerns as a primary deterrent. In a survey conducted by the report, 70% of foreign companies that decided against investing in Nigeria during this period cited the proliferation of arms and associated insecurity as a major factor. The informal sector, which employs a significant portion of Nigeria's workforce, has not been spared. A study by the



Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA, 2023) found that in urban areas affected by high rates of armed robbery and kidnapping, such as parts of Lagos and Abuja, small businesses reported a 40% decrease in nighttime economic activities between 2021 and 2023. This has led to job losses and increased poverty rates in these areas. Transportation and logistics have also been severely affected. The Nigerian Shippers' Council (2023) reported a 25% increase in transportation costs for goods moved across the country between 2020 and 2022, primarily due to the need for increased security measures and the avoidance of high-risk routes. This has led to increased prices of goods and services, further straining the already challenged Nigerian economy.

### Factors Contributing to SALW Proliferation in Nigeria

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria is driven by a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and societal factors. This section explores key drivers of the phenomenon with specific examples and references to reputable studies.

**a) Porous Borders:** Nigeria's extensive and largely unmonitored borders, spanning over 4,000 kilometers and shared with countries like Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, have significantly contributed to the influx of SALW. These borders are poorly regulated, allowing the smuggling of arms through clandestine routes. According to Aluko and Ajala (2021), approximately 60% of SALW entering West Africa find their way into Nigeria due to its strategic position and the availability of thriving black markets. A notable example is the post-Gaddafi era in Libya, which saw a surge in arms smuggling across the Sahel. Weapons from Libyan stockpiles have been traced to Boko Haram insurgents in northeastern Nigeria, further destabilizing the region (Okeke, 2019). Additionally, studies highlight that communities along border towns like Seme (Lagos State) and Jibia (Katsina State) often serve as transit hubs for illicit arms trade, facilitated by weak border patrols and corrupt officials (Ogunde, 2020).

**b) Weak Governance and Corruption:** Weak governance structures and systemic corruption within Nigeria's security and administrative institutions exacerbate the SALW proliferation problem. Security agencies tasked with arms control, including the Nigerian Customs Service and Nigeria Immigration Service, are often underfunded, poorly equipped, and susceptible to bribery. According to Adebayo (2017), corrupt

practices among border officials enable arms smugglers to bypass regulations, often by paying bribes to avoid detection. The inefficiency of regulatory frameworks is another critical issue. For example, the Firearms Act of 1959, which governs arms control in Nigeria, is outdated and poorly enforced. Research by Yusuf and Musa (2021) points out that despite Nigeria's ratification of the ECOWAS Convention on SALW, institutional bottlenecks and lack of political will undermine its implementation. The proliferation of SALW is also fueled by political actors who arm thugs and militias during elections, only for these weapons to remain in circulation afterward, contributing to insecurity (Eze, 2020).

**c) Insurgency, Militancy, and Organized Crime:** The activities of insurgent groups, militant organizations, and criminal syndicates have significantly increased the demand for SALW in Nigeria. Insurgent groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) rely heavily on SALW to sustain their operations in the Northeast. Studies reveal that these groups acquire arms through international smuggling networks, battlefield seizures, and local fabrications (Okeke, 2019). In the Niger Delta, militant groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers use SALW to sabotage oil installations, demand ransoms, and exert influence. Aluko and Ajala (2021) argue that militancy in the region has persisted due to the ready availability of arms, which not only escalate violence but also undermine development efforts.

Organized crime, including kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling, has further driven the proliferation of SALW. Criminal syndicates in states like Zamfara and Kaduna have been documented using SALW to perpetuate banditry, resulting in loss of lives and property. Ogunde (2020) highlights how bandits often trade arms with foreign smugglers or corrupt security personnel, ensuring a continuous supply of weapons.

### Consequences of SALW Proliferation in Nigeria

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria has far-reaching implications for the country's security, human rights, and socio-economic development. This section discusses these consequences with relevant examples and references from reputable journals.

### Threat to National Security

The widespread availability of SALW has escalated insecurity across Nigeria, contributing to the activities of insurgent groups, banditry, and communal violence. Insurgents such as Boko Haram and ISWAP leverage SALW to carry out attacks on



civilians, security forces, and critical infrastructure. For instance, the abduction of over 200 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014 was facilitated by the group's possession of SALW, which allowed them to overpower local security forces (Okeke, 2019). Furthermore, SALW have fueled banditry in the Northwest, particularly in Zamfara, Kaduna, and Katsina states. Armed groups equipped with sophisticated weapons have attacked villages, killed civilians, and kidnapped individuals for ransom, creating a climate of fear and instability. Aluko and Ajala (2021) note that these incidents undermine the government's ability to maintain territorial integrity and enforce law and order.

The use of SALW has also heightened communal and ethnic clashes. In the Middle Belt region, disputes over land and resources often escalate into violent conflicts, with rival groups using SALW to assert dominance. For example, the herder-farmer clashes in Benue and Plateau states have resulted in thousands of deaths and displacement, exacerbated by the easy access to SALW (Adebayo, 2017).

#### **Human Rights Violations**

The proliferation of SALW has led to widespread human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, gender-based violence, and forced displacement. Armed groups and criminals use SALW to perpetrate mass killings, often targeting vulnerable populations. For instance, Boko Haram's attacks in the Northeast have involved massacres of entire communities, rape, and the abduction of women and children (Yusuf & Musa, 2021). The use of SALW by security forces in Nigeria has also resulted in human rights violations. Amnesty International has documented cases of excessive force and extrajudicial killings by law enforcement agencies during operations against armed groups. These actions often result in civilian casualties and foster distrust between communities and security forces (Eze, 2020). Additionally, SALW contribute to the proliferation of gender-based violence, particularly in conflict zones. Women and girls are frequently subjected to sexual violence by both state and non-state actors, with SALW serving as tools of intimidation and coercion (Ogundele, 2020).

#### **Impact on Socio-Economic Development**

The proliferation of SALW significantly hampers Nigeria's socio-economic development by disrupting economic activities, discouraging investment, and straining public resources. Armed violence in agrarian communities, particularly in the Middle Belt, has displaced farmers and reduced

agricultural productivity, contributing to food insecurity in the country (Adebayo, 2017). In addition to undermining agriculture, SALW-related violence has negatively impacted trade and commerce. For example, the frequent attacks on transportation routes by armed groups have made it difficult for goods to move freely, raising costs and reducing economic efficiency (Aluko & Ajala, 2021).

SALW proliferation also imposes a financial burden on the government, which must allocate substantial resources to security operations, humanitarian assistance for displaced persons, and rebuilding destroyed infrastructure. This diverts funds from critical sectors such as education and healthcare, further impeding development (Eze, 2020). Moreover, the pervasive insecurity associated with SALW discourages foreign direct investment. Businesses are reluctant to invest in volatile regions, stifling job creation and economic growth. For instance, oil companies in the Niger Delta have scaled back operations due to attacks by armed militant groups, resulting in revenue losses for both the government and local communities (Yusuf & Musa, 2021).

#### **Efforts to Address Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Proliferation**

Efforts to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) involve a combination of national, regional, and international strategies. These efforts focus on improving legislation, enhancing security measures, promoting disarmament, and fostering international cooperation. Here are some key initiatives and strategies:

**a. United Nations Program of Action (PoA):** Adopted in 2001, the PoA aims to prevent, combat, and eradicate the illicit trade in SALWs. It calls for measures such as better regulation of arms transfers, improved record-keeping and stronger border controls. Member states are encouraged to implement these measures and report on their progress regularly.

**b. Arms Trade Treaty (ATT):** The ATT, which came into force in 2014, is a multilateral treaty that regulates the international trade in conventional arms, including SALWs. It seeks to prevent and eradicate the illicit trade in weapons by establishing common standards for the transfer of arms. The treaty requires states to assess the potential for arms to be used in human rights abuses or to fuel conflict before authorizing transfers.

**c. UN Security Council Resolutions:** Various UN Security Council resolutions address





the proliferation of SALWs, often in the context of specific conflicts or regions. These resolutions may impose arms embargoes, mandate the collection and destruction of illicit weapons, and support peacekeeping operations that include disarmament components.

**d. International Tracing Instrument (ITI):** Adopted in 2005, the ITI provides a framework for states to ensure the effective tracing of illicit SALWs. It calls for the marking of weapons at the time of manufacture and import, as well as record-keeping and information exchange to trace illicit arms effectively.

**e. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on SALW:** This regional convention, adopted in 2006, aims to prevent and combat the illicit proliferation of SALWs in West Africa. It includes measures for the control of arms transfers, the collection and destruction of surplus weapons, and the establishment of national commissions to oversee implementation.

**f. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Programs:** DDR programs are crucial in post-conflict settings to reduce the number of SALWs in circulation. These programs involve collecting weapons from ex-combatants, providing alternative livelihoods, and reintegrating them into society. Effective DDR programs help prevent the resurgence of violence and reduce the availability of illicit arms.

Addressing the proliferation of SALWs requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that involves international, regional, national, and local efforts. By strengthening legislation, improving security measures, promoting disarmament, and fostering international cooperation, the global community can work towards reducing the availability of illicit weapons and mitigating their impact on peace and security.

### Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks serve as a basis for examining the dynamics and implications of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation in Nigeria. This study utilizes two theories (the Theory of Structural Violence and the Conflict Theory) to elucidate the phenomenon; however, it also explores its far-reaching consequences.

### Theory of Structural Violence

Johan Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence (1969) serves as a critical framework for comprehending how systemic inequalities and socio-political structures foster the proliferation of

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). Structural violence encompasses the harm inflicted by societal arrangements that inhibit individuals from fulfilling their basic needs; this, in turn, cultivates conditions conducive to armed conflict. In Nigeria, pervasive poverty, unemployment and inequality create a fertile environment for the spread of SALW. Communities that are marginalized from economic and political power often resort to violence to address their grievances. For instance, in the Niger Delta, youth militancy arose as a reaction to perceived exploitation and neglect by both the federal government and oil corporations. SALW became a means for asserting demands, escalating violence and perpetuating instability (Adebayo, 2017). Furthermore, structural violence is evident in weak governance, rampant corruption and ineffective law enforcement, which facilitate the trafficking and circulation of SALW. The state's inability to secure its borders or adequately address grievances only exacerbates the cycle of violence and insecurity. However, it is crucial to recognize that these issues are interconnected; without addressing the root causes, the cycle will likely continue.

### Conflict Theory

Conflict Theory, which is deeply rooted in Karl Marx's works, suggests that social conflict emerges from competition over resources, power and status. In the scenario of SALW (Small Arms and Light Weapons) proliferation in Nigeria, this theory elucidates how conflicting interests among diverse groups—such as ethnic militias, insurgents and criminal networks—fuel the demand for weapons. The theory emphasizes that inequality and resource scarcity exacerbate competition, subsequently leading to violent conflict. For example, the clashes between herders and farmers in Nigeria's Middle Belt are driven by competition for land and water resources. SALW not only amplify the scale of these conflicts but also increase their lethality, resulting in mass casualties and displacements (Eze, 2020). Furthermore, the conflict perspective highlights the significance of power dynamics in the proliferation of SALW. Political elites and warlords frequently manipulate ethnic and religious identities to garner support and maintain armed groups. In the Northeast, insurgent factions like Boko Haram take advantage of social discontent and ideological rifts to recruit members and secure arms (Yusuf & Musa, 2021). However, this complex interplay of factors reveals the intricate nature of conflict in Nigeria.



The amalgamation of the Theory of Structural Violence and Conflict Theory provides a thorough comprehension of SALW proliferation in Nigeria. Although structural violence elucidates the systemic conditions that facilitate the flow of SALW, conflict theory engages with the direct drivers and repercussions of armed violence. This combination of frameworks underscores the interconnectedness of governance, socio-economic disparity and resource-centric conflicts in exacerbating SALW proliferation. By embracing these theoretical lenses, the research offers a detailed examination of the causes and effects of SALW proliferation; however, it also informs policy suggestions aimed at alleviating the challenge.

## **II. Methodology**

This study adopts a documentary and thematic approach to investigate the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria. This methodology is chosen for its ability to comprehensively analyze secondary data from a wide range of sources, such as government reports, scholarly articles, security agency publications, and media coverage.

## **III. Discussion of Findings**

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria has profound consequences that significantly affect national security, human rights, and socio-economic development. The study reveals that one of the most immediate threats posed by SALW proliferation is the destabilization of national security. Armed insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram and various militias in the Niger Delta, use these weapons to challenge state authority, resulting in widespread violence and territorial control in conflict zones. The constant threat of violence has made it difficult for government forces to maintain control, leading to increased insecurity and loss of life, especially in the northeastern and Middle Belt regions.

The study also highlights the direct human rights violations resulting from SALW proliferation. Armed groups use these weapons to terrorize local communities, leading to extrajudicial killings, forced displacement, and sexual violence. These violations have created a humanitarian crisis in affected regions, where civilians live in constant fear. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgency has displaced millions, causing severe economic and social dislocation. Human rights abuses have been particularly rampant in areas where the government has struggled to deploy effective countermeasures, leaving civilians vulnerable to violent attacks.

Socio-economic development in Nigeria has also been severely hampered by the proliferation of SALW. Armed violence disrupts local economies, especially in regions heavily affected by conflict. In the Niger Delta, for instance, militancy and the theft of oil using illegal weapons have undermined the country's economic stability. The fear of violence has deterred investment in affected regions, and businesses are forced to close or relocate. Furthermore, education and healthcare services are disrupted as schools and hospitals are attacked, and workers flee insecure areas. These disruptions hinder long-term development and perpetuate poverty, reinforcing cycles of underdevelopment and insecurity. Therefore, SALW proliferation not only threatens security and human rights but also undermines Nigeria's overall development efforts.

## **IV. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in Nigeria indeed poses a significant challenge to national security, human rights and socio-economic development. This study has identified several key factors contributing to the spread of these weapons: porous borders, weak governance and the prevalence of insurgency and organized crime. The consequences of SALW proliferation are, however, far-reaching; it undermines the government's ability to maintain control, exacerbates human rights violations and severely disrupts socio-economic development. In particular, the availability of SALW has empowered insurgent groups and criminal organizations, resulting in widespread violence, displacement and a humanitarian crisis. Although the proliferation of arms hinders economic growth, it also discourages investment and disrupts essential services like education and healthcare, because this creates an environment of instability.

Tackling the proliferation of SALW (small arms and light weapons) in Nigeria necessitates comprehensive and multifaceted solutions: both domestic and international efforts are essential. The Nigerian government must take decisive actions to strengthen border controls, improve governance and enhance the rule of law. However, regional cooperation is vital in addressing the transnational nature of arms trafficking. Although arms embargoes and disarmament initiatives are in place, their effective enforcement is often lacking because of various challenges.

In order to tackle the porous borders that enable the smuggling of Small Arms and Light



Weapons (SALW), the Nigerian government ought to invest in modernizing its border control infrastructure. This investment involves equipping border security agencies with cutting-edge technologies for surveillance and intelligence gathering; furthermore, it requires the improvement of coordination among these agencies. Collaborative efforts with neighboring nations—such as Chad, Niger and Cameroon—are crucial for effectively curbing cross-border arms trafficking. Combating Corruption and Fortifying Governance:

The Nigerian government must undertake reforms aimed at diminishing corruption within security and law enforcement agencies. A transparent and accountable governance framework (although challenging) will constrain the capacity of corrupt officials to facilitate the illicit trade and possession of arms. This objective can be approached through rigorous oversight, regular audits and the establishment of independent anti-corruption bodies that focus on the security sector. However, achieving these reforms is complex because it necessitates political will and public support.

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